

COMEDY VERSUS TRAGEDY:
POST-*SHOAH* REFLECTIONS

by

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Comedy Versus Tragedy: Post-*Shoah* Reflections

Sir Zelman Cowen, President and Mrs. David Patterson, Friends and Colleagues: I express my gratitude to Elisabeth and Robert Maxwell for making this lectureship possible. I should like to enter this particular lecture in celebration for my friend Irving Greenberg, who is a fellow-wanderer with me through the byways of comedy and tragedy.

The purpose of these reflections is to tell a story. The story concerns the life and destiny of that human condition known as *incongruity*. For it is incongruity – understood as one or another juxtaposition of opposites – that makes possible human laughter and human tragedy, though also human faith.

We all have our favourite one-liners, our favourite epitomes of incongruity. So I shall capitalize upon our momentary vis-a-vis together to reproduce half a dozen of my own favourites:

When his wife was turned to salt, what do you suppose Lot told his medical insurance company?

Will Cuppy observes that Montezuma had the courage of his convictions; the only trouble was he had no convictions.

If Jesus was a Jew, how come he had a Puerto Rican name?

From Emo Philips: I'm not a fatalist. And even if I were, what could I do about it?

C.M. Bowra is alleged to have said of another Oxford don: "He is the kind of man who will stab you in the front." (I include that one in case Inspector Morse is looking in.)

And my current *favourite* favourite, Fred Allen's description of a certain individual: He was so small that it was a waste of skin.

(Incidentally, for anybody here who'd like to make it as a comedian: The first step is to change your name to Allen. We have Fred Allen, Steve Allen, Woody Allen, Gracie Allen, Dave Allen, and so on. In fact, everyone I am quoting in this lecture is secretly named Allen.)

All through the enchanting months I've been enjoying at our Centre, I've engaged myself in a *mystery*, the mystery of laughter-humour-comedy, but yet

within a most sober frame of reference: the aftermath, the shadow of the *Shoah* – an event that sounds an ominous note across our reflections, perhaps helping to remind us that whatever else it is, the study of humour is a deadly serious business.

I shall ask you to bear in mind throughout the extraordinary finding of Rabbi Lionel Blue, if a debatable finding, that “the most typical weapon of Jewish spirituality is humour.”¹¹ Insofar as Blue is on to something, I submit that he is pointing up one of the major dissonances, if not *the* major dissonance between Jewishness and Christianity – a conflict of telling sociological, psychological, and moral import. How can it be, for example (speaking of mysteries) that in the United States today (an unofficially Christian land) Jews, constituting 2.7 percent of the population, should comprise some eighty percent of the humourists?

So much for introduction. I offer now a little forecast of my main reflections, in question form:

1. What is the general *Anschauung* behind the presentation, its vision or overall point of view?
2. What are the foundations of the human sense known as humour?
3. What is the task of the representative of comic laughter?
4. How may we relate humour and religious faith?
5. How may we relate comedy, tragedy, and the affirmation/denial of God?

1. The overall philosophic/theologic point of view behind the analysis

For weal or woe, my general orientation is *postmodernist*. Harvey Cox writes: “A viable postmodern theology will be created neither by those who have withdrawn from the modern world nor by those who have affirmed it unconditionally. It will come from those who have lived within it but have never been fully part of it, like the women in Adrienne Rich’s poem who, though they dived into the wreck, have not found their names inscribed within it.”¹²

The postmodernist stands within the modern world – who can escape that world? – but is never fully *of* that world. Further, since the modern era was itself largely post-Christian, i.e., the Christian church was already no longer socially and politically hegemonous in the West, it is evident that the postmodern consciousness will continue and probably intensify the post-Christian *Tendenz*, in some measure an anti-Christian *Tendenz*.

We shall see how this overall *Anschauung*, this general orientation, may be explored within the bounds of our subject.

2. The foundations of the human sense called humour

This question is essential to my work in the realm of humour, as will shortly become evident. The answer to the question necessitates a short journey into philosophy in its ontological dimension, its thrust toward being.

I propose a number of primordial jokes – or Proto-Jokes, as a few of you have heard me dub them. In and through such Proto-Jokes, all humour is made possible.

The most original or First Joke (or Incongruity) is Being Amidst Nothingness. How could there be such an incongruity as this? How could it be that there is something rather than nothing? How could it be that there is nothing where something has been? Here, perhaps, lies, the *Urgrund*, the ultimate ground of all human comedy (as of all human tears) – not to mention public performances of magic, a first cousin of comedy. In the game of peekaboo the very small child already apprehends something of this primordial Joke.

The Second Joke is Order versus Chaos – or perhaps rules versus anarchy. In the name of chaos, one immediately recalls the classic movies of the Marx Brothers.

The Third Joke is The Absence of Any Say in One's Birth. No one asks to be born. Accordingly, the human being is, with every creature, left with the task of "making the best" of things. One way to do this is to laugh. There is also weeping, making the worst of things. And there is resignation – allowing oneself to be pushed around by the great world.

For humans, as for other creatures, the Fourth Joke is Death Amidst Life. Stephen Leacock contends that humour stems finally from "the incongruous contrast between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness."³

The Fifth Joke is the "Is" Versus the "Ought" – the eternal incongruity between the world and people as they are, and the world and people as they could or may become. It's at this place that human suffering and humour so often confront each other. William Hazlitt discerns the secret of human laughter/weeping in humankind's being struck with the differences between things as they are and things as they ought to be.⁴

The Sixth Joke, tied very much to the fifth, is Selfabnegation Versus Selfcenteredness – the will (instinct?) to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others, counteracted by the urge (instinct?) to sacrifice others for the sake of ourselves.

The Seventh Joke is the Human Thrust/Wish to Partake of or Relate to Infinity. This is why so much in religion is comical – or why, put somewhat more forcibly, religion is a special kind of joke.

The Eighth Joke is Body in Juxtaposition to Spirit. Thus, the same human voice that in one moment selfexaltingly pronounces upon the world's "eternal verities" may in the next moment be coughing itself to pieces.

The Ninth Joke, more or less peculiar to humans, is Clothing vis-a-vis Nakedness. Here we have an essentially naked entity forced and/or enabled to appear, behave, and masquerade in and through a vast phantasmagoria of extrinsic, assorted shapes, sizes, and materials.

The Tenth (and last) Joke on my list is The Human/Domestic Animal Symbiosis. How can there be such accord between these disparate realities? How could it ever be that *this* kitten should lie purring upon *this* child's lap? Is it not a miracle? At the least, it numbers itself amongst life's many unpierced secrets.

If the philosophic enterprise begins in human wonder, our little decalogue of primordial Jokes may help sharpen the wonder of everything there is. All particular jokes are dependent upon these primordial ones. (Some of you may have additional Proto-Jokes to propose.) One implication of the decalogue is that it opens the kingdom of humour to a much wider and deeper foundation than is sometimes permitted to humour.

Now we are ready to grapple more directly, more intimately, with our special theme, "Comedy Versus Tragedy: Post-*Shoah* Reflections."

3. What is the task of the comedian, the representative of comic laughter?

I propose that the comic figure's calling is to guide us from the foundation of the Proto-Joke into a stance of defiance and thence out into a world of carnival.

In *Souls on Fire* Elie Wiesel attests that the hasidic storyteller has but "one motivation: to tell of himself while telling of others."⁵ In partial contrast, I think that the final or ideal motivation of the servant of comic laughter is to tell of others while telling of herself or himself.

More specifically, the generalized understanding of comedy is drama with a happy ending, as against tragedy as drama with a sorrowing or terrible ending. The shortcoming in such differentiation is that comic laughter is never safe from despair, while the tears of tragedy just may be dried by the sunshine.

There is, further, the enigma of whether laughter could ever become omnipresent, could take over all things. I cite Wiesel's *Beggar in Jerusalem*:

Somewhere in this world, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav used to say, there is a certain city which encompasses all other cities in the world. And in that city there is a street which encompasses all other streets in the city. And on that street there stands a house which dominates all other houses on the street. And that house has a room which comprises all other rooms in the house. And in that room there lives a man in whom all other men recognise themselves. And that man is laughing.

That's all he ever does, ever did. He roars with laughter when seen by others, but also when alone.⁶

Were laughter to be everywhere, to encompass everything, what could it possibly mean to speak of laughter? But weeping runs up against the identical obstacle. Julian Green wrote that after Auschwitz, "only tears have meaning." Who would want to argue with him? Yet where is the meaning in such tears as seek to encompass all things? Bereft of pain, humour appears to share the same plight that afflicts "the good" when its antagonist "evil" is somehow removed. Humour requires tears; tears require humour. Imperializing laughter is not laughter, imperializing tears are not tears. Soft laughter seems to be somewhat healthier, and soft tears as well.

True laughter, like true weeping, is often marked by fragility and scarcity. At the beginning of Wiesel's *The Testament* Viktor Zupanev reports, pitifully, that he has never laughed in his entire life. It is not until the final page of the tale that he is enabled to fill this gulf: "My heart is broken but I know that I shall laugh. And suddenly it happens: I am laughing, I am laughing at last."⁷

The patriarch Abraham is reputedly told by God that he must sacrifice his son by fire (Gen. 22) – called by Robert McAfee Brown one of the most terrifying of the biblical stories. Yet the son bears the name Itzhak, he who laughs, he who will laugh. How can these things be said in one breath: abandonment, and laughter?

The tale is familiar. Just in time an angel stays the hand of the executioner, and a ram is substituted for Itzhak. I venture three brief midrashim upon this tale: (i) The occasion was scarcely a time for the ram to laugh – or its mother and father, or its never-to-be-born offspring. (ii) In *Messengers of God* Wiesel posits a subsequent estrangement of father and son: Itzhak remained alive, but he no longer journeyed with his father.⁸ The life of laughter can carry a high price. (iii) Citing Wiesel further, upon why the most tragic of our ancestors should be named Isaac: "As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime, and still not give up the art of laughter. [Of course, Isaac] never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything he did laugh."⁹

To make as one these three midrashim: Laughter can be an *in-spite-of-whatever-comes*. "Laughter becomes a defiance. A defiance and a victory."¹⁰

Finally, in identifying the "complete equality" that is the mark of human carnival, W.H. Auden points to the two dimensions of laughter: protest and acceptance. In this way he speaks for all of us:

... [What] is carnival about? ... It is a common celebration of our common fate... Here we are, mortal, born into the world, we must die...

There is joy in the fact that we are all in the same boat, that there are no exceptions made. On the other hand, we cannot help wishing that we had no problems – let us say, that either we were in a way unthinking like the animals or that we were disembodied angels. But this is impossible; so we laugh because we simultaneously protest and accept.¹¹

All this, I suggest, comprises the calling of the comedian: to lead us from the application of one or more Proto-Joke out into a certain defiance but thence onward into carnival (where as to go the other way, from carnival to defiance, is tragedy).

4. The relation between humour and religious faith.

If religious faith is inherently *serious*, a life-and-death matter, the expression of our “ultimate concerns” (as my teacher Paul Tillich used to have it), and if comedy and humour are in important respects *unserious*, sometimes climaxing in frivolous joy and even in delightful nonsense, how is it possible to connect faith and humour?

Another teacher of mine, Reinhold Niebuhr, answers this question positively through resort to the same phenomenon with which we began: *incongruity*.

The intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence. Humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones. Both humour and faith are expressions of the freedom of the human spirit, of its capacity to stand outside of life, and itself, and view the whole scene. But any view of the whole immediately creates the problem of how the incongruities of life are to be dealt with; for the effort to understand life, and our place in it, confronts us with inconsistencies and incongruities which do not fit into any neat picture of the whole. Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life.¹²

In deference to the series of Proto-Jokes, I’m inclined to question or at least to qualify somewhat the terms of Niebuhr’s distinction. For is it not the ultimate incongruities of life that make humour possible? Marie Collins Swabey is thus correct that the religious spirit and the comic spirit alike partake of the metaphysical dimension. Furthermore, Conrad Hyers is right that the reality of humour knows no limits; human beings are capable of laughing at the ultimate incongruities as well as the immediate ones.¹³

Thus, what is to be said or done when a reputedly divinely-sustained order is bulldozed out of existence by the wrecking power of a Holocaust? Again, the religious person or community is not always a submissive one. Sholom Aleichem's character Tevye inquires rather timorously of God, "You help complete strangers – why not me?" His question is joined and then overwhelmed by the shattering cry of the psalmist, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1). A readily suggested consequence, or temptation, is to laugh at God in derision, turning upside down the laughter of God at the nations in Ps. 2:4. The life of religious faith may itself be penetrated by a critical or derisive or comic spirit that judges God and finds God wanting. This has happened more than once within the story of Judaism – a fact that hones to a razor's edge Lionel Blue's midrash, "the most typical weapon of Jewish spirituality is humour."

As a matter of fact, we have not yet done anything, if we *can* do anything, to resolve the dilemma of whether faith is any more capable than humour of coming to grips with ultimate incongruousness. Reinhold Niebuhr maintains that it is so capable. His exposition contrasts in considerable measure with Marie Collins Swabey's exaltation of reason and coherence.¹⁴ For Niebuhr, the irrationalities and incongruities of existence can never be made amenable to a nice rational or congruous system.

Philosophers seek to overcome [the basic incongruity of life] by reducing one world to the dimension of the other [as in naturalism]; or raising one perspective to the height of the other [as in idealism]. But neither a purely naturalistic nor a consistently idealistic system of philosophy is ever completely plausible. There are ultimate incongruities of life which can be resolved by faith but not by reason. Reason can look at them only from one standpoint or another, thereby denying the incongruities which it seeks to solve. [These ultimate incongruities] are also too profound to be resolved or dealt with by laughter. If laughter seeks to deal with the ultimate issues of life it turns into a bitter humour. This means that it has been overwhelmed by the incongruity. Laughter is thus not merely a vestibule to faith but also a "no-man's land" between faith and despair. We laugh cheerfully at the incongruities on the surface of life; but if we have no other resource than humour to deal with the incongruities that reach below the surface, our laughter becomes an expression of our sense of the meaninglessness of life... That is why laughter, when pressed to solve the ultimate issue, turns into a vehicle of bitterness rather than joy. To laugh at life in the ultimate sense means to scorn it. There is a note of derision in that laughter and an element of despair in that derision.

Niebuhr concludes:

Our provisional amusement with the irrational and unpredictable fortunes that invade the order and purpose of our life must move either toward bitterness or faith,

when we consider not this or that frustration and this or that contingent event, but when we are forced to face the basic incongruity of death ...

... Faith is ... the final triumph over incongruity, the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence. There is no other triumph and will be none, no matter how much human knowledge is enlarged. Faith is the final assertion of the freedom of the human spirit, but also the final acceptance of the weakness of man and the final solution for the problem of life through the disavowal of any final solution in the power of man.

Insofar as the sense of humour is a recognition of incongruity, it is more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason. But the sense of humour remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities. It must move toward faith or sink into despair when the ultimate issues are raised.

That is why there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter, in the holy of holies.¹⁵

We see, then, how for Reinhold Niebuhr a kind of rank ordering is to be applied, beginning with the, in effect, relatively low level of philosophic reason, going up to the somewhat more refreshing or effective level of humour, and than breaking forth upon the existentially most worthwhile level of faith. But I think this ordering is defensible only so long as the evils that religious faith itself tends to produce (intolerance, aggression, violence, tyranny) are subjected successfully to both humour and reason (not to mention political power and political norms). Of course, Niebuhr was himself always critically cognizant of such destructive accompaniments of faith, and he dealt with them ceaselessly and responsibly throughout his writings and career.

The Jewish scholar Israel Knox comments as follows upon the Niebuhrian conclusion found above, and thereby returns us to the Jewish-Christian encounter, mentioned in passing toward the beginning:

Prayer and faith and awe *are* present in the Jewish Holy of Holies, but it is exactly because there is awe – "Know before Whom you stand" – that Abraham can plead with God: "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly." And several millennia later the compassionate Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev can dare to engage God in a *din toreh*, in "litigation": *Vos hostu tzu dein folk Yisroel? Vos hostu zich ongezetz af dein folk Yisroel?* ("What have you against your people Israel? Why have you heaped afflictions upon your people Israel?") And in Peretz's folktale, *Berl Shneider*, the humble little tailor – without the prerogatives of a rabbi – can muster the courage and the impudence to quarrel with God for His indifference to the plight of the poor who are required, like the well-to-do, to abstain scrupulously from dishonesty, but, unlike them, do not always have food for their hungry children.¹⁶

Knox's commentary leads us into our fifth question. But first there are space and time for a little incongruous relief. (We've been sailing in rather deep waters.)

From Rodney Dangerfield: I told my doctor there's something wrong with me. Every time I look in the mirror I throw up. My doctor replied: "Look at it this way: Your eyesight is perfect."

A small gem from Totie Fields: I bought 50 pairs of stockings at 12 pennies a pair, only to discover that the seams go up the front. At that price I can learn to walk backwards.

From Woody Allen (my four-word characterization of whom is, Not quite The Messiah). A man named Berkowitz, leaving a fancy dress ball attired as a moose, was shot, stuffed, and mounted at the New York Athletic Club. But Jews had the last laugh: The club ordinarily restricted itself to goyim.

From Rita Rudner: I have a method of weighing myself in the morning. I hang off the shower curtain and gradually lower myself to the scale. When it gets to the right weight, I try to black out.

From Melvyn Helitzer: Alexander Graham Bell to his mistress: What do you mean my three minutes are up?

And from Joan Rivers: Marry rich and old. Buy him a pacemaker, then stand behind him and say boo!

Now perhaps we are a little more ready for our final point, which I venture to develop somewhat more intensively than the others.

5. The relation amongst comedy, tragedy, and the affirmation and/or denial of God.

The remainder of my reflections may be received as a critical response to Reinhold Niebuhr's attempted exclusion of human laughter from the "holy of holies."

As a point of departure, here is a further observation from Rabbi Blue: "God has no human form in Jewish theology but He reveals a very human psyche in Jewish jokes. There He enters into the suffering and paradoxes of the world, and experiences the human condition. There He is immanent, if not incarnate, and a gossamer bridge of laughter stretches over the void, linking creatures of flesh and blood to the endlessness of the *Ein Sof*, and the paralysing power of the Lord of hosts."¹⁷ Not wholly foreign to this viewpoint, I think, is the Christian teaching of the Incarnation of God in Jesus; as Paul has it, in Christ there is a *foolishness* of God that is "wiser than men" (I Cor. 1:25). What could be a more uproarious joke than God becoming human? Rather like God writing a book!

To call upon terminology recently coming out of Germany: Discretely theological reflection may originate from two directions, “from below” and “from above.” Let’s consider these alternatives in order.

(a) To reason and to act theologically “from below” is to proceed from the standpoint of human experience, human fortune, human dignity.

I’ve already intimated the outrageous possibility of human laughter, not with God, but at God. Put more particularly, in a post-*Shoah* world is there divine comedy, or is there only divine tragedy? Put in yet another way, once self-mockery is seen to penetrate highly moral humour, what is there to exempt God from mockery?

A further word is in order from Levi Yitzchok. Of this man, “called the Compassionate One, it was told that on a certain Day of Atonement, hearing the Jews confess their sins to the Almighty, he became tired of this one-sided demonstration of humility; he suddenly closed the doors of the Ark, turned to the congregation, and cried: ‘That’s enough now. It’s God’s turn to confess *His* sins!’”¹⁸

Elie Wiesel thus describes the genesis of his play, *The Trial of God*: “Inside the Kingdom of Night [the *Shoah*] I witnessed a strange trial. Three rabbis – all erudite and pious men – decided one winter evening to indict God for allowing his children to be massacred. I remember: I was there, and I felt like crying. But there nobody cried.” As the drama moves on, only a single party is to be found who will agree to serve as defense attorney for God. That party turns out to be none other than the devil.¹⁹

Within the frame of reference of the *Shoah*, our Third Proto-Joke (The Absence of Any Say in One’s Birth) may become almost unbearable. For the Absolute that comprises the *Shoah* – the German Nazi decree that *every* Jew must die – gives that Joke a terrifying visage. The Jew of the *Shoah* addresses God – the *human being* of the Jew addresses God: We could not choose our birth. And we as Jews did not, in the first instance, choose to be chosen. And now we are robbed of the ordinary right to die with dignity, in the fullness of time. *Tell me, are you some kind of fiend?* This is the question of the *Shoah* to God, the only question of the *Shoah* to God – not to other human beings, to God, for it is God who alone ultimately bears the responsibility. As Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits of today’s Jerusalem declares (strictly in the context of the *Shoah*): “God is responsible for having created a world in which man is free to make history.”²⁰ It is God who is brought to trial, it is God who stands in the prisoner’s dock – as never before in the history of the world, for never before was the Absolute Word formulated, “No more Jews.” The *Shoah* comprises the ultimate historical/existential refutation of the erstwhile religious notion that human beings have no right to question God and the ways of God. On the contrary, to silence such

questioning appears in and of itself as an act of sacrilege, for the silencing constitutes an assault upon human dignity, the *imago dei*, humankind made in the very image of God.²¹

How, then, may God be redeemed? – if there is to be redemption for God. It is not out of the question that God should seek out human forgiveness. In *Souls on Fire*, Levi Yitzchok reminds God that he would do well to ask forgiveness for the hardships he has visited upon his children. This is why, so the tale goes, the phrase *Yom Kippur* also appears in the plural, *Yom Kippurim*: “the request for pardon is reciprocal.” And yet: Rabbi Berkovits concludes that within the dimension of time and history, the ways of God are simply unforgivable.²²

But suppose that human beings – a few at least – resolve to forgive God anyway? Suppose they say, in effect, “Oh, what the hell!” Suppose they determine to forgive the unforgivable? Suppose that the trial of God is even the solitary way left to honor God, in the shadow of the *Shoah* – the solitary way left to laugh, now not *at* God, but *with* God? Perhaps the most overwhelming fact about Wiesel’s *Trial of God* is that the play is set on the Feast of Purim, a day when, as the prosecutor himself observes, “Everything goes.” Purim is a time, not alone for children and beggars, but also for fools. In the act of poking fun at everyone, the fool is making merry. And how could God ever be excluded from the party? Irving Greenberg points up the rationale of Purim: “One can only respond with laughter and mockery and put-on, satirizing God and the bitter joke this world threatens to become. . . . But as the hilarity reaches its climax, Jews move beyond bitterness to humor. . . . Through the humor, Jews project themselves into future redeemed reality that transcends the moment. Thus, hope is kept alive and the Messiah remains possible.”²³

In Wiesel’s tale, *The Gates of the Forest*, the dancing and the singing of a certain hasid convey his resolution to tell God: “You don’t want me to dance; too bad. I’ll dance anyhow. You’ve taken away every reason for singing, but I shall sing. I shall sing of the deceit that walks by day and the truth that walks by night, yes, and of the silence of dusk as well. You didn’t expect my joy, but here it is; yes, my joy will rise up; it will submerge you.”²⁴ We seem to be impelled here back into a kind of humor of defiance. And yet: It is with his very body that the hasid acts out his ironic joy. Is this not to affirm God after all, the One who created that body, the One who may yet act to redeem that body? Furthermore, on Purim it is fitting to wear *masks*. Abraham Joshua Heschel emphasizes the “overwhelming sympathy with the divine pathos” that the prophet Isaiah developed.²⁵ “Why don’t we just don the mask of Isaiah? The play’s the thing: no one will stop us. Contrary to Berish – the prosecutor [in *The Trial of God*] to be sorry for God and for human beings is never an either/or: the two deeds sustain each other. For me, the penultimate height of faith – not

the final height, for that would be salvation, the last reconciliation of humankind and God – the penultimate height of faith is to find oneself genuinely sorry for God (*daath elohim*, sympathy for God).²⁶

But why and how in the world are human creatures to feel sorry for God? This question visits upon us a frightening, ultimate dialectic between faith and humour. For we appear to be forcing ourselves into the incredible determination that God is some kind of klutz. Is not this why we are to feel sorry for God? Is there not descending upon us some form of unbelievable divine comedy? In the Woody Allen film *Love and Death*, Boris Grushenko proposes that the worst thing we may conclude about God is that God is an Underachiever. From this perspective, God may be counseled to try harder. But what if trying harder only compounds certain mischiefs? Is not God, *kiveyakhol*, more a klutz than anything else?

Heinz Moshe Graupe identifies the Hebrew term *kiveyakhol* as an appropriate term in Hebrew literature for conveying religious content “that almost seems blasphemous.” The term is variously translated as “so to speak,” “as if it were possible,” and “as one might be allowed to say.” The denominating of a divine klutzhood or blatantly seeming incompetence will shock many, sounding grotesquely sacrilegious to them. However, such people may only be opening themselves to a dread question: How do *you* propose to reconcile the fear of sacrilege with a rightful human dignity? ...

... No, God is the ultimate klutz – *kiveyakhol*. God would have to go and make Godself a world. Now God is stuck with it, and with us, and God is left with little choice but to keep on undergoing the agony of it. ... And by revealing and demanding certain absolute requirements, God has only opened the way to being held unmercifully to account before the *very same* requirements – and, of all things, at the hands of that upstart humankind. The Creator of all the universes made radically assaultable, and under God’s very own sponsorship! If this is not the essence of klutzhood, then I don’t know what the concept means. ... However: I think I’m ready to suggest a deal. ... I’m prepared to substitute the concept *vulnerability* for the concept of klutzhood.²⁷

Does God laugh? Does God listen to jokes? Does God *tell* jokes? Oh yes! Here is one straight from God’s mouth – and God alone. (That’s not a joke, swear to God – or is it?) The reference is *God: The Ultimate Autobiography*: “I blew mightily upon the Red Sea and the waters parted and the Israelites rushed across. When they were on the opposite bank, I stopped blowing and the waters gushed back again, drowning all the Egyptians and their horses. Which was a bit unfortunate but I was completely out of breath, not being as young as I once was and having a sedentary job in which I don’t get enough exercise.”²⁸

Enter Sigmund Freud. How could we leave him out? Freud was a very good Jew at one all-decisive place: He insisted that by its repudiation of *suffering*, humour falls among the great human methods “for evading the *compulsion* to suffer.”²⁹ The Freudian psychiatrist Martin Grotjahn remarks that the successful joke disguises aggression sufficiently to make its utterance allowable. The gifted teller of jokes “is an artist who commits the sin of expressing the dangerous thought. ... And that very sin ... is then *forgiven* with our acceptance of his joke – through our laughter,” which frees up or redeems our own aggressive impulses.³⁰

How may God receive the “dangerous thoughts” of those intercessors who serve the comic cause, not just upon Purim but throughout the year? I should propose that, ultimately speaking forgiveness may win the day. The aggression against God – or the counteraggression – in response to the divine aggression is itself eligible for forgiveness. Yet I should also submit that in the final reckoning forgiveness is never a purely human achievement. It’s a gift from beyond. Thus may forgiveness enter the dialectic of humour and faith, pointing to the beginnings of reconciliation amongst all parties. For in the depths of authentic humour everyone stands forgiven. That’s what humour comes down to really: forgiveness.

(b) To reason and to act theologically “from above” is to proceed, with all due *chutzpah*, from the standpoint of, *kiveyakhol*, God’s experience, God’s fortune, God’s dignity.

The noted Jewish philosopher Emil L. Fackenheim ends his recent study, *What Is Judaism?*, by referring to a Talmudic ambiguity upon the hiding of God: “Does [God] hide in wrath against, or punishment of, His people? God forbid that He should do so at such a time [as ours]! Does He hide for reasons unknown? God forbid that He should, in this of all times, be a *deus absconditus* [a secretive or obscuring God]! Then why does He hide?” It is his weeping that He hides. “He hides His weeping in the inner chamber, for just as God is infinite so *His pain is infinite, and this, were it to touch the world, would destroy it. ... God so loved the world that He hid the infinity of His pain from it lest it be destroyed.*”³¹

As Christians read these words from Professor Fackenheim, they may be reminded of other words: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son ...” (John 3:16). Is the chasm between the Judaic interpretation and a Christian view uncrossable? I think not. The chasm may be crossed – from either direction. But this is possible only upon the foundation of the love of God: It is in the hiding that the love of God is revealed; and it is in the revealing that the love of God is hidden. Were the infinity of God’s pain to touch the world, the world would indeed be destroyed. And so God must act to control Godself – the comedians are sent to stand in God’s

place – as in the meanwhile God never ceases to weep within the inner chamber. This means that however guilty God may appear to be, God is innocent. God does not willfully sin. Therefore, it is fitting, if astonishing, that in the 1988 Wiesel work *Twilight*, Raphael should at the end reject the idea that God could ever be cruel.³²

In the last resort, we appear to have two choices: a tragic God who is subject to fate, wherein is also dictated human despair; or a comic God who is free to do the best she can (as we have been made free to do the best we can). A destructive God whose laughter is an instrument of judgement, or a redeeming God whose weeping is the instrument of love and laughter. Perhaps we have the makings here of an Eleventh Proto-Joke: Infinite power vis-a-vis klutzhood (a klutzhood necessitated by love) – an exquisitely divine comedy. We could do a lot worse than attend to the epigram of Voltaire: “God is a comedian playing to an audience that is afraid to laugh.”

It has been said that in the shadow of the *Shoah* only tears have meaning. But if the tears are tears from above, then may human laughter be found again. Tragedy is transformed into comedy, in the measure that fate is transformed into freedom. Tragedy may help imbue a sense of human courage, but only comedy can foster a sense of hope.³³ Where there is humour there is hope; where there is hope, there is humour. The tragic is the inevitable; the comic is the unforeseeable.³⁴ In unrelieved tragedy, forgiveness is lacking. In the life of comedy, as we have suggested, forgiveness enters the arena. Human suffering is here repudiated by the human spirit, the very *imago dei*. Laughter is restored within the holy of holies itself.

The best current book on the Holocaust – well, it’s not on that subject as such; it’s a biography of that quasi-Messiah Woody Allen, and a magnificent study it is, by, of all people, a University of Cambridge political theorist, Graham McCann. Amidst his many references to the *Shoah*, McCann declares: “After the death camps there are at least six million reasons not to laugh anymore, and at least six million reasons to try and laugh again.”³⁵

The underdogs, the fools, the clowns, the jesters, the children keep on dancing and singing and making jokes – against every incongruity and against every mystery. There is no other ending, there is no ending *at all*. There is present only, blessedly, an openness to the future. “The Messiah remains possible.”

I’m giving the final word to Lionel Blue (or Lionel Allen). He is, after all, a rabbi, while I – well, I’m simply a wayfarer passing by the temple, hearkening, but only from upon its threshold, to the laughter in the holy of holies.

It was announced in Tel Aviv that God was soon to send a tidal wave thirty-feet high over the city because of its sins.

Muslims went to their mosques and prayed for a speedy translation to the paradise of Muhammad.

Christians went to their churches and prayed for the intercession of the saints.

Jews went to their synagogues and prayed, "Lord God: It's going to be very hard living under thirty feet of water."³⁶

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