

THE PLACE OF HUMOR IN PREACHING AND WORSHIP: A COURSE PLAN WITH BIBLIOGRAPHY

by Doug Adams *

Having once read Halford Luccock's proposal that all seminary students take a course on humor in their senior year before being unleashed to lead a lifetime of worship and preaching, I teach a course entitled "Humor and Faith" each spring term at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California; RA 390 HUMOR AND FAITH. The course description promises "an exploration of the history of humor's use in the Jewish and Christian traditions (in the Bible and pulpit literature, religious drama and dance, religious art, music, and novel) and contemporary uses of humor to express the faith in worship, preaching, education, and social action." Class meetings embody the forms of humor before analyzing them; for as E.B. White warned, analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog -- the subject dies.¹

In the first class session, I appear as Henry Ward Beecher and present "Exorcising Idols: Humor From The American Pulpit," an hour of humor used in eighteenth and nineteenth century American preaching; and then staying in character as Beecher, I answer class questions about how and why humor was used in preaching. It is clear from that material that humor was used primarily to put down American idolatries of power, wisdom, and wealth.² Before the presentation, students are advised that that at which we cannot laugh has become for us an idol; and so, each student is to note down the jokes at which he or she has difficulty laughing. Such a list then becomes the student's idol inventory and the basis for the next class assignment.

To the second class session, each student comes personifying an idol in our culture: e.g. education, political power, wealth, the private home, youth, or whatever contemporary idol promises salvation. Each student selects one of his or her own idols from the list generated at the first class session. Through costuming and props, each is to help us and himself or herself laugh at the idol. The costumes and props utilize hyperbole. One woman came as marriage that she idolizes; she was dressed as a wedding cake (three tiers) with a little bride and groom hat on her head. I usually come in full academic regalia and a three foot square mortarboard with a foot long tassel that sways in front of my face throughout the class session. One woman came as her house; her address was stenciled on her forehead, a miniature roof pitched on her head, and cuttings from her garden in hand. Others come as their calendars of coming social action appointments, or as some book the person believes would solve the world's problems if everyone read it (one man wore a billboard with "I'm O.K." on the front and "You're O.K." on the back), or as their political position (one particularly conservative student came wrapped in the American flag).

After the idols introduce themselves, then they cluster in compatible groups. Each group has the assignment to plan a worship service celebrating its idolatry. They are to report back to the whole group where they would hold

1. E.B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor," The Second Tree from the Corner, New York, Harper, 1954.

2. Cf. Doug Adams, Humor In The American Pulpit From George Whitefield Through Henry Ward Beecher, Austin, Sharing Company, 1980 revised edition; and Adams, "Laughing At National Idols: A Religious Heritage and Imperative," Modern Liturgy, Vol. 3, No.1, (January 1976), pp. 12-14.

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such a celebration, whom they would invite, what they would do at the celebration, what music or entertainment or refreshments would be shared, what benediction they would pronounce, etc. Our academic group (comprising three of us in full regalia, a person dressed as a Bank Americard/Visa, and a high brow ballet dancer) decided to hold our celebration at Widener Library, Harvard. After a four hour lecture on a particularly fascinating conjugation of a Greek verb, we would award an honorary degree to the Bank Americard/Visa and announce the anonymous donation of a new library wing. For music, we would all sing "I Found A Million Dollar Baby" (our Visa's favorite) played with sophistication on the harp and choreographed for classical ballet. Our benediction was simply "Study" spoken in ~~ten~~ ancient and ~~two~~ modern languages.³

The third class uses a variety of techniques to bring to life biblical humor. In the first hour I share dramatic ways to bring out the humor in several of Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees, his parables, and his disciples. These ways are fully detailed in several articles recently published to which the students may later refer.⁴ During the second hour, the students work in sub-groups to select and develop the humor of biblical passages. For this day, they have read works by John Dominic Crossan, Elton Trueblood, Bob Funk, Dan Via or others.⁵ In future years, I will probably hold this class and the next one closer to the end of the quarter so that students will have the tools of humor in music, drama, dance, and visual art to bring the biblical humor to life. For most of the sub-groups see the humor but only partially bring it to life the next week.

The fourth class is the time given over for groups to share presentations of biblical humor. Some groups dramatize the humorous story, others put on a musical comedy, and others give modern translations. A few students skilled in mime have presented a series on Jesus' parables; and one student put together a two screen slide show with fine juxtaposition based on the beatitudes (or antibeatitudes discussed by Crossan). Some of the best results I regularly have Modern Liturgy publish.⁶ Each presentation is followed by critique. Such critique considers not simply the quality of form and content but also the appropriate audience that such humor would address. For instance, the Good Samaritan might be gay if the play is to be presented to a conservative church, but probably should be a KKK member or Nazi if the play is to be presented to a liberal church. The advisability of presenting two or three short different versions of the same play is explored; so, in most churches one would do the Good Samaritan once as a gay and again as a KKK member and again as an oil company executive (all in the same evening or morning worship.)

The fifth class explores humor in art. My lecture shares humor through the history of medieval church art and architecture as well as through the image of the devil and the serpent in the nineteenth and twentieth century American

3. For a further description of such an idolatry party, cf. Adams, "Laughing At National Idols," op.cit., p. 14; and Adams, "April Fool's Day," Liturgy, XIX, No.3, (March 1974), p.34.

4. Adams, "Bringing Biblical Humor To Life In Liturgy," Modern Liturgy, Vol.6, No.8 (Dec.'79/Jan.'80), pp.4-5 & 27-29; and other articles in that issue devoted to humor in worship.

5. Especially recommended to students are Crossan's The Dark Interval, Chicago, Argus, 1975; and Funk's Jesus As Precursor, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975.

6. Modern Liturgy, Vol.6, No. 8, op.cit., carried two such results: translations by John Kiffmeyer (pp.6-7) and a play on Jonah by Jim Groves and Terry Teigen (p.8).

art; for those two images appear much more frequently and more centrally in American art than in European art. The interrelation of imagery in drama, art, and sermons is shared.⁷ Students have read articles such as Samuel Miller's "The Clown in Contemporary Art" and Wolfgang Zucker's "The Clown as the Lord of Disorder" and bring to class cartoons expressing significant insights through humor. In the class we use the cartoons as the bases for quick tableaux or mimes with brief narration so that we embody the cartoons for others to sense. Critique concentrates on ways to edit the presentations to make them as brief as possible. (Doris Humphreys once noted that all dances are too long; and the same is true of most humorous sketches as well as most sermons.)

The sixth class session exposes students to the medium through which much humor enters worship: music. More has been written about humor in music than about humor in any other form. Background readings are Gerardus van der Leeuw's observations about "change in music" as the basis for humor; for a major change in pitch, in volume, or in pace produces the humor. Also students read about Irony and Satire in the Black Spirituals.⁸ To class, students bring satirical lyric replacements to contemporary popular tunes or old time favorite hymns: e.g. "Stand Up, Stand Up for Potlucks." We then sing some of these in class and plan a variety show for the whole school with songs satirizing the idolatries of each of our favorite campus groups and causes.

The seventh and eighth class sessions feature each student as a preacher who used humor in preaching. (Students may select a religious figure who used humor in other avenues of expression: e.g. G.K. Chesterton, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et.al.) This long term assignment may be presented in one of two ways: the student may present a short sermon or join in a panel "Meeting of the Minds" discussion that I moderate. The student speaks lines drawn from the characters they have chosen and stay in character as they interact with others on the panel or in the class. I ask that the students choose characters who will serve them well in future ministry: i.e. they choose characters from their own denominations so they might use the sermons in their future churches. Background reading includes my HUMOR IN THE AMERICAN PULPIT FROM GEORGE WHITEFIELD THROUGH HENRY WARD BEECHER from which each student may select one preacher from the ninety-one discussed. I group those choosing to serve on panels by commonality of interest. For instance, there is one panel of church reformers in different periods: Luther, Brother Francis (while he was still living and not a saint), Mrs. Alexander Campbell, and Anne Hutchinson. Having the panelists come from different periods adds to the humorous insights. Our format is similar to Steve Allen's: a brief time in which each panelist may speak with the moderator and then a general panel discussion where the characters may question each other. From these class sessions have come programs that students take out to the churches as evening events, sermons, education forums, etc.

7. Students read sections of G.R. Oust, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, London, Blackwell and Mott, 1966, pp.471-547 on "Sermon and Drama."

8. Gerardus van der Leeuw, "The Transitional Structure" and "Transition," Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy In Art, Nashville, Abingdon, 1963, pp.234-242; Russell Ames, "Protest and Irony in Negro Folksong," Science and Society, XIV, (Summer 1950), pp.193 and 213; and John Lovell, Jr., "The Social Implications of Early Negro Spiritual," The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States, New York, Arno Press, 1969, pp. 128-137.

The ninth and tenth class sessions are usually filled with final projects presented or summarized for class benefit. Some students work together to present a short play suggested in a reading list.⁹ Others present a contemporary sermon they have crafted to deal with a modern idolatry in their parish. Others share hymns they have written to help us laugh at ~~our~~ sins that otherwise have us immobilized. Whatever has been created is evaluated in terms of its possibilities and place in worship or preaching. For instance, a satirical or humorous hymn or prayer may be needed at times of confession but might not be appropriate later in the service. Such presentations allow us to develop more fully the theology of humor in worship and preaching. And several readings provide background for such discussions.¹⁰

For those who mistakenly think that Christians worship in a holy of holies on a sabbath, humor will be consigned to the vestibule; for humor is too unsettling in the Temple.¹¹ But for those who understand that Christians worship in a nave on the first workday of the week, humor will unsettle our worship and preaching; for in the relation between finite and infinite, there will always be humor even in heaven. At the end of our class on HUMOR AND FAITH, I ask each student to bring an epitaph appropriate for his or her funeral or memorial service. (Some students design their own funerals with humor as a final project in the course.) As one collects parishioners' favorite jokes for later reference in funeral counselling if not the funeral sermons, so students collect material to be able to witness to the Christian faith and die laughing. Some read Marjorie McCoy's fine book To Die With Style and others produce Christopher Fry's play A Phoenix Too Frequent. At the close of the class, I share my favorite humor dealing with death. (These sharings range from the fine one line epitaph, "this is all over my head" to the closing story about Samuel Upham. (In the story, I change John Hus to Joan of Arc for the sake of students who did poorly in church history.) This was also a favorite of Hal Luccock's.

The beloved Dr. Samuel Upham lay dying; friends and relatives were gathered about the bed. The question arose whether he was still living or not. Someone advised, "Feel his feet. No one ever died with warm feet." Dr. Upham opened an eye and said, "John Hus did." These were his last words, and glorious ones too. They tell a lot about the relation of humor to faith.¹²

9. Cf. Doug Adams, "Humorous Plays For The Church Year: An Annotated List," a four page review of 28 plays suitable for presentation in whole or in part for sermon times through the church year. \$1.25 from The Sharing Company, P.O. Box 2224, Austin, Texas 78767.

10. Soren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, Lee Capel, trans., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1965; Conrad Hyers, ed., Holy Laughter: Essays On Religion In The Comic Perspectives, New York, Seabury, 1969; Horace Bushnell, "Work and Play," Work and Play, New York, Charles Scribner, 1864.

11. Unfortunately Reinhold Niebuhr misunderstood the place of Christian worship as the Temple and so misplaced humor: cf. "Humor and Faith," Discerning the Signs of The Times, New York, Harper and Row, 1949, pp. 130-131.

12. Simeon Stylites (Halford Luccock), "Research; Human Interest and Humorous Stories of the Church," Christian Century, (July 7, 1954), p. 817; and cf. Ezra Squier Tipple, Drew Theological Seminary, 1867-1917, A Review of the First Half Century, New York, The Methodist Book Concern, 1917, p.136.