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## The Angelic Smile between Science and Theology

**Abstract:** Ancient cultural models viewed laughter as a cathartic source of purification due to its close connection with the comic, in opposition to the tragic, and with the banal of everyday life. During the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the science of the comic, with its vast philosophical, aesthetic and anthropological resources, had to face the challenge of being regarded with suspicion by theology, a discipline on the rise, whose attempts failed, for the most part, to grasp its essence, force and significance. The sinuous history of the acceptance and integration of smile, even in its angelic form, within a Christian frame constitutes a topic of great relevance in present-day circumstances, when public derision has almost entirely replaced the profound, redemptive effects of quality humour. Ancient philosophy, patristics and scholastic science, and modern thought converge to mark a symbolic trajectory for the gentle, angelic smile in each of us, or at least in those of us who do not forsake their childhood virtues. A scholarly foray into the area of laughter may easily turn into a life lesson occasioned by the universality of this phenomenon, the only human activity that releases more energy than it consumes.

**Keywords:** *humour, sympathetic, angelic smile, modern Christian, laughter*

**Rezumat:** Modelele culturale antice au valorizat râsul ca o surs de purificare cathartica a fiin ei prin conexiunile sale intime cu comicul, opus aadar atât tragicului, cât i banalului cotidian. Comicologia ca tiin cu ample resurse filozofice, estetice i antropologice a avut de înfruntat în Antichitatea târzie i în Evul Mediu timpuriu rezervele unei teologii în curs de elaborare, din rândurile c reia doar câ iva protagoni ti de for i-au intuit esen a, for a i însemn tatea. Istoria sinuosei accept ri i integr ri în cadre cre tine a surâsului, fie acesta i angelic, constituie un subiect de maxim relevan i chiar actualitate, ast zi când formele derizivii publice au uitat sensul compensator i profund simpatetic al umorului de calitate. Filozofia antic , patristica i scolastica, gândirea modern concur toate la schi area unui destin emblematic pentru zona surâsului delicat i angelizat al fiec ruia dintre noi, sau cel pu in al tuturor celor ce nu- i reneag virtu ile copil riei bune din ei. Orice excurs erudit în arealul comicologic se poate lesne transforma într-o lec ie de via , datorit universalit ii acestui fenomen, singura activitate uman care elibereaz mai mult energie decât consum .

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *umor, simpatetic, surâs angelic, cre tin modern, râs*

Anthropologists have established that one of the many remarkable spiritual expressions of the passion for living amongst Romanians is their subtle, refined sense of humour. Romanians, but most certainly other peoples and ethnic groups as well, have a penchant for farce, joke, irony, self-irony, and banter, and the rare gift of being able to smile in the face of adversity. Our increased mental capacity and heightened sensitivity, forged in the turmoil of a harsh history, have gradually elevated us to the privileged state of assuming the inner *joy* of being cheerful, of understanding and cherishing the existential *compensating* virtues of laughter. For is laughter not – in Kantian terms – together with the beautiful and the sublime the guarantee of an essential spiritual harmonisation, *i.e.* a necessary mental and humoral balance, that singular connection between the phenomenal world and the unknown ?

The aesthete Paolo Santarcangeli argued that “l’Umore e il Comico sono, in primo luogo, un segno e un simbolo di umanità: non solo, ma di riflessione, di maturità, di capacità critica, insomma, di libertà”<sup>1</sup>, while the Romantic Jean Paul Richter believed from the depths of his tumultuous soul that “it is through the idealism that ignores the real world, through the cordial humour that requires only a small infinity as the site of free running imagination, and the combination of the two that [...] one can reach happiness”<sup>2</sup>.

Without theoretically locating sympathetic smile exclusively within Christian theology, we consider useful and illuminating any hermeneutic attempt to correlate the anthropological dimension of the comical with past or present cultural spaces. For example, in the Old Testament human laughter cannot be immediately justified by recourse to the existence of God’s laughter. The human echo of divine joyfulness consists in the legitimate joy and the “happy heart beat” of a community that experiences the passage from

<sup>1</sup> Paolo Santarcangeli, *Homo Ridens. Estetica, filologia, psicologia, storia del comico*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschky Editore, 1989, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Paul Richter, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 1804, apud Marian Popa, *Comicologia*, Bucure ti, Editura Univers, 1975, p. 229.

*tremendum* to *fascinans*: “fear is sublimated into inner happiness, finding its natural expression in joy and laughter. This state of relaxed wonder can reach the zenith of old testamentary religious joy, shaping the religious mentality of Orthodox Judaism and the Talmudic thought of the Rabbis”. Jakob Jonnson also notes that for the benefit of religious edification “the most holy things and ideas have been humorously discussed, not because the holy should be ridiculed, but because the comical served a holy purpose”<sup>3</sup>.

What are, then, the forms of laughter available to the biblical man? There are at least two, corresponding to the words for laughter in the *Old Testament*. *Lâak* designates the scornful, negative, often malicious laughter. It is the laughter of the “madman”, which symbolically indicates “fallen humanity as a whole”<sup>4</sup>. The insane mocker (*stultus, insipiens*) is a moral anarchist who discredits the holy through a kind of “devilish imitation”, a distorted mimicry of divine laughter. His sketch, gleaned from *The Proverbs of Solomon*, reveals a mean, incorrigible individual, who attracts disaster and is rightfully cursed; he refuses to accept advice, reproof, or instruction, and remains a source of trouble until he is driven away from the city. Such is the “qualifying laughter” that emanates from the human being, making it prone either to “blasphemy” (if insane and unrestrained) or righteousness, if kept within the confines of common sense and moderation: “A man’s attire and open-mouthed laughter, and a man’s manner of walking, show what he is”<sup>5</sup> (*Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirah*, 19, 27). Moderate laughter is thus a characteristic of normative humanity: “A fool raises his voice when he laughs, but a clever man smiles quietly”<sup>6</sup> (*ibidem*, 21, 22).

There is another form of old testamentary laughter, captured by the term *sâhak*; it is a laughter that stems from joy and positive enthusiasm, in the spirit of God. This is the name Isaac received from God Himself: *Yçhq-El* (“Elohim hath made me to laugh”), as predestined in the Book of Life: “And we told her the name of her son, as his name is ordained and written in the heavenly tables (*i.e.*) Isaac”<sup>7</sup> (*The Book of Jubilees*, XVI, 3-4).

The New Testament brings along a clear “paradigm shift” in the scholarship on laughter. The existence of a Christian laughter, inspired by the Saviour’s deeds or words, was questioned from the very beginning. The stumbling block for theologians was the opinion (based on the *Gospels*’ total silence on the matter) that Jesus – God incarnate and absolute embodiment of perfect humanity – never laughed in his entire life on earth. The rejection of laughter by Christian theology has its own history: between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries we witness a planned repression of mockery and bad jokes (*stultiloquium, scurrilitas*), expressly forbidden by the Apostle in the *Letter to the Ephesians* (V, 4).

In the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Jacques le Goff<sup>8</sup> identifies a stage of “controlled liberalisation of laughter, when the distinction between good and bad laughter gradually takes shape”, and more favourable quotes from humanistic writings complement the biblical references to laughter. It is during this period that theologians (Alexander of Males, John of Salisbury, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas) develop a new categorisation of the comical, defining the conditions of legitimate laughter. Around the same time, smile finds its place in Gothic sculpture (especially on the lips of young angels), and Franciscans become known among the other religious orders as *joculatores Dei*, promoters of the childlike smile as a pedagogical method.

We have to stress at this point that no Father of the Church (Tertullian, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great etc.) ever condemned laughter in itself, but warned against its liability to passions. The gradual distinctions introduced in the conceptualisation of laughter represent the new values of Christian spirituality, mapped onto the Greek and Roman classical concepts: “For the seemly relaxation of the countenance in a harmonious manner – as of a musical instrument – is called a smile. So also is laughter on the face of well-regulated men termed”<sup>9</sup> (Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* II, 5: *De risu*).

Any morally and divinely established community is characterised by a permanent “legitimate joy” (*joie*

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Jonnson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1985, p. 86-87.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Teodor Baconski, *Râsul Patriarhilor. O antropologie a deriziunii în patristica r s ritean*, Bucure ti, Editura Anastasia, 1996, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: standard revised version containing the Old and New Testaments with its Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books*, [Iowa Falls], World Bible Publishers, 1973, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Henry Charles, D.D., *The Book of Jubilees*, New York, Cosimo Classics, 2007, p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques le Goff, *Jésus a-t-Il ri?* in “L’Histoire”, XIV, no. 158, sept. 1992, p. 72-74.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. Alexander Roberts, Sir James Donaldson, Arthur Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Vol. II), New York, Cosimo Classics, 2007, p. 250.

*licite*), as Marius Latour notes<sup>10</sup>. Many ordinary or outstanding Christians distinguished themselves by leading their public and private lives in just such a state. The great saints went down in the history of universal spirituality by asserting, through personal example, the happiness of taking part in the cosmic drama of human redemption. Saint Francis of Assisi poured his soul and contagious enthusiasm not only upon the Franciscan Friars but upon the entire nature. Saint Bonaventure recounts in the *Major Legend* that “[w]hen the saint died, the larks, who are the friends of light and fear the dusk, gathered in large flocks, even though the sun was setting, circling round the roof of his house *with an eerie joy, a cheerful and obvious testimony* to the glory of the Saint, who had so many times invited them to raise their song to God” (added emphases).

Another famous Italian Saint, Filippo Neri (1515-1595), known from childhood as Peppo the Good, used his constant joy and inherent optimism as pedagogical and preaching methods. *Liturgia horarum* mentions in its preface to the saint’s day on May 26: “Enituit amore in proximum, evangelica simplicitate et *hilari servitio Dei*”. Not surprisingly, the favourite saying of San Filippo Neri, considered by Henri Bremond to be “*le saint patron des humoristes*”, was “*Lo spirito allegro acquista piu facilmente la perfezione cristiana che non lo spirito malinconico*”.

Prime examples of cheerful strength before martyrdom were offered by saints such as Polycarp (c. 69-c. 155), the heroic Bishop of Smyrna, Lawrence of Rome (c. 210-258), or the brilliant humanist, Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), who was able to make jokes with his executioner on his way to the scaffold. Christ’s laughter (or not) remains a matter for ongoing theological debate, but such examples allow us to believe that laughter and, in particular, smiling, is neither a demonic figment, nor a flaw in creation reserved for the evil.

The culture of the angelic smile advanced in Christianity demonstrates that the smile of the face and the wittiness of the heart (*eutrapelia*) are perfectly compatible with Love, Providential Care, and the promise of eternal joy made by the Saviour in the name of the Father. It thus marks a higher stage in the studies of laughter at the time. We consider that we should return to the principles of this stage, which we put forward in the present study. The experience of martyrdom, coenobitic heroism, and the power of the Christian example opened up new avenues in the interpretation of the comical, and philosophical and aesthetic theories started spreading the cultural models forged within this frame. Smile and prayer stopped being viewed as irreconcilably opposed.

There are numerous scenes or episodes in the *Gospels* where we can hardly imagine Jesus being able to keep a stern countenance, devoid of the innermost smile that could be easily read on his face: the wedding in Cana, his disciples’ childish squabbles, his call to the children (*Sinite parvulos ad me venire*), Lazarus’ enthusiastic resurrection, or his triumphal entry to Jerusalem.

The “joy of the heart”, recognised by H. Freiherr von Campenhausen in *Christentum und Humor*<sup>11</sup>, amounts to a *charàn megalen* (“great joy”, *Luke II, 10*), “opposed to the pessimism and despair specific to first-century paganism” (C. Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux. Commentaire*, II, 1853, *passim*). Other new testamentary encounters or contexts (the adulterous woman, the question asked by the man born blind, *John IX, 27*), Jesus’ refusal to answer the Jews before they answered him (*Matthew XXI, 7*) are permeated with a discreet, all-pervading humour. Such quasi-humoristic interventions may indeed be attributed either to Jesus, or to the Gospellers, or to the first recipients of the sacred texts, but their comical tone cannot be denied. It is also present in the candour of Christ’s parables, confirming Gary Webster’s argument, from a position of theological authority, that “in the world of the New Testament” nothing is taken completely seriously, except for the redemption of the soul<sup>12</sup>. In a similar vein, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard points out that “Christ’s religion offers the most ironic-humorous perspective in the entire human history”.

Through their frankness and transparency, the *Apophthegms* of Late Antiquity consolidate “an image of the holy man as even-tempered [...] [and] endowed with a grain of humour: monks are merry men, and their ascetic lifestyle does not make them morose” (C. Wagennar). This is how many Christian luminaries have come down through the ages: St. Joseph Calasantius (1557-1648), Saint Joseph of Cupertino (1603-1663), St. Martin of Porres (1579-1639), and the great pedagogue Giovanni Bosco (1815-1888), remembered by Victor Hugo as a charismatic and serene man, in whom he had encountered “a true human being”.

Closer to us in time, we find the great convert of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cardinal John Henry Newman, and

<sup>10</sup> Marius Latour, *Le probleme du rire et du réel: le reel joué ou ludique comme premier réel*, Paris, Presses Universitaires du France, 1949, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Christentum und Humor* in *Aus der Frühzeit des Christentums. Studien zur Kirchengeschichte des ersten und zweiten Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1961, p. 309 *sqq.*

<sup>12</sup> Gary Webster, *The Laughter in the Bible*, Bloomington, Bethany Press, 1960, p. 20.

even Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (1881-1963), who became a Roman Catholic Pope and the promoter of the *aggiornamento*, under the name of John XXIII. A collection of authentic anecdotes and conversation snippets attributed to Pope Roncalli, entitled *A Pope Laughs*<sup>13</sup>, was published and translated into many languages. The Pope's religiosity, modern in its daring spirit, but traditional in its fervour and balance, transpires in the book, as the Pope believed that "humour and wit were related to wisdom": "the first Pope who is full of cheerfulness and joy" (according to the *Daily Express* in 1959). This luminescent trend of his personality is also underlined in a recent biography published by the famous Austrian publicist and writer Hubert Gaisbauer: *Ruhig und froh lebe ich weiter. Älter werden mit Johannes XXIII*, Wien, DomVerlag, 2011. One of the chapters in this book is speaking precisely of *Humor und Selbstkritik* (humour and self-criticism).

The most striking conclusions about this delicate subject belong, we believe, to St. Augustine, quoted by Blaise Pascal as the greatest authority on the matter: "We ought ever [...] to preserve charity in the heart, even while we are obliged to pursue a line of external conduct which to man has the appearance of harshness; we ought to smite them with a sharpness, severe but kindly, remembering that their advantage is more to be studied than their gratification. [...] The wicked, in persecuting the good, blindly follow the dictates of their passion; but the good, in their prosecution of the wicked, are guided by a wise discretion, even as the surgeon warily considers where he is cutting, while the murderer cares not where he strikes". "Who would venture to say that truth ought to stand disarmed against falsehood, or that the enemies of the faith shall be at liberty to frighten the faithful with hard words, and jeer at them with lively sallies of wit; while the Catholics ought never to write except with a coldness of style enough to set the reader asleep?"<sup>14</sup>

On a final note, we can say, together with Nicolae Corneanu, the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of Banat, that "the Church Fathers and, with them, the entire Christian world, awoken to a new life, do not condemn laughter in its pure, angelic form. They do not make crying the norm, for, even when they recommend tears, for the virtuous these are tears of joy and spiritual beatitude; it is only for the sinful that they are tears of penance and heartbreak"<sup>15</sup>.

All this clearly points to the compensating, bracing, therapeutic role of laughter. Laughter eliminates or reduces Freudian-like complexes, by defusing the tension of repression in open and optimistic confrontations, and avoiding, in this way, any dramatic conflicts. In the midst of disagreeable, sometimes awkward, but always benign events, laughter immediately restores self-confidence and puts an end to the terrifying prospect of a relapse. In spite of the small steps ahead over the past few years, the correct, scientific use of laughter in medicine and psychology remains a virgin territory, open to further exploration. Nonetheless, numerous Western and Indian clinics have lately offered support for unconventional therapy based on the controlled stimulation of laughter (humour therapy or gelasotherapy); medical specialists employ groundbreaking techniques in order to change the mood of their patients, such as the "clownish" ones portrayed by famous actor Robin Williams in the feature film *Patch Adams* (1998, directed by Tom Shadyac) inspired from the real story of medical student Hunter Adams who believed that "laughter is the best medicine", or promoted these days by the Gestalt therapist Lenny Ravich<sup>16</sup>.

Scientifically speaking, as the only human activity that generates more cerebral energy than it consumes, laughter surely acts as a corrective both to the cerebral cortical flow in states of consciousness and to the excessive separation between the neocephalic brain and the paleocephalic brain. It is very likely that a brain that does not laugh enough suffers from an aggravated dichotomy between these centres.

Finally, beyond the therapeutic, or at least preventative function in the case of neurosis and depression, beyond the preservation and development of mental faculties, beyond the breaking of stereotypes and one-sided perceptions, beyond the substitution of clarity for equivocation, and the production of a supply of neuromediators, laughter restores confidence not only in oneself, but in the human community and in the sense of belonging to a civilisation overall. It inspires a refreshing confidence in the system of values, the world, and the cosmos at our disposal, all ultimately attributes of authentic Christianity.

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Klinger, *Ein Papst lacht. Die gesammelten Anekdoten um Johannes XXIII*, Frankfurt, Buchgemeinschafts-Aufgabe, Heinrich Scheffler Verlag, 1976, 127 p.

<sup>14</sup> Blaise Pascal, Thomas M'Creie (trans.), *Provincial Letters*, Boston: Mobile reference.com, Mobi Classics Series, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Mitropolit Nicolae Corneanu, *Cenzura răsului la Sfin ii P rin i*, in the volume *Patristica mirabilia. Pagini din literatura primelor veacuri cre tine*, Timi oara, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, 1987, p. 196-197, making reference to Otto Zimmermann & Karl Hageney, *Grundriss des Aszetik*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1933, p. 284.

<sup>16</sup> Lenny Ravich, *Endless optimism: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Enlightenment. A Spiritual Approach of Happiness*, 2003, XLibris, Corp., p. 7 sqq.

The tragic nature of the human condition, the chaos, the sound and the fury of the century, and the breaks in history are such that, in the absence of a permanent (re)affirmation of confidence and faith, the ordinary person risks losing their passion for living. It is in these terms that laughter can be understood to contribute to everyone's well-being and equilibrium, to the survival of the species. After tens of millennia during which the instinct governed by the paleocephalic brain secured the salvation of humanity, in a world increasingly artificial and "prefabricated", full of pseudo-spiritualities and obsolete recreational techniques, it is time for neocortical intelligence to demonstrate the same vital capacity<sup>17</sup>.

Our forebears, whether simple people, kings or saints, cried and laughed equally heartily, embracing a "supra-real" vision of the world that bestowed them with meaning. Today, when we laugh so rarely and inconsistently, spiritual prosperity is more than ever at risk. It is only positive laughter and prayer that charge our batteries and help our mental, nervous, and informational circuits to regenerate. "The *cathartic, healing laughter* renews and fulfils [...] in a world that remains insecure, deceitful, and changing" (Jean Courtes). *Mehr Freude* (more joy) was how the priest G.V. Keppler chose to entitle his urge to faith in 1910, while Emil Fiedler defined the "new man" of modern Christianity as "God's free and joyful son. He has a most serene understanding of life, and is instilled with the greatest optimism, which only the man who sees himself as the son of God can experience".

More recently, in 1977, the Catholic priest Hans Walhof, bringing all these arguments together, wrote a literature review on the binary theme of "humanising laughter" and "Christian laughter". Some of the quotes gathered by him<sup>18</sup> are absolute *memorabilia*. "Man cannot offer a more valuable gift to his fellowman than laughter", wrote, for example, the Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931). And if a Tyrolean proverb says that "the door to heaven opens only to those who know how to smile", Paul Claudel notes that "the greatest joy is accompanied by the greatest truth".

To the child's innocent question "why can angels fly?", the Catholic Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936), also known as "the laughing philosopher" who is and will surely remain one of our main cultural and spiritual models, offered a simple answer: "because they feel light" – I do believe that it is only when we smile from the heart that we, modern and contemporary people, do feel the same.

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<sup>17</sup> V. Claudiu T. Arie an, *Geneza comicului în cultura română*, Timi oara, Editura Excelsior Art, 2010, p. 144-147, for more information and developments on this subject.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Walhof, *Lachen macht menschlich. Das Lachen gehört zum Christentum*, Limburg, Lahn Verlag, 1977.

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