

Humor is to Religion as ... ?

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Let me begin by saying that I feel awkward speaking on the topic of humor, so soon after we have just lost Richard Wallsom, a treasured member of our congregation, and long time choir member. I know we are all saddened by his loss. But Richard had a wonderful sense of humor, which he generously shared with us, prominently through alternative lyrics to popular songs, which we have sung at fund raising events. I believe, were he here, he would enjoy this service.

I want to relate prominent aspects of humor to religion, but in attempting this, I do not intend to sanctify humor. I know it can sometimes be mean spirited, or trivial. Come to think of it, so can religion ... But not surprisingly, I will not be focusing on those aspects of religion. I want to focus on our Unitarian religion in particular. So, let me clarify what I mean in both spheres.

Religion has been defined in two prominent ways, although I might add that no definition of religion is completely accepted, except perhaps by its author:

Substantive definitions of religion focus on the content:

- “A system of beliefs in a divine or super human power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power.” Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi (1975)

Functional definitions focus on essential functions of religion.

- “Whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive, and that we will die.” Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis (1993)

In this case, the **answering of existential questions**.

What is the meaning of life? Whom do I aspire to be? How should I treat others? I find this focus far more relevant to **Unitarian** religion.

And of course, I am most interested in Unitarian religion

I am sure most Unitarians, at some point or other, have been asked the question, “**What do Unitarians believe?**”

When I hear the question, “What do Unitarians believe, my first thought is often, “**Wrong verb.**”

I think a more defining question for us is, “**What do Unitarians value?** Disparate as our **beliefs** might be, I see us as **united by our values**. And some of our **most prized values** bring me to some clear parallels with humor.

So let’s consider some prominent and maybe informative **aspects of humor**:

- I. It arises out of ability to **perceive and consider multiple perspectives**, and the children’s story this morning was a crystal clear example of flexibility in shifting between alternative perspectives. Currently the most influential theory of humor says it is based on **incongruity**. This makes for a fairly intimate relationship between humor and religion, because both deal with the incongruities of our existence. As alluded to in the Niebuhr quote earlier, humor is concerned with immediate incongruities of life, and religion deals with ultimate ones.

So let me share a joke. A man is in a ship wreck, and he washes up on a deserted island. He is a pretty resourceful fellow, and he manages to create tools from available resources, cultivates various native plants for food, and creates very substantial shelter for himself. His time alone on the island stretches into years. Then one day he sees a small boat in the distance that seems to be drifting toward the island. As it draws close enough, he pulls it in, and there is another man who has been shipwrecked. After the newcomer recovers a bit, he looks around and is amazed at how well the first man has managed to flourish on the island.

He notices what looks like a house, and asks, “Did you build that house?”

He answers, “I did.”

“Well, would you give me a tour, I am fascinated?”

The first replies, “Sure”, and walks him through the house.

The visitor is greatly impressed, but at one point he looks out a window and exclaims, “What is that larger building behind the house? Did you build that too?”

The first replies, “That’s my church, and I did build it. I take religion seriously, and I wanted a place to worship” The visitor is surprised and asks to see the church. As they are going through it, he sees still another large building through a church window.

He asks, “What on earth is that?”

“**Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.**”

Now with regard to **Incongruity**, there is an ample supply of incongruities in human existence, and religion deals extensively with them. In this joke, there is the **incongruity of religious ideals for loving relations, affirmation of others, brotherhood of humanity** pitted against the simple

fact that even within a religious context **we too often encounter and create awkward conflict**, exaggerated, in the joke, in a person who evidently could not even get along with himself.

And I should add, if only in his former church, he had elected himself to a **Committee on Right Relations**.

Unitarians **value flexible thinking**, a willingness to confront the complexity of existential or basically any issues and do our best to make sense of them. I see that as a prominent aspect of sound religion

II. Further, humor is **positive and playful**, and as such it illustrates, at least in a modest way, some degree of **faith**.

As part of the human condition, we know we will die. We also know that for many, maybe most, our death will be preceded by some significant inconvenience and likely, suffering. So to joke and engage in humor is to deal constructively and in a positive way with difficult circumstances.

“Comedy is an escape, not from the truth but from despair; a narrow **escape into faith**.”
Christopher Fry

Now you probably expected, as a psychologist eventually I was going to quote **Freud**. In a similar but more verbose vein, he wrote, “Humor has in it a liberating element, something fine and elevating, ... the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that ... the wounds dealt by the outside world are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.”

Of course, other religions sometimes equate faith with the **absence of religious doubt**. Thankfully that is not the case for us.

III. Humor also **integrates thinking and emotion (mirth)**. The cognitive structure of a joke, if successful, elicits the positive emotion of mirth and laughter. Religion too, strives to integrate thinking and feeling, in fostering clear thinking about ultimate questions, with the implied compassion and passion that accompanies our beliefs and values. We are affected more when a person’s words have close ties to their heart.

IV. Humor is always, of necessity, **revealing**. I say this because humor involves an element of surprise, and when we are surprised, something is revealed which we did not expect. What is revealed is often minor, as a result of misdirecting attention in the narrative of a joke, but sometimes more substantial. Consider the following.

A man goes to a Buddhist hamburger stand, and he says, “I want you to make me one with everything.” That is not the joke, though it could be. However, there is more. The counter man cooks up a hamburger, wraps it up, and places it on the counter. The customer reaches in his pocket, pulls out a \$20 dollar bill, and hands it over to the counter man. He puts it in the register drawer, and closes the drawer with an air of finality. The customer exclaims “Wait!, that’s a \$20 dollar bill. This is just a hamburger. Where’s my change?” The counter man replies softly, “Ah, change comes from within.”

For a more startling revelation from humor, I belong to an organization called the International Society for Humor Studies. They scheduled a panel to present views on whether humor has any direct impact on politics. One speaker argued, “Humor has no significant impact on politics, it can’t, and it never will.” The panel was thinking primarily of jokes told about politicians. The next speaker brought up the perfect counter argument. Namely, George Allen, from right here in Virginia. He made a joke at a political rally, referring to a dark skinned young man of Indian descent as “macaca”, a racial slur where George Allen grew up. This remark revealed and confirmed an aspect of George Allen that abruptly transformed him from an assumed front runner to become the Republican presidential candidate, to a non candidate. Revelation on a different level is a prominent aspect of religion as well.

V. Humor can defuse highly stressful situations, as well as physiological stress more generally. At one point early in his career, Abraham Lincoln, having bested an opponent in a dispute, was quite literally challenged to a duel. In those days, literally a life or death situation. Lincoln responded, “I will accept your challenge if I may choose both the weapons and the distance.” “Then we shall proceed sir, the choices are yours!” To which Lincoln replied, “Cow pies at 10 paces.” Probably an extremely difficult time for most to generate a perspective other than fight or flee, but Lincoln’s ability to bring forth a completely different and humorous perspective was evidently well worth the effort. The two dissolved in laughter, and the duel was averted.

Religion too can prevent or defuse highly stressful situations, through principles like the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or, the New Testament based, “Turn the other cheek, 70 times 7 times.”

VI. Also, humor, at its best, can help the healing process for psychological trauma. Kurt Vonnegut, the author, was a prisoner of war in WWII in the German town of Dresden. Late in the war, while Vonnegut was a prisoner there, allied forces, for no apparent military objective, ruthlessly bombed Dresden, creating massive casualties, and destroying the town. This carnage, and the meaninglessness of the action, were clearly traumatic for Vonnegut, and some 17 years later, he published *Slaughterhouse Five*, a tragicomic novel which addressed both the war and the bombing.

The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, had various surreal experiences, one of which was visits with beings from another planet, Tralfamadore. The Tralfamadoreans taught him to “come unstuck in time”, which meant he could run time backward as well as forward. One night when Billy was having great trouble sleeping, as, I assume, was often the case for Vonnegut, Billy experienced the following:

“He went into the living room, ... turned on the television. He came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again. It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.”

I think in this passage, one can readily sense Vonnegut’s comic spirit working in fantasy to undo the ravages of war, as well as this war’s horrible damage to Vonnegut himself. I do not think it necessary, at this point, to dwell on the parallel attempts of sound religion to heal a wounded world.

My title, “Humor is to Religion as ...?”, implies that I might attempt, through the talk, to complete the analogy. However, knowing my audience, I think it more

appropriate that you come up with your own completions of the analogy, and perhaps we can discuss them over coffee.