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# The Importance of Being Earnest: Evangelicalism's Aesthetics of Sincerity

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***Abstract:*** *A recent debate between theologians James Eglinton and Michael Bird illuminates questions about the aesthetics of evangelicalism, in particular the place and limits of its characteristic earnestness. Historically and theologically, this earnestness arose against a backdrop of the earlier eighteenth century marked by sharp religious and political divisions which served as a breeding ground for satire—a mode or aesthetic that is in many ways the opposite of earnestness. Yet, even in as emblematic a satirical work as Jonathan Swift's* A Tale of a Tub*, earnest, even fervent, religious commitments prevail, albeit through indirection. The spirit of seriousness that undergirded the evangelical movement and, later, the ethos of the Victorian era hinders a dialogism more prone to cultivating a genuine and authentic faith, particularly within the context of the later modern age depicted by the philosopher Charles Taylor. Inasmuch as style is substance, the circumspect posture of humor is its own kind of earnestness.*

***Key Words:*** *Charles Taylor, earnestness, evangelicalism, humor, Jonathan Swift, satire, Systemic Theology*

All human language—even the language of the Bible—is varied in its richness, layerings, and depths. Literary language—especially the language of the Bible—is even more so. To read the Bible literally requires reading it literarily, with an eye for all the ways in which words communicate—directly and indirectly, straightforwardly and sideways, seriously and humorously, earnestly and ironically. This is the essence of hermeneutics: reading a text in such a way so as to understand not merely the words themselves but their meaning.

## Earnestness and Edmund Gosse

The devastating results of a hermeneutic derived from a flat understanding of language, a hermeneutic that fails to consider the literariness of the Bible's language, including its use of narrative, poetry, symbol, and other figures of speech, is shown dramatically, tragically, in the life and works of English poet, critic, and biographer Edmund Gosse. Gosse,



whose life spanned from 1849 to 1928, lived in the wake of evangelicalism's peak influence in England's Victorian era, an age known—like the evangelicals themselves—for its earnestness.[1]

The only child of his evangelical parents, Gosse was raised in his father's belief that his child was among the elect and in his mother's hope that "I should be the Charles Wesley of my age, 'or perhaps,' she had the candour to admit, 'merely the George Whitefield.'"[2] While his father's severity certainly played a great part in his turn away from the faith, as a young man with early propensities toward literature and imagination (passions his parents sought to repress), ultimately, it was Gosse's parents' approach to Scripture that seems to have had a more profound impression on the young man. In his 1907 memoir, *Father and Son*, Gosse describes the flatness with which his parents read Scripture:

> In order to realize [my mother's] condition of mind, it is necessary, I think, to accept the view that she had formed a definite conception of the absolute, unmodified and historical veracity, in its direct and obvious sense, of every statement contained within the covers of the Bible. For her, and for my Father, nothing was symbolic, nothing allegorical or allusive in any part of Scripture, except what was, in so many words, proffered as a parable or a picture. … Hence, although their faith was so strenuous that many persons might have called it fanatical, there was no mysticism about them. They went rather to the opposite extreme, to the cultivation of a rigid and iconoclastic literalness.[3]

As Gosse goes on to explain, this extreme literalness led to misreading the highly symbolic book of Revelation:

> When they read of seals broken and of vials poured forth, of the star which was called Wormwood that fell from Heaven, and of men whose hair was as the hair of women and their teeth as the teeth of lions, they did not admit for a moment that these vivid mental pictures were of a poetic character, but they regarded them as positive statements, in guarded language, describing events which were to happen, and could be recognized when they did happen.[4]

Gosse's mother, having long repressed her own inclinations toward imaginative literature, forbade her son to read novels. But this suppression,

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[1] Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 1976), 9–14.

[2] Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

[3] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 41.

[4] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 42.

not surprisingly, had a reverse effect—not only on novel-reading but ultimately on Gosse's rejection of the truth of the Bible, from which his parents had stripped all wonder, wit, and imagination:

> The longing to invent stories grew with violence; everything I heard or read became food for my distemper. The simplicity of truth was not sufficient for me; I must needs embroider imagination upon it, and the folly, vanity and wickedness which disgraced my heart are more than I am able to express.[5]

In looking back on his upbringing, Gosse understands his parents' views to be, not singular, but reflective of their evangelical culture: "To extremely devout persons, there is something objectionable in most of the great writers of antiquity. Horace, Lucretius, Terence, Catullus, Juvenal,—in each there is one quality or another definitely repulsive to a reader who is determined to know nothing but Christ and him crucified."[6]

Gosse closes his memoir with the scene in which he finally rejects his father's demands regarding the reading of Scripture. Amid this ongoing battle, Gosse's "distaste for Holy Scriptures" grew. Even so, he says, "My desire was to continue to delight in those sacred pages, for which I still had an instinctive veneration." Despite this yearning, he "could not but observe the difference between the zeal" with which he read literary works compared to the daily Bible readings his father pushed him to read with all solemnity.[7] Then (referring to himself in the third person) Gosse describes his final rejection of the authority of both his earthly father and his heavenly one:

> No compromise, it is seen, was offered; no proposal of a truce would have been acceptable. It was a case of "Everything or Nothing"; and thus desperately challenged, the young man's conscience threw off once for all the yoke of his "dedication," and, as respectfully as he could, without parade or remonstrance, he took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself.[8]

If, as his parents insisted, the Bible can be read only in a flat, straightforward fashion, with no room for tension or play, Gosse would not read it at all. As though adding insult to injury, *Father and Son* is written with rapier wit and subtle irony, a devastating counterstrike against the aesthetics

[5] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 16.

[6] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 96.

[7] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 177.

[8] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 186.



of his parents' earnestness.[9]

Gosse's story demonstrates that, in matters of faith, style and substance are inextricably connected. From Carl F. H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* to D. W. Bebbington's quadrilateral to Mark Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* to Thomas Kidd's *Who Is an Evangelical?*, the substance of modern evangelical belief has continued to be a subject of discussion and debate.[10] Relatively less attention has been given, however, to the style of evangelicalism. Yet, in many ways, in evangelicalism (as in all things), style is substance. Indeed, what Edmund Gosse rejected, his memoir shows, is not the substance of his parents' belief but its style. Gosse explains,

> Whether the facts and doctrines contained in the Bible were true or false was not the question that appealed to me; it was rather that they had been presented to me so often and had sunken into me so far that, as someone has said, they "lay bedridden in the dormitory of the soul," and made no impression of any kind upon me.[11]

Gosse's use of "impression" in this reflection is key, for this word refers more to an aesthetic felt response than an intellectual one, again, to style more than substance. It is instructive, then, to attend to the recurring questions regarding the evangelical mode, its style of worship, culture, art, and its very mood and posture—in other words, the aesthetics of evangelicalism. Of course, given that there is little agreement over the definition or the ingredients of evangelical belief, it is likewise difficult to define a characteristic aesthetic, particularly across its history, which is nearly three hundred years long. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that one defining and enduring quality of the style of evangelicalism is earnestness of the sort that produced the literalism of Gosse's parents and the apostasy of Gosse himself.

[9] For more on Gosse's rejection of evangelical belief, see David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 139–62.

[10] Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947); D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from 1730 to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

[11] Gosse, *Father and Son*, 177.

## Earnestness in Modern Dialogue

A recent discussion between two theologians whose work bears significant weight today within evangelical communities offers a helpful glimpse into the continued role of earnestness within evangelicalism, along with skepticism toward its opposing impulses (including humor, jesting, and playfulness), particularly within the spaces evangelicals are likely to take most seriously—the theological ones.

In a review of Michael Bird's *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*,[12] Reformed theologian James Eglinton questions Bird's use of humor, in particular the sidebars that appear throughout the 969-page book titled "Comic Belief," which offer jokes, puns, and other humorous bits. Eglinton questions whether Bird's use of humor in a systematic theology "indulges in the trivialisation of the ultimately important" and expresses concern, following John Webster, that "our theology be properly theological." Eglinton's brief history of humor from pre-modernity through modernity to our current day culture of the therapeutic leads to his charge that "one of our culture's key therapies" is "fun: a recently invented, self-administered soft drug that enables us to laugh at paradox and in so doing, to trivialise its claims upon our lives and make us momentarily forget [Charles] Taylor's problem of haunting immanence." To joke, not only about theology but about God himself, as Bird does in his book, is essentially to suggest, Eglinton believes, "that God puts us in need of therapy, whilst turning to trivialisation, rather than the transcendence of faith, in search of healing." Eglinton's concern—valid in and of itself as well as instructive for numerous other applications—is whether or not such an aesthetic mimics "the norms of secular therapy in its response to the paradox of God." If fun has become a secularized therapy, then a fun systematic theology is, in Eglinton's view, by definition a secularized theology. Citing Wittgenstein, Eglinton concludes that humor is not merely a mode or mood but a worldview.[13]

In other words, style is substance.

Of course, whether or not a humorous style is inherently trivializing depends upon what humor is—a crucial point that will be picked up later in this essay.

In response to the review, Bird rejects Eglinton's account of humor as part of a secular culture of the therapeutic. Rather, Bird argues that humor is simply part of what it means to be human. It also plays a role in both

[12] Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

[13] James Eglinton, "On Fun and Systematic Theology: No Laughing Matter?" *ExpTim* 127.3 (2015): 124–28.



God's story and the human story, for "theology is a drama, and in any drama, even in tragedy, there is a deliberate engineering of comic moments," including in Scripture itself. Theology is not only something we observe but something we live. Bird agrees that "theology should not be trivialized" but cautions that "theology can be trivialized without humour (by suppressing its importance) and humour does not necessarily trivialize its subject (in instances where it genuinely engages, excites, and enlightens an audience)." Thus, Bird argues, a humorous style embodies "delight in the exorable majesty of the God of the gospel," a posture particularly important for theologians and ministers to take. The teaching of theology, Bird concludes, has "one purpose: to lead students to smile and delight in the exorable majesty of the God of the gospel."[14]

Once again, style is substance.

What then is the substance of humor, given that it is not merely a mode or style? And does humor inherently oppose earnestness? Or can the two serve to correct one another and combine into one coherent understanding? These are questions deserving of the many treatments already written on these topics and deserving of many more than what will be suggested briefly in this essay. This treatment will consist of a cursory look at the religious and cultural factors (particularly literary ones) that preceded and gave rise to evangelical earnestness, consider exemplary illustrations of the earnest style in early evangelicalism, and offer some observations about the necessity of the double vision humor offers, not only to a genuinely earnest and lasting faith but also to a basic understanding of reading and interpreting the Bible.

## Earnestness in Pre-Evangelical Context

The sincerity that characterizes the evangelical mode did not emerge from within a vacuum. Following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, which ended an eleven-year Puritan-led Commonwealth, a *via media* was wanted, not only as evidenced by the strengthening of the Established church as a stabilizing force but also as shown by the development of a middle way in the realm of aesthetics and taste. Stuart Tave explains,

> To good-natured Englishmen of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the legacy of the Commonwealth and the Restoration was a double burden. As they saw it, first had come the Puritan, enthusiastic, morose, and austere, then the rake, cynical, gay, and debauched: two extremes in agreement on the natural de-

[14] Michael F. Bird, "Rejoinder by a Smiling Theologian," *ExpTim* 127.3 (2015): 129–31.

pravity of human nature, and either intensely holy or intensely profane.[15]

The Neoclassical Age in England that followed the period of the Restoration was a time of general stability and consensus, occurring after a long period of internal division and strife. It was thus an age ripe for comedy in general and satire in particular—the opposite of the earnestness that would develop later and triumph in the next century. Comedy depends on the agreed upon norms and standards required to provide the humor that arises from deviation from these. In art and literature, on stage and page, humor, jesting, coarseness, and bawdiness prevailed. Satire, a mode of verbal irony, reigned supreme as, arguably, the most accomplished art form of the age. In its most basic sense, going all the way back to the origins of the Greek word *eiroeia,* irony refers to "artful double meaning,"[16] an incongruity, in other words, between what is *said* and what is *meant.* Satire is based on the clearest of all double visions. Because it mocks vice or folly for the purpose of correction, it requires the ability to see vice or folly as such and to see the rule by which it ought to be corrected. The greatest satirists of the age were, not coincidentally, some of the most devoutly religious men of the day: John Dryden, poet laureate and dramatist; Jonathan Swift, the Dean of St. Patrick's in Dublin; Laurence Sterne, Anglican cleric and novelist; and Alexander Pope, Catholic poet and translator of the classics.

No better demonstration that style is substance even as it pertains to doctrine and church practices is found than in a vivid picture painted by Swift in his 1704 satirical work, *A Tale of a Tub.* Half of this digressive, genre-busting work of genius centers on an allegorical tale of three quarrelling brothers—Martin, Jack, and Peter (who represent the three branches of the church, Anglican, Puritan, and Catholic, respectively). The brothers disagree over how to implement the instructions left to them by their late father's will (which serves in the allegory as a symbol of the Scriptures). Jack and Peter (unlike the more faithful Martin) take an approach to their father's will (Scripture) that is the polar opposite of the flat reading of Gosse's parents, stretching the meaning of the text far beyond any reasonable sense in order to read into it whatever passing fashions meet wordly approval. "Fashion" is rendered by Swift quite literally in the form of a coat to which the brothers seek to attach whatever accoutrements come into style. Ironically, by the end of the tale, the embattled Jack and Peter have become so polarized in their opposing beliefs

[15] Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the 18th and Early 19th Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 3.

[16] Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.



and practices that they end up being almost exactly alike, even to the point of being easily mistaken for each other. Jack (symbolizing within the allegory the Puritan severity of John Calvin) so rends his coat that viewed from a distance, its tatters resemble the frills and finery with which Peter (who symbolizes the Catholic tradition) has adorned his own coat.

*A Tale of a Tub*, like nearly all of Swift's considerable corpus of works, is satirical. Yet, Swift uses the humor of satire to promote his own earnest adherence to the Church of England—in his view, the *via media.* In writing some of the greatest satires in the English language, Swift—beloved Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, ardent churchman, and defender of both human and religious liberty—also provides some of the most profound and insightful (and brilliantly humorous) theological works of the age, although his theology was by no means "systematic."[17] Swift was, of course, no evangelical (or rather, less anachronistically speaking, he rejected the Puritan strain of the church from which evangelicalism emerged toward the end of his life). His sardonic, Juvenalian brand of satire would soon fall out of favor even among those appreciative of humor. Yet, his earnest doctrinal convictions were derived from, based on, and deepened by the accommodation of different perspectives within his understanding. The sincerity of Swift's doctrinal belief was, paradoxically, distilled from the impure waters of paradox, wit, humor, and satire.[18]

The ideas about humor developing around the early eighteenth century took a very different turn from the satirical mood of Swift and his fellow Augustans. The new ideal "exerted a twofold influence on the comic," Tave explains. This aesthetic "corrected the Puritan by liberating and encouraging the milder forms of comic expression, the smile, or sympathetic laughter, and innocent mirth; and it corrected the rake by controlling and discouraging the more vigorous forms, punitive laughter, ridicule, satiric wit."[19] The cheerful smile offered a *via media* between moroseness and ribaldry. Eventually, Lord Chesterfield would advise his son in a letter in 1748, "I could heartily wish, that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh."[20] Thus, the wit and satire embraced by the neoclassicists of the early eighteenth century was gradually replaced, first, by a standard of gentler humor or cheerfulness—a "middle way of the joyful Christian"—then, in one short skip, from cheerfulness

[17] Indeed, "systems"—the product of those Swift referred to derisively as "Moderns"—were a primary object of Swift's satire.

[18] The word "sincere" derives etymologically from root words meaning "whole," "sound," "genuine," and "pure."

[19] Tave, *The Amiable Humorist*, 3.

[20] *Lord Chesterfield's Letters*, ed. David Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 72.

to earnestness.[21]

## Earnestness in Evangelicalism

The earnestness embraced by the earliest evangelicals was a counter-strike against both the spirit of personal licentiousness, on the one hand, and that of religious complacency, on the other, that characterized the dominant culture of the Restoration and the Neoclassical periods. (Religious minorities, including Catholics, Puritans, and other Dissenters, as well as those of other religions existed throughout on the margins.) Earnestness flows throughout the movement, forming it in both word and deed, in its sermons, music, literature, and, later, film, as well as in the portrayals of evangelicals by outsiders (especially critics) within the broader culture. Indeed, this earnestness is not only a defining mood but also, as Eglinton would have it, a worldview.

Earnestness became a chief characteristic, not only of evangelicalism but also of the culture of the Victorian era in which evangelicalism gained its peak cultural influence.[22] Seriousness—nearly synonymous in sense and usage with earnestness—in belief, practice, and demeanor has been the hallmark of evangelical Christians since its embryonic stage in the Wesleys' Holy Club at Oxford, through the evangelically influenced Victorian age,[23] to the omnipresent altar calls of present-day churches. As Richard D. Altick explains in his examination of the evangelical influence on the Victorian age, "To be serious was to cherish Evangelical religious views." A "serious person," he continues, "was puritanically opposed to the vanities and frivolities of life, devoid of humor, and intolerant of others' frivolity and indulgences." Earnestness, "while not excluding humor and innocent pleasure, alluded to the same zealousness and above all sincerity in the pursuit of presumably worthwhile personal and social goals."[24]

Altick's descriptive language closely echoes the prescriptive language in John Angell James's popular and highly influential work, *An Earnest*

[21] Tave, *The Amiable Humorist*, 4.

[22] Many Victorian novelists, the novel being the foremost literary genre of the age, are characterized by critics today for their "moral earnestness" and "theological pontification," in the words of Chad P. Stutz, "Across the (Many) Dividing Lines: Evangelicalism and the Spirit of Interdenominational Cooperation," *Victorian Review* 46.2 (Fall 2020): 172–76.

[23] See, e.g., Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000); Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (New York: Macmillan, 1976).

[24] Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 175.



*Ministry: The Need of the Times* (1847). The reach of James, a well-known Nonconformist English preacher and abolitionist, was extended even by Charles Spurgeon, who cited him in his handbook for preachers.[25] In *An Earnest Ministry*, James defines and expands on earnestness for the minister as a unified pursuit, desire, devotion, and aim.[26] Likewise, in *Lectures to My Students*, Spurgeon writes,

> If I were asked—What in a Christian minister is the most essential quality for securing success in winning souls for Christ? I should reply, "earnestness": and if I were asked a second or a third time, I should not vary the answer, for personal observation drives me to the conclusion that, as a rule, real success is proportionate to the preacher's earnestness.[27]

In an 1862 sermon titled "Life in Earnest," Spurgeon describes earnestness as whole-heartedness. Earnestness is not only an approach to life, vocation, and ministry; it also works upon the body itself, Spurgeon observes, for "it enters into every part of the spiritual man: earnestness quickens his pulse, increases the circulation of his blood, it makes the man in all respects in an healthy state; these holy stimulants make the soul stronger than the giant when he is refreshed with new wine."[28] In their own opposing ways, then, both Spurgeon and Gosse appeal to the bodily impression of or response to earnestness; it is, in other words, an aesthetic experience (or in the case of Gosse, the lack of one).

Outside the fold of evangelicalism, critics in its peak years of influence in the nineteenth century range from the high Anglican Jane Austen—whose satirical style was the opposite of earnestness and who declared, "I do not like the evangelicals"[29]—to nominal Anglican (eventual Catholic) Oscar Wilde, whose most-loved play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, satirized this evangelical-cum-Victorian seriousness.[30] The most well-known example of Austen's satirical wit is the famously ironic opening line of

[25] C. H. Spurgeon, *Feathers for Arrows, Or Illustrations for Preachers and Teachers, from My Notebook* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1870), 31–32.

[26] John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry: The Need of the Times* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Sons, 1848), 12.

[27] C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1877), 145.

[28] C. H. Spurgeon, "Life in Earnest: Sermon on 2 Chronicles 31:21" (February 2, 1862), in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 8, https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/life-in-earnest/#flipbook/.

[29] Jane Austen, "Tuesday [January 24, 1809]," in *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters: A Family Record*, by William Austen-Leigh and Richard Austen-Leigh (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1913), 228.

[30] *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed in London in 1895.

*Pride and Prejudice*, whose meaning (not the words) expresses not a universal truth but rather the particular wish of parents of daughters like the Bennet sisters whose futures depend on prudent marital matches: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."[31] Here Austen uses humor to prompt readers to consider the important distinction between unquestioned assumptions or desires (ones she is, in fact, sympathetic to) and truth. At the latter end of the same century in which Austen wrote (the most marked evangelical cultural influence occurring in between), Wilde mocked earnestness itself, pointing out that even earnestness can be trafficked for personal gain and those too sincere to see that will prove only gullible. When the character Algernon discovers that his friend who has been going by the name of Ernest is really named Jack, Algernon protests unbelievingly:

> You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. [Taking it from case.] 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.' I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else. [Puts the card in his pocket.]

Jack, who has been living a double life in pretending to be Ernest (and earnest) replies, "Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country."[32]

The trajectory illustrated by these two satirists alone—a movement from a virtue ethicist in Austen, whose aim is to conserve traditional values and beliefs, to a subversive in Wilde, whose wit was employed to counter the same—does support the claim, one echoed by Eglinton, that following the eighteenth century, humor has become a force for increasing secularization.[33] While Austen uses irony to stabilize truth, Wilde uses irony to expose what he sees as the unstable foundations of his society's understanding of truth. "Ernest" is but a name that one might slip in and out of at will.

[31] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin, 2002), 5.

[32] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Ernest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (2021), First Act, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm.

[33] Russell Heddendorf, *From Faith to Fun: The Secularization of Humor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), xiv–xv.



## Earnestness and Humor

As all these examples show, humor can be used for good or evil, to show truth or overturn it. In other words, earnestness is not unquestionably good nor humor necessarily evil. The real questions facing Christians, before attempting to understand what humor *can* do, are what humor *is* and how it functions.

The word "humor" as we use it today is derived from the same word that originally referred to the four bodily fluids thought to flow throughout the human body. It was believed that these humors needed to be in proper balance for health. The current phrases "to be out of humor" or "to humor" someone reflect the origins of this idea. From this usage, it is a short jump to see humor as understood today as something that brings a certain balance or proportion to a situation or understanding. In this way, humor inherently depends upon the notion of two (or more) qualities or perspectives in tension with one another.

A simple example of this from the Bible is seen in 1 Kgs 18:27, where Elijah taunts the priests of Baal by suggesting that their god is not answering their prayers because he is thinking, going to the bathroom, or asleep. Such mockery is not humorous to the priests of Baal, of course, but from the perspective of those who follow the God of the Israelites, the incongruity is humorous and satisfying. Other instances of the way in which a double perspective is needed for right reading can be found throughout the Bible. The many symbols in Revelation, which confounded Gosse's parents, represent another set of good examples. The seemingly contradictory views expressed in Ecclesiastes are reconciled by understanding each as a partial view within an all-encompassing eternal perspective. The satire of the Old Testament prophets, the paradoxes and irony of the wisdom literature, and the sharp rebukes of the religious leaders by Jesus are all examples of how language must be engaged and understood beyond a surface level through layers of understanding and perspective that often defy an earnest reading of the text.

While earnestness and sincerity imply a seriousness and unity of vision, humor, in all its forms, depends upon a kind of double vision, an incongruity, a recognition of the difference between what is and what should be. As mentioned above, humor emerges from the deviation from an implied or expected standard or norm. This double vision inherent in humorous forms is, by its very nature, dialogical, requiring a simultaneous recognition of what is and what should be, or at the very least, that something is not as it should be. Earnestness, or seriousness (its closest synonym), is by nature unified and monological, less admitting (if admitting at all) of alternative outcomes, conditions, or views. The problem with earnestness, then, is not its seriousness or sincerity but its tendency toward monologism rather than dialogism—in other words, its totalizing nature. Once a structure of thought becomes totalizing, it no longer leaves room for faith, or even the book of Job.

The greater possibilities for authenticity—including authenticity in one's faith—cultivated by dialogism are outlined by Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, his treatment of the construction of the self in the modern age, the very context in which Eglinton, Heddendorf, and others assert that humor has become an agent of our therapeutic culture. Taylor explains, "We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression." By "language" he means "not only the words we speak but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the 'languages' of art, of gesture, of love, and the like." (Humor, I would add, is also such a language.) These languages, the very materials of self-identity, are acquired in dialogue with others, Taylor says.[34] If nothing is more central to self-identity than religious belief (which defines one's view of all other aspects of one's being), then Taylor's emphasis on the dialogical nature of the language of religious expression is a caution against too tight a grasp on earnestness.

## Conclusion

None of this is merely academic or theoretical. In a different context, I have elucidated, anecdotally, the way in which the failure of evangelical culture to not only entertain but to welcome a dialogical approach to faith can lead to doubt, deconstruction, and deconversion,[35] as the life of Edmund Gosse shows—along with many others of his generation and ours. The ability to hold to one belief while recognizing the existence and even the validity of differing views doesn't trivialize faith—it elevates and strengthens it. Particularly now, in this "secular age" in which Christian belief presents itself as just one choice among many others, a style (and substance) that not only can, but does, admit other and competing views (and does so even enthusiastically) is the wiser, more loving course. A double vision that accounts for perspectives other than truth pays homage to the power of truth. It's tempting to imagine how the witty, bright, and

[34] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 33.

[35] See my chapter, "Anti-Intellectualism: We Must Ask Hard Questions," in *Before You Lose Your Faith: Deconstructing Doubt in the Church*, ed. Ivan Mesa (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 93–100. See also my article, "How to Love Your Ideological Enemy," *Christianity Today*, May 18, 2017.



searching Edmund Gosse might have turned out if his father had approached teaching his son the tenets of the Christian faith as Bird does in the opening of his book's first chapter, "What is Theology?"—with a multiple-choice quiz:

> What exactly is theology? If the question is posed in a multiple-choice format, we could choose from the following options.
>
> A. The name of the eighth full-length album by Sinead O'Connor, released in 2007.
> B. What my father tells me to stop doing and get a real job.
> C. The study of God.
> D. All of the above.
>
> The answer is option (d), "All of the above." However, option (c), "The study of God," is technically the more correct answer, and we can unpack that a bit more.[36]

Such "comic belief" echoes the overarching narrative of the Bible, which is, after all, a comedy in the classical sense: a story that begins with a disruption of order and ends with its restoration.

[36] Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 3.