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## A Chestertonian Approach to Humor

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

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## **A Chestertonian Approach to Humor**

Robert Moore-Jumonville

## A Chestertonian Approach to Humor

by Robert Moore-Jumonville

Writing about G. K. Chesterton's humor in dull, academic fashion would seem to miss the point that Chesterton was primarily a journalist (not an academician) who used his humor to tempt intellectual opponents to bite on, if not swallow, arguments that without the humor would be as appealing as swallowing a sixteenth-century canon ball with the fuse lit. I propose, therefore, not only to write about the way Chesterton used humor intellectually to critique the humorless; I also intend to imitate his tone and tactics.

While I was riding the bus the other day, a thought occurred to me. Could it be true that most evangelicals take themselves too seriously? Picture the stereotypical male evangelical pastor: he's wearing a grey frumpled suit, a dash of egg on his lapel, adorned by one of those ties that resembles material from some 1960s drapes. He slouches a bit and glares with an affected smile. Just from his intense expression, you can guess he is contemplating the coming end of the world. I like that cartoon where a woman is sitting next to a man on a bus who looks as though he is experiencing dull abdominal pain. The caption reads: "No ma'am, I'm not a pastor. I'm just sick today." Unfortunately, what is too often true of evangelical pastors is probably too often true of Christians in the academy. Why is there so little laughter and

humor evident in the practice of our faith and work? Of course I do not mean cynical or hurtful laughter. There is a kind of laughing *at* others we all recognize as the opposite of a Christian spirit. As Bruce Cockburn sings, God's laughter "is not the laughter of a frightened mind, it's not the laughter you can hide behind. . . . It's more like the wind in the wings of a diving dove; you better listen to the laughter of love." I think that is a profound thought—that love laughs, that God laughs.

Why does it seem strange, or even a touch heretical, to bring laughter into Christian academics? First, it's because in the academy we talk about serious ideas—big theological concepts that have to do with decrees and decisions forged in the very council of heaven. Another cartoon that has inspired me over the years shows a man talking on the phone with his head buried in his hands, obviously distressed. He says something like, "Pastor, my wife left me, I lost my job, and I'm due for major surgery this week; you've just got to tell me the difference between pre-, post-, and a-millennialism." We're so serious about our theological subtleties. And as solemn Christian church attenders, we're serious about everything else, too—about all the sickness in our congregations (which is serious), and about who has taken our pew, or about what color the nursery carpet should be (which is

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not serious). In one church I served a skirmish actually broke out over whether the Christian flag or the American flag should stand on the right side of the chancel (or was it the left?). I forget who won.

Chesterton was always perceptive at pointing out the lighter side of people with heavy countenances. In his *Autobiography* he recounted a delightfully funny experience with the American novelist Henry James—what he called “the most comic comedy of cross-purposes that ever happened in the world” (205). James had come to Europe as an American who wanted to become a stately European. “He had left America because he loved Europe, and all that was meant by England or France; the gentry, the gallantry, the traditions of lineage and locality, the life that had been lived beneath old portraits in oak-paneled rooms” (210). One day Henry came with his brother William James to pay Chesterton a visit. The conversation turned tactful, ceremonial, even grave. And then a fog-horn bellowed. Chesterton knew instantly that the din and clamor did not really originate from a fog-horn, but from his good friend Belloc shouting irreverently, “Gilbert! Gilbert!” In stumbled Belloc, a member of Parliament with a friend from the Foreign Office. The two men had been traveling in France, where they had run out of money, gotten into all kinds of mischief, and now had arrived boisterous and famished, “ragged, unshaven, shouting for beer, shameless above all shades of poverty and wealth; sprawling, indifferent, secure” (210). The gap between these aristocratic tramps and the “Puritan refinement of Boston” exuded by Henry James “was wider than the Atlantic.” The joke, however, was too subtle for James, said Chesterton.

If Henry James’s demeanor were turned into a philosophical principle, we might call it “seriousness for seriousness sake.” Chesterton, on the other hand, was a life-long advocate of playfulness. “The object of all human life is play,” he once remarked, and of his own life he commented wistfully:

but I for one have never left off playing, and I wish there were more time to play. I wish we did not have to fritter away time on frivolous things, like lectures and literature, the time we might have given to serious, solid and constructive work like cutting out cardboard figures and pasting colored tinsel upon them (*Autobiography* 50).

Of course, Chesterton certainly devoted energy and effort throughout his life to serious literature and lectures. Nevertheless, Chesterton vigorously directed his humor against people who took themselves too seriously, foisting their seriousness on other innocent people; he stood against prigs and puritans with all their petty protests and prohibitions. He considered bans against enjoyment (the teetotaler dogma) as theologically untenable. As a recent interpreter of Chesterton counseled: “Perhaps G. K. Chesterton is the needed antidote for a Christian upbringing too heavily laden with somber legalism and unrelenting guilt” (Peters 33). The more we recognize that we are not God, that it is not our job to be the morality police, or save the world—the more, in fact, we recognize that God does not even need us, the better off we will be as Christians. Out of a sense of our own smallness, then, our own place in the

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infinitely larger scheme of things, comes a humble laughter.

The pessimist or cynic, a persona most of us unwittingly assume in faculty and department meetings, was another type of person that Chesterton playfully chided. Many intellectuals in Chesterton's day were attracted by materialistic or nihilistic philosophies (originating from Comte, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche, for instance), and were intrigued by those who said that life was not worth living. Chesterton's rebuttal in his novel *Manalive* contains some of the funniest material he ever wrote. He exorcizes the nihilistic demons through sputtering, hilarious laughter. In brief, an important subplot of the story goes like this: a college student named Innocent Smith is receiving advice from his tutor, Dr. Eames, who concludes that, like a sick puppy, the world ought to be mercifully put out of its misery. But suddenly the professor finds himself anxiously staring down the barrel of Smith's revolver. In Charlie Chaplin fashion, Smith chases Eames around the room, promising to put him out of his misery. Eames ends up dangling from a gargoyle off his second floor balcony pleading for life. Promising to give anything "to get back," the professor is forced by Smith to sing a hymn:

I thank the goodness and the grace  
That on my birth have smiled,  
And perched me on this curious  
place,  
A happy English child (165-175).

While the sword of Chesterton's humor cut against all brands of puritanism and pessimism, alongside this polemic lay an anti-Gnostic affirmation of the joy of bodily existence. There is an earthy, Old Testament-like spirituality in Chesterton's thought that

attests to the goodness of all created and creaturely things: earth, neighborhoods, gardens, food, drink, and especially laughter. In his novel *Manalive* the protagonist declares with vehemence,

if there be a house for me in heaven  
it will either have a green lamp-post  
and a hedge, or something quite as  
positive and personal as a green  
lamp-post and a hedge. I mean that  
God bade me love one spot and  
serve it, and do all things however  
wild in praise of it, so that this one  
spot might be a witness against all  
the infinities and sophistries, that  
Paradise is somewhere and not  
anywhere, is something and not  
anything (267).

Perhaps another reason why laughter seems out of place in Christianity is because we imagine God as overly serious—frowning, scolding, judging his children harshly. There he is high on the mountain shouting the ten commandments amidst peals of thunder and bursts of fire, while a band of ragamuffin nomads tremble below like the cowardly lion before the Great and Terrible Oz. But God really does have a terrific sense of humor. I have always appreciated Frederick Beuchner's retelling of the Abraham, Sarah and Isaac story in his book *Telling the Truth*. Recall that in the Genesis account, Sarah laughs when God tells her she is going to bear a son in her old age—who wouldn't laugh? Picture Sarah delivering in the geriatrics ward, or having to hire folks to pick the child up for her. Who can blame her for laughing? She not only laughs at God's announcement, her chuckles and chortles splutter into roaring peals of delirious laughter. Occasionally, Abraham has to check on her.

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He says, "It's okay, God's gone now . . . and would you please control yourself!" Whereupon they both fall to their knees, then roll on their backs, holding their sides while they gasp for breath. God reappears on stage and confronts Sarah about her lack of religious etiquette. "You laughed," he says matter of factly. She denies it. God says, "No, but you did." Finally, God fully enters into the joke by naming the child Isaac—in Hebrew, "he laughs."

Sometimes I ask my students if they can imagine Jesus as a spoil sport, as someone walking around with a clipboard trying to ruin people's fun, as someone who would make us more narrow and critical as people. The picture does not fit what we know about Jesus. In fact, a narrow and critical spirit sounds more descriptive of the Pharisees (or the Elder Brother in the story of the Prodigal Son) than of the Lord of the Dance. I picture the Pharisees as squinting with malice, talking through their teeth, drumming their long-nailed fingers. The Pharisees, who took themselves so seriously, were genuinely disturbed by Jesus, by this drunk and gluttonous people's rabbi who had too much fun. After all, does it make good religious sense to teach grace? Do we want to tell people that they only have to work a few hours at the end of the day to receive a full day's pay? Are we in favor of celebrating the return of every prodigal who gets homesick? What kind of model is that for our youth?

The last line of Chesterton's masterfully-written *Orthodoxy* reads: "There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth" (160). I agree wholeheartedly. Sometimes I imagine that an overly zealous and overly ascetic copyist, early in the manuscript history

of the New Testament, took a verse out of one of the original Gospels because he saw how injurious it might be to serious religious instruction. It was a short verse of only two words, which read: "Jesus laughed." I wish he would have left it alone.

I am glad that none of the copyists omitted Jesus's camel jokes. I think that these camel passages probably escaped expurgation because serious religious types don't really get the joke. Actually, they are not as much like jokes as they are like cartoons. You can follow each frame of the cartoon yourself. Let's make Gary Larson the cartoonist. First frame: a huddle of Pharisees all decked out in religious garb "straining at gnats." You'll have to imagine the tense expressions, the Rube Goldberg gnat-straining devices, and the incredibly huge pile of strained gnats. Second frame: the peaceful, confident, self-possessed people drinking whatever liquid it was the Pharisees were trying to sanitize. Here, it's probably best to picture the setting in an English gentlemen's club with couches, servants, and reclining Pharisees conversing leisurely among themselves. Then the final frame: "swallowing a camel." The cartoon *image*, here, is what is most important—how the Pharisee's throat has taken on the shape of the humps, and how the back legs still stick out of his mouth as his arms flail. I'd put a few smiling camels looking on at the scene, secretively peering over the rim of cups held by other Pharisees in the room, giggling in anticipation. Jesus's second camel cartoon was reserved for another group of people that took themselves too seriously—the rich. Once again, there is great potential to turn a "camel going through an eye of a needle" into a marvelous animated *short* (perhaps in the genre of a Tom and Jerry cartoon). All the disciples are working at getting this camel

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through the tiny hole—Peter, John and James have him by the head, and they've got one hump through, as if the camel's body is composed of some super strong rubber. The part that is going through the hole shrinks thin, while the rest of the animal is stretched bulbously (like a cartoon cat getting crammed into a bottle much too small for him). Andrew and Phillip plant their feet on either side of the needle hole, trying to keep it in place. Other disciples cheer or scream directions from the sidelines. Judas has another idea of how to get the camel through; he approaches the camel's rear, grinning wickedly and concealing a large, sharp needle behind his back.

When all is said and done and all the jokes have been told, Chesterton recognizes that laughless and humorless Christians are in danger of succumbing to religious pride. Pride has been considered the root of all sin by Christian thinkers from Augustine, to Dante, to C.S. Lewis. With his humor Chesterton reminds his readers that pride and self assertion describe the spiritual condition of Satan—Lucifer took himself too seriously. “[He] fell by the force of gravity,” Chesterton said. What, then, is the opposite of this spiritual disease of self-importance? Isn't it that brand of humility that Jesus recommends in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit?” When we are poor in spirit, that is, when we acknowledge our spiritual poverty and need, then and only then are we open to receive from the Spirit above. “Angels can fly,” Chesterton remarked, “because they take themselves lightly.”

We ought to be able to laugh at ourselves, therefore, not in self-deprecation, but rather, in the realization of how silly and like monkeys we are. “Yes, I do snore like Zeus, don't I?” “I really do talk in a monotone that would put a raging bull to sleep, don't I?” “I really am a

whimsical 'piece of work.’” Chesterton constantly poked fun at himself—grinning at his own girth, his frumpled appearance, and his forgetful habits. He claimed that his becoming a journalist was nearly accidental, a stroke of luck and irony: “It was outrageously unjust that a man should succeed in becoming a journalist merely by failing to become an artist” (*Autobiography* 102).

So, where should we begin if we were interested in repenting of our overly zealous solemnity? We might begin laughing in thankfulness, laughing as it were with God and his creation. There is an element of wonder to life that we humans need to cultivate. Where is our surprise at the drama of life we see played out each day? How can we fail to be thrilled by geese, or amused by monkeys? Children are constantly thrilled and amused. I believe that God also is constantly thrilled and amused. I'll bet he laughs at the sight of a rollicking monkey. Being fully alive means cultivating our awareness of “the wonder and splendor of being alive.” Being fully alive means appreciating the gift of life; it means practicing amazement and surprise. In an extraordinary passage in *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton crafts an analogy using the shipwreck in the Robinson Crusoe story. Everything that Crusoe pulls from the sinking ship and sea is a gift, a joy, a prize. So, too, each green lamp-post we encounter, not to mention each star, is a great “might-not-have-been”—each object in life is something pulled from the sea of non-existence for our delight and benefit. Here is what Chesterton called his “makeshift mystical theory,” namely, that “anything was magnificent as compared with nothing,” and ought to evoke in us “a sort of mystical minimum of gratitude” (*Autobiography* 96, 97). The person who is fully alive, then, is simply the one who “refuses to die while he is

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still alive. He seeks to remind himself by every electric shock to the intellect that he is still a man alive, walking on two legs about the world" (*Manalive* 298). This may be a slightly different way of obeying the New Testament injunctions to "keep awake!" "The real difficulty of man," argued Chesterton, "is not to enjoy lamp-posts or landscapes, not to enjoy dandelions or chops; but to enjoy enjoyment" (*Autobiography* 323).

Finally, God's "larger scheme of things" also has to do with salvation, which is surely something to laugh lustily about. The cross is no laughing matter, of course, but that Christ saved *me* is absolutely hilarious. The devil is still roaring like a lion, seeking whom he may devour, but from God's view he's more like a defeated and wounded cartoon cat. Karl Barth said that Jesus Christ is God's "Yes" to the world. Christ has won, hallelujah! We know the end of the story, and we know who wins! That should make us smile, if not collapse in convulsions of belly-rumbling. We could call this "the laughter of Easter." Christ is risen indeed! I do not mean to imply that we must literally sputter and spit and scream. Sheer joy, pure delight, raucous jubilation would be enough. There *are* laments in the psalms, but remember there also are many notes of praise. In other words, the Bible is not all knit-brow seriousness. If our academic pursuits boast no humor, no joy at all, can they really be considered Christian? When was the last time you had a good, honest spiritual chuckle?

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