Stellenbosch Theological Journal Supp. 2019, Vol 5, No 2, 81–94 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.Supp.2019.v5n2.a05
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459

Revisiting the social and religious value of humour

Cloete, Anita
Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
acloete@sun.ac.za

"Where there is humour there is hope, and where there is hope there is humour."

(Hyers 1987:5)

Abstract

The aim of the article is to revisit and reintroduce the social and religious significance of humour. The chapter will examine humour as a complex human action by focusing on the function thereof in everyday life. The discussion will be informed by examples of the value of humour for physical and mental health, politics and religion. Politics and religion serve among the most popular themes and sources for comedy today, especially in stand-up comedy. These examples will illustrate how humour enables people (individuals and communities) to cope with life by engaging them in an open-ended process in which alternative perspectives and attitudes become possible. As a cultural and contextual human action, humour can also serve as social commentary on social challenges and, by doing so, raise social awareness about burning issues in society. Moreover, the discussion will especially highlight two aspects of humour, namely tension and paradox. It will argue that embracing humour as a hopeful attitude that unlocks alternative perspectives of viewing reality needs more attention, especially from a religious perspective. The final section will, therefore, consider the religious significance of humour by expounding on the relationship with faith and hope.

Keywords

Comedy; tragedy; humour; religion; resilience; hope

1. Introduction

In this chapter I outline different aspects of humour by discussing the origin of humour, as well as its communication function. This discussion is motivated by the fact that humour is understood to be a complex human

act that can have both a positive and negative impact. As a human act that plays out in everyday life, several examples are presented that point to the complexity of humour, but more importantly for this chapter, illuminate the value of humour for people in different spheres of life. After the social value of humour is established by these different examples, the relationship between the comic and tragic vision of life is introduced, underscoring the differences between the two. In the final section the religious significance of humour is discussed by exploring the connection with ethics and faith. Furthermore, the functioning of humour in the Bible with specific reference to the role of the fool as embodied in the ministry of Jesus, is emphasised.

2. Origin and social function of humour

Since humour is the main focus of this chapter, a working definition of what it entails, is necessary. As with many other definitions, there is no definitive definition, but precisely because of the potential complexity surrounding the concept, the need for a working definition is even more pressing. Tavory (2014:275) describes humour as "…one of the most complex cultural accomplishments…", and therefore hard to analyse. Therefore, any attempt to present a working definition must consider this complexity and try to bring to the fore the different facets and aspects that form part of the attitude and act of humour.

Tavory (2014:277) presents a helpful summary of the theory of humour towards understanding humour as social and cultural act. Tension is an integral part of humour, and, even more important, is that this tension should not be resolved. "To make humour together is then to experience this tension collectively" (Tavory 2014:277). This implies that ambiguity and not clarity makes a situation humorous, because as soon as, for example, a joke is explained, it is not funny anymore. Humour is part of everyday life and as such provides insights into people's experiences. Humour creates a platform where people, through shared experiences, can engage with a process of meaning making. Meaning making as part of humour is difficult to measure since what people find funny is not made explicit, but only experienced, which is often difficult to explain.

Tapley (2006:423) argues very strongly that humour is social, stating that "Humour is fundamentally social". Tapley (2006:425) also contends that

humour is individual as a personality or character trait. Individuals perform humour, acting as individual agents. This relationship between humour as communal and individual is not mutually exclusive but rather two sides of the same coin, signalling interrelatedness instead of separation. Humour could also be described as a cognitive experience during which redefining of reality takes place, of which laughter is often an external display (Meyer 2000:311).

Does humour serve the common good? What about the ethics of humour? Are certain rules needed to make humour a positive and constructive element of our everyday living? These are indeed valid questions to ask because there is enough evidence to suggest that humour can also be employed to cause harm and can contain important social elements like power. Martin et al. (2003:53) present a helpful summary of different individual uses of humour as part of communication. This summary also assists in providing a broader and more nuanced understanding of humour. The summary identifies four ways in which humour can be used:

1. *Affiliative humour* suggests people spontaneously amuse others and, by doing so, facilitate relationships with others, while reducing interpersonal tensions.
2. *Self-enhancing* humour describes those who have a humorous outlook and are often amused by the incongruities of life.
3. *Aggressive humour* includes sarcasm, teasing and generally putting others down. This use of humour can potentially harm others.
4. *Self-defeating humour* entails the use of humour in a manner that is self-destructive. In other words, funny things are said at one's own expense.

However, Martin et al. (2003:53) explain that although these different uses of humour can be identified, one should expect some degree of overlap. This implies that humour does not always neatly fit in one exclusive category.

Meyer (2000) presents another useful analysis of how humour functions, underscoring how the use of humour is not a linear process, but there are many factors that play a role in why something is humorous and is received as such. He argues that the communication function of humour

makes more sense if you have a basic understanding of the theories on the origin of humour (Meyer 2000:311). Communication is key in humour. I found both the theories on the origin and the communication function of humour helpful for this discussion. The theory on the origin of humour can be summarised in the following three ways:

Relief: This perspective focuses on the relief people experience as a result of humour. This means that when people experience humour, it can reduce stress.

Incongruity: The element of surprise as part of humour is the key focus of this theory. To be able to experience surprise, you need the cognitive ability to understand and recognise the reality, before you can notice the difference.

Superiority: This theory notes that people laugh at others, be it outwardly or inwardly, whilst experiencing some kind of superiority and triumph. This can include hostile laughter as well as the use of humour as social correctives (Meyer 2000:312–314).

The communication function of humour operates on a continuum starting with identification, followed by clarification, enforcement and identification on the other extreme. The value of humour is that it can build support when the communicator identifies with the audience, and by doing so, gains more creditability. A communicator can use humour to make short memorable statements that are easy to remember, thereby clarifying the message. Humour can also be used to enforce the message of the communicator through critique but still maintaining identification with the audience. Differentiation is when humour is utilised by communicators to contrast themselves with their opponents. This kind of humour is often used by politicians, creating alliances and distinctions at the same time (Meyer 2000:318–321).

Jackson (2012) also makes a noteworthy contribution towards understanding the social psychological function of humour. The social function of humour answers the question: How does humour relate to reality? Jackson (2012: 23–25) highlights the paradoxical nature of humour when she explains that whilst humour draws people closer to each other by, for instance, laughing together at a joke, it draws boundaries between

those laughing together and those outside this circle. Humour can reveal ourselves to us, as well as an alternative reality different from the real reality. It is this alternative reality I would like to underscore, because this also highlights what is, but also what ought to be. Therefore, humour not only creates an opportunity to have a glimpse of that alternative reality, but also encourages action to move and work towards the alternative ideal reality. Play is another important element of humour. I don't argue that humour is play, but rather that humour starts with play. Humour is more than play, but both are expressed through laughter (Tapley 2013:147–148).

From this overview on the social functioning of humour, it is evident that humour can be utilised in different ways and does not necessarily always have a positive impact. Therefore, researchers like Tapley (2006) explicitly question the value of humour in their work, as it cannot be assumed. Tapley (2006:421) specifically pays attention to the work of Jean Harvey (1995) and John Morreall (1938) in which Harvey argues that there is no good in humour, whilst Morreall advocates for the good that is to be found in humour. In this interesting publication Tapley (2006:422) contrasts the two views, pointing out the main arguments of Harvey, that humour is a weapon that is used by the elite (powerful) to oppress others and to maintain power, whilst Morreall argues that humour entails an attitude of lightness and willingness to look differently at a situation. In his final analysis of this comparison Tapley (2006:431) concludes that joking is "… not inherently morally flawed. Joking like many other social practices and social constructs can be used or practised for good or bad".

3. Social value of humour

There is a significant body of research on the value of humour in several spheres of human existence. In the next section I provide examples of this by pointing out the areas in everyday life where humour is found to be of value. Kuiper (2012:480) argues for the positive contribution of humour from a positive psychological perspective. From this perspective, humour is viewed as a positive attribute, characterised by several strengths like gratitude and hope. This view is based on a nuanced understanding of humour, considering both its potential to be positive or negative, and therefore affiliative humour is singled out as more conducive to

contributing to resilience. Resilience is understood as the capacity to adapt and bounce back in the face of adversity (Kuiper 2004:485). According to Kuiper (2012:485) humour contributes to resilience because it makes a reinterpretation of a traumatic event possible or it can lead to enjoyment of a positive event. Tapley (2006:422) stresses the fact that humour gives us some objectivity to look at ourselves and a difficult situation. This means that humour helps to create distance that assists us to reinterpret a situation from more than one angle, providing balance that makes alternatives possible. This distance helps us to not only see other possible ways of looking at the situation but unlocks our potential instead of viewing the situation as static. In the words of Corrigan (1981:8) "All comedy celebrates humankind's capacity to endure: it dramatizes the fact that no matter how many times we may be knocked down or fall short, we somehow manage to pull ourselves up and keep on going".

Booth-Butterfield et al. (2007:299) corroborate and state: "Humour helps us to cope with life". Coping is understood as an intrapersonal process in which communication plays an important role. Booth-Butterfield et al. (2007:302) conducted a study examining the role of humour among health professionals with special reference to the difference between high and low humour individuals and how these differences in communication contribute to coping with stress and job satisfaction. Some of their main findings were that using humour leads to stress relief and increases job satisfaction across age and professional samples. People with a high humour orientation reported that they managed to solve problems and experience relief of tension, because they handled situations better in general. The outward focus, away from their own stressful situation, that humour provides, assists them to redirect their attention (Booth-Butterfield et al. 2007:308).

Cameron (2015) contends that humour is even valuable as a strategy of public engagement in order to promote social justice. He admits that humour has both practical and ethical risks and limits, but in the face of significant low levels of public engagements, it is a risk worth taking. The question that this research posed, was if humour could lead to critical thinking and social engagement. According to Cameron (2015:280) the main ethical objection to humour is against the superiority theory and functioning of humour, but in his view there has been a move since the 18th

century towards incongruity theory, which focuses more on the structure of a joke and to a lesser extent on the content. In his understanding the significance of the incongruity theory is that it allows humour to be ethical and generate ethical consequences. Conscious of the possibility and view that humour can be a weapon used by the powerful to oppress and marginalise, he argues there is enough evidence that humour can be utilised for the common good (Cameron 2015:281). Tapley (2006:426) so aptly explains: "There are people whose struggling and strife is made that much easier by the sense of humour. There are people who face oppression and poverty owning nothing but their character and spirit".

Davis et al. (2018:3900) are of the opinion that due to social media, participation in politics is made more accessible and therefore no longer performed by only the political elite, but "…everyday people join the 'experts' to have their say". Moreover, the use of social media has shaped the tone of political interaction and fostered new forms of political communication, encouraging playfulness as a distinctive mode of communication. This playful nature of political communication facilitated by social media platforms like Twitter, enhances political engagement by serving as entry point for participation by disempowered groups (Davis et al. 2018:3901). Social media platforms like Facebook, used by millions of people, have several pages that communicate jokes about politics and race to name a few. Race, for example, in a country like South Africa, is still, 25 years after the end of apartheid, a very sensitive and complex issue. However, when these otherwise complex and sensitive issues are framed and received as humorous, it is often experienced differently and can assist meaningful dialogue or just help people to laugh about things that they otherwise would not.

In the next section of the paper I would like to turn to the religious value of humour by discussing the relationship between humour and tragedy, presenting examples of humour in the Bible, the intellectual and moral ethics that humour could foster, as well as the connection between humour and faith as a way of seeing.

4. Humour and tragedy

Jackson (2012:14) describes the relationship between comedy and tragedy as follows "Comedy began as tragedy's younger relative, and the pair have remained close, joined in an inextricable relationship". She qualifies this statement by saying that comedy was originally understood as one half and tragedy the other half. The formal, traditional understanding of comedy is dramatic performance, but this understanding has evolved to a much broader understanding of the term and the forms thereof. Morreall (1999) gives a helpful overview of the connection between religion, comedy, and humour. Although religions, comedy and tragedy all focus on the incongruities in life, the different responses of comedy and tragedy to these incongruities is of importance, because of how they impact on the vision for life. While tragedy can provoke emotions of anger, comedy, on the other hand, can provoke the opposite like amusement, and these differences are profound for how it impacts on how we view ourselves and life (Morreall 1999:5). Comedy and tragedy share the belief that there are incongruities in life, but they inspire different responses towards life. Morreall (1999) succinctly describes the contrasting vision of tragedy and comedy in a way that I found valuable for this discussion because it corroborates with and confirms what was discussed earlier under the value of humour and also forms the basis of the religious value of humour.

Morreall (1999:25) argues that comedy is characterised by disengagement with emotions and tragedy by emotional engagement. I wish to differ from him on this point because I think both require cognitive and emotional responses, although the outcomes of these elements are different. The cognitive functioning of humour stands out in Morreall's (1999:22–31) comparison. I would like to demonstrate the contrast in terms of cognitive and psychological dimensions with Table 1, followed by a short explanation.

Tragic vision	**Comic vison**
Simple schemes	Complex schemes
Preference for familiar	Seeking the unfamiliar
Uncritical thinking	Critical thinking
Convergent thinking	Divergent thinking
Low tolerance for ambiguity	High tolerance for ambiguity
Stubbornness	Willingness to change

Idealism	Pragmatism
Finality	Second change
Seriousness	Playfulness

Table 1

I hope this table provides a helpful summary, demonstrating the main differences between the tragic and comic view of life as postulated by Morreall (1999) in an easy and accessible way. From this table it is evident that the outcomes of these two visions are at best opposites and therefore lead to different ways of looking at ourselves, others and the world. Whilst a person with a comic view of life is open to alternative views (the unfamiliar), utilising critical thinking and engaging with complex processes, the person with a tragic view of life often looks for a single answer or "truth" (simple) in a way that is known (familiar) to him or her.

5. Religious significance of humour

In the earlier discussion reference was made to the need for ethics for humour to be positive, not only for individuals, but also for the common good. Research that argues in favour of humour always points to the fact that humour can be used in different ways. However, it became evident throughout this chapter that the positive impact of humour seems to outshine the possible negative effect. Morreall (1999:151) postulates that humour as critical spirit is important for religion. Moreover, humour does not only support other virtues, but is a virtue itself. Morreall (1999:152–153) argues that humour promotes intellectual values like critical and complex thinking, and openness for the unknown, but also traditional moral values like humility and forgiveness. The distance created by humour is a creative one that makes room for alternative interpretation and meaning making. Furthermore, this experience and viewpoint provided by humour makes us more patient with our own shortcomings and those of others as we come closer to understanding that the reality, we are perceiving is complex, and so is truth.

McFadden (2004:16) unpacks the role of humour during aging and states that "Older adults experience a kind of double jeopardy of despair". She explains that society views old age as a time of despair where life

is experienced as meaningless, but she has found that humour makes a significant contribution to turning this perception and experience around. She contends that humour reminds us of our capacity to triumph over suffering by assisting us to integrate different experiences of life in a way that gives meaning and hope (McFadden (2004:21). Important for this work is the fact that she understands humour as an expression of faith. Put differently, faith undergirds humour and therefore forms the basis of humour as the ultimate order that carries us in times of despair and brokenness. Faith, and not humour, is thus the ultimate in her understanding of the relationship between humour and faith (McFadden 2004:16).

Berger (1969) also makes an interesting connection between play, humour and religion in his book: *A Rumour of Angels*. Berger (1969:70) argues that these are "… *signals of transcendence* within the empirically given human situation". These signals point beyond this reality, in other words transcending the everyday known reality. Moreover, these signals also point to some kind of order that helps us to make sense and meaning amidst or despite the chaos of suffering and pain. This reality that transcends the empirical reality is described as religion facilitated by inductive faith that begins in the everyday experience of man. Berger (1969:75) explains: "By 'inductive faith' I mean a religious process of thought that begins with the facts of human experience …" This kind of faith therefore does not rest on mysterious revelations, but on shared everyday living (Berger 1969:79).

Berger (1969:76) identifies play and humour as two of these everyday experiences and acts that posit the ability to be signs of transcendence. The intent of play is joy, and it has the ability to help us to step out of time into another, from the temporary to eternity, by bracketing the temporal. Similarly, humour relativizes tragedy, implying that it can be overcome. Because play and humour have these abilities, Berger (1969:90) postulates that they can be viewed as religious vindication of joy. Hamman (2012:44) explains the theological significance of play is often overlooked in practical theology, because of its ambiguous and paradoxical nature. Despite this, he argues that "… play informs life in many ways and is central to being a happy and content person" (Hamman 2012:46). Moreover, playfulness also creates anticipation as part of a hopeful attitude.

The role of the fool or trickster is an integral part of comedy. Corrigan (1981:9) describes the fool as the character that has "…magical licence to strip us naked as he reflects the folly of all human endeavours. He can act free of law and order, seemingly independent of the constraints of space and time, and always untouched by the terrors of reality ". Hyers (1987) argues that there is divine comedy in the Bible because of the use of comedy throughout the Bible. Hyers (1987:1–2) notes that according to Paul's preaching, the cross and God's work in this world is foolishness. He motivates his argument of the Bible as divine comedy by pointing out how the motifs of divine foolishness overturn human wisdom and similarly motifs of divine weakness overcome human strength. This paradox runs through the Bible and signals the power of comedy to bring home the serious message of the gospel. It is, however, a feature of the biblical text that is often overlooked because many do not associate comedy and/or foolishness with the Bible and therefore insist that it does not exist in scripture.

Colleague Johan Cilliers is definitely not one of those who deny the comic nature and foolishness of scripture. On the contrary, he sees it quite clearly and is excited about the possibilities and hermeneutical key/s that it offers for reading and understanding scripture, which is of utmost importance in preaching, his area of specialisation. Moreover, for Cilliers this is more than an academic exercise, because in my relationship with him as colleague, he embodies something of this. He keeps telling me the same joke about my car over and over again, and I laugh every time, not to please him, but because it connects us in a special way. His life speaks of an attitude of looking at the bright side of life, not in a simplistic and superficial way, but because he believes there is an alternative perspective on life.

In one of his many academic works, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as Rhetoric of Folly*, he and Campbell (2012) present a thought-provoking and rich perspective on the foolishness of the cross and preaching. They focus on the function of humour and particularly the role of the fool in Jesus's ministry. They describe the role of the fool as follows: "They break into our circled wagons and smelt down our iron theologies. They interrupt and unsettle, inviting us to move from one place to another". I particularly agree with their argument that fools are agents of perspective (Campbell & Cilliers 2012:80) because it resonates with the description of the value of

humour earlier in this chapter, but also because of how they demonstrate the embodiment and expression thereof in the crucifixion and ministry of Jesus. In their view, Jesus played the fool, a radical liminal figure who was intentionally ambiguous in his teachings, creating liminal spaces where discernment is needed, and new perspectives are possible (2012:103). An outstanding example of how this played out in Jesus's ministry is the example of the parable of the "Good Samaritan". Jesus told this parable (Luke 10:25–37) in response to the question of a lawyer: "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus's response was not expected by the crowd and especially the lawyer, as it turned his question around to say that the question is not who is your neighbour, but rather are you a neighbour? Moreover, this response was disruptive on a personal but also communal and cultural level, as it questioned the ways and customs of the day, laying the responsibility on individuals to rethink what they believe and how it impacts the lives of others.

A new, surprisingly unexpected perspective was offered in no time, before the lawyer could gather his own thoughts and present a counter argument. Instead he was challenged to rethink his question and especially the motives behind the question. The element of surprise is therefore outstanding in Jesus's ministry and his embodiment of this ministry on the cross. His way of dealing with the continuous questions, which were actually a questioning of him and what he represented by the religious leaders of the day, left them speechless and gently forced them to think out of the box of religious laws and cultural practices that functioned very strongly, about power that can include and exclude. His responses were not only disturbingly surprising, but also pointed to the revelation of God's love and forgiving heart for all humankind, something that was not part of their religious views and beliefs. And therefore, Jesus become their worst enemy, one they needed to kill as the only option to stop this radical message of inclusion and love for all.

6. Conclusion

I would like to return to the function of humour as attitude and everyday act or practice that has the ability to create distance in order to present alternative perspectives. In the light of this, I would like to argue that

humour has a hermeneutical function in everyday life that points to or discloses a transcendent reality as also argued by Berger (1969). Therefore, I also found the argument of McFadden (2004:16) feasible that humour undergirds faith. I would like to argue that having a positive, humorous attitude towards life and the self, signals transcendence and takes people's active participation in being people of faith seriously, but also their embodied experiences. Having said this, I don't argue that we can be saved or come to faith by humour, but that humour can be an expression of such faith received by grace. Faith can also be understood as a way of seeing and is therefore hermeneutical (Brümmer 2010:1). Moreover, humour as expression of faith can also be understood as the language of hope, because it is not satisfied with common-sense answers and responses, but points to a transcendent reality not seen by the naked eye, yet it exists. Such vision has the potential to motivate people to act in accordance with this view of reality created by the eyes of faith, imaging a different reality and outcome.

Bibliography

Berger, P. 1969. *A rumour of Angels*. London: Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd.

Booth-Butterfield, M., Booth-Butterfield, S. & Wanzer, M. 2007. Funny Students Cope Better: Patterns of Humour Enactment and Coping Effectiveness. *Communication Quarterly*, 55(3):299–315.

Better: Patterns of Humour Enactment and Coping Effectiveness. *Communication Quarterly*. 55 (3) 299–315.

Brümmer, V. 2012. Spirituality and the hermeneutics of faith. *HTS Theological Studies*, 66 (1) 1–5.

Cameron, J.D. 2015. Can poverty be funny? The serious use of humour as a strategy of public engagement for global justice. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2):274–290.

Campbell, L. & Cilliers, J.H. 2012. *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*. Texas: Baylor University Press.

Corrigan, R. 1981. *Comedy, Meaning and Form*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Davis, J.L., Love, T.P., & Killen, G. 2018. Seriously funny: The political work of humour on social media. *New Media & Society*, 20(10):3898–3916.

Hamman, J. Playing. 2012. In Miller-McLemore, B.J., (ed) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. 42–51.

Harvey, J. 1995. Humour as Social Act: Ethical Issues. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 29(1):19–30.

Hyers, C. 1987. *And God created Laughter. The Bible as Divine Comedy*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.

Jackson, M. 2012. *Comedy and feminist interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: University Press.

Kuiper, N.A. 2012. Humour and Resiliency: Towards a Process Model of Coping and Growth. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 8(3):475–491.

Martin, R.A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Grasy, J. & Weir, K. 2003. Individual differences in uses of humour in relation to psychological well-being: Development of Humour Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*. 37:18–75.

McFadden, S.H. 2004. The paradoxes of Humour and the Burdens of Despair. *Journal of Religious Gerontology* 16:3–4, 13–27.

Meyer, J.C. 2000. Humour as Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humour in Communication. *Communication Theory*, 10(3) 310–331.

Morreall, J. 1999. *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Morreall. J. 1983. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Tapley, R. 2006. The value of humour. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 40:421–431.

Tapley, R. 2014. On Morreall: A Failure to distinguish between play and humour. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 47:147–162.

Tavory, I. 2014. The situations of culture: humour and the limits of measurability. *Theory and Society*, 43:275–289.