

WISDOM, HUMOR, AND FAITH: A HISTORICAL VIEW

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“And frame your mind to mirth and merriment, / Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.”
Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, Scene 2.

“Laughter without a tinge of philosophy is but a sneeze of humor. Genuine humor is replete with wisdom.”
Mark Twain, quoted in Opie Percival Read, *Mark Twain and I* (1940), 17.

“Humor offers both a form of wisdom and a means of survival in a threatening world. It demands that we reckon with the realities of human nature and the world without falling into grimness and despair.”
Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France—1885 to World War I*, rev. ed. (1968), 248.

“Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer. . . . The saintliest men frequently have a humorous glint in their eyes. They retain the capacity to laugh at both themselves and at others. . . . To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom.”
Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (1945), 111, 122, 126.*

“Religion and humor are incompatible. . . . Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty.”
Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* (1995), 9, 32-33.

“When people ask me if there's an afterlife, I answer, ‘If I knew, I would tell you.’”
Art Buchwald, *Too Soon to Say Goodbye* (2006), 29.

“I can’t imagine a wise old person who can’t laugh.” So said psychologist Erik Erikson, and many wisdom researchers say the same about a wise person of any age.¹ But the more we look at the connection between wisdom and humor, the more we realize the subject cannot be adequately addressed without also dealing with faith and religion. Thus, we shall begin by clarifying our understanding of wisdom, then examine how humor can contribute to it, look at this connection historically among some leading individuals in Europe, Russia, and the United States, and finally analyze the relationship between wisdom, humor, and faith.

Wisdom, Perspective, and Values

Although definitions of wisdom often include an ability to make good judgments regarding life and conduct, these good judgments themselves flow from good perspectives and values. Wisdom

* Except in titles of books or essays I have changed all spellings of humour to humor in quotes for the sake of consistency.

¹ Erikson is quoted in Richard Hawley Trowbridge, “The Scientific Approach of Wisdom” (Ph.D. diss., Union Institute & University, 2005), 81, at www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc (all web citations are from January 2011). Trowbridge is one of those wisdom scholars who lists humor as one of the qualities possessed by wise people.

scholar Copthorne Macdonald has noted that wisdom involves certain mental states and ways of perceiving, such as:

- seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are
- deeply understanding the human/cosmic situation
- being able to handle whatever arises with peace of mind and an effective, compassionate, holistic response.

He also notes that psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that wise people “tended to be more detached than ordinary from the dictates and expectations of their culture. They were inner-directed people. They were creative, too, and appreciated the world around them with a sense of awe and wonder. . . . The inner directedness that Maslow noted is a key feature of wisdom. It arises, in part, from acquiring new, more helpful perspectives.”²

Wise perspectives are dependent on wise values. As Macdonald has written, “Wise values express themselves in wise attitudes and wise ways of being and functioning.” Among the wise values he mentions that relate to perspective are creativity, serenity, humility, clarity about what is, empathy, insight, intuitive understanding, patience, reality, self-awareness, and truth.³

Another prominent wisdom researcher, Robert Sternberg, believes that “people are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” In fostering wisdom, Sternberg also thinks it is important to teach people to see “things from others’ perspectives as well as one’s own,” to tolerate “other people’s points of view, whether or not one agrees with such views.” He refers to this approach as his “balance theory of wisdom.” He also believes that many “smart and well-educated people” lack wisdom because they “are particularly susceptible to four fallacies,” which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies. All four are tied up with too big an ego and with overestimating their own importance and powers.⁴ These fallacies also skew our sense of reality.

Achieving a realistic perspective on life means seeing life as it is, with all its disappointments, frustrations, and irrationalities, but also with all its wonders and mysteries. In writing specifically of political wisdom, Isaiah Berlin stated that it involved “an acute sense of what fits with what.”⁵ The same could be said for wisdom generally, and Berlin’s remark suggests that a wise person also knows what does not fit. Being wise also means possessing a realistic sense of ourselves, not letting our egos overemphasize our own significance and being able to see ourselves with some detachment. Because wise people realize their own limitations, as well as those of others, they tend to be more tolerant than most people; they realize that no one has all the answers, and that we all are struggling to cope with life as best we can. In turn, this realization makes wise people more empathetic and compassionate. They are more likely than

² Copthorne Macdonald, Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom: Finding Our Way to Inner Peace, Love & Happiness* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2001); available online at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>.

³ Copthorne Macdonald, “Values That Various People Have Associated with Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>;

⁴ “It’s Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>.

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgment,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 46.

most to follow the advice of Philo of Alexandria, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Humor’s Contribution to Wisdom

The English writer G. K. Chesterton wrote that “humor not only refuses to be defined, but in a sense boasts of being indefinable; and it would commonly be regarded as a deficiency in humor to search for a definition of humor.”⁶ He did, however, see it as linked to humility, which enables us to perceive our own failings, the gap between what we aspire to be and what we actually are.

A philosophic encyclopedia declares that the most dominant theory of humor is one that deals with such gaps, that which does not fit—the incongruous. More specifically, it sees humor “as a response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness.” Among those advocating some variety of this theory were the philosophers Kant, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer. Thus, like Berlin dealing with political wisdom, this theory of humor is dealing with the perception of “what fits [or does not] with what.”

This same encyclopedia, while indicating that “several scholars have identified over 100 types of humor theories,” highlights only a few others. One is the relief theory, popularized by Freud, which describes humor as a way of relieving tension. Two others are a superiority theory advocated by the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes and others, and an inferiority theory offered more recently by the philosopher Robert Solomon. Hobbes wrote that “that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.” Conversely, Solomon thinks that in viewing folly (for example, that of the Three Stooges comedies) we can see our own tendency to unwise behavior and that it can help us become more modest and compassionate—both important steps to becoming wiser. The encyclopedia essay also indicates that some thinkers view humor as a form of play and that humor has “until recently has been treated as roughly co-extensive with laughter,” though the two are not really the same.⁷ Chesterton also distinguishes between laughter and humor, seeing the latter as a more “civilized product,” possessing a “subtle and sometimes sub-conscious . . . quality.”⁸ Here, however, we will not try to draw too precise a distinction between humor and that which makes us laugh.

Hobbes’s theory of humor suggests that humor may not always be on the side of wisdom. If we laugh at others while feeling superior to them, it only inflates our egoism, which is never wise. This is the problem with many ethnic jokes if they make us feel superior, amidst our own ethnic group, to any supposed inferior group. Humor is also sometimes an inappropriate response to an event. Hearing of evils like the killing of an innocent person, the demeaning of a child, or

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, “Humour” in *The Spice of Life and Other Essays*, at http://wikilivres.info/wiki/The_Spice_of_Life_and_Other_Essays/Humour.

⁷ “Humor,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor>. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, who also stresses an incongruity theory of humor in his “Humour and Faith,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (1945), 112-15, available at http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp_djvu.txt. All future Niebuhr references will be to this version. Another slightly different form is in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁸ “Humour,” at http://wikilivres.info/wiki/The_Spice_of_Life_and_Other_Essays/Humour.

the rape of a woman should elicit not humor but sorrow. As the Bible's book of Ecclesiastes says, there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

Enlightening comments on the relationship of humor to wisdom were once made by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), perhaps the twentieth-century's most influential U. S. theologian (and a favorite thinker of President Obama). Although Niebuhr generally agreed that humor stresses the incongruous, he also, like Chesterton and Solomon, linked it with humility.

Humor is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humor is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to "stand off" from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant little bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life. But we pretend that we are the very center of this organization. This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us.⁹

Humor and Wisdom in Europe: Some Highlights

Renaissance Humor: Erasmus, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare

In his book *Rabelais and His World*, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin wrote: "The Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the universe are accessible only to laughter."¹⁰ Bakhtin includes the Frenchman Rabelais, the Spaniard Cervantes (author of *Don Quixote*), and the Englishman Shakespeare as the three great writers of this early era when humor often reflected wisdom. He also mentions the Dutchman Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1509) as "one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature."¹¹

Since Erasmus comes first chronologically, let's start with his book. He depicts Folly as a goddess addressing her devotees. She begins with the presumption that folly is shared by all humans. Through her, Erasmus ticks off follies found among all classes—like those of lovers, spouses, money-seekers, nationalists, warmongers, and the old trying to look young—but he targets mainly the folly of the upper classes like kings, courtiers, popes, and bishops, and the most pretentious and would-be wise like writers, lawyers, scientists, philosophers, and theologians. He describes writers as

persons that are ever tormenting themselves; adding, changing, putting in, blotting out, revising, reprinting, showing it to friends, and nine years in correcting, yet never fully satisfied; at so great a rate do they purchase this vain reward, to wit, praise, and that too of a very few, with so many watchings, so much sweat, so much vexation and loss of sleep, the most precious of all things. Add to this the waste of health, spoil of complexion, weakness of eyes or rather blindness, poverty, envy, abstinence from pleasure, over-

⁹ Niebuhr, 112-15, 119-20.

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

hasty old age, untimely death, and the like; so highly does this wise man value the approbation of one or two blear-eyed fellows.¹²

Philosophers, he claims, are “so much revered for their furred gowns and starched beards that they look upon themselves as the only wise men and all others as shadows.” In general, he depicts all those who consider themselves wise as being austere, cold, unfriendly, proud, vain, blind to their own faults, impractical, timid, and bookish. In words that should still give pause to all self-styled intellectuals, he writes:

Invite a wise man to a feast and he'll spoil the company, either with morose silence or troublesome disputes. Take him out to dance, and you'll swear “a cow would have done it better.” Bring him to the theatre, and his very looks are enough to spoil all . . . withdrawing rather than put off his supercilious gravity. Let him fall into discourse, and he shall make more sudden stops than if he had a wolf before him. Let him buy, or sell, or in short go about any of those things without there is no living in this world, and you'll say this piece of wisdom were rather a stock than a man, of so little use is he to himself, country, or friends; and all because he is wholly ignorant of common things and lives a course of life quite different from the people.

Perhaps, the most important of this “wise man’s” defects are his lack of compassion and humility because without possessing these it is difficult for anyone to be truly wise.

Erasmus is especially hard on the church hierarchy and theologians, whom he sarcastically refers to as “wise men” who “while being happy in their own opinion . . . look with haughtiness on all others as poor creeping things.” In his use of irony and satire to show how far the church headed by the papacy had departed from wisdom, Erasmus used humor to make some of the same points later made by historian Barbara Tuchman in a long section of her book *The March of Folly*.¹³

The Praise of Folly is perhaps the best Renaissance literary example of the attempt to deal with the paradoxes of wisdom and folly presented by Paul in his New Testament Epistles. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he wrote that “it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise.’ . . . Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” A little later he added, “If any of you thinks he is wise in the ways of this world, he must become a fool to become really wise. For the wisdom of this world is nonsense in God’s sight.” And still later, “We are fools for Christ’s sake.” In his Epistle to the Colossians, Paul wrote that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” were hidden in Jesus Christ. Later, we shall examine these words in some detail.

Outside of the literary world, commoners also dealt with the paradoxes of wisdom and folly in such carnivalesque celebrations as the Feast of Fools. Theologian Harvey Cox gives the following description of it:

During the medieval era there flourished in parts of Europe a holiday known as the Feast of Fools. On that colorful occasion, usually celebrated about January first, even ordinarily pious priests and serious townfolk donned bawdy masks, sang outrageous ditties, and generally kept the whole world awake with revelry and satire. Minor clerics painted their faces, strutted about in the robes of their superiors, and

¹² All quotes from *The Praise of Folly* are from the John Wilson translation, at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9371>.

¹³ See the section “The Renaissance Popes Provoke the Protestant Secession: 1470-1530,” in her *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 51-126.

mocked the stately rituals of church and court. Sometimes a Lord of Misrule, a Mock King, or a Boy Bishop was elected to preside over the events. In some places the Boy Bishop even celebrated a parody mass. During the Feast of Fools, no custom or convention was immune to ridicule and even the highest personages of the realm could expect to be lampooned.¹⁴

Following in the tradition of such celebrations and Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and others have praised a sort of wise folly in such characters as Triboulet (in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*), Cervantes's Don Quixote, Shakespeare's Falstaff, and Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin (the title character in *The Idiot*).¹⁵

Rabelais was born after Erasmus but before Cervantes and Shakespeare, both of whom died in 1616. Bakhtin quotes the French historian Jules Michelet who wrote that "Rabelais collected wisdom from the popular elemental forces of the ancient Provençal idioms, sayings, proverbs, school farces, from the mouth of fools and clowns. But refracted by this foolery, the genius of the age and its prophetic power are revealed in all their majesty." In his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* Rabelais suggests that humor and wisdom are mixed together in sort of a wise folly that reflects the spirit of carnival. About this folly Bakhtin wrote: "Folly is, of course, deeply ambivalent. It has the negative element of debasement and destruction (the only vestige now is the use of "fool" as a pejorative) and the positive element of renewal and truth. Folly is the opposite of wisdom—inverted wisdom, inverted truth. It is the other side, the lower stratum of official laws and conventions, derived from them. Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness."¹⁶

Novelist Milan Kundera once said "Rabelais is dearest to me of all writers" and gave him credit for being one of the great pioneers of humor. Kundera associates it with the birth of the novel during the days of Rabelais and Cervantes, and considers the Italian Boccaccio as "the great precursor." Quoting the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, Kundera avows that humor is "the great invention of the modern spirit," and "that it renders ambiguous everything that it touches." He also believes that "religion and humor are incompatible." And he writes: "Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty."¹⁷ Besides the question of whether religion and humor are compatible, which we shall examine later, Kundera seems to be overlooking all the humor that predates the Renaissance including that of Aristophanes, whose comedies in ancient Greece were a great source of humor and some wisdom.

Like Bakhtin and Harold Bloom in his book *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Kundera also believes that there was much wisdom in the humor of Cervantes and that he taught future novelists an important lesson.

¹⁴ *The Feast of Fools* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970), 3.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Walter Jacob Kaiser, *Praises of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Cathleen T. McLoughlin, *Shakespeare, Rabelais, and the Comical-Historical* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); and Eric J. Ziolkowski, *The Sanctification of Don Quixote: From Hidalgo to Priest* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1991), 207-14; and "The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue," *American Studies International* (Feb. 1, 2003), at http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-2771832/The-holy-fool-in-Russian.html.

¹⁶ Bakhtin, 2, 260.

¹⁷ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 5, 9, 29, 32-33; see also the 1980 Kundera interview with Philip Roth at http://www.kundera.de/english/Info-Point/Interview_Roth/interview_roth.html.

When Don Quixote went out in the world, that world turned into a mystery before his eyes. . . . The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties the novel is dead. The totalitarian world, whether founded on Marx, Islam or anything else, is a world of answers rather than questions. There, the novel has no place. In any case, it seems to me that all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties.¹⁸

But more than Rabelais, Erasmus, or Cervantes, it is Shakespeare that many consider the wisest writer. Bloom writes, “Shakespeare, grandest of entertainers, is also the wisest of teachers.” As Kundera saw Rabelais and Cervantes, Bloom sees Shakespeare—as one more intent on depicting reality than making dogmatic judgments and one “whose grandest achievements cannot be reconciled . . . with any creed or ideology whatever.”¹⁹ Although detecting certain Christian influences on Shakespeare, Alan Nordstrom also states that “though most observers are naturally inclined to project their own attitudes upon an enigmatic other they cannot decipher, spying out familiar confirmations of what they already assume, Shakespeare eludes easy cosmological classification.”²⁰

Nordstrom also provides important insights into the relation of Shakespeare’s humor and wisdom. He writes that “examples of folly and error predominate in his plays” —in the tragedies as well as the comedies—and since he “is not an essayist but a playwright, he does not tell but show, thus we must learn not by precept but by instance and example.” By viewing folly through Shakespeare’s eyes, “ironically we may infer something of what wisdom is and why it is so rare.” Further, “if we cannot fully grasp the wisdom he possesses, we can better recognize our own folly by his fools and learn to laugh at it or mourn the miseries it brings.” His characters “constitute a full catalogue of fools, a motley menagerie of lunatics and dunces of all colors and degrees. Among them we’ll find images of family and friends, acquaintances and strangers and, most strangely, us, if we look truly enough into our own blinking idiocy.”

Nordstrom tells us that “Shakespeare represents the struggle of human beings to be wise, to transcend their innate and nearly all-consuming proclivity to folly and to attain rare spiritual insight into the principles that make for ultimate human happiness, those principles revealed by our race’s most enlightened luminaries,” and that “wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head,” with “a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness.” The mixture of insight (or perspective), compassion, and a non-dogmatic portrayal of human life in all its complexity that we see in Shakespeare helps explain why so many thinkers have regarded him as wise.

He perceived that life—“this great stage of fools,” in King Lear’s words—could be seen from a tragic and/or comic perspective. Nordstrom emphasizes the importance of treachery in Shakespeare’s plays. But after pointing out what an important role it plays in his histories and tragedies, he observes that “even Shakespeare’s comedies—especially Shakespeare’s comedies—turn to treachery for their success. Duping and delusion, knavery and gulling are the warp and woof of all their motley foolery.” After mentioning the comedies he adds, “Pretty

¹⁸ Kundera at http://www.kundera.de/english/Info-Point/Interview_Roth/interview_roth.html; see Bloom’s chapter on “Cervantes and Shakespeare,” *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 78-115.

¹⁹ Bloom, 101, 107, 112.

²⁰ For all Nordstrom quotes, see his “Shakespeare’s Take on Human Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>.

depressing, when you view it all. But then, that's life, and Shakespeare gives us life. He shows us what we are, yet also what we may be, at our best: honest and honorable, faithful and true, loyal and trustworthy, constant in love."

In his *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Bloom deals with several other writers after Shakespeare, but hardly mentions humor except some occasional references to irony, a type of humor we shall examine more later. Although we will not take the time here, it might be useful to investigate further his statements about Germany's greatest writer and sage: "Only irony for Goethe makes wisdom available to us," and "Goethe's wisdom always verges on the outrageous, and I like *Faust II* best for its excesses. Most of *Faust II* is a parody."²¹

Two European Russians: Anton Chekhov and Vladimir Soloviev

Many critics have discovered much wisdom in the great non-Communist Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and I intend to write more on this subject in a future essay. But here a few Russians should be mentioned, and the first is Anton Chekhov, Russia's best dramatist and short story writer.²² From his youth when he wrote a play entitled *Laugh It Off If You Can* until the last evening of his life at a German spa, still only 44 years old, when he made his wife laugh by inventing a funny story, humor was important to this grandson of a serf. After enrolling at Moscow University to study medicine in 1879, he became the chief provider of his family by writing, primarily at first for popular humor magazines. During the next seven years he wrote more than 400 pieces, most of them short stories. In addition, an editor of one of his collections of letters wrote of "their irrepressible humor" and noted that Chekhov repeatedly insisted that his final play, *The Cherry Orchard*, was a comedy.²³

"All his life, from his early childhood, he had laughed off any disagreeable situation in which he had happened to find himself; the joke became his most effective weapon in a crisis."²⁴ He viewed "laughter as medicine, and a vital prerequisite for any treatment of his fellow human beings. Implicit is the sense that laughter—and comedy—are restorative. . . . Chekhov's comedy is therefore not only a stylistic feature in his works, but is also a vital part of his philosophy. It is the point where content and form meet, the one usually inseparable from the other."²⁵ But Chekhov's view of life, strongly influenced by his medical training and experiences as a doctor, saw both the tragedy and comedy of life. He sought to write realistically, and his tragicomic approach was a reflection of his ability to do so. Vladimir Nabokov observed that "things for him were funny and sad at the same time, but you would not see their sadness if you did not see their fun, because both were linked up."²⁶

One of the characters in Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* declares, "Chekhov brought Russia into our consciousness in all its vastness—with people of every estate, every class, every age." Grossman's character then lists some of the people we discover in Chekhov's works: "doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, lecturers, landlords, shopkeepers, industrialists,

²¹ Bloom, 181,185.

²² I have written more extensively on Chekhov's wisdom and humor in "The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov," <http://www.wisdompage.com/ChekhovEssay.pdf>. See that essay for many links to Chekhov's online works.

²³ Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Avraham Yarmolinsky (New York: Viking Press, 1973), viii.

²⁴ David Magarshack, *Chekhov: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, Evergreen Book, 1955), 377.

²⁵ Vera Gottlieb, "Chekhov's Comedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 228.

²⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 252.

nannies, lackeys, students, civil servants of every rank, cattle-dealers, tram-conductors, marriage-brokers, sextons, bishops, peasants, workers, cobblers, artists' models, horticulturalists, zoologists, innkeepers, gamekeepers, prostitutes, fishermen, lieutenants, corporals, artists, cooks, writers, janitors, nuns, soldiers, midwives, prisoners on the Sakhalin Islands.”²⁷

Whether depicting the tragic or comic, Chekhov's writings dealing with all these people reflected his compassion. In 1902, he said that when people realized how badly they lived, they would “create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again, ‘Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!’”²⁸

Chekhov's balanced perspective on life, his ability to see his own comic shortcomings as well as others, contributed to making him one of the most modest, tolerant, open-minded, pragmatic, and wisest Russian intellectuals of his day. He knew that life was a mystery, and neither he nor anyone else had all the answers. Thus, his opposition to dogmatism. The Tsarist political system encouraged not only a conservative political dogma, but also authoritarianism, obsession with rank and decorations, and obsequiousness, all of which Chekhov satirized. In an analysis of Chekhov's humor, one scholar refers to this type of humor as the “comedy of subversion.”²⁹

Although he avoided dogmatism, he possessed a strong sense of social justice. To take just one example, he praised French novelist Emile Zola's famous open letter in a French newspaper in 1898, which accused the French military of convicting the innocent Captain Dreyfus of treason, partly because he was Jewish, then covering up the injustice. Chekhov also contributed to aiding Jewish victims after a horrendous pogrom directed at them in Kishinev in 1903. Vasily Grossman, in his novel *Life and Fate*, has one of his characters say that “Chekhov is the bearer of the greatest banner that has been raised in the thousand years of Russian history—the banner of a true, humane, Russian democracy, of Russian freedom, of the dignity of the Russian man.”³⁰

In Soviet Russia some of Chekhov's successors were considered subversives when they dared to poke fun at Soviet society. One was Mikhail Zoshchenko. His story “Adventures of a Monkey” got him in trouble because Soviet leaders thought this story about a monkey who got free from his zoo cage and roamed a town suggested that life was better in a zoo cage than in Soviet society.

A contemporary of Chekhov was Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900). During Chekhov's time, he was Russia's leading philosopher, an ecumenical religious thinker, a defender of human rights (including those of Jews), and perhaps the best poet of his generation.³¹ Moreover, he emphasized wisdom more than any other Russian writer. It was a central theme in his philosophy and a central image in his poetry, but he generally dealt with it on a much more transcendental plane than did the worldlier Chekhov. Aristotle once distinguished between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom, and Soloviev better exemplified the first type and Chekhov the second.

²⁷ Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate: A Novel*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: Perennial Library, 1987), 282-83.

²⁸ Quoted in David Magarshack, *Chekhov, the Dramatist* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960). 13-14.

²⁹ Harvey Pitcher, “Chekhov's Humor,” in *A Chekhov Companion*, 92-93.

³⁰ Grossman, 283. On Chekhov's political thoughts, see the section on his “Social and Political Views,” in my “[The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov](#).”

³¹ See my “Vladimir Soloviev and the Jews in Russia,” *The Russian Review* 29 (April 1970): 181-91, at <http://www.naderlibrary.com/lit.soloviev.2.htm>.

On a very basic level Soloviev defined wisdom as “the knowledge of the best ways and means for attaining the purpose before us, and the capacity to apply these means aright.” But on a higher level it was also one of the cardinal virtues, and as such it depended “on the moral worth of the object itself.” It was only a virtue when applied to “objects of the greatest worth.”³² On a higher level still it was Sophia or Wisdom of a divine sort that had been emphasized in the Bible, the Jewish Kabbala, and the Greek and Russian Orthodox traditions, all of which influenced Soloviev’s view of Sophia. He thought of her as the universal oneness, the oneness of God with creation. He saw history as a process of man and nature falling away from God and splintering into separateness and then eventually reuniting in a higher synthesis. Sophia symbolized that potential synthesis. For Soloviev that all-oneness with God became the goal of history. But Sophia was to him more than just the abstract idea of Divine Wisdom. Influenced by the symbolic language of the mystics and by the description of Wisdom in the Bible’s “Book of Proverbs,” he perceived Sophia in feminine form. She was the Eternal Feminine, “the feminine soul of the world.”³³

In his most famous poem dealing with Sophia, “Three Encounters,” first published just two years before his death in 1900, he tried to convey some sense of the three mystical encounters that he apparently had with her. The last was in an Egyptian desert in 1875, and he wrote of her eyes full of azure flame, appearing amidst the purple of heavenly splendor and the smell of roses. The image of her filled his being. Only she existed. Past, present, and future were all encompassed in her gaze, as were the blue “seas and rivers,” the “distant forest,” and the “heights of snowy mountains,” all of which Soloviev stated he saw stretched out before him. Earlier, before even leaving Egypt in 1876, he wrote a poem about Sophia, his “queen,” who comes to him bathed in light and full of quiet tenderness. She covers him with her radiance. Thus, to Soloviev, Sophia represented not only the mystical oneness of the universe, but also a tender, loving, maternal force, and his most potent symbol of beauty.

An enlightening article on Soloviev’s poem “Three Encounters” and his rich sense of humor notes that the philosopher-poet “possessed a great sense of humor and a frenzied, almost tormented passion for humorous verse, parodies, and puns; he loved even the most inept play on words, senseless buffoonery, coarse, even obscene anecdotes. Gaiety would descend upon him in elemental fits, like a kind of epilepsy.”³⁴ The article goes on to quote Soloviev’s words that “the [only] characteristic peculiarity of man is found in the fact that only he has the ability to laugh. This ability is extremely important, and lies at the very essence of human nature. I therefore define man as a *laughing animal*.”³⁵ In his poem about his three mystical meetings with Sophia he pokes fun at himself, saying to Sophia, for example: “You must have laughed truly, as I walked into the desert \ In coat and top hat.”³⁶

³² Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2009), 96.

³³ Mikhail Epstein’s web site, “The Basic Ideas of Four Russian Thinkers,” at http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/four_thinkers.html, offers a good brief summary of Soloviev’s chief concepts. I also deal with Soloviev in my *Russia in the Age of Alexander II, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), especially in Ch. 27. This book is also available in a slightly different form at <http://people.emich.edu/wmoss/publications/>.

³⁴ Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, “On Laughter and Vladimir Solov'ev's *Three Encounters*,” *Slavic Review*, 57 (Autumn, 1998), 563, quoting Konstantin Mochul'skii, *Vladimir Solov'ev: Zhizn' i uchenie*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1951), 25.

³⁵ Kornblatt, 570.

³⁶ From an English version of the poem that can be found at <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/S/SolovyovVlad/ThreeMeeting.htm>, but readers should remember that poetic translations lose a great deal of their beauty, more than prose translations, when rendered into a different language.

Soloviev never clearly spelled out his perception of the exact connection between wisdom and humor, but he perhaps best suggested it in the following lines written before his return from Egypt to Russia:

Laughter supposes a state of freedom; a slave does not laugh. [. . .] In natural laughter, in the laughter of a child or young girl, humanity's metaphysical freedom manifests itself unawares. It acquires consciousness of self [only] in the reflective laughter of a thinking person. Such a person has a clear understanding of another, ideal world contrasted to this apparent reality, the latter being the entire reality of a beast or of uncivilized man. He sees the contrast and he mocks the false reality: he laughs. How could he laugh if he truly believed in this miserable reality? He laughs because he knows well that true reality belongs to that other world, to the ideal world, of which this is but a deformed shadow. He feels himself free in this world only because he is a citizen of another; it is only in his quality as a metaphysical being that he can mock his physical being.³⁷

Soloviev's mature works reflect a less dualistic view of reality and insist on the necessity of humans spiritualizing and transforming their everyday world, but he continued to believe that a gap existed between the ideal and everyday worlds. This view bears some resemblance to the incongruity theory of humor mentioned above. When Soloviev writes that one "sees the contrast and he mocks the false reality: he laughs," he is suggesting that laughter, humor, parody, satire, can all play a social role and be appropriate responses to unwisely taking this everyday world and our mundane concerns too seriously and forgetting that a higher, better world, at least potentially, exists for all of us.

Although we shall deal with the relation of faith to wisdom and humor later, it is appropriate here to quote Niebuhr because Soloviev's view of humor was similar to his.

The intimate relation between humor and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence. Humor is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones. Both humor and faith are expressions of the freedom of the human spirit, of its capacity to stand outside of life, and itself, and view the whole scene. But any view of the whole immediately creates the problem of how the incongruities of life are to be dealt with; for the effort to understand the life, and our place in it, confronts us with inconsistencies and incongruities which do not fit into any neat picture of the whole. Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life.³⁸

Reflections on Humor from Nietzsche to the Theatre of the Absurd

Although he died in 1900, the same year as Soloviev, the German Friedrich Nietzsche was almost a decade older than the Russian poet-philosopher. According to one source Nietzsche "awards laughter a status higher than that granted by any other philosopher. . . . It plays an important role in his entire world-view."³⁹

In his 1882 book, *Gay Science* (sometimes rendered as *Joyful Wisdom*), Nietzsche wrote that "to laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh out of the veriest truth, to do this, the best have not hitherto had enough of the sense of truth." But Nietzsche believed that "there is perhaps still a future even for laughter . . . [when] perhaps then laughter will have

³⁷ Quoted in Kornblatt, 572.

³⁸ Niebuhr, 112.

³⁹ John Lippitt, "Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (January 1, 1992): 39.

united with wisdom, perhaps then there will be only “joyful wisdom.”⁴⁰ Nietzsche seems to have believed that sages needed to “lighten up” and occasionally demonstrate, as he put it in another work, “wit and a certain self-mockery.” One study of his thought in *Gay Science* states that “Nietzsche is proposing that a comic outlook — a view that adjusts for and delights in incongruities that undercut one’s expectations — is optimal if a person is to thrive.” This same work notes that his “levity reflects his being a very serious man. Like the humor of certain stand-up comedians, Nietzsche’s jokes are often black-humored pointing out incongruities that might in other moods cause tears. Tragedy and comedy, as the first section of *The Gay Science* insists, are kindred outlooks, perpetually overwhelming each other, as one wave succeeds another, in turn to be overcome.”⁴¹

Walter Kaufmann has stated that “for Nietzsche laughter represents an attitude toward the world, toward life and toward oneself,” and he quotes three passages from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that he thinks are most important in demonstrating Nietzsche’s position.

Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!

.....
As yet he has not learned laughing and beauty. Gloomy this hunter returned from the forest of knowledge. . . . but I do not like these tense souls. . . . As yet his knowledge has not learned to smile. . . . Gracefulness is part of the graciousness of the great-souled. Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.

.....
What has so far been the greatest sin here on earth? Was it not the word of him [Jesus as quoted in Luke 6:25] who said, “Woe unto those who laugh here”? Did he himself find no reasons on earth for laughing? Then he searched very badly. . . . He did not love enough: else he would also have loved us who laugh. But he hated and mocked us: howling and gnashing of teeth he promised us. . . . Laughter I have pronounced holy: you higher men, *learn* — to laugh!”

After quoting these three passages, Kaufmann concludes that “for Nietzsche laughter becomes less a physical phenomenon than a symbol of joyous affirmation of life and of the refusal to bow before the spirit of gravity.”⁴²

Although there are some similarities in their appreciation of laughter, including at oneself, Nietzsche and Soloviev had very different views on wisdom, as Nietzsche’s quote above referring to the words of Jesus suggests. In an 1880 work Nietzsche had written, “Above the founder of Christianity, Socrates is distinguished by the gay kind of seriousness and that wisdom full of pranks which constitute the best state of the soul of man. Moreover, he had the greater intelligence.”⁴³ One of Soloviev’s major works was *Lectures on Godmanhood* (1878), in which the central theme was the falling away of the world from the Divine and then the gradual incarnation of the Divine into the world. The appearance of Jesus Christ was the most perfect expression of this incarnation, but it was up to humanity to help bring about the more complete worldly incarnation (symbolized by Sophia) of the Divine. For Soloviev the highest wisdom was Sophia or Divine Wisdom, and that concept was intricately connected with his belief in Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. Nietzsche, however, not only rejected Jesus and any concept of the

⁴⁰ From the online version at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/n/nietzsche/friedrich/n67j/book1.html>.

⁴¹ Quoted in Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3, 4, 9.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000), 421-23, n. 41.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 69.

Divine, but rather than Jesus the godman, the German philosopher held out as his ideal the *ubermensch* (overman or superman), who rejected any god. Quite familiar with Nietzsche's ideas, Soloviev rejected the "demonism" of the concept of *ubermensch*.⁴⁴ To the question of the relationship between Christianity, or indeed any religion, and wisdom and humor, we shall return again in the last major section of this essay.

Although the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) lived decades longer than Chekhov, Soloviev, or Nietzsche, he was born a year before Chekhov. He eventually came to a conclusion with which Soloviev might have agreed: "The great mystic transcends individuality and extends divine action," and that such action "would be the highest form of wisdom, of which philosophy could only be considered an approximation."⁴⁵ During the 1880s he gave a lecture on laughter, a version of which he finally published in 1900 under the title of *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.⁴⁶ One source refers to it as containing perhaps

one of the most influential and sophisticated theories of humor. . . . He argues that the source of humor is the "mechanical encrusted upon the living" and that "the comic does not exist outside of what is strictly human." He thinks that humor involve[s] an incongruous relationship between human intelligence and habitual or mechanical behaviors. As such, humor serves as a social corrective, helping people recognize behaviors that are inhospitable to human flourishing. A large source of the comic is in recognizing our superiority over the subhuman. Anything that threatens to reduce a person to an object—either animal or mechanical—is prime material for humor.⁴⁷

Like Soloviev, Bergson emphasizes that laughter is restricted to humans and that it deals with incongruities. And both philosophers believed that it can serve (in Bergson's words) "as a social corrective, helping people recognize behaviors that are inhospitable to human flourishing," or, as Soloviev would see it, helping them advance toward the synthesis of the human and Divine symbolized by Sophia or Holy Wisdom.⁴⁸

Nietzsche's belief that wisdom should display a certain lightness was later voiced in W. B. Yeats's wonderful line, "Wisdom is a butterfly / And not a gloomy bird of prey" (from his 1918 poem "Tom O'Roughley"). Several Yeats scholars have argued that in him "a strong sense of the comic forms a consistent strand of the perspective from which Yeats viewed experience."⁴⁹ He believed that "comedy is joyous because all assumption of a part, of a personal mask, whether of the individualized face of comedy or of the grotesque face of farce, is a display of energy, and energy is joyous." But he believed that most dramas were a mixture of comedy and tragedy, as he believed was often the case with Shakespeare.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ See my *Russia in the Age*, 198-99, for more on Soloviev's *Lectures on Godmanhood*, one of which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky attended on the same night. On Soloviev and Nietzsche, see Kornblatt, 573.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., with the assistance of Brian J. Reilly and Malcolm DeBevoise, *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 432.

⁴⁶ The essay is available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4352>.

⁴⁷ The quotations in this paragraph are from "Humor," at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor>.

⁴⁸ See Kornblatt, 573-76, for some of her thoughts on the similarities of the humor ideas of these two philosophers.

⁴⁹ Susan Shaw Sailer, "Yeats's Postmodern Vision: The 'Unpresentable,' Narrative Knowledge, and the Comic," in *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual studies*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 140; Sailer also cites other writers and works that emphasize Yeats's appreciation of the comic, including Vivian Mercier's *The Irish Comic Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); see also Cynthia D. Wheatley-Lovoy, "The Silver Laughter of Wisdom: Joyce, Yeats, and Heroic Farce," *South Atlantic Review*, 58 (Nov., 1993): 19-37.

⁵⁰ W. B. Yeats, *The Complete Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 3: *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 348.

To what extent Yeats's views on humor were influenced by Nietzsche's is debatable, but he was certainly impressed by the German philosopher, especially by his Zarathustra. In 1902, two years after Nietzsche's death, he wrote to his friend Lady Gregory: "You have a rival in Nietzsche, that strong enchanter. . . . I have not read anything with so much excitement since I got to love [William] Morris's stories which have the same curious astringent joy."⁵¹

But there were also many differences between the Irish poet (and dramatist) and the German philosopher. The Irishman was more mystically and religiously inclined and fascinated with the mythical, occult, and supernatural. As one scholar wrote, "Whereas Nietzsche was bitterly scornful of Christian doctrine, Yeats merely insisted that its basic truths had been distorted. Like Blake, he believed that "all religions are one."⁵² He was strongly influenced by the third century Platonist and mystic Plotinus, an influence clearly central to his prose work *A Vision* (1925, 1937). In some ways, his ideas, or at least his enthusiasms, were as similar to those of the ecumenical Soloviev as they were to those of Nietzsche. But Yeats possessed his own unique genius. Although he was no systematic philosopher, he was a continual seeker of wisdom and one of the twentieth-century's best poets. One writer described him as "something more than a poet—a philosopher of an almost forgotten kind, of a time when truth and beauty grew from the same stem, and were known by the now remote-sounding name of 'wisdom.'"⁵³

During World War I, Yeats was already well into middle age, but the war struck him especially forcefully when Major Robert Gregory, the son of his good friend Lady Gregory, was mistakenly shot down while in his airplane by an allied Italian pilot. Yeats wrote several poems about the young man's death, the most notable being "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and "An Irish Airman foresees his Death."⁵⁴ This death coming at the hands of an *allied* pilot was just one of the many ironies of a war that Paul Fussell believes was the main progenitor of modern irony, the twentieth century's predominant form of humor—"I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."⁵⁵ In his study of the Avant-Garde in France before the Great War, Roger Shattuck also observed the change the war had brought about regarding humor, going from a delight in "comic innocence" to more emphasis on irony and the absurd. One of the prewar writers he examines is Alfred Jarry. "One lesson of his life is that humor offers both a form of wisdom and a means of survival in a threatening world. It demands that we reckon with the realities of human nature and the world without falling into grimness and despair."⁵⁶

Following the war, however, artists and writers increasingly expressed despair at a world that seemed to have lost its meaning. There were, for example, the artists and poets of Dadaism, a movement that sprang up in Zurich, Switzerland during the war, and was especially indicative

⁵¹ Quoted in George Mills Harper, "The Creator as Destroyer: Nietzschean Morality in Yeats's *Where There is Nothing*," *Colby Quarterly* 15 (June 1979): 116, also available at <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2362&context=cq>; see also John R. Harrison, "What Rough Beast? Yeats, Nietzsche and Historical Rhetoric in 'The Second Coming,'" *Papers on Language & Literature*, 31, no. 4 (1995): 362-88.

⁵² Harper, 122.

⁵³ Arland Ussher, *Three Great Irishmen: Shaw, Yeats, Joyce* (New York: Mentor Books, 1957), 83.

⁵⁴ Both poems, and many more of Yeats, can be found at <http://www.poemhunter.com/william-butler-yeats/>.

⁵⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2000), 35.

⁵⁶ Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France—1885 to World War I*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 32-34, 248.

of the disillusionment produced by “the slaughterhouses of the world war.”⁵⁷ After the war, in cities like Paris and Berlin Dadaists demonstrated their contempt for traditional culture by acts and works that seemed nonsensical to many, but to the Dadaists themselves merely reflected the senselessness of life.

Other works of the 1920 that reflect postwar disillusionment were Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1922), T. S. Eliot’s famous poem, “The Waste Land” (1922), and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), where his leading character comments on the debasement of language by the war: “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow” have become “obscene.” In addition, one of the century’s most influential philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, insisted in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) on the limited ability of language to reflect reality and maintained that words could not say anything meaningful about art, metaphysics, or values. Like many postwar writers, artists, and thinkers, he believed the world was in a period of decline.⁵⁸

If the Great War helped bring about the “transformations of the comic spirit into varieties of the absurd,” then “The Theatre of the Absurd,” a term coined by Martin Esslin in his book of that title, clearly reflects that result. The chief playwrights of this humor of the absurd, following still another world war (WWII), were Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter. Ionesco best expressed the perspective that Esslin thought they shared: “Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”⁵⁹ This situation is sometimes perceived as a form of “cosmic irony.”

This sense of the absurdness of life was sometimes accompanied by humor, if not by true joy. Ionesco wrote: “I have never been able to understand the difference that is made between the comic and the tragic. . . . Humor makes us conscious, with a free lucidity, of the tragic condition of man. . . . To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying.”⁶⁰

Between the balanced dramas of Shakespeare and Chekhov and the Theater of the Absurd there are some similarities. The Absurd dramatists, like their two great predecessors, saw that the tragic and comic coexisted. Esslin also writes that “there is in Shakespeare a very strong sense of the futility and absurdity of the human condition.”⁶¹ In another place Esslin writes:

There is only a small step from Chekhov’s images of a society deprived of purpose and direction to the far more emphatic presentation of a world deprived of its “metaphysical dimension” in the plays of Beckett, Genet, Adamov or Ionesco . . . Chekhov’s determination to look at the world not merely with the cool objectivity of the scientist but also with the courage to confront the world in all its absurdity and infinite suffering (without flinching or self-pity and with a deep compassion for humanity in its ignorance and helplessness) led him to anticipate, far ahead of all of his contemporaries, the mood and climate of our own time.

But after quoting this passage from Esslin, another writer, Geoffrey Borny, disagrees with him and writes: “Far from denying change or hope, his [Chekhov’s] plays embody an

⁵⁷ The words are those of one of the Dadaists Hans Arp, as quoted in Peter Watson, *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the 20th Century* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 161.

⁵⁸ I have borrowed a portion of these comments on postwar culture from my *An Age of Progress?: Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (London: Anthem Press, 2008), 202-04.

⁵⁹ Quoted by Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), xix.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

attempt to *awaken* an audience to the possibilities of change and improvement. It is not existential angst at the fixed nature of the world that is being expressed by Chekhov, but his sense of humanity's comic and pathetic failure to make the most of the world."⁶² Despite perceiving the absurdity and folly of human behavior, Shakespeare and Chekhov did *not* share the basic view of the Theatre of the Absurd, which saw life as "devoid of purpose." Like most wise people, the two earlier dramatist possessed hope that despite all of the human folly they perceived, humans could act more wisely.

Upon Yeats's death in January 1939, the English poet W. H. Auden wrote in his "In Memory of W. B. Yeats": "Earth receive an honoured guest: / William Yeats is laid to rest." Auden's works would later offer us some meaningful insights into the relationship of humor and wisdom, but since his ideas will become so infused with his religious beliefs, we will take them up when we consider religion's impact on the wisdom-humor links. Coincidentally, Auden moved to the United States the same month as Yeats' death, and we shall use that occasion to shift our consideration of wisdom and humor to Auden's new country of residence.

Humor and Wisdom in the United States: Lincoln, Beecher, Twain, Sandburg, and Buchwald

Among U. S. individuals who commented on wisdom and humor or provided insight into their connection four will be highlighted here: Abraham Lincoln, Henry Ward Beecher, Mark Twain, and Carl Sandburg. And a fifth, Art Buchwald, will be mentioned briefly. Lincoln had a great appreciation for Beecher, the leading preacher of his day and a leading abolitionist; Twain was called "the Lincoln of our literature" by his friend the writer and *Atlantic Monthly* editor William Dean Howells; and Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years* was, in the words of one Lincoln scholar, "the best-selling, most widely read, and most influential book about Lincoln."⁶³

So let's start with Lincoln. In *The War Years*, Sandburg wrote "Lincoln was the first true humorist to occupy the White House. No other President of the United States had come to be identified, for good or bad, with a relish for the comic."⁶⁴ Sandburg then devoted most of a chapter to examples of Lincoln's humor. Although Sandburg also mentions Lincoln's melancholy nature, he does not dwell on it or examine it as closely as does Joshua Wolf Shenk in his *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (2006). Shenk connects the president's melancholy with humor in the following lines: "More than any medication, more than any doctor's counsel, Lincoln drew on two therapies for inspiration and succor: He read poetry, which helped him cut straight into the heart of real life. And he told jokes, which he called 'the vents of my moods & gloom.' It's an apt image, as humor helped keep Lincoln's inner life in circulation, keeping him in a kind of equilibrium with the environment."⁶⁵

⁶² Quoted in Borney, *Interpreting Chekhov* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006), 26-27, also available at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/chekhov/pdf/chekhov-whole.pdf>; the quote from Esslin is in his "Chekhov and the Modern Drama," in Toby W. Clyman, ed., *A Chekhov Companion* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1985), 143, 145.

⁶³ James Hurt, "Sandburg's Lincoln within History," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 20 (Winter 1999), at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/20.1/hurt.html>. For an extensive guide to Lincoln materials, see http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/l/abraham_lincoln/index.html?inline=nyt-per.

⁶⁴ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years*, Laurel ed., vol. 3 (New York: Dell, 1959), 607.

⁶⁵ Quoted from Shenk's web site at http://www.lincolnmelancholy.com/disc_jokes.html.

Sandburg provides us with an especially apt example of how Lincoln used humor to keep his mental balance and cope with tragedy.

On the day after [the North's crushing defeat at] Fredericksburg the staunch old friend, Issac N. Arnold, entered Lincoln's office [and] was asked to sit down. Lincoln then read from [humorist] Artemus Ward. . . . That Lincoln should wish to read this nonsense while the ambulances were yet hauling thousands of wounded from the frozen mud flats of the Rappahannock River was amazing to Congressman Arnold. As he said afterward he was "shocked." He inquired, "Mr. President, is it possible that with the whole land bowed in sorrow and covered with a pall in the presence of yesterday's fearful reverse, you can indulge in such levity?" Then, Arnold said, the President threw down the Artemus Ward book, tears streamed down his cheeks, his physical frame quivered as he burst forth, "Mr. Arnold, if I could not get momentary respite from the crushing burden I am constantly carrying, my heart would break!" And with that pent-up cry let out, it came over Arnold that the laughter of Lincoln at times was a mask.⁶⁶

Another source on Lincoln captures his mix of melancholy and humor this way: "Lincoln was an intensely brooding person, plagued with chronic depression, and gloomy reflections about life and mortality. His poetry, speeches, letters, and conversations were filled with references to death, almost as if he were obsessed by it. He also worried about insanity and feared losing his mind. . . . Known for his humor and folksy anecdotes, he liked to tell all kinds of jokes, bawdy stories, and yarns—usually poking fun at himself. . . . When he was accused of being two-faced [during an earlier Lincoln-Douglas debate], Lincoln responded: 'If I had another face, do you think I would wear this one?'"⁶⁷ The willingness of this man, who many thought homely in appearance, to make fun of his own looks attests to his willingness to combine humor with humility as Reinhold Niebuhr later suggested one should.

One person to whom Lincoln once told several funny stories was Henry Ward Beecher, "the most famous preacher in the land." In her Pulitzer-Prize winning biography of Beecher, *The Most Famous Man in America*, historian Debby Applegate states that Beecher "made the antislavery movement respectable to mainstream America." She also notes Beecher's sense of humor and quotes a minister who saw in him "the union of moral philosopher and comedian," as well as a "passion and his desire to do good." Applegate follows up this quote by her own assessment: "At his best, Beecher represented what remains the most lovable and popular strain of American culture: incurable optimism; can-do enthusiasm; and open-minded, open-hearted pragmatism."⁶⁸ One of Lincoln's contemporaries heard the president say that "he thought there was not upon record, in ancient or modern biography, so productive a mind, as had been exhibited in the career of Henry Ward Beecher!"⁶⁹

That Beecher valued wisdom and possessed many of the qualities of a wise man, including a rich sense of humor, is attested to by many sources. An earlier biographer who knew him well wrote:

But with all these contradictions he possessed certain qualities which were always present and potent, and which never changed with changing moods. Among these were the spontaneity of his humor, his love of

⁶⁶ Sandburg, vol. 3, p. 620.

⁶⁷ The source, <http://millercenter.org/academic/americanpresident/lincoln/essays/biography/print>, is located at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs.

⁶⁸ Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 6, 352, 470. See also <http://www.themostfamousmaninamerica.com>.

⁶⁹ "Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)," *Mr. Lincoln and New York*, at <http://www.mrlincolnannewyork.org/inside.asp?ID=44&subjectID=3>.

beauty, the strength of his conscience, his chivalry toward women and children, and his transparent sincerity.

He was humorous in the pulpit because he instinctively saw things in their incongruous relations, and described them as he saw them. . . .

. . . He made himself a welcome guest in the shop, the office, the factory. He did not confine his fellowship to any class or circle in society. He says somewhere, "There is no man that is not wiser than I am on some subjects; I can get something from everybody." In another place he says, "There is not a deck-hand on the ferry-boats, nor a man at Fulton Ferry whom I do not know, and who has not helped me." This was the secret of his interest in all manner of things. While he was getting information from men he was getting insight into men.⁷⁰

Of Beecher's humor, there is much evidence. Only months after his death there appeared a two-hundred page book entitled *Beecher as a Humorist: Selections from the Published Works of Henry Ward Beecher*. Almost a century later an essay on "The Humor of Henry Ward Beecher," appeared in the journal *Studies in American Humor*.⁷¹ On one occasion, he stated:

A man that is mirthful shall walk by Mr. Soberside who never saw a humorous thing, and who marvels that his companion is perpetually cachinnating [laughing hard]. The sober man feels nothing, and sees nothing; but the man that is mirthful is sensitive to every thing that is grotesque in nature or among men. . . . Life is full of amusement to an amusing man. Fortunate is he who has this faculty. It is more blessed than a garment in cold weather. There is nothing that so covers the nerves, there is nothing that so tempers passion and anger, there is nothing, that is such a natural cure for discontent, there is nothing that brings down men to such a companionable level, and creates such fellowship, as the divine spirit of mirth.⁷²

In a reflection of his religious liberalism, his humor, and willingness to accept evolution, he confessed: "I am perfectly willing that it should be true, that, millions of years ago, my ancestors sprang from monkeys. I would as lief [leave] spring from a monkey as from some men I know of."⁷³

Like Lincoln, however, Beecher could poke fun at himself as well as the foibles of others. Realizing that the literary quality of his novel *Norwood* did not come close to matching that of his sister's most famous work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he quipped: "People used to accuse me of being the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* until I wrote *Norwood*."⁷⁴ Also like Lincoln, he relied on humor in times of trouble. In one of the most trying periods of his life, in 1874 when he underwent a six-month trial on charges of adultery, he displayed his humor on several occasions in court before the jury deadlocked 9-3 in his favor.

Mark Twain's humor is so legendary that we need spend little time on it here. And there have been various references to his "wit and wisdom" from his own day to the present. In 1867, for example, *The New York Times*, commenting on his book *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*, wrote that "there is a great deal of quaint humor and much pithy wisdom in his writings."⁷⁵ Not long after the book came out, Twain gave a talk that

⁷⁰ Lyman Abbott, *Henry Ward Beecher* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1903), 114, 410.

⁷¹ The book *Beecher as a Humorist* was compiled by Eleanor Kirk [Ames] (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1887) and is available at Google Books. The essay, by William Peirce Randel, is available at http://www.compedit.com/henry_ward_beecher.htm.

⁷² *Beecher as a Humorist*, vii-viii.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11. For quotations about mirth attributed to Beecher, see http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/topics/mirth_t001.htm.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Applegate, 377.

⁷⁵ The *Times* piece is available at <http://www.twainquotes.com/18670501.html>.

advertised, “Doors open at 7:00 o’clock. The wisdom will begin to flow at 8:00.”⁷⁶ (Twain was a frequent and very successful lecturer and public speaker/entertainer who on one lecture tour in 1871-72 gave more than 80 speeches and continued to give many for the rest of his life.⁷⁷) In our own day, books entitled *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain* have appeared, and in October 2010 the British newspaper *The Guardian* published an article entitled “This Column Will Change Your Life: The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain,” which declared, “Twain proved that . . . you can dispense real, uncynical life-wisdom, and still be hilarious.”⁷⁸

Although there is no doubt about Twain’s humor, his wisdom is a bit more problematic. He was indeed wise sometimes, in some ways, but not others. The poet, dramatist, and critic T. S. Eliot wrote of the pessimism and misanthropy he displayed in some of his later works, thought it stemmed from a form of self-dissatisfaction, and added that “there is no wisdom in it.”⁷⁹ A string of sentences from a well-regarded book about Twain’s last decade, the most tragic of his long life, will indicate some of the ways he was not wise. Appropriately enough the book is entitled *Mark Twain: God's Fool*.

An indisputable and almost overwhelming sense of inferiority competed inside him with a vanity and aggressiveness that compelled him to seek the spotlight whenever he could. . . . Fear had been the controlling emotion of his life. . . . To compensate for his fear of poverty he spent lavishly—foolishly. He invested, almost always unwisely, but compulsively. . . . The same insensitivity that marked his relationship to his family from 1900 to 1910 had also been an undercurrent in his domestic life during the halcyon years of his marriage. . . . His volatile temperament could explode without warning and inflict exactly the injuries he attempted so strenuously to avoid.⁸⁰

Yet there is much wisdom contained in his writing, especially political wisdom. *The Gilded Age* (1873), a novel he co-wrote, captured well enough the democratic failings, materialistic excesses, corruption, and hypocrisy of the time that U. S. historians down to the present still use the term “Gilded Age” to describe the late nineteenth century.

Twain eventually became a strong and early critic of imperialism, whether that of the United States or colonial powers like Belgium in the Congo.⁸¹ During the last decade of his life he became vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League and spoke out against the American subjugation of the Philippines. He also satirized those who asked God’s blessings for their war efforts—“O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows

⁷⁶ Fred Kaplan, *The Singular Mark Twain: A Biography* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2005), 184.

⁷⁷ For a thorough list of his speeches, see <http://www.twainquotes.com/SpeechIndex.html>.

⁷⁸ This article, by Alexander Burkeman, is available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/16/change-your-life-happiness-twain-laugh>.

⁷⁹ T.S. Eliot “Introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” *Mark Twain*, ed. Harold Bloom, rev. ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 2006), 35.

⁸⁰ Hamlin Hill, *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 269-71. In 2010 the first volume of a new unexpurgated autobiography of Twain, published 100 years after his death, appeared; some reviewers, such as humorist Garrison Keillor, thought it might have been better left unpublished. See his review at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/19/books/review/Keillor-t.html>.

⁸¹ See, e.g., “Mark Twain on Imperialism at <http://www.historywiz.com/primarysources/marktwain-imperialism.htm>, and the satiric “King Leopold’s Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule,” at <http://chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/i2l/kls.html>.

with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst.”⁸²

In 1901, almost two decades before women obtained the vote in U. S. national elections, he told an audience: “For twenty-five years I’ve been a woman’s rights man. . . . I should like to see the time come when women shall help to make the laws. I should like to see that whip-lash, the ballot, in the hands of women.”⁸³ He also spoke out about the mistreatment of minorities like U. S. Chinese workers—“I have seen Chinamen abused and maltreated in all the mean, cowardly ways possible to the invention of a degraded nature, but I never saw a Chinaman righted in a court of justice for wrongs thus done to him.”⁸⁴ Because of the use of words like “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain has sometimes been accused of being racist, but that fails to properly consider the work’s historical and literary context. One of Twain’s most recent biographers cites Booker T. Washington’s comment about Twain’s “sympathy and interest in the masses of the Negro people.” This same biographer writes that “Twain strongly believed that white America owed reparations to black America,” and he quotes Twain writing: “Whenever a colored man commits an unright action, upon his head is the guilt of only about one tenth of it, and upon your heads and mine and the rest of the white race lies fairly and justly the other nine tenths of the guilt.”⁸⁵

By the mid 1880s he was sympathetic with workers’ efforts to unionize and told the Knights of Labor union in 1886: “Who are the oppressors? The few: the king, the capitalist, and a handful of other overseers and superintendents. Who are the oppressed? The many: the nations of the earth; the valuable personages; the workers; they that Make the bread that the soft-handed and idle eat.” Later in the same speech, he added: “But when All the bricklayers, and all the bookbinders, and all the cooks, and all the barbers, and all the machinists, and all the miners, and blacksmiths, and printers, and hod-carriers, and stevedores, and house-painters, and brakemen, and engineers, and conductors, and factory hands, and horse-car drivers, and all the shop-girls, and all the sewing-women, and all the telegraph operators; in a word all the myriad of toilers in whom is slumbering the reality of that thing which you call Power . . . when these rise, call the vast spectacle by any deluding name that will please your ear, but the fact remains a Nation has risen!”⁸⁶

In Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), he had his hero criticize the lack of workers’ powers, suggest a “new deal,” and predict that by the nineteenth century workers would band together, battle their employers, and help set their own wages. According to some Twain scholars, Franklin Roosevelt later borrowed the term “New Deal” from Twain’s

⁸² From his unpublished “The War Prayer,” at <http://www.ntua.gr/lurk/making/warprayer.html>.

⁸³ From *Mark Twain’s Speeches* at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3188>.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Maxwell Geismar, ed., *Mark Twain and the Three Rs: Race, Religion, Revolution and Related Matters* (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1973), 98.

⁸⁵ Kaplan, 4, 411; see also <http://www.twainquotes.com/Negroes.html>, and “The United States of Lyncherdom,” <http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam482e/lyncherdom.html>. In early 2011 a publisher announced the publication of a new version of *Huckleberry Finn* with all uses of the word “nigger” replaced by “slave.”

⁸⁶ His speech is reprinted in Mark Twain, “The New Dynasty,” *The New England Quarterly*, 30 (September, 1957): 384-85. See also Philip S. Foner, *Mark Twain: Social Critic* (New York: International Publishers, 1958), 154. I deal with early twentieth-century imperialism and racism and the century-long struggle for the rights of women, minorities, and workers in my *Age of Progress*, 2, 91-95, 142-54.

book to describe his own policies.⁸⁷ Months before his death in 1910, Twain told his good friend Howells that the unions were the “sole present help of the weak against the strong.”⁸⁸

Twain was also concerned about human rights in other countries. Like Chekhov, he criticized the treatment of the Jewish Captain Dreyfus in France during the Dreyfus Affair, contributed to raising funds for Jewish pogrom victims in Russia, and criticized oppressive measures of the Russian tsarist government. When Chekhov’s friend Maxim Gorky came to the United States in 1906, Twain introduced him at a fund-raising banquet to assist the cause of Russian freedom.⁸⁹

Twain attitude toward humor also reminds us of Chekhov’s compassionate and restorative view of comedy, that when people realized how badly they lived they would “create another and better life for themselves.” Twain once said, “To my mind, a discriminating irreverence is the creator and protector of human liberty.” Here again he reminds us of Chekhov, whose irreverent humor attempted to liberate people from enchaining themselves. Twain also reminds us of Beecher, who seemed “the union of moral philosopher and comedian.” Twain appreciated the following words from William Thackeray’s essay on Jonathan Swift: “The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness—your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture—your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. . . . He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher.” Twain believed that humor had to serve an “ideal higher than that of merely being funny.”⁹⁰ Howells wrote in 1880, that Twain’s humor sprung “from a certain intensity of common sense, a passionate love of justice, and a generous scorn of what is petty and mean.”⁹¹ Before giving a speech in London in 1907, a member of Parliament introduced him as follows: “Here he is, still the humorist, still the moralist. His humor enlivens and enlightens his morality, and his morality is all the better for his humor. That is one of the reasons why we love him.”⁹²

Howells also suggested that much of Twain’s humor was based on the incongruity between words and deeds, or pious platitudes and unseemly behavior. There was, for example, “the ludicrous incongruity of a slaveholding democracy nurtured upon the Declaration of Independence, and the comical spectacle of white labor owning black labor.” As Howells notes, “If the knowledge and vision of slavery did not tinge all life with potential tragedy, perhaps it was this which lighted in the future humorist the indignation at injustice which glows in his page.

⁸⁷ Hugo D. Johnson, “Labor,” in *The Mark Twain Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster, James Darrell Wilson, and Christie Graves Hamric (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1993), 436; “New Deal,” at <http://www.twainquotes.com/NewDeal.html>.

⁸⁸ William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), 100. Also available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3390>.

⁸⁹ For a good overview of Twain’s attitude and activities regarding Russian freedom, see Barbara Schmidt, “Mark Twain on Czars, Siberia and the Russian Revolution,” at <http://www.twainquotes.com/Revolution/revolution.html>. After Twain discovered that the woman accompanying Gorky on his American trip was not his wife, he criticized the Russian radical’s lack of discretion.

⁹⁰ Twain quotations are from Harold K. Bush, Jr., “Mark Twain’s American Adam: Humor as Hope and Apocalypse,” *Christianity and Literature* (Spring 2004), at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb049/is_3_53/ai_n29118466/pg_11/?tag=content;col1. Valentine Tschebotarioff Bill recognizes the importance of freedom to Chekhov in her *Chekhov—the Silent Voice of Freedom* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987).

⁹¹ Howells, 130.

⁹² See <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3188>, where his speeches (and some introductions to them) can be downloaded and searched.

His indignation relieves itself as often as not in a laugh; injustice is the most ridiculous thing in the world, after all, and indignation with it feels its own absurdity.”⁹³

The higher ideal that Twain sought could be thought of as some form of wisdom. Besides the Twain epigraph at the beginning of this essay—“Genuine humor is replete with wisdom”—he also spoke or wrote other words that suggest a connection between humor and wisdom. “Humor is the great thing, the saving thing, after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place” (“What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us?”). “The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven” (*Following the Equator*). “Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand” (*The Mysterious Stranger*). Howells believed that “all his wisdom . . . begins and ends in his humor.”⁹⁴ In 1905, Howells composed a poem, “The American Joke,” for Twain’s seventieth birthday celebration. In it he wrote:

One eye winked in perpetual eclipse,
In the other a huge tear of pity stood. Wisdom in nuggets round its temples shone.

And the joke says about itself:

I am the joke that laughs the proud to scorn;
I mock at cruelty, I banish care,
I cheer the lowly, chipper the forlorn,
I bid the oppressor and hypocrite beware.
I tell the tale that makes men cry for joy;
I bring the laugh that has no hate in it;
In the heart of age I wake the undying boy;
My big stick blossoms with a thornless wit,
The lame dance with delight in me; my mirth
Reaches the deaf untrumpeted; the blind
My point can see. I jolly the whole earth.

And Howell concludes by having the joke say, “*Mark Twain made me.*”⁹⁵

An article published a hundred years after Twain’s death, stated that “his example paved the way for Will Rogers, James Thurber, Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, and Jon Stewart—droll outsiders, one and all, who invite us to join them in the back of the class, where school is always out and everyone is free to mock whatever party line is being preached at the moment. There was nothing like that in America’s humor before Twain. After him there is not much else.”⁹⁶

Although that praise may be a bit overstated, one writer just starting his career at the time of Twain’s death did resemble him in many ways, and that was Carl Sandburg (1878-1967).⁹⁷ The main things the two men had in common were their rich sense of humor, their devotion to

⁹³ Howells, 180.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186-87.

⁹⁶ Malcolm Jones, “Our Mysterious Stranger,” *Newsweek*, at <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/30/our-mysterious-stranger.html>.

⁹⁷ I have written at much greater length on Sandburg in my essays “The Wisdom of Carl and Paula Sandburg” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.pdf>, and “Carl Sandburg’s Wisdom through Humor,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgHumor.pdf>.

writing, their fame in giving live performances, and their reflections on their country and its people. What Sandburg wrote about the American people in his long poem *The People, Yes* might have been written by Twain.

The people laugh, yes, the people laugh.
 They have to in order to live and survive under lying politicians, lying
 labor skates, lying racketeers of business, lying newspapers, lying ads.
 The people laugh even at lies that cost them toil and bloody exactions.⁹⁸

But whereas Twain was primarily a writer of fiction and an essayist, Sandburg was a poet, Pulitzer-Prize winning biographer of Abraham Lincoln, and folk-song collector, who was less famous for the occasional fiction he wrote, including a very long novel (*Remembrance Rock*) and humorous children's stories. These differences were also evident in their stage performances which played to each man's strength, including Sandburg's singing of folk songs and playing his guitar.

In his introduction to Sandburg's *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960*, critic (and poet) Mark Van Doren wrote: "Carl Sandburg . . . brought something back to poetry that had been sadly missing in the early years of this century. It was humor, the indispensable ingredient of art as it is of life. Just as we cannot take a man seriously who lacks the sense of humor, so we cannot take the poet. Humor is the final sign and seal of seriousness, for it is proof that reality is held in honor and in love." Van Doren thought that "the sense of humor in him is more than anything else the sense of the absurd, or, as he might say, the cockeyed, the loony, the goofy." And it was central to the way Sandburg perceived the world. Van Doren went on to write that "Thomas Carlyle once remarked that the presence of humor in a poet—he meant Shakespeare chiefly—enables him to see what is beneath him and about him as well as what is above him. . . . The real poet studies the world as it is: lovely, terrible, sensible, grotesque; and would ask for no other one in its place. In this sense, Sandburg is a real poet, so that it is no wonder people trust him and adore him."⁹⁹ One of Sandburg's best friends, Jewish-American humorist Harry Golden, wrote that "he was the first American historian who made use of the native American talent for telling tall tales, for laughing, and for appreciating the vernacular."

If wisdom involves knowing "what fits with what" and humor often displays wisdom by depicting the incongruous—that which does not fit—then Sandburg's works often evidenced both traits. In his long poem *The People, Yes* he repeats various lines he had heard among the people: "You are to be hanged and I hope it will prove a warning to you." "I took so much medicine I was sick a long time after I got well." "I can never get these boots on till I have worn them for a while." "The new two dollar a day street-sprinkler driver took his job so serious he went right on driving while the rain poured down." And then there was the Irish policeman who arrested a Pawnee Indian and said "why don't you go back where you came from?" Sandburg was also wise enough to laugh at himself. Like Twain, who once wrote, "I am a great and sublime fool," Sandburg was wise enough to realize that he too shared the human penchant for folly. In *The People, Yes* he wrote, "To never see a fool you lock yourself in your room and smash the looking-glass." And his late poem "Dreaming Fool" states:

⁹⁸ *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, rev. and expanded ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 537.

⁹⁹ From Van Doren's "Introduction" in Carl Sandburg, *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co, 1960), 9-10.

I was the first of the fools
 (So I dreamed)
 And all the fools of the world
 were put into me and I was
 the biggest fool of all.¹⁰⁰

The most recent American humorist to garner great attention for his “wit and wisdom” was Art Buchwald. He was a syndicated columnist for over 60 years, primarily for the European edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* and, after returning from more than a decade in Paris, for *The Washington Post*. His columns appeared in more than 500 newspapers worldwide. He won various awards, including a Pulitzer Prize, and had many friends in Paris, Washington, and beyond, including many members of the Kennedy clan. According to *The Times* (of London), “during the Vietnam War, his columns developed a sharper edge. . . . Nixon loathed him; but Dean Acheson called him ‘the greatest satirist in English since Pope and Swift.’”¹⁰¹ By all accounts he was a humble, compassionate, and generous person. He had a difficult childhood and, like Lincoln, sometimes suffered from depression. After two serious bouts of it, he often joked that if he had a third attack, “I will be inducted in the Bipolar Hall of Fame.”¹⁰² But it was the way he dealt with death that earned him the most attention.

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once stated that the true test of wisdom was maintaining a positive approach to life in the face of death.¹⁰³ And the way Buchwald did that, with great humor and grace, captured media attention for many months before his death in January 2007 at age 81.

In February 2006, soon after having experienced kidney failure and having a leg amputated below the knee, he decided to stop dialysis treatments and check himself into a hospice. Although doctors expected him to die within a short time, he lived almost a year. While in the hospice he gave radio and television interviews, and his humor about his situation was vintage Buchwald. After about five months in the hospice, he checked out and spent subsequent months at his home on the island of Martha's Vineyard and later at his son's home in Washington, D. C. He also wrote a book, *Too Soon to Say Goodbye*, about his recent experiences, which was published late in 2006. In it he wrote, “At a certain time in life—actually, right now—the two questions that become uppermost in my mind are: ‘What am I doing here?’ and ‘Where am I going?’ The first answer is a narcissistic one. I was put on this earth to make people laugh. The second one is much harder—I have no idea where I'm going, and no one else knows either.” He later added: “When people ask me if there's an afterlife, I answer, ‘If I knew, I would tell you.’ . . . Everyone swears their own God is the only one, and if you pray to another you are an infidel, but I'm not too God-damned sure anymore. . . . Since the God factor plays such an important part in the hospice, I am still waiting for a sign to tell me which God is the real one.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Twain is quoted in Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1912), 609; Sandburg's quotes are from his *Complete Poems*, 473, 490, 496, 616, 713.

¹⁰¹ From *The Times* (of London) obituary on him (January 19, 2007) that mentioned his “wit and wisdom” in its title, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article1294342.ece>.

¹⁰² Quoted in Ronald G. Shafer, “The Genius of Art Buchwald,” *The Washington Post*, Saturday, March 4, 2006, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/03/AR2006030301614.html>.

¹⁰³ Erik H. Erikson, “Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle,” in *Aging, Death, and the Completion of Being*, ed. David D. Van Tassel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 60.

¹⁰⁴ Art Buchwald, *Too Soon to Say Goodbye* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2006), 11, 29, 35.

In an Epilogue in his book some of his friends eulogized him. One of them was television correspondent Tom Brokaw. He wrote that Buchwald's "humor was a road map to essential truths. . . . I've never had a richer appreciation of his friendship and presence among us than during the final passage of his life, when, facing death, he taught us anew lessons in courage, grace, friendship, family and the mysteries of the human body, laughing all the way."¹⁰⁵

Humor, Wisdom, and Faith

Earlier in this essay we encountered Milan Kundera's statement that "religion and humor are incompatible," but many others disagree. Niebuhr, for example, wrote that "the saintliest men frequently have a humorous glint in their eyes" and "they retain the capacity to laugh at both themselves and at others." Among the individuals we have mentioned, some, like Kierkegaard, Soloviev, and Beecher, would strongly agree with Niebuhr that religion and humor are compatible; others, like Chekhov, Twain, and Sandburg, might appreciate Kundera's viewpoint more, without going as far as he does.

The necessary starting point for any examination of the humor-wisdom link is to define religion. The Oxford Dictionary of English's first definition is "the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods." One religious text also notes that "since the 1960s 'religion' has increasingly come to be seen as that which is institutionalized: involving prescribed rituals; established ways of believing," etc. and distinguishes this narrower definition from spirituality.¹⁰⁶ Other definitions are much broader. For example sociologist Peter Berger has defined religion as "the human attitude towards a sacred order that includes within it all being—human or otherwise—i.e., belief in a cosmos, the meaning of which both includes and transcends man."¹⁰⁷

Critics of Religious Dogmatism

Kundera can only be correct about the incompatibility of humor and religion if he defines religion very narrowly, for example as reflected in the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books which banned the books of such authors as Rabelais and Erasmus.¹⁰⁸ Before either of these Renaissance writers one of the great medieval mystics, Meister Eckhart, displayed an appreciation for humor when he wrote that in understanding God, humor could help divert our mind from too much emphasis on the individual ego and attempting to understand God by logical-rational approaches. The papacy, however, appreciated the wide-ranging ideas of Eckhart little more than it later did those of Rabelais and Erasmus—in 1329 Pope John XXII condemned some of his writing as

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 152. Buchwald was also the first person interviewed for own video obituary in the *New York Times*, see <http://video.nytimes.com/video/playlist/last-word/art-buchwald/1194820770698/index.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Heelas, "The Spiritual Revolution: From 'Religion' to 'Spirituality,'" *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. Linda Woodhead et al. (London: Routledge, 2002), 356-57.

¹⁰⁷ For this and some other definitions of religion, see "What Is Religion?" at <http://www.religionfacts.com/religion/quotes.htm>. Trowbridge, 235-44, makes some interesting comments on the relationship between religion and wisdom.

¹⁰⁸ See <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/indexlibrorum.html> for an article on the Index.

heretical.¹⁰⁹ In general, however, various religious thinkers in many of the world's religions have expressed an appreciation for the importance of humor in furthering wisdom and spirituality.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, Kundera makes an important point to the extent that religion, or any other system (e.g. Communism or Nazism), becomes dogmatic. Dogmatism not only fails to appreciate humor, but it is unwise because it is contrary to humility, which is necessary for the most developed wisdom. Kundera is correct in thinking that humor is on the side of wisdom when it recognizes that we live in a world of moral ambiguity, where we are all sometimes foolish and no one possesses absolute truth, including religious believers. He is critical of "those who look for a *position* (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art rather than searching it for an *effort to know*, to understand, to grasp this or that aspect of reality." He adds that "suspending moral judgment is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality*. The morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone; of judging before, and in the absence of, understanding. From the viewpoint of the novel's wisdom, that fervid readiness to judge is the most detestable stupidity, the most pernicious evil. Not that the novelist utterly denies that moral judgment is legitimate, but that he refuses it a place in the novel."¹¹¹

In different ways, Chekhov, Twain, and Sandburg all poked fun at dogmatism, religious or otherwise, but the question of their religiosity, or lack thereof, is much more complicated. In Chekhov's *Notebook*, he wrote, "Between 'there is a God' and 'there is no God' lies a whole vast tract, which the really wise man crosses with great effort." One writer starts out his book *Mark Twain's Religion* quoting scholars who wrote that Twain was an atheist or "a man who entirely lacked religion," but the writer then goes on to argue that if religion is defined broadly enough then Twain certainly did have one.¹¹² Although critical of "fire and brimstone" preachers like Billy Sunday, Sandburg once said of himself, "I am a Christian, a Quaker, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Shintoist, a Confucian, and maybe a Catholic pantheist or a Joan of Arc who hears voices. I am all of these and more. Definitely I have more religions than I have time or zeal to practice in true faith."¹¹³ Incidentally, Twain wrote a novel, *Joan of Arc*, sympathetic to the young Frenchwoman, and he thought it his best work.

Four Believers Who Stressed Humor: Kierkegaard, Chesterton, Niebuhr, and Auden

Among the more traditional religious believers we have mentioned who have written on humor, several more (besides Soloviev and Beecher) are worth considering further: the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Englishman G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), and two twentieth-century friends, the theologian Niebuhr and the poet Auden.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (Berkeley: Frog Books, 2008), 41, 188.

¹¹⁰ See, e.g., Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008). According to Hyers, "Humor in Zen, Comic Midwifery," *Philosophy East and West* 39 (July 1989), 270, Zen has "self-consciously employed and developed humor: (1) humor as a technique for reversing and collapsing categories, and (2) humor as a technique for embracing opposites," and within Zen, humor can be viewed "as an expression of enlightenment, liberation, and inner harmony."

¹¹¹ Kundera, 7, 91; see also Benjamin Letzler, "Towards a Metahumor, or, Kundera, Thick Glasses and Anchises' Piggyback Ride," at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/lithum/gallo/humor.html>.

¹¹² William E. Phipps, *Mark Twain's Religion* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 1-6.

¹¹³ Quoted in Harry Golden, *Carl Sandburg* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961), 64.

¹¹⁴ On the influence of Kierkegaard and Niebuhr on Auden and on other aspects of Auden's humor, see Timothy Eugene Green, "The Comic Art of W. H. Auden: Theory and Practice" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1974), at <http://etd.lib.ttu.edu/theses/available/etd-04102009-31295000823392/unrestricted/31295000823392.pdf>.

A professor of theology who has put together an anthology of Kierkegaard humor has written: “Bundle together any other ten philosophers who have made a major impact in the history of philosophy. I challenge any reader to assemble a selection of humor from all of them put together that is funnier than what you find in this volume of Kierkegaard.” But “laughter as such is not his [Kierkegaard’s] major objective but rather the understanding of laughter within the stages of development of the human spirit. Nonetheless, while writing intricately dialectical philosophy, he is often not only funny, but keenly aware of just why something is funny.”¹¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s dissertation, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), dealt with one form of the comic and he would later deal with other types of it.

Kierkegaard shared St. Paul’s sentiment that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (see above, p. 6) and praised the example of the *Bible’s* Abraham. This father, because of his faith, was willing to do as God requested and offer his own beloved son Isaac as a burnt offering before at the last moment an angel of God stopped him from doing so, telling him that he had proved his love of God. Kierkegaard thought that Abraham was “great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself.” But most of all Abraham was great because of his faith, which made “it a holy act to be willing to murder one’s son.” And Kierkegaard also asked, “Would it not be better to stop with faith, and is it not revolting that everybody wants to go further? . . . Where would they go, he asks. “To earthy wisdom, to petty calculation, to paltriness and wretchedness, to everything which can make man’s divine origin doubtful. Would it not be better that they should stand still at faith, and that he who stands should take heed lest he fall? For the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd.”¹¹⁶

In regard to humor, Kierkegaard saw it as a path toward a higher consciousness or true faith-based wisdom—“humor is the last stage of existential inwardness before faith.”¹¹⁷ Although he thought of irony as a lower stage of the comic than humor, we need not be delayed by going into his distinction. What is important is that Kierkegaard perceived humor as a way of helping people cope with the absurdities and contradictions of human existence, especially between our bodily time-limited existence and our aspirations toward the eternal. The comic vision can keep us from being dominated by a tragic vision of life that despairs of any way out of life’s absurdities—a no-exit view of life. But Kierkegaard thought that the comic incongruities of life ultimately necessitated faith.

Like Kierkegaard, G. K. Chesterton both wrote about and displayed humor. He was a prolific essayist who also wrote fiction, non-fiction monographs, biography, poetry, and plays, and he went through various religious stages before he finally converted to Catholicism in 1922. But already in an essay two decades earlier he had written:

Nonsense will, in a very unexpected way, come to the aid of the spiritual view of things. Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the 'wonders' of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider

¹¹⁵ From Thomas C. Oden’s “Introduction,” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Humor of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton University Press, 2004), available at <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/i7746.html>.

¹¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 13, 21, 26-27.

¹¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 259.

it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper.

. . . This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense. Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook. The well-meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that 'faith is nonsense,' does not know how truly he speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith.¹¹⁸

In his autobiography Alan Watts, who helped popularize Zen Buddhism in America, praised Chesterton's humor and found the essay from which the above quote was taken the "most profound and provoking" of all the thousands of essays that Chesterton wrote.¹¹⁹ The poet Auden was also an admirer of Chesterton and wrote an introduction to a book of his prose. Auden also stated, "I cannot think of a single comic poem by Chesterton that is not a triumphant success."¹²⁰ Most recently, Paul Johnson has devoted a chapter to him in his book *Humorists: From Hogarth to Noel Coward*.

Although aware of Chesterton's writings, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was more in the tradition of the Protestant Kierkegaard and thought he possessed more psychological insight than Freud. Although Niebuhr's ideas on humor display some similarities to those of the Danish thinker, there are also differences. Most importantly Niebuhr's essay on humor and faith, which appeared in his 1946 book *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, is much clearer and concise than Kierkegaard's scattered writings on humor and the comic.

Like Kierkegaard, he thought that humor was primarily a response to the incongruities that surround us and that it could help us become humbler and wiser. As we have seen above (p. 5), he especially stressed the necessity of laughing at ourselves, seeing it as a prelude to contrition for our faults and sins. Humor can also help us deal more wisely with others.

All men betray moods and affectations, conceits and idiosyncrasies, which could become the source of great annoyance to us if we took them too seriously. It is better to laugh at them. A sense of humor is indispensable to men of affairs who have the duty of organizing their fellowmen in common endeavors. It reduces the frictions of life and makes the foibles of men tolerable. There is, in the laughter with which we observe and greet the foibles of others, a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance. We would not laugh if we regarded these foibles as altogether fitting and proper. There is judgment, therefore, in our laughter. But we also prove by the laughter that we do not take the annoyance too seriously.¹²¹

And in some ways, humor can aid us to better cope with life than any exclusive dependence on Reason because "life does not make sense as easily as those philosophers, who think they have charted and comprehended everything in a nice system of rationality, would have us believe. Man's life is really based upon a vast incongruity."

¹¹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Nonsense," at <http://www.nonsenselit.org/content/view/59/48/>.

¹¹⁹ Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography, 1915-1965* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 259.

¹²⁰ *Chesterton's Non-Fictional Prose*, ed. and intro. W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 11-18; W. H. Auden, "The Gift of Wonder," in *G. K. Chesterton—A Centenary Appraisal*, ed. John Sullivan (London: Paul Elek, 1974), 78.

¹²¹ Niebuhr, 115.

[Rationalistic] systems do not do justice to the large areas of chaos in the world; and they fail to give an adequate account of man himself, who is something less, as well as something more, than mind.

The sense of humor is, in many respects, a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the spirit of philosophy. If we are able to laugh at the curious quirks of fortune in which the system of order and meaning which each life constructs within and around itself is invaded, we at least do not make the mistake of prematurely reducing the irrational to a nice system. Things “happen” to us. We make our plans for a career, and sickness frustrates us. We plan our life, and war reduces all plans to chaos. . . .

To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom. Such laughter does not obscure or defy the dark irrationality. It merely yields to it without too much emotion and friction. A humorous acceptance of fate is really the expression of a high form of self-detachment. If men do not take themselves too seriously, if they have some sense of the precarious nature of the human enterprise, they prove that they are looking at the whole drama of life not merely from the circumscribed point of their own interests but from some further and higher vantage point.¹²²

Niebuhr believed, however, that laughter or humor was insufficient for dealing with the “ultimate incongruities of existence” —like “man’s very position in the universe”—that “threaten the very meaning of our life.” The theologian acknowledged “gallows humor,” but thought it “quite inadequate to deal with the depth and breadth of the problem of death.” Moreover, “if we persist in laughter when dealing with the final problem of human existence, when we turn life into a comedy we also reduce it to meaninglessness. That is why laughter, when pressed to solve the ultimate issue, turns into a vehicle of bitterness rather than joy. To laugh at life in the ultimate sense means to scorn it. There is a note of derision in that laughter and an element of despair in that derision.”¹²³

Niebuhr perceived laughter as a “no-man’s land” between despair and faith. For confronting life’s ultimate puzzles “faith is the only possible response.” Humor is “a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer. . . . but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humor is fulfilled by faith.” In dealing with the ultimate incongruities of life, such as the contrast between our yearnings for immortality and our very mortal bodies, neither reason nor laughter is enough. For the Christian what is needed is “the power and the love of God, and [the belief] that the love which Christ revealed is finally sufficient to overcome the contradiction of death. Niebuhr concludes, “Faith is therefore the final triumph over incongruity, the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence. There is no other triumph and will be none, no matter how much human knowledge is enlarged.”¹²⁴

Niebuhr thought that laughter “sometimes contributed to the loss of prestige of dying oligarchies and social systems,” but that “laughter alone never destroys a great seat of power and authority in history. Its efficacy is limited to preserving the self-respect of the slave against the master.” Against the evils of someone like Hitler, he did not believe it was that useful of a resource. In the face of great evil or sin, whether of ours or of others, he believed that humorous forbearance would be “harmful indulgence” and would become “the instrument of irresponsibility.” The mix of mercy and judgment that may characterize our poking fun at the foibles of others and ourselves is not appropriate for dealing with the evils of a Hitler or Stalin, and our “laughter may turn to bitterness when it faces serious evil, partly because it senses its

¹²² Ibid., 123-26, 130.

¹²³ Ibid., 112-13, 127.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 111-15, 127, 129-30.

impotence.” For Niebuhr the Christian, “not humor but the cross” was the answer to dealing with great evil. “There is no humor in the scene of Christ upon the Cross.” Facing the truly evil, only faith could square mercy and judgment. Only it was an adequate alternative to despair.¹²⁵

Believing that one had to reach beyond humor to faith in order to achieve the highest wisdom did not mean that Niebuhr thought the person of faith could then dispense with humor. Faith, he thought could bring about a new joy, one that “expresses itself in an exuberance of which laughter is not the only, but is certainly one, expression.”¹²⁶

A few years before coming to New York in 1939 the English poet W. H. Auden, who had lapsed from his boyhood religious beliefs, was already reading Kierkegaard. In 1940 he met Reinhold Niebuhr. Early the following year, Auden reviewed favorably the theologian’s *Christianity and Politics*. In these first years in his new country, he also returned to the Anglican faith of his childhood by going regularly to an Episcopal church near his New York home, and he became a close friend not only with Niebuhr but also with his English-born wife, Ursula. For the remainder of his life, his Christian faith would remain central to his views and actions, and the influence of Kierkegaard and Niebuhr would continue to resonate in his own approach to humor and faith. But it also took on specific characteristics of its own and displayed subtle changes over his remaining decades.¹²⁷

Although Auden did not write much about wisdom, he displayed many of the characteristics of a wise person. Perhaps the most glowing tribute came from the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who emigrated to the USA in 1972. He wrote of Auden’s “autonomy, sanity, equipoise, irony, detachment—in short, wisdom.” In this same essay, he said he considered Auden “the greatest mind of the twentieth century,” and that “he went among the world’s grave, often terminal cases not as a surgeon but as a nurse. . . . And I marveled at that love.”¹²⁸

Love or compassion is a central value displayed by wise people,¹²⁹ and Auden’s love or compassion was demonstrated in many ways, including in his poetry. In a 1946 talk on novelist Henry James, Auden said, “One thing, and one thing only, is serious: loving one’s neighbor as one’s self.”¹³⁰ Brodsky quoted the lines “If equal affection cannot be / Let the more loving one be me” from Auden’s poem “The More Loving One.” And Brodsky thought that the lines captured well his “main precept.”¹³¹ Although the homosexual Auden does not seem to have been especially wise in his choice of a life partner—but then no one is always wise in all things—he appears to have been more loving than the man he chose, the much younger Chester Kallman, who in 1941 broke off sexual relations with him.

Another of Auden’s many friends wrote that “he was a wise and good man. . . . wholly devoid of self-importance or pretentiousness, and he often revealed a genuine and deep humility.” The same friend noted his “special gift for friendship,” and added that “he was, and took pleasure in being, funny in both senses—*peculiar* and *amusing*—loving jokes, songs,

¹²⁵ Ibid., 116-19, 121, 127.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 122-23.

¹²⁷ I have written at much greater length on Auden in my “W. H. Auden’s Wisdom, Faith, and Humor, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WHAudensWisdomFaithandHumor.pdf>.

¹²⁸ Joseph Brodsky, “To Please a Shadow,” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 357, 372, 382.

¹²⁹ See Macdonald at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.

¹³⁰ W. H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, vol. II: 1939–1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 302.

¹³¹ Brodsky, 359.

puzzles, and word games, and always happy to entertain.”¹³² Ursula Niebuhr wrote that “whether in casual conversation or action. . . [he] always was kind and generous.”¹³³

Besides love or compassion, Auden displayed many other wisdom traits or values that scholars have emphasized including humility, tolerance, and empathy. A recent study of Auden’s Christianity by Arthur Kirsch, a self described “agnostic non-Christian,” states that “the most remarkable feature of his remarkable intelligence may have been its generosity. Auden was hardly a saint but . . . he was a kind man, whose compassion was ‘rooted,’ as he said compassion must be, in a delight in existence, and in thankfulness, ‘in wonder, awe, and reverence for the beauty and strangeness of creation.’” Kirsch writes that “perhaps the most compelling characteristic of Auden’s thought is the sense of the comic that informs his dialectic of faith and doubt,” and that “Auden was remarkably free of religious prejudice.” Kirsch criticizes “academics and intellectuals who assume that one cannot be a religious and a thinking person at the same time,” and writes that “Auden stands as an eloquent example of the joining of the two, a modern instance of a person in whom thought and faith not only co-existed, but nourished each other. His faith expanded the horizons of his mind as well as his heart, and his formidable intelligence, in turn, probed the nature and limits of his Christian belief.”¹³⁴

Although Auden was a Christian, he defined faith broadly, once stating that “every co-ordinated pattern of human thought or behavior requires a faith.” Nevertheless, he distinguished between faiths and Faith. By the latter he meant the presuppositions one holds in order to “make sense of his past and present experience” and act meaningfully in the future. He also wrote that “the truths arrived at in different fields cannot ultimately conflict.”¹³⁵

In 1946-1947 Auden gave a series of lectures on Shakespeare at New York’s New School for Social Research. Later, in the 1960s, he included a section of more than 100 pages on him in his *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*. Auden believed that Shakespeare’s plays reflected much wisdom, as well as Christian values. In one of his lectures he said, “You can argue for hours as to what Shakespeare believed, but his understanding of psychology is based on Christian assumptions.”¹³⁶ In one of his later essays on Shakespeare he wrote:

Comedy . . . is not only possible within a Christian society, but capable of a much greater breadth and depth than classical comedy. . . . Christian comedy is based upon the belief that all men are sinners; no one, therefore, whatever his rank or talents, can claim immunity from the comic exposure and, indeed, the more virtuous, in the Greek sense, a man is, the more he realizes that he deserves to be exposed. Greater in depth because, while classical comedy believes that rascals should get the drubbing they deserve, Christian comedy believes that we are forbidden to judge others and that it is our duty to forgive each other. . . . In Christian comedy the characters are exposed and forgiven: when the curtain falls, the audience and the characters are laughing together.¹³⁷

In a 1954 piece in the same collection Auden stated: “The man who takes seriously the command of Christ to take up his cross and follow Him must, if he is serious, see himself as a comic figure, for he is not the Christ only an ordinary man, yet he believes that the command, ‘Be ye

¹³² Monroe K. Spears, “In Memoriam W. H. Auden,” *The Sewanee Review* 82 (Fall 1974): 672-73.

¹³³ “Memories of the 1940s,” in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 110.

¹³⁴ Arthur C. Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xi, xix, 176, 179.

¹³⁵ Auden, *Prose II*, 98; *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, vol. III: 1949–1955, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 170-71.

¹³⁶ *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xiii, 312. As we saw above, however, Bloom was more cautious in identifying Shakespeare with any one religion.

¹³⁷ “The Globe,” in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 177.

perfect,' is seriously addressed to himself. . . . In proportion as he takes the command seriously . . . he will see himself as a comic figure. To take himself seriously would mean that he thought of himself, not as an ordinary man, but as Christ."¹³⁸ If incongruity is essential to presenting comedy, what could be more incongruous than we humans, with all our flaws, trying to be perfect?

In several other essays in the same book, Auden adds other insights. Sometimes accused by critics of writing frivolous poetry, in an essay on the frivolous and the earnest he wrote, "A frivolity which, precisely because it is aware of what is serious, refuses to take seriously that which is not serious, can be profound." And, "Christianity draws a distinction between what is frivolous and what is serious, but allows the former its place. What it condemns is not frivolity but idolatry, that is to say, taking the frivolous seriously."¹³⁹

In one of his Shakespeare essays, Auden indicated that he preferred humor that reflected Christian charity and humility rather than hatred. He wrote that "laughing and loving have certain properties in common. Laughter is contagious but not, like physical force, irresistible. A man in a passion of any kind cannot be made to laugh; if he laughs, it is a proof that he has already mastered his passion." He added, "Real laughter is absolutely unaggressive; we cannot wish people or things we find amusing to be other than they are; we do not desire to change them, far less hurt or destroy them." He found Shakespeare's Falstaff especially appealing because in his "untiring devotion to making others laugh" he was "a comic image for a love which is absolutely self-giving."¹⁴⁰ A similar Auden sentiment is found in his attitude toward satire. In an essay on Byron's *Don Juan* he wrote: "Satire and comedy both make use of the comic contradiction, but their aims are different. Satire would arouse in readers the desire to act so that contradictions disappear; comedy would persuade them to accept the contradictions in good humor as facts against which it is useless to rebel."¹⁴¹

This did not mean that Auden thought that great evil should be accepted as just part of the human condition, only that satire was not the best way to deal with it. In another essay in his *The Dyer's Hand* collection, he wrote that "when we really hate someone, we cannot find him comic; there are no genuinely funny stories about Hitler." And he ended his essay with the reflection that "satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering. . . . In public life the evils and sufferings are so serious that satire seems trivial and the only possible kind of attack is prophetic denunciation."¹⁴² In another essay Auden had defined a prophet as one "through whom God speaks to awaken the Church to a consciousness of its contemporary historical mission." He stressed that modern-age prophets need not even be Christians, and added that most of the recent "great prophets, e. g., Voltaire, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, have been actively hostile to Christianity."¹⁴³

In late 1968, just five years before his death, Auden received a copy of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* and strongly agreed with much of it, especially Bakhtin's praise of the carnival spirit. In the first poem Auden wrote after reading it, he counseled that in writing advice to the younger generation the "dominant mood should be that of a Carnival."¹⁴⁴ In 1970, he wrote a review in which he spelled out some of his newly-formed ideas on Carnival.

¹³⁸ "Balaam and His Ass," in *ibid.*, 135.

¹³⁹ "Postscript: The Frivolous & the Earnest," in *ibid.*, 429-30.

¹⁴⁰ "The Prince's Dog," in *ibid.*, 206-07.

¹⁴¹ "Don Juan," in *ibid.*, 388.

¹⁴² "Notes on the Comic," in *ibid.*, 372; for more on Auden's political views, see my "W. H. Auden, Humor, and the Politics of Today," at <http://hnn.us/articles/134653.html>.

¹⁴³ The quotes are from Auden, *Prose* III, 175, and taken from a 1950 essay on "Religion and Intellectuals," which Auden wrote for the *Partisan Review*.

¹⁴⁴ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007), 835.

Carnival celebrates the unity of our human race as mortal creatures, who come into this world and depart from it without our consent, who must eat, drink, defecate, belch, and break wind in order to live, and procreate if our species is to survive. Our feelings about this are ambiguous. . . . We oscillate between wishing we were unreflective animals and wishing we were disembodied spirits, for in either case we should not be problematic to ourselves. The Carnival solution of this ambiguity is to laugh, for laughter is simultaneously a protest and an acceptance. During Carnival, all social distinctions are suspended, even that of sex. Young men dress up as girls, young girls as boys. The escape from social personality is symbolized by the wearing of masks.¹⁴⁵

Another Auden scholar summed up the impact of Carnival on him this way:

Carnival laughter, the laughter provoked by Auden's celebration of the human body, reveals that the problematic nature of the human condition is not something to be ashamed of or to be distraught over but something to revel in. Carnival laughter is ethical and Christian in its demonstration that it is possible to love those we laugh at, as well as those we laugh with. Carnival laughter, moreover, is the free, spontaneous laughter of those released from the bondage of fear, alienation, and despair. As a wise fool in his poetry, Auden knows that a dignity based on sublimity is not the ideal Christian attitude. Great laughter, Auden believes, releases man from the aridity of social dignity and self-righteousness and allows him to celebrate his biological existence and bring a catharsis to his discontent.¹⁴⁶

Auden also appreciated the part played by folly and wise fools during the Renaissance and demonstrated by such literary characters as Shakespeare's Falstaff and Cervantes's Don Quixote. The "wise fools" he appreciated and to some extent emulated were in the tradition of "fools for Christ's sake" mentioned by St. Paul.

How he would reconcile folly and wisdom, he indicated in several of his works. In his long poem dealing with the first Christmas, "For the Time Being," he depicts one of the three Wise Men as previously being too much head and too little heart, but he now confesses that his learned philosophizing was not enough.

But arriving at the Greatest Good by introspection
And counting the Greater Number, left no time for affection,
Laughter, kisses, squeezing, smiles:
And I learned why the learned are as despised as they are.
To discover how to be loving now
Is the reason I follow this star.

And after arriving at the manger where Jesus is born the three Wise Men say,

Love is more serious than Philosophy
Who sees no humor in her observation
That Truth is knowing that we know we lie.¹⁴⁷

In placing love first among various wisdom values, Auden demonstrates that his type of wisdom follows the advice of St. Paul when in his first epistle to the Corinthians, he wrote: "If I speak in the language of humans and angels but have no love, I have become a reverberating gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can understand all secrets and every

¹⁴⁵ This Auden review is reprinted as his "Introduction: Concerning the Unpredictable," in Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower*, Harvest Book ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1979), 21-22.

¹⁴⁶ Green, 188.

¹⁴⁷ *Collected Poems*, 369-70, 383.

form of knowledge, and if I have absolute faith so as to move mountains but have no love, I am nothing.” Auden’s wisdom also resembles that of Shakespeare’s, which emphasized the heart more than the head (see above, p. 8).

Conclusion

Our historical survey indicates that a sense of humor is indeed an important wisdom aid and value. Humor can also be combined with faith, as long as the latter remains tolerant, to enhance wisdom. In fact, wisdom, humor, and faith, each of which involves the heart as well as the head, can, if defined broadly enough, augment each other. For example, all three traits should reinforce the humbling lesson that we are all prone to folly and that we should not take ourselves too seriously and fall victim to the four Sternberg-listed fallacies—egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability—that often prevent learned people from acting wisely. Of course, if a religious belief encourages unwise values, like intolerant dogmatism, it can impede wisdom, partly because such dogmatism lacks the humility necessary for the highest wisdom. But to the extent that religion reinforces such wisdom values as compassion, empathy, humility, and tolerance it can be especially helpful in cultivating wisdom. And if Auden is correct that “the truths arrived at in different fields cannot ultimately conflict,” then religious truth does not contradict scientific or any other type of truth. Benefitting from the insights of the individuals we have examined, the following can also be said.

- (1) There is much truth in Niebuhr’s statement, “The sense of humor is, in many respects, a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the spirit of philosophy. . . . To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom.”
- (2) A sense of humor contributes to a better and wiser life in many other ways. As Beecher wrote, “Life is full of amusement to an amusing man” (see p. 19 above for the rest of this quote). This is similar to the perspective of Chekhov, who viewed “laughter as medicine, and a vital prerequisite for any treatment of his fellow human beings,” or the Yeats lines: “Wisdom is a butterfly / And not a gloomy bird of prey.”
- (3) Despite humor’s many positive aspects, it is not always sufficient or the best response in dealing with evil. Although Charlie Chaplin’s mocking of Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940) may have helped people see how ludicrous the German dictator was, Niebuhr and Auden were correct in believing that much more than humor was needed to deal with such a great evil. Failing to act and standing on the sidelines with a smile of bemusement in the face of such evil would be, as Niebuhr emphasized, “irresponsible.”
- (4) Wisdom and humor should both reflect a realistic perspective on life. This perspective sees that life contains both tragic and comic elements. It also helps us to see what fits with what, as well as the incongruous—what does *not* fit with what—which is often humor’s subject.
- (5) Faith can also affect our perspective, as many Christian religious believers from St. Paul to the present believe it does. Mystics in various religion traditions, like Vladimir Soloviev, see the world anew. The great Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki gives some sense of this when he writes of the concept of satori. “Satori may be defined as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new

- world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind. Or we may say that with satori our entire surroundings are viewed from quite an unexpected angle of perception. Whatever this is, the world for those who have gained a satori is no more the old world as it used to be; even with all its flowing streams and burning fires, it is never the same again.”¹⁴⁸ Mystics perceive a basic primal-Being unity, also shared by what Aldous Huxley has referred to as the “perennial philosophy.”¹⁴⁹ Such a perception helps us to understand why Bergson could write that “the great mystic transcends individuality and extends divine action,” and that such action “would be the highest form of wisdom, of which philosophy could only be considered an approximation.”
- (6) As Chesterton reminds us, both religion and humor can delight in the mysterious, incongruous, puzzling aspects of life. And possessing a sense of wonder and appreciation for the mysteries of life heightens our wisdom.
 - (7) Two central incongruities, often the subject of humor, are the gaps between a) our spiritual and physical nature, and b) our ideals, or at least professed ideals, and our actions.
 - (8) Although wise and humorous people can be found among those who are religious or non-religious, some sort of faith and hope, however broadly defined, seems most conducive to wisdom. The agnostic Chekhov’s belief that in the future people would “create another and better life for themselves” is one example of such faith and hope. The humor of Chekhov and Shakespeare seems wiser than the more despairing humor of the Theater of the Absurd.
 - (9) Although not all definitions of wisdom emphasize the centrality of compassionate love, some wisdom scholars and many faiths do emphasize it. For St. Paul and Auden it was *the* central value. Shakespeare’s wisdom also “has far more to do with the heart than the head,” with “a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness” (see above, p. 8). We also see how compassion can be related to humor in the following passage.

The Buddha’s sense of humor—which is so evident in many of his discourses—is closely bound up with his sense of compassion; both are born from an understanding of greater connections, from an insight into the interrelatedness of all things and all living beings and the chain reactions of cause and effect. His smile is the expression of one who can see the “wondrous play of ignorance and knowledge” against its universal background and its deeper meaning. Only thus is it possible not to be overpowered by the misery of the world, or by our own sense of righteousness that judges and condemns what is not in accordance with our own understanding, and divides the world into good and bad. A man with a sense of humor cannot but be compassionate in his heart, because his sense of proportion allows him to see things in their proper perspective.¹⁵⁰

One could also say that adding to other people’s happiness by making them laugh can by itself be an act of love. As Auden said about Shakespeare’s Falstaff, in his

¹⁴⁸ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Random House, Inc., 1996), 98-99.

¹⁴⁹ Aldous Huxley, “Introduction,” in *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (New York: New American Library, 1972), 11-22. See also Macdonald’s mention of perspective and the “mystical traditions of both East and West,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Hyers, “Humor in Zen, Comic Midwifery,” 276, quoting Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (London: Hutchinson, 1956), 177.

- “untiring devotion to making others laugh” he was “a comic image for a love which is absolutely self-giving.” Many of Art Buchwald’s friends apparently thought similarly about the man who believed he was “put on this earth to make people laugh.”
- (10) Compassion sometimes involves suffering, as Christians believe it did for Jesus. But as Auden wrote, “Suffering is an inescapable element in life . . . to be accepted, not as just in itself, as a penalty proportionate to the particular sins of the sufferer, but as an occasion for grace or as a process of purgation. . . . The difference between Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies is not that the characters suffer in the one and not in the other, but that in comedy the suffering leads to self-knowledge, repentance, forgiveness, love, and in tragedy it leads in the opposite direction into self-blindness, defiance, hatred.”
- (11) Although some people are wiser than others, the humor of Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare, and the more modern writers we have looked at should help us to realize that we are all sometimes foolish. As Sandburg wrote, “To never see a fool you lock yourself in your room and smash the looking-glass.” For St. Paul, Erasmus, and more recently Sternberg, it is often “smart and well-educated people,” or those who consider themselves wise like Erasmus’s writers and philosophers, who “are particularly susceptible” to Sternberg’s four fallacies that keep people from being wise. Although intelligence, education, and the humanities should help people become wiser, well-educated people should not dismiss the possibility of folk wisdom. From Erasmus and Rabelais to Sandburg’s *The People, Yes* and Auden’s appreciation of “wise fools” and the democratic nature of carnival humor we learn that an elitist approach to wisdom that overemphasizes social and educational distinctions is not wise.¹⁵¹
- (12) Wisdom and humor both should recognize, as Auden put it, that we are “mortal creatures . . . who must eat, drink, defecate, belch, and break wind in order to live, and procreate if our species is to survive.” The wisest humor, such as that of Shakespeare or Auden, does not reject our physical nature, but with a smile and laughter accepts it as part of the human condition.
- (13) The wisest humor is a tolerant, humble, and compassionate humor, not that described by Hobbes as emanating from a sense of superiority. Ethnic jokes, for example, if they feed our egoism, are not wise. Self-deprecating humor—like Lincoln’s remark when accused of being two-faced (“If I had another face, do you think I would wear this one?”)—is wiser. Satire, including political satire, can reflect wisdom, and such satire as practiced by individuals like Erasmus, Rabelais, Chekhov, Twain, and Buchwald can serve wisdom’s purpose, as Sternberg phrases it, of using “intelligence to seek a common good.” But when employing such satire, it is useful to remember what Auden wrote in one of his essays about the attitude critics should convey toward their readers, “Remember that like you and everyone else I am a weak fallible creature who will often make false judgments; and therefore you must not take everything I say as gospel.”¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe in *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 13-17, in a section on “a wise custodian,” provide a good example that wisdom knows no class barriers.

¹⁵² Auden, *Prose II*, 97.

Niebuhr was correct in saying that “there is [or should be?], in the laughter with which we observe and greet the foibles of others, a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance.” But Kundera was also correct in warning us against dogmatism and indicating our “profound incompetence to judge others.” As we have seen above, Shakespeare was more intent on depicting reality than making dogmatic judgments. And the Christian spirit, which Auden believed Shakespeare manifested, also warns against judging others without first paying attention to our own imperfections. “Judge not, that ye be not judged,” and “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Matthew 7, King James version of the Bible).

In summary, perhaps the best we can say about wisdom, humor, and faith is what the insights of Nordstrom and Auden suggest about Shakespeare’s works: in combination they can help us to enlarge our self-knowledge, forgiveness, compassion, and love.