

excommunicated

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A Report from the "Other" ISHS

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I attended the 34th annual conference of the International Society for Humor Studies (whose acronym is also ISHS) in Oakland, CA, from June 29-July 3. This conference is big enough to last almost an entire week, with more than 150 participants! Our ISHS has some growing to do before we can rival that, not to speak of holding *annual* conferences that size.

Let me begin by saying that I was kindly received into the fold of this group, although I was something of an oddball. Most folks at that conference are social scientists, with a lot of psychologists (especially from "positive psychology"), a good number of linguists, neurologists, media studies experts, a handful of philosophers, and a sprinkling of literary folks like me.

It was an edifying experience to see how colleagues from the social sciences do things at a conference. For starters, they do not read their talks off a prepared script, which was a revelation to me—it *can* be done! Of course, not all of their PowerPoint talks (and I mean *talks*) were equally compelling, but the average paper did indeed benefit from the unscripted delivery method. I must admit that some presentations went a bit over my head, since much of it was statistical data. I was bombarded with terms like "Discriminant validities," "multitrait-multimodal matrix," "principal component analysis," "factor loadings," and (my favorite) "Crombach alphas." But several of even the statistics-heavy papers could at least partially reach me.

For instance, one such paper investigated the effects of humor on subjective well-being, taking a positive-psychology approach. The researchers found statistically relevant correlations between degree of well-being and sense of humor. However, these effects almost disappeared when the researchers controlled for personality. In other words, what made for the relative increase in well-being among humorous people (compared to their more dour peers) was primarily a function of personality rather than a result of laughter *per se*. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that laughing makes a person happier. Rather, a person is happier if she has personality traits that dispose him or her to laugh more easily.

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However, there is hope even for the humor-challenged – although the positive effects were greatly reduced once the researchers controlled for personality, the effects of laughter on well-being did not entirely disappear, they were simply quite small. So, laughter may not be the best or the only medicine against the blues, but it surely doesn't hurt either.

The conference was run efficiently at Holy Names University, a religious institution of higher learning near San Francisco.

Interestingly, there was hardly any comment on the intersection of faith and laughter at this conference. If anything, the relationship between religion and comedy was downplayed, both generally and specifically. The specific downplaying happened in the wake of my own talk. My presentation was titled "Faith and Laughter: An Empirical Study of the Relationship between Religious Self-Identification and Humor Appreciation." I presented my research on the question whether one's religious affiliation (or non-religious status) can serve as a predictor of humor appreciation. My data-driven conclusion went over smoothly, including my finding that only the most openly blasphemous comedy causes a statistically relevant divergence in responses between atheists and practicing Christians (although even that difference was relatively small). One way to look at this is to conclude that today's practicing Christians are not heeding 2000 years of theological and ecclesiastical condemnations of laughter and comedy. To my surprise and considerable consternation, several audience members flatly rejected the thesis that official Christianity (Church, theology, clergy, dogma) has long been hostile to laughter. I tried to counter with quotes by Basil, Jerome, St. John of Chrysostom, even Reinhold Niebuhr; I figuratively waved the Benedictine monastic rule book forbidding laughter in front of them; and I listed the names of theologians-of-laughter (Karl-Joseph Kuschel, Jacqueline Bussie, Gerald Arbuckle, James Martin, Conrad Hyers, Charles Campbell, William Whedbee, etc.) who all acknowledge Christianity's deep-seated suspicion against laughter – but I could not gain any traction with my disputants. They had completely internalized the acceptance of

humor in contemporary religious life without seeing it as a recent, heterodox phenomenon. Hence, they and I came almost to the same conclusion, but from opposed directions. I argued that contemporary Christians are well-disposed toward humor (even blasphemous humor) *despite* the pervasive theological opposition to laughter throughout the ages; they thought that since Christians welcome humor today, it must have always been part of religious life.



Holy Names University in Oakland

I gave my talk wearing the "official" ISHS t-shirt (showing Cristiano Banti's 1857 painting "Galileo Facing the Catholic Inquisition" and the title of our newsletter, exCommunicated), and during the discussion following my talk, I did indeed begin to feel a bit like a heretic among my fellow humor scholars, many of whom were unwilling to acknowledge Christianity's troubling past in dealing with the very subject they are making a living studying. One Christian in the audience flatly stated that Jerome, Basil, Chrysostom, Saint Augustine, et al. were not relevant to Christianity. This made me wonder who the heretic was in this exchange. That no amount of theological argument could deter him from this view shows, if nothing else, that theology may have a tenuous hold on the lived Christian experience of Americans like him. Indeed, privileging personal experience over matters of doctrine and institutional dogma betrays an inherently protestant bent.

Later that day, I talked to one of my new acquaintances, a friendly professor a few years my senior from the University of Chicago; he happened to share my views,

and when I recounted my experience, he patted me on the shoulder and said reassuringly: "Don't worry, Bernard, you are right—they are wrong." The upside of this episode is that I know I am not treading on territory meticulously covered by scholars and that there is some real work to be done to shed more light on the subject of religion and humor and to edify people about the heretical potential of laughter. Jacqueline Bussie has made a good start in her book *The Laughter of the Oppressed* (2007) when she stated that "The

church, from Augustine on down through the Middle Ages, thus interprets laughter vis-à-vis Christianity, the church, and God, as a pernicious phenomenon that seeks to undermine ecclesiastical authority and doctrine" (17). I don't think laughter's subversive potential has evaporated just because contemporary practicing Christians don't think laughter is a problem any longer. Perhaps, the subversive force of laughter (as explored in this newsletter by John Holloway's essay on the SNL skit "Djesus Uncrossed") only reaches

deeper into the psyche of believers now that they are no longer resistant to laughter, including comedy targeting their religion.

Appropriately enough I'd like to finish with a humorous anecdote: my new friend from the University of Chicago had a way of turning almost any of my statements into witty quips. For instance, while watching me fumbling with the hot and cold water valves in the bathroom, failing to turn off the water because the valves turned in counter-intuitive directions, he noted drily: "that's why there's a drought in California—you can't turn these damn things off..." After a few more quips, I complimented him with the words "You are as funny as Sam Johnson ever was," to which his reply came instantly "and I'm as old as him, too." Going by the research described earlier, this man's sense of humor has a measurable effect on the well-being of people around him.

I am now a member of two ISHS organizations and expect to attend many more conferences of both associations. Who knows, the two organizations might establish friendly diplomatic relations in the near future – I'd gladly volunteer as an ambassador.