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## LITURGY AND COMEDY: SOME KIERKEGAARDIAN REFLECTIONS

On April 19, 1848, Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his journal: "My whole being is changed. My reserve and self-isolation is broken. I must speak. Lord, give thy grace".<sup>1</sup> After years of suffering, after having been "brought to the last extremity" at the prospect of his sinfulness, he now felt that he had been accepted and forgiven by God. Now he could affirm: "A new hope has awakened in my soul, that God may desire to resolve the fundamental misery of my being, that is to say, now I am in faith in the profoundest sense".<sup>2</sup> This new hope, he added, would necessarily be reflected in his writing: "As poet and thinker I have represented all things in the medium of the imagination, myself living in resignation. Now life comes closer to me, or I am closer to myself, coming to myself". Now he had both the calling and the ability to speak out, far more boldly than before, on the subject of Christian existence.

An important element of Kierkegaard's deepened and more direct Christian witness was his sharp attack on the liturgical life of the Danish State Church. This essay will examine the character and the doctrinal underpinnings of that attack—with the aim of calling to mind an often-overlooked aspect of liturgy, namely, its relation to comedy.

### I

God is the object of liturgical worship. But what then is God? He is the most comical being that ever lived; his word is the most comical book that has ever come to light: to set heaven and earth in motion, . . . so to threaten with hell, . . . in order to attain what we understand by being Christians (and indeed we are Christians)—no, nothing so comical ever occurred.

The most spiritless divine worship, more stupid than anything that is or was found in paganism, more stupid than worshipping a stone, an ox, an insect, more stupid than all that is—to worship under the name of God . . . a twaddler.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the danger has gone out of liturgy. If the being worshipped is comical, so is the worship. Liturgy has become a counterfeit, a game. "Artists in dramatic costumes make their appearance in artistic buildings", and what do they do? They "play comedy".<sup>4</sup> The comedy is complete: all are Christians, and everything is Christian, "and everything expresses the direct opposite of the Christianity of the New Testament".<sup>5</sup> In fact, the difference between the theatre and the church is that the church tries in every way dishonestly to hide what it is. "The theatre is a wag, really, a sort of witness to the truth, which gives the secret away. What the theatre does openly the church does secretly".<sup>6</sup> Must one not conclude that "divine worship is in the direction of making a fool of God"?<sup>7</sup> "For its principal aim is to provide an occasion for . . . a banquet which differs in this respect from other banquets, that this banquet (what a refinement!) has 'also' a religious significance."

What, then, of the centre of liturgical worship, the eucharist? Well, the clergy takes special care not to enlighten the people about what the New Testament understands of this sacrament and of the obligations it imposes. They are too busy receiving sacrifices—their incomes—to reflect that Christianity might require them to make sacrifices of themselves. The eucharist has become a mere ceremony, before and after which one lives in complete worldliness. It is forgotten that at the Last Supper he who from all eternity had been consecrated to be the Sacrifice met for the last time with his disciples—who, if they followed him, were themselves consecrated to death. Hence, "for all the festal solemnity, it is shudderingly true, what is said about the body and blood, about this blood-covenant which has united the Sacrifice with his few faithful . . . blood-witnesses".<sup>8</sup> Only nowadays what is shudderingly true is shudderingly forgotten.

What troubled Kierkegaard was that the sacramental life of the State Church lacked subjectivity. It will be recalled how highly he prized this dimension of inward, affective acceptance, this truly personal receptivity. Kierkegaard found the sacraments of his communion to be merely objective, merely "out there". They are the conventional rites of an empirically identifiable group of men who are united, not by a blood-covenant with the sacrificial Christ, but by common adherence to an abstract religious ideology.

Men . . . grow accustomed to identifying the church with Christians, and there

are no Christians in any other sense but this. Then behind this abstraction the Christian makes holiday. . . . A million Christians more or less does not mean more than a sausage when pigs are being slaughtered.<sup>9</sup>

The conventional, merely objective sacrament caricatures both terms of the sacramental relationship, both God and man. It mocks God because God is sheer subjectivity, personality in the most eminent sense. God abhors "official solemnity". "The official is more loathsome to him than it is to a woman when she discovers that a man is making love to her out of a book of etiquette."<sup>10</sup>

Sacramental "objectivity" makes a farce of man's side of the relationship, too. Perhaps the basic difficulty here is that "Christianity takes Christianity merely as a gift. That is why it makes so much ado about the sacraments (in the superstitious sense), and pretends to know that the sacrament carries an obligation".<sup>11</sup> The gift that Christians think Christianity is, more precisely, is the gift of assurance that one is counted among the elect. There is a sense, of course, in which this understanding of Christianity is perfectly correct, but this sense can be comprehended only by a man who, having in inwardness touched the roots of his selfhood, acknowledges his total guilt before God. When, on the other hand, absolute religious assurance is sought where only a relative assurance is possible, when it is sought in the history, ideology, and external rites of Christianity, there is no real assurance at all, but only comical self-deception. If, for example, "in the moment of temptation, . . . faith does not lay hold of God, but is reduced to a belief that one has really been baptized", there are really no grounds for assurance of salvation. "Were it only a matter of, say, ten thousand dollars at stake, the case would scarcely be permitted to stand with the kind of certainty we all now have that we are baptized."<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, it is through this misuse of sacraments that Christianity has slipped back into what Kierkegaard terms "Judaism". By means of purely objective rites the whole matter of a happy eternity has been settled once and for all, and "in the easiest and cheapest manner possible", so that would-be Christians are free to enjoy themselves in this life, too. Take, for instance, the eucharist: "The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is used like the sacrificial offering in Judaism: everything is calculated to set one at rest—objectively and rapidly—in relation to the matter of eternity, and we live out our lives enjoying existence, multiplying and filling the earth". Indeed, "Christianity is an association of men who by means of certain sacraments free themselves of the duty of loving God."<sup>13</sup>

The State Church and its liturgy are scandalous, comical. And yet there is another whole side to Kierkegaard's understanding of the sacraments, particularly the eucharist. Kierkegaard had never been ordained to the Lutheran ministry, but he did hold a theological degree, and thus, according to the custom of the times, he was accredited to preach. And he preached about the eucharist. The eucharistic doctrine of his sermons seems to follow that of Luther—apart from his insistence on a sort of "works-righteousness" as the preparation for a truly Lutheran religious self-awareness. Kierkegaard's "Discourses at Communion", particularly those on Luke 22:15 and I Peter 4:8, written respectively in 1848 and 1851, are rich in phenomenological description of the experience of the eucharist—and deserve to be read thus—but if a doctrinal scheme were to be distilled from them the result would be something like this.<sup>14</sup>

The eucharistic action takes place within the wider context of God's effective promise of salvation, his Word. It can be said that Christ's death is preached at the altar. Of course, he died but once for the whole world's sin: his death is not repeated. But the individual Christian is not, in terms of space and time, a contemporary of Christ, and it is for his sake that the action at the altar is repeated. Since for Kierkegaard the whole of life is repetition, one can see how this divine institution figures forth the basic structure of the Christian life, wherein one's old self is reaffirmed in holiness through the repeated reception of Christ's pledge of salvation. I am what I am. I hear of the law and the gospel from the preacher. My reception of the eucharist is the joining of the gospel with me in sensory symbolism, and just as my being is enmeshed in repetition, so the eucharistic Christ comes to me again and again. Still, I remain my sinful self. The purpose of this repetition is to give me a pledge that Christ has died for me, that Christ gives himself to me as a shelter. It is important to note, however, that Christ gives *himself*: "It is not some comforting thought he gives thee, it is not a doctrine he communicates to thee; no, he gives thee himself". Or again, "From the minister of the church thou hast received assurance of the gracious pardon of thy sins; at the altar too thou dost receive the pledge of it. . . . In re-receiving the pledge thou dost receive Christ himself; in and with the sensible sign he gives thee himself as a covering for thy sins."<sup>15</sup>

Whatever historians of philosophy may have made of him, Kierkegaard emerges in these discourses as an essentially orthodox Lutheran preacher—even one who was rather conservative for his time. It is precisely because Christ

is really present in the eucharistic signs, precisely because he is there as a real pledge of the real forgiveness of sin, that the worship of the State Church is such a scandalous comedy.

Would it not stand in the most strident contradiction to the sacred account of how heartily the Institutor longed for this supper, would it not be the most terrible contradiction, if it were possible that anyone out of habit, . . . or perhaps impelled by circumstances quite accidental, . . . would come to holy communion without a hearty longing?<sup>16</sup>

So much for the wrong dispositions for approaching this real, and in a good sense, objective, divine ordinance. It is when Kierkegaard attempts to elaborate the *right* dispositions thereto that he diverges somewhat from classical Lutherism. In 1852 he wrote in his journal:

Now if I think of wishing to go to communion—well, I admit that up to the present I have never succeeded in going worthily to communion. This I repent, grace is offered to me, this is grace from behind, in relation to what is already past.

But now I am to go to communion again—am I now worthy? Dare I say that I am worthy? And this might after all be demanded of me in thanksgiving for the grace I have received in the past. There we have it! The sacrament promises and strengthens me in grace in order to use the sacrament.<sup>17</sup>

What comes to the rescue here—in the end, at least—is indeed the classic Lutheran conception of the meaning and power of the sacrament, even if Luther would not have been altogether pleased with such musings over one's worthiness. Precisely by being neither purely Lutheran nor purely Catholic, Kierkegaard's doubts about the right preparation for the eucharist contain a serious problem.

What about the—apparently numerous—people who come to communion out of habit, without a hearty longing? If they are not doing what they should be doing, or at least, if they do not have the proper attitude toward what they are doing, has not Kierkegaard's hearty longing itself become a kind of good-work, such as Kierkegaard rejected as pertaining to Catholic works-righteousness? Furthermore, what about Kierkegaard's disavowal of practically everyone's past eucharistic experience, his own included, wherein the longing was not hearty enough? What has happened to Luther's observation that a perplexed and erring conscience is the best preparation for communion? In short, by rejecting so large an area of eucharistic experience, has he not implicitly undercut his *doctrine*, as to how the eucharist promises and produces grace?

Of what use is a sacrament that almost never does what it is supposed to, or at least, does it so badly that its usage must be disavowed in the name of religion? Granted, the State Church hides its fatuousness behind purely objective doctrine and ritual: the power of the real eucharist is not allowed to operate upon the State Church. Yet the eucharist has been more or less inoperative in Kierkegaard himself: his subjectivity has never adequately come into contact with its reality, its intrinsic holiness. Of course, Kierkegaard passionately believes in that reality. Still, one is tempted to ask, why should he? Why should one hold, doctrinally, that there is a certain liturgical reality, instituted by Christ for one's own benefit, which, however, one can never properly appropriate? It would seem that the reality of the eucharistic Christ has effectively been placed beyond reach. With its shallow emphasis on the purely objective and external, the State Church makes the worship of God comical. Nevertheless, what about the passionately subjective believer who experiences such a disproportion between striving and result? Can he break down his isolation, or is he *also* comical?

## II

If, then, one considers not only the liturgical critiques in the pages of Kierkegaard's "attack upon Christianity" but also his late communion-discourses and journal-entries, one senses a certain anomaly: the State Church is criticized for failing in the impossible. It can be argued that this anomaly is rooted, first, in the Christology set forth in *Training in Christianity*, 1848, and secondly, in the theological anthropology set forth in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of 1846. With respect to the latter work, it may be noted that even though it was written before the forgiveness-experience mentioned above, it was certainly not rendered irrelevant by that experience; indeed, to a large extent, forgiveness came to Kierkegaard precisely in terms of the *Postscript*.

It will be of use to consider two aspects of Kierkegaard's Christology. In the first place, the God-man is a sign, a sign being understood as something that negates sensory immediacy. That someone or something would negate the results of sense-perception implies that he or it has stimulated reflection, that is, that the sign is seen as being in fact a sign. What stimulates reflection in the case of Jesus of Nazareth is the miracle. Further reflection, however, discovers this sign-person to be a sign of contradiction. It finds that he is a contradiction in his very constitution: "The contradiction, the greatest possible, is that between being God and being an individual man".<sup>18</sup> In consequence, "one must perceive that direct communication is an impossibility for the God-

man, for being the sign of contradiction, he cannot communicate himself directly". Kierkegaard observes that it is precisely when Jesus' mode of being and communicating is left out of account that Christianity becomes direct, merely objective, doctrine and ritual.

In the second place, Jesus Christ, "as the Paradox, . . . is an extremely unhistorical person". "Christ is the absolute", "becoming a Christian in truth comes to mean to become contemporary with Christ", and "in relation to the absolute there is only one tense: the present". By way of elucidation,

What really occurred (the past) . . . is not the real. It lacks the determinant which is the determinant of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness, the *for thee*. The past is not reality—for me; only the contemporary is reality for me. What thou dost live contemporaneous with is reality—for thee. . . .

And thus every man can be contemporary only with the age in which he lives—and then with one thing more: with Christ's life on earth; for Christ's life on earth, sacred history, stands for itself alone outside history . . . Christ's life on earth is not a past event. . . . His earthly life possesses the eternal contemporaneousness.<sup>19</sup>

Here, it may be noted, is the ground of the intrinsic sacredness of the Christian liturgy, and especially of the eucharist. Fundamentally, it is by reason of this nineteenth-century version of Luther's ubiquity-doctrine that Kierkegaard's Christ can enter into our history and become our contemporary. It is by reason of his "eternal contemporaneousness" that Christ the subject can make contact with our subjectivity. Conversely, it is, again, precisely when Christ is regarded as a portrait in doctrine, and not as an actually present subject, that this doctrine and the worship based on it become a comical caricature of authentic Christianity.

Such a Christology, despite its entirely laudable stress on the mystery of Christ's being and presence, is not without serious problems. In a word, the humanity of Christ stands in a curious isolation. In its normal, everyday functioning it cannot be an index of the divine; it points beyond itself only by being distorted, albeit sublimely, in miraculous sayings and doings. There was nothing to be seen but "a lowly man, who, by signs and wonders and by affirming that he was God, continually posited the possibility of offence".<sup>20</sup> The perspective of the *communicatio idiomatum*, if not explicitly abandoned, is clearly secondary; the humanity of Christ is seen in isolation from his divinity, seen as the tortured symbol of the divinity. At the same time, Christ's human life is said to be radically extra-historical, although it is difficult to see what a

thus absolutized humanity would amount to; in any case, this instance of humanity is unlike any other instance of it. As a result of this bi-dimensional isolation, however, one is left to wonder whether the Christ in whom Kierkegaard believed had any earthly consistency at all. A humanity anchored neither in the Word nor in the human race and its history is but the merest shadow. As was the case with the sacraments, the sign that causes nothing positive, the instrument that cannot but fail according to its own nature, cannot be taken altogether seriously. One root of Kierkegaard's anomalous view of the Christian liturgy is his view of Christ's humanity. Another is his view of ours, his theological anthropology.

The development of the human personality in terms of religion—a man's passage from sensuous aestheticism, through irony, ethical concern, and humor, to authentic religiosity—can well be discussed in terms of comedy, or more exactly, in terms of the placement of the zone of the comic. This Kierkegaard does in Chapter IV, Section II-A of the *Postscript*.<sup>21</sup> For Kierkegaard, the comical is the painless contradiction. It is not, as Aristotle would have it, some contradictory thing, but rather the very "relationship of contradiction". This relationship is seen as painless because the "comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by having in mind the way out."<sup>22</sup>

Now the apprehension of comedy follows a constant pattern. The relationship of contradiction, it may be said, becomes visible only in retrospect, or assuming that one is moving in an upward direction, only from the top down. Kierkegaard states:

The lower can never make the higher comical, i.e., it cannot legitimately apprehend the higher as comical, and has not the power to make it comical. It is another thing that the lower, by being brought into relationship with the higher, may make the relationship ridiculous.<sup>23</sup>

The reason for this is that the beholder of comedy firmly adheres to the norm with which he sees the comical in contradiction. Without this "foothold in existence" all contradiction would vanish, or, with absurdity everywhere, the situation would become intolerable through the absence of a way out.

For the aesthete, then, the zone of the comical is solely the external: certain perceived objects are in harmless contradiction. For the ironist and the ethicist, though, comedy is partially internalized: in this case, other men fail to perceive what is going on in the mind of the ironist or ethicist, and hence comically misapprehend them. In other words, one pole of the relationship of contradiction is inside the ironist or ethicist. For the humorist, however, both poles of



the relationship of contradiction are internal: he himself does not take seriously what is going on in his own mind. For the authentically religious man, finally, for the culmination of Kierkegaard's theological anthropology, there is no more comedy, but only suffering. The religious man has arrived at and acquiesced in the realization that absolutely nothing he can do can express his relationship to God.

He lies in the finite as a helpless child; he desires absolutely to hold fast to the conception of the absolute God, and precisely this annihilates him; he desires to do all, and while he summons his will to the task his impotence begins. . . . The absolute consciousness of God consumes him as the burning heat of the summer sun when it will not go down, . . . when it will not abate.<sup>24</sup>

True, by reason of his lack of serious concern with mundane things, the religious man may still look to others like a humorist; as Kierkegaard observes, the garb of the humorist is his incognito. Again, the religious man may now and then note how comically people misjudge him, but this is far from being his real preoccupation. The sun that consumes him is the realization that all he can do is not enough: this contradiction has no way out. The religious man is, in Kierkegaard's words, a knight of hidden inwardness.

It must be stressed that the only thing the knight of hidden inwardness finds comical is the disproportion between his public self and his inward passion, never this inwardness itself. Moreover, "the religiosity which has humor as its incognito preserves its justification only by constantly keeping itself in religious passion with respect to the God-relationship, and hence it sees the comic aspect of humor only vanishingly".<sup>25</sup> The knight of hidden inwardness takes his inwardness very seriously:

The religious individual discovers that what occupies him absolutely seems to occupy others very little, but he draws no conclusion from this; partly because he does not have time, and partly because he cannot know for certain whether all these people may be knights of hidden inwardness. He feels compelled by the environment to do what the dialectical process of producing inwardness demands of him, namely to set up a screen between himself and men, in order to safeguard and ensure the inwardness of his God-relationship.<sup>26</sup>

The screen referred to, of course, is a mental one. The knight can, and indeed should, be active in the environing world. What is characteristic of him, however, is that he "transforms his outward activity into an inward manner, . . . by severing every teleological relation to his activity in the outward direction"<sup>27</sup> He does not do anything external either because he is religious or in order to

become religious. Now it is just this lack of inward-outward relationship that sometimes makes the misapprehensions of men appear comical to the knight: in this case, nonetheless, the "foothold in existence" is authentic religiosity, and this, as the norm against which something can, if only vanishingly, appear comical, cannot itself be thought comical. As Kierkegaard remarks, "The religiosity of hidden inwardness . . . is by means of the comical secured against the comical".<sup>28</sup> The structure of the comical is such that it must always have an upper norm, and no norm can be set above religion. Conversely, "the comical is excluded from religious suffering, . . . because this suffering is precisely the consciousness of the contradiction [between the divine and the human], which is pathetically and tragically incorporated in the consciousness of the religious individual."<sup>29</sup>

Apropos of liturgy—or life generally, for that matter—the result of such a passion for inwardness is solitude. All understanding among men is in terms of the external and relative, but the introvert knight has "reflected himself out of every existential relativity". He is quite alone in that which is most characteristic of him. Still, says Kierkegaard, "It follows from this quite consistently that he will participate in the outward worship".<sup>30</sup> Why? Because, Kierkegaard replies, he has a more or less spontaneous impulse to do so, because he does not wish to call attention to himself by not doing so, and because, finally, "there is no third party here, at least not with knowledge of the religious individual, since he naturally assumes that everyone of those present is there for his own sake and not to observe others". Before God, one is tempted to say, it's every man for himself. Liturgy may be comical, then, but no matter: liturgy seems in the end to be fundamentally irrelevant to religion. "The comic expression of ownership is therefore just as reverent, *religiously*, as its pathetic expression. What lies at the root of both the comic and the tragic in this connection is the discrepancy, the contradiction between the infinite and the finite".<sup>31</sup> The knight of hidden inwardness can never turn from the God-consciousness that wounds and isolates him, not even in the worship of God.

It would thus appear that Kierkegaard's theological anthropology forms a continuity with his Christology. Like Christ, the knight of hidden inwardness is isolated from the rest of humanity. Both are living paradoxes. Just like the earthly action of Christ, the worship of the true Christian is a sign of contradiction, an anomaly.

The authentic Christian can thus be either amused or grieved that the rites of religion are incommensurable with his religiosity. But he is more

likely to see the chasm between rite and religion as tragic. He occasionally experiences a certain nostalgia, in fact, for an earlier and happier, if less clairvoyant, period of Christianity. Catholicism is not to Kierkegaard's taste. If "religiosity which essentially pretends to externality, essentially makes the external commensurable, is comical", then Catholicism is comical; and it would doubtless be better off if it could see how comical it is.<sup>32</sup> Still, he concedes, humor was healthier in the Catholic Middle Ages than it is now. The reason is that the medieval comic vision embraced a totality: some modern humorists have become Catholics in order to find again "a community, a foot-hold, which they could not find within themselves". For "in the Middle Ages lyrical poetry had a whole objectivity of its own; it is not individual, it is man".<sup>33</sup> If man subsequently sought to free himself from the authority that had created this holy objectivity, he has since paid a terrible price.

As always, the punishment fits the sin. You shall be free! And when you lie on your death-bed, perhaps in despair, and you would give everything for a man who had authority to reassure you—no, my friend, now it is too late, you did not want to have authority, and therefore there is none.<sup>34</sup>

When, a little over a year after writing these lines, Kierkegaard himself lay on his death-bed, he seems not to have despaired. Nor would he receive the eucharist from a minister of the State Church.<sup>35</sup>

### III

From Kierkegaard's death-bed refusal of the eucharist one might possibly conclude that he was merely being consistent, merely making a personal application of his own theories: a follower of Christ the Paradox does not need the eucharist. Such a conclusion, however, is excessive, if not downright perverse. It deals with only half the anomaly sketched above, for there is no reason whatever to suppose that Kierkegaard ever abandoned his Lutheran faith in the nature and purpose of the eucharist. Indeed, in 1851 he had written in his journal that, as to fundamentals, neither church nor doctrine really needed to be reformed: what was needed, rather, was "the reformation of us all".<sup>36</sup> It makes much more sense to see in Kierkegaard's action a final prophetic gesture in aid of this second sort of reformation. He passionately wanted Christianity—but not the brand of Christianity offered by the State Church.

Nevertheless, the anomaly remains. Christ present in the sacraments of the church is curiously estranged from the inwardness of the Christian, for whose benefit, presumably, he is there. The State Church has real sacraments,

but to partake in them one has also to commune in the absurdities of official worship. Christ's presence in worship, whatever its fundamental significance, is in fact immersed in comedy—but comedy is irrelevant to authentic Christian religiosity. If there is no reason to question Kierkegaard's intentions, there are at least two reasons for questioning his theological formulation of them.

In the first place, it is doubtful whether Kierkegaard fully appreciated what one might call the *stickiness* of comedy, the fact that once a man has begun to laugh he can no longer be sure who is the butt of the joke. In an essay, not on a knight of hidden inwardness, but on Don Quixote, Francis Thompson calls attention to this peculiarity of the comic relation: you laugh at Cervantes' satirical picture of Don Quixote—and then "derision is derided". Cervantes trips you into revealing yourself.

At the deepest core of the strange and wonderful satire, in which the hidden mockery is so opposite to the seeming mockery, lies a sympathy even to tears with all height and heroism insulated and out of date, mad to the eyes of a purblind world: nay, a bitter confession that such nobility is indeed mad and phantasmal, in so much as it imputes its own grandness to a petty and clay-content society.<sup>37</sup>

Kierkegaard's knight of hidden inwardness would be more believable were he to realize that, precisely because he can see a comical disproportion between his religious quest and his cultic acts, his religious quest must itself be comical. And the way out is the simple acknowledgement of creaturehood, the acknowledgement that this disproportion is the very law of his being. Only in God is there a *coincidentia oppositorum*, not in religious man. Human nobility or religiosity or whatever cannot help being "mad and phantasmal". Cervantes never forgot that idealistic knights are deserving of a sympathy "even to tears", for in the very heart of their idealism they also happen to be extremely funny. Cervantes pleads for idealism in and through laughter: he makes the "bitter confession" that the bearer of his idealism is in fact a clown. In the *Postscript*, at least, Kierkegaard has to make a rather more alarming admission, namely, that he has so exalted authentic religiosity that it may not be possible to find a religious man: "Whether there really exists . . . such a religious person as above described, whether all are religious or no one is, I do not propose to decide, nor would it be at all possible for me to decide".<sup>38</sup> Even allowing that Kierkegaard is speaking somewhat tongue-in-cheek, one still suspects that he has set the stakes too high for poor humanity. He who observes the comical is one pole of a comic relationship. Cervantes' knight beguiles you

into joining the community of the laughable. Kierkegaard's knight is implicated by his incognito.

In the second place, it is similarly doubtful whether Kierkegaard fully appreciated the comic dimension of what he called "sacred history", the extent to which comedy is integral to the fundamental truths and rites of Christianity. In *The Centre of Hilarity*, a charming riposte to over-serious existentialist types, Michael Mason suggests that the ground of evil and contradiction is seriousness, which seriousness is actually quite comical.<sup>39</sup> He quotes Chesterton's observation that the devil fell "through force of gravity". The idea that a creature, utterly dependent upon its creator, could use its will to assert independence is utterly absurd. Creaturehood, itself rather comical, is taken with ultimate seriousness—and that is the fall. In other words, "the shape of realism is determined by laughter". There is laughter all about. "It may be the laughter of heavenly rejoicing in the creaturely condition. It may be the laughter of that earthly humor which glorifies man's dignity and rationality by reminding us that reality is in no way diminished by their fragility."<sup>40</sup>

Not only the fall and its effects, but redemption, too, has a comic dimension. Evil and creaturely seriousness are allowed to fasten their grip on the God-man, and, "by a sort of divine judo", they are made to provide the fullest proof of their absurdity. Christ is not a sign of contradiction, but the perfect protagonist: he is what he signifies. And so is the centre of the liturgy, the eucharistic bread. "The first Christendom found our lost centre of gravity again when it made Calvary, and Calvary's perpetuation in the Mass, the axis of its cosmic dance; and in so doing it found, too, that the centre of gravity was even more fundamentally a centre of hilarity."<sup>41</sup>

The whole point of liturgical symbolism is that it is, as etymology suggests, a casting together of things that are apparently separate, and even contradictory. It may well be said that the symbolic relation and the comic relation are one and the same. As a result, it may also be affirmed that Christian liturgical symbolism, precisely as comical, is a perfect and typologically continuous representation of the fall and the divine remedy for the fall. Just because of our fragility, it would seem, *authentic* Christian liturgy is scandalous and comical. Our liturgy invites us to do scandalous and comical things. "Precisely because symbol and reality here coincide", notes Mason, "the fundamental point about Christ's presence in the host is that the host should be eaten, not meditated on or conceptually analyzed, but eaten."<sup>42</sup>

The idea of eating God in Christ is a rather un-Kierkegaardian thought. Still, the church of the Middle Ages held and holds that he who seems "a

Charlie Chaplin among the gods" wishes precisely this. Perhaps, then, Christ's institution of the eucharist and its surrounding liturgy is meant to tell man something about himself. Perhaps the intestinal way to God is meant, in profoundly comic symbols, to tell man that he is essentially comical. To tell him that, instead of being scandalized by a fragile, comical liturgy, he is to find there the truth about himself. To tell him that in the eminently attackable rites of an ecclesiastical establishment of one sort or another he is to find the remedy of salvation. Christ is indeed the paradox, the paradox, namely, that punctures preciosity of hidden inwardness.

"Eat, drink, and be merry", quipped Thompson, "for tomorrow ye are men". Kierkegaard, one suspects, would have taken him seriously.

## NOTES

1. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and tr. A. Dru (New York, 1938), p. 235.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
3. *Attack Upon Christendom*, tr. W. Lowrie (Boston, 1956), p. 110.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
9. *The Last Years: the Kierkegaard Journals, 1853-55*, tr. R. G. Smith (New York, 1965), p. 297.
10. *Attack*, p. 153.
11. *Last Years*, p. 337.
12. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1941), p. 44, note.
13. *Last Years*, p. 177.
14. Cf. *Christian Discourses*, tr. W. Lowrie (New York, 1948), pp. 259-68; *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves*, tr. W. Lowrie (New York, 1941), pp. 18-25.
15. *For Self-Examination*, pp. 23f.
16. *Discourses*, p. 260.
17. *Journals*, p. 488. Regarding works-righteousness, cf. *Last Years*, pp. 316ff.
18. *Training in Christianity*, tr. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1941), pp. 125f.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 67f.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
21. *Postscript*, pp. 386-468.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 459-64.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 463.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 452.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 432, 454.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 456.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 82f.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
33. *Journals*, pp. 47, 71.
34. *Last Years*, p. 116.
35. Cf. W. Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (New York, 1962), p. 584.
36. *Journals*, p. 428.
37. *Works* (New York, 1913), vol. III, pp. 94f.; cf. p. 111.
38. *Postscript*, p. 457.
39. *The Centre of Hilarity* (London, 1957), pp. 189-223.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 191f.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 202f.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 205.