

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

## Three Philosophers Walk Into a Bar

**THE SOURCE:** "What's So Funny? Or, Why Humor Should Matter to Philosophers" by Camille Atkinson, in *Philosophy Today*, Winter 2006.

PHILOSOPHERS HAVE NEVER been much for jokes. It's not that they can't crack a smile, but that they don't see much philosophical value in humor, writes Camille Atkinson, a philosophy instructor at Central Oregon Community College. She thinks that's a mistake.

There are three general theories of humor. The superiority theory, which prevailed from Plato's time to the 18th century, holds that humor involves feeling superior to somebody else—or wanting to. The Athenians may have had jokes about how many Spartans it takes to light a torch; we have our own endless varieties, ranging from harmless stereotypes of absent-minded professors to stinging put-downs of ethnic groups.

Sigmund Freud favored the relief theory, which posits that laughter is "the release of nervous energy." Self-deprecation—the airing of insecurity through humor—is the clearest example, as in Woody Allen's quip, "My one regret in life is that I'm not someone else."

Both these forms of humor—which often overlap—aren't much use to philosophers. They tend to emphasize "the anxieties or con-

cerns" of individuals, according to Atkinson. Such jokes may be grist for sociologists or psychologists, but philosophers seek universal truths. And to find them, writes Atkinson, they would be wise to seek inspiration in the third category of humor, the humor of the incongruous.

Jokes of this sort pit our expectations of what should happen against what actually happens: Don Quixote persists in his grand delusions; Inspector Clouseau blithely acts as if he were a genius

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detective. We know better, but in the end, Atkinson says, we are laughing not at "someone but at something." In these cases it is the human tendency to take oneself too seriously. But other incongruities—e.g., the comedian who takes on the characteristics of a machine or an animal—can spur us to examine large questions: "Why don't kangaroos go into bars?" might lead us to ask why we use intoxicants

to alter human consciousness.

"Laughter has no greater foe than emotion," wrote the philosopher Henri Bergson. He meant that humor requires a certain disinterest, or "the ability to look at something from a more distant, abstract, or rational point of view," Atkinson explains. Incongruous humor thus draws us closer to the philosopher's stance.

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## The Catholic School Deficit

**THE SOURCE:** "Can Catholic Schools Be Saved?" by Peter Meyer, in *Education Next*, Spring 2007.

THE NUMBER OF ROMAN CATHOLICS in the United States, now nearly 77 million, has grown by more than 70 percent in the past four decades, but in the same period the nationwide network of Catholic schools has shrunk by more than half. Some 600 parochial schools have closed in the last six years alone, and the student population receiving a Catholic education has decreased by nearly 300,000, or 11 percent. Everything but a plague of locusts has afflicted the nation's Catholic schools, writes Peter Meyer, former news editor of *Life* magazine. Catholic schools will have to become expert fundraisers to survive. "And marketers. And promoters. And lobbyists. And miracle workers."

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