

RELIGION & 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."

Studies by scholars at the University of Chicago, Northwestern, the Brookings Institution, and



Holy Redeemer High School supporters march to save their school, one of 15 shuttered by the Archdiocese of Detroit in 2005. Only two Catholic schools, both boys-only, remain open in the city.

Harvard have all concluded that Catholic schools, on average, do a better job of educating children, especially poor and minority students, than public schools do, Meyer notes. Parochial schools never had to go back to basics because they never left them. Catholic schools have always required correct grammar, uniforms, homework, good posture, proper skirt lengths, and a balanced lunch, including peas and carrots, Meyer writes.

Even so, an unholy trinity has descended on modern Catholic education: financial distress,

declining enrollments, and falling test scores. Teaching nuns, who provided virtually free labor, constituted 90 percent of all Catholic school teachers in the 1950s; they account for less than five percent today. As a result, costs have soared, with tuition rising from next to nothing to about \$2,400 for elementary school and \$6,000 for high school. Middle-class Catholic parents who might have paid the difference have largely evacuated the city neighborhoods many schools serve. Enrollment dropped from 5.2 million in 1960 to 2.3 million in 2006. The chil-

dren who slid into the empty desks in cities where Catholic schools have been hardest hit were disproportionately poor and had low incoming test scores.

Then came the sex abuse scandals, Meyer writes: a shattering, "endless parade of headlines about priests abusing children." One in four Catholics told pollsters they withheld donations, even as the church faced millions of dollars in claims. Four dioceses have already declared bankruptcy, and others are on the brink.

Meyer, who attended a parochial school himself, says that he's not counting them out. Two new developments may help stabilize the situation. Education reform is one. While a growing charter school movement has sucked away students, a second reform vehicle, vouchers—public grants that parents can use to send their children to private schools—are providing an antidote in the cities where they are offered. And several archdioceses have launched successful fundraising campaigns to reopen inner-city schools and revive others. The schools are a missionary undertaking, not one aimed solely at providing a sectarian service for members (although religion classes are part of the curriculum). Most of the children who would attend the schools the parishes are struggling to keep open are not Catholic. "We don't educate these children because *they* are Catholic," Meyer quotes Cardinal James Hickey of Washington, D.C., as saying, "but because *we* are Catholic."