

Response to Jessica DeCou's analysis of "Barth's Comic Theology"

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Jessica DeCou makes a compelling case for understanding Barth—he of the infamous “No!”—as a comic theologian, emphasizing not only the wit with which he wrote but also the logical role of the comic within the larger (much larger) corpus of his writing. The essay performs a repetition of the main theme of incongruity and relief, intermixing Barth and Ferguson (in the most bizarre theological pairing since Athens and Jerusalem, perhaps) with the more humorous *bon mots* from both. Moving deftly through Barth and the large cloud of scholars who have followed his voluminous wheelbarrow, DeCou highlights the importance of the humorous as a way to hold the cantankerous curmudgeon who bashes opponents with his ink bottle in a dialectical tension with someone who ached to allow for an honest and joyfilled laughter. Her use of Ferguson provides a useful contrast point to Barth, showing the function of humor—especially self-negating humor—in destroying the machines through which humans turn into little gods.

At the end of her essay, DeCou argues that humor should express joy, which appears initially to reduplicate the sense of the incongruous that serves as a light motif throughout the paper. Joy, which Aquinas identifies as following after the theological virtue of love, seems to be unlike chuckling at an amusingly captioned picture of a cat. In Question 28 of the *Summa IIaIIae*, Aquinas indicates that there are two forms of joy: the first rejoices in the divine goodness considered in itself, while the second joy is able to incorporate the sadness of the soul, taking into account that which is opposed to the participation of divine goodness. The latter form would seem to be the only earthly form of joy that humor can access (only when Barth and Schleiermacher joke in heaven can the first form be attained), and definitely the only form of humor available dialectically. In its capacity to reconcile the incongruous, the humor of joy is able to laughingly propel us from a despairing rest with the sorrows of the world in order to allow us to charitably rest in love.

Barth, as read by DeCou, seems intent on expanding the possibilities of this kind of joy in the world by poking holes into the occasionally dry or dour world of modern theology: as DeCou writes, Barth's “pointed criticism” is motivated by and serves the end of an eschatological hope. Although her essay lacks the space to fully develop the point, in this way Barth seems aware of the possibility of a theological depth in Freud's characterization of humor. In his Joke and the Relation to the Unconscious, Freud details four types of humor that result in “relief,” as DeCou properly notes. These four include wordplay, the bawdy, cynicism and skepticism—cynical humor attacks institutions, while skeptical humor attacks the possibility of knowing anything at all. The latter two, manifest in the comedic ranging from dry wit to black comedy, allow for a much more powerful (because more anxiety ridden) form of laughter.

The incongruity of Barth's reflection on New Year's Eve exemplifies this: the incongruous contrast between the serving of punch and the universal *Aufhebung* of Being, followed by the banal comment "And then life went on," does not admit of either a pun or wordplay. Instead, Barth's exposes the absurdity of modern theological discourse and its distance from the experience of human life with a laugh that deflates the dour power of the one while simultaneously replacing it with another alternative. Neither the incongruity nor our laughter "disprove" the universal *Aufhebung* of Being, and it is not meant to. What is unique, however, is the way that Barth's comic theology truly does allow "the critique to conclude with its own brand of optimism": rather than leaving the reader in a cynical or skeptical abyss of uncertainty with nothing but one's anxious laughter ringing in the ears to relieve the pressure (perhaps verging on the "fallen laughter" DeCou references), the laughter induced here is one that shows the weakness of the system under attack in a gentle way that supplies laughter as its own corrective. We can follow Barth in seeing the disconnection between a swaggering theology and the banality of life, but we also can follow him *past* this chasm and joyfully rest in the optimism of continuation. The banality of "and then life went on" is required for the joke, but shows us that he—like us—can move past trivial mundanity as well as the more "profound," but ultimately bleak, ironic skepticism.

Ferguson, read through DeCou, seems sympathetic to this sense of joy through incongruity in his attempts to help the reader past cheap humor into something that would approach a charitable joy. Ferguson's use of bawdy humor is nested within the incongruous, providing a more full sense of humor than a simple double entendre, as the comment on Henry VIII suggests. More importantly, however, Ferguson's refusal to engage in the cynicism inherent in destroying cultural idols such as Anna Nicole Smith—his ability to recall us from cheap laughter at an easy target to the deep sorrow that the laughter masks opens up the possibility that we can experience true joy again. The joy Ferguson provides, like that which Barth provides, is one that is skeptical of the institution that has made him famous but shows an optimistic path through the lesser functions into a higher (although less often used) remainder. Ferguson, like Barth, neutralizes an ironic distance that lets us laugh at others and forces us into a deeper contemplation of our own lives—thereby reinvesting our daily life with new pathos.

Overall, in reminding us about the possibility of joy unlocked through a true humor that incongruously conjoins skepticism with optimism, DeCou reminds the reader about a theological ground that is enjoyable and profound, and remains deeply connected in one's day-to-day existence. If Barth anticipated a happy ending, my hope is that DeCou represents a happy beginning.