

## A Response to Jessica N. DeCou

### “Too Dogmatic for Words”? Karl Barth’s Comic Theology in Dialogue with the Comedy of Craig Ferguson

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A word of confession is in order at the outset: I have changed my mind about Karl Barth since *The Comedy of Redemption* was published almost two and a half decades ago, in 1988. It may thus come as a surprise that I will be critical of Barth himself as much as of Jessica DeCou’s use of his theology. This is not at all to detract from the excellence of her essay, despite the difficulty endemic to all attempts to write about comic things in academic prose. The trouble was well revealed by Peter De Vries when, in one of his novels, a certain Dr. Didisheim gives a lecture on comedy, only to be greeted by an angry lady who plasters him in the face with a *recipe* for custard pie. I have no pies, real or fictional, to fling at Ms. DeCou. On the contrary, she has gone to the heart of Barth’s comic vision.

My own interpretation of Barth’s comic vision centered upon the ways in which Barth’s humor derives from his understanding of the Gospel itself as wondrously one-sided and asymmetrical—as throwing everything off kilter and upside down—by way of its radically Christological redemption of an utterly undeserving world. Rather than being faced with a dire threat, an angry caveat that warns of the

wrath to come, Barth envisions believers as being surprised into the Kingdom, as the Gospel strips away all of our sour self-justifications, leaving us hilariously devoid of any alternative except the Good News. While I still hold to this reading of Barth, I have come to discern its problematic character when given communal expression.

DeCou interprets Barth's comic sense as having two different but complementary grounds—namely, in the eschatological hope that prevents us from taking ourselves and the world too seriously, and in a pugnacious desire to puncture and deflate all false seriousness, especially among modern theologians. Rather than stressing Barth's comic *vision*, she deals with his ability to provoke actual *laughter*. She buttresses her thesis by delving deeply into Barth, especially *CD* III, 4, as well as the *Ethics*, but also by dealing with others who have reflected on the theological implications of comedy, especially Conrad Hyers, but also with glances at Hegel and Kierkegaard and Bergson.

DeCou rightly describes Barth's conception of eschatology as the basis for his laughter. "*All* right human action," she notes, must be performed "in light of the promise of redemption" (5). Christians can laugh, Barth contends, because the Kingdom will come by God's surprising action even when our serious striving fails. We are thus freed to take the present life "seriously within the [eschatological] bracket," she quotes Barth as saying, "not because it is not serious enough in itself, but because God's future, which breaks into the present, is more serious" (6).

The problem with Barth's eschatological comedy becomes evident when we seek to locate the in-breaking divine futurity that interrupts this present evil age. The Barthian placement of it seems evident: It occurs wherever we recognize Christian action as a form of play—indeed, whenever we embrace our status as “God's little children at play.” “When children play properly, [she is still quoting Barth], they do so with supreme seriousness and devotion” (5). Surely this likening of Christian action to play, despite all of Barth's qualifiers, is wrong. Bonhoeffer standing naked beneath the scaffold at Flossenburg—having just declared that “This is not the end but the beginning for me”—is not playing. Neither was Barth himself playing when he composed the Barmen Declaration. Nor was Reinhold Niebuhr wrong to observe that the gamesmanship at the foot of the Cross was not funny. This is far from saying that there is no humor to be found in the Christian life. Rather it is to suggest that redemptive laughter occurs more in retrospect more than prospect. Only when we have lived faithfully *through* the horror can it then elicit anything akin to mirth.

DeCou protests against all false hilarity by comparing Barth to the comedian Craig Ferguson. Though this seems like putting Monty Python alongside Job, she shows that Ferguson refuses to satirize the vulnerable and the powerless. Surely this is to mark the theological limits of comedy understood as childlike play. Even a secular wit knows that certain matters are off limits to laughter, even if he cannot discern the source of his restraint. Barth doesn't really come to his aid with his post-earthly eschatology.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has a much more faithful understanding of eschatology as living here and now in accord with the End that has *already* come in our midst.

Christians are called to align themselves—often painfully, seldom playfully—with the Kingdom that Jesus, which his disciples and saints have *already* brought to reality by living here and now the eschatological life that lies beyond death. Hence the excellent claim of N. T. Wright that we should not speak of our redemption as “life after death” but rather as “life after life after death.”

Josef Pieper is the figure who might best enable DeCou make a theological adjustment to her Barthian project. As a Catholic philosopher having to make covert and indirect theological claims under of Nazi scrutiny—rather than thundering satirically from the safety of “neutral” Switzerland—Pieper is imbued with a sense of the Church’s contrapuntal life of fasting and feasting. He argues that joyless work and mirthless war are the two main markers of human self-sufficiency in the modern West. Over against them, he proposes a return to festivity. Festivity seeks no domination of others, nor does it serve any utilitarian purpose. Instead, it makes “joyful assent” to the utter worth of being itself. “It is the Goodness of reality taken as a whole,” to quote from Pieper’s *In Tune with the World*, “which validates all other particular goods and which man himself can never produce nor simply translate into social or individual ‘welfare.’” Here, I believe, is the true worldly echo of the Pauline summons for Christians repeatedly to “rejoice” (Phil 4:4)—namely, to celebrate the

Kingdom that is already come and still coming. To employ a Barthian metaphor:  
festivity is the occasion for hearing both Mozart *and* Bach.