

# WHAT IF SOUL YEARNS TO LAUGH?

By TOM HAMILL

One morning while the master was at prayer,  
the disciples were surprised to hear his hearty laughter . . .  
Later, in the afternoon, at the funeral of the king's minister,  
they heard him laugh again: and wondered . . .  
That night as the community chanted evening service,  
suddenly he laughed aloud, during the prescribed  
silence . . .

At midnight, the assistant approached the master  
as he sat beneath an olive tree gazing at the stars!  
'The disciples are confused and concerned  
about your inappropriate laughter . . .'  
The master laughed for the fourth time that day . . .  
As the assistant turned to go, the master spoke . . .  
'My grandmother used to say:

When heaven touches your heart,  
will it not respond  
like birds at dawn?

I'd forgotten that until today . . . !!'  
And once again he laughed . . .

*If you were a disciple,  
what would you do?*

**T**HE RELATION OF PRAYING AND PLAYING: undoubtedly this is a paradox: even to pose it is somewhat ludicrous . . . like asking what have Jerusalem and Athens or the-one-of-Jesus and Mammon in common . . . apt to waken a condescending smile. Surely more of an antagonism, like fire and water, than any synergy or complementarity . . . How should buffoonery be tolerated in the place-of-encounter? Traditional Christian teaching on the practice of prayer appears to have sedulously excluded distraction and humour and ribaldry from the tent of meeting, and inculcated a fairly strict and serious practice for both public and private prayer. Reverence and seemliness are expected to prevail at all times. This paradigm is not generally experienced as

limiting or oppressive, even though it may be linked to a set of prescriptions on attitude and style and demeanour, that one could associate with dependants who must have recourse to those who wield power-over, in the well-known institutions that have imperceptibly grown up around us. These political, religious, legal, medical and other concentrations of power, demand a placid self-abnegatory obeisance in return for the bestowal of their seigneurial benevolence. One wryly wonders what Jesus would make of this potential Egypt, and of the fashion of prayer that looks suspiciously akin to the humourless toeing of the line that most people must perforce endure, so as to ingratiate themselves with the powerful, and thus negate their own soul's fountain-of-God.

To negate one's soul! Negating one's body, in western culture, is both unthinkable and inevitable: even in a mind-set so body-identified as ours is, body is yet negated by a tissue of harmful addictions, indulgences, negligences and ideologies, deleterious not only to the so-called individual body but to the body of the planet . . . . We are Caliban to our recollected body; and somehow in spite of a thousand years of eucharistic controversy, we still nearly feel justified in our fecklessness towards body: maybe the fruits of a too-prurient spirituality.

But to negate one's soul! That is surely like saying that we negate the Mad Hatter's tea-party . . . . Soul is too unreal to be negated . . . or to be affirmed too vehemently . . . perhaps soul-talk is no longer as imposing as in the older times . . . a palpable embarrassment, you admit: hinting a serious loss-of-soul. The tumbril may be cleverly furbished: and Jung and Angelus Silesius and Hildegard and Eckhart rolled out. Apart from much psittacism however, what evidence is there that soul is now being sanctioned either for affirmation or negation, or that our bookwise modish tribe is becoming to any extent truly soul-identified? Or that prayer and play are considered to be credibly intimate, let alone interchangeable? Such is the poignant riddle that would entertain us: what if soul yearns to laugh? And how will you engagingly and fruitfully explore soul's riddle? Should one be grave or gay? Or learned? Whatever about a particular modality of exploration, surely it will be born out of, and retorted in turn towards, the inner and outer patternings that represent our life in the world, and of which prayer and play are significant elements. Like the master in the story, surprised and re-contexted; as a pungent memory regained his attention, and shifted the veils, his heart burst out of the life-map he had constructed for

himself and the disciples . . . Or how does his story touch us? Such stories can easily be held at arms'-stretch: flailing shortbodied comedian: to let them know who has the power to control their affect, to dampen the tickle-of-resonance about our heart's-root. And not only these whimsical, eye-or-rib poking stories, obviously. More than ever in the history of the Christian Churches, there is resource and will to take the biblical narratives in hand, and declare their meaning and import to all. They are computerized and re-aligned and irradiated with confident good-intent. How then, will the stories of Jesus, for instance, not feel controlled, and perhaps frustrated? How will the untrammelled interplay of story, story-teller and listening heart be honestly encouraged and facilitated? Lest we too late discover that homily and commentary and orthodox interpretation have banalized the imaginative outreach of all concerned, and silted those subtle channels that would enrapture soul towards the one-who-frees-us from our contemporary Egypt: the dead hand that constrains both him and ourselves. Headbutting the ancient narratives and mouthing borrowed lines (whether in prayer or in teaching) will hardly nurture in Christian folk the playful, imagining soul-fullness that the narrative Jesus occasionally succeeds in offering one a glimpse of. As he might well say: 'What happens when you make a divinity out of me, a Christ out of Jesus, and a Christian out of a disciple-of-mine?'

Is this a caricature and perhaps undignified? Well, let me offer another heurism: partly by way of play, partly like the story of the Master's laughter to offer ourselves a mirror for a moment. If it is deemed a seriously cracked mirror, so be it. How would you outline the marks of a contemporary Christian? I imagine you saying:

serious obedient observant guilty punctilious wary devout  
casuistic diffident xenophobic intellectual passive sectarian  
predictable confused resentful . . .

and the traits of Jesus of Nazareth? Would you agree to something like this:

fierce compassionate flexible ironic honest imaginative open  
ambivalent irreverent uncalculating surprising innocent  
utterly-at-risk . . .

If I call one the 'boredom of God', the other is surely 'the excitement of God'. Whatever about the details of such a tentative characterol-

ogy, the curious hiatus between contemporary Christian and narrative Jesus must provoke not despair or apologetic or recrimination, but laughter: the surprised acknowledgement of a potent whisper . . . but is such laughter any longer a possibility for you or me, as it was for Eckhart and Francis and Teresa and Merton?

One of my small crane-bag of memorabilia from the lecture halls of my old seminary in Maynooth is the summing up by a lecturer in ascetical theology of the conditions in which some early monks were expected to deepen their holiness. I can still recollect too, his amiable Irish expressiveness: 'All laughtcher and daylight shut-out!' It seemed to us at the time that even mushrooms would need something more, at least for savour. But we were not slow to realize, if not to regret, that laughter and playfulness and levity and anything that disturbed the idealized still pool (either from above or below) was to be counted anathema in the Christian/priestly life. And this view and its consequent desirable orthopraxis were never seriously called in doubt, at least consciously. Though perhaps then and later we learned to depose play to an acceptable and safe remove from worship and devotion and spirituality: not wanting to renounce it completely but not sure how to be playful and holy at one time, whatever about in one role or one persona.

The necessity imposed on Christians of our day to remove the playful propensities of soul is very serious, especially if the purging of Church theory and practice is successfully carried through and maintained. Signs that the censor is in the neighbourhood are terms like reverence, decorum, decent, dignified, restrained, becoming, befitting; and their opposites. Certainly the different Christian traditions like to blame each other for the gloom or banality or pessimism of life in their respective Churches, and these mutual censures are important evidence for the state of the Christian soul. We do, however, need to face the impression that a predominant desire in the Christian Churches is to exile the playful spirit for the sake of Church order.

In the Hebrew Scriptures those faces of divinity are outlined, which may represent three different ways of 'prayer', and three ways of being-in-the-world.

- 1) Elohim (in English, 'God'): the one who orders space and time;
- 2) Yahweh (in English, 'Yahweh' or 'Lord'): the one who brings out the enslaved from Egypt;
- 3) Chokmah: (in English, 'Wisdom'): the one who plays among women and men.

These have by now been tidied by generations of effort and reflection into one deity called God: order and redemption (if not liberation) have been institutionalized in various degrees in the Christian traditions. And what of play? Wisdom has been associated with the Holy Spirit or Breath, and is apparently central. But it/she, like the Shekinah, is arguably imprisoned by reverence. Any whirlings of Chokmah that threatened Elohim have always been quickly reined in or pushed out to the margins of the Christian enterprise. Play and Order will not tolerate a symbiosis, it seems, by which one would intolerably threaten the being of the other: in one case a shaking of the matrices and other regularities of logos, ethos and pathos; in the other a domestication of soul's extravagations. Chokmah would find more in common with Yahweh, but perhaps is wary of his moods and unpredictabilities. I believe however she found in Jesus of Nazareth an embodiment of Yahweh's inner breath which was complementary to her own. He was the temple of Redemption and Play, he was their wondrous dance.

Of a truth, there is a strangeness about Jesus that is not fully accounted for by our traditional piety and our familiar christology. There is an insufficiently reckoned otherness in his vitality, as he strongly self-presents in the gospel narratives. A clue for us is the hunch about the shared dance of Chokmah and Yahweh. While being globally aware of the nature and yearnings of the Lord and of Wisdom, the Church of Jerusalem was massively constructed on the apparently solid bedrock of Order. Jesus, however, consistently deployed himself at awkward angles to the stance of that Church, which was, and was not, his Church. In struggling to actualize the real liberation of those enslaved in contemporary Egypt, and to play among women and men for their awakening, he realized the enormity of the forces arrayed against him. He also knew that Yahweh frees, that prayer frees, and laughter frees . . . but knew too that traditionally, laughter was associated with the fool and with the denier-of-God. So, to link laughter and God was to be suspected of blasphemy. Even though happiness and rejoicing were associated with God (especially the one-who-frees-the-dead-in-Egypt); even though the mouths of the redeemed, and presumably of the one-who-redeems, were filled with laughter, in the conventionalities of the Church the laughter-of-God, the laughter-of-soul, the laughter-of-prayer were unthinkable. Because such laughter is a small thunder, it is numinous: even if God were to laugh, it would only be over the destruction of their enemies. Inappropriate laughter was wind,

thunder, storm: it opens on chaos and is therefore a denial of the one-who-orders-space-and-time. In his words and actions, Jesus exuded laughter; he created a sudden shift of contexts that disclosed an inarticulate abyss: between teaching and behaviour, between soul and the straw man of church. Since laughter is peculiarly human, it became an essential plank in his bridge-building.

In the stories his comic flights are many . . .  
 the shrub that thought it was a cedar  
 the camel that tried to squeeze through a needle's eye  
 the officious man with a log growing out of his eye  
 blind guides, and all fall in the ditch  
 those who strain out gnats and swallow camels  
 the man who puts a flame under his bed  
 the man whose prayer shawl is bigger than his prayers  
 the Church that mistakes its Lord for Satan  
 the would-be tower builder, and his mere stump;  
 and many others . . . .

His dialectical encounters too, with those who opposed him in the Church, were always laced with a characteristic humorous irony, undoubtedly a reminiscence of his stance and style. Regularly a mention of the people and the bystanders indicates their appreciation of his repartee. It is easy to see that in his playful ministry Yahweh and Chokmah were contriving to be properly incarnated in the contemporary Church. It is less easy to admit that these references to the religious institution centred in Jerusalem as 'Church', or 'the contemporary church', themselves have a certain playfulness and ironic relevance: the network of contemporary Christian Churches naming themselves, as they do, 'his Church' and contending, as they do, with the insistent efforts of Yahweh and Chokmah, to be integrated into our Church-in-the-world. Granted the significant dialectic between Jesus and the Church of his time, it is yet impossible to avoid the truth that he is in the same playful disputation with any church that claims him. To hear this is scandalous and offensive to many, but it follows from the tendency not only of Yahweh and Chokmah, but of Elohim, to seek institutional embodiment; also from the ability of Egypt (recognized by Jesus) to lurk in ever new disguises, even in the holiest environs. And especially, it follows from the low valuation of soul that prevails in the Christian Churches. Yet soul is the keystone that links prayer and play; so it

follows that a low valuation of soul will inevitably entail a low valuation of prayer and play in our Christian experience. An appeal to experience will confirm this. Grounding in prayer for most Christians is utterly rudimentary, if not pitiable and inadequate. Initiation into the marvellous intimacies of the interior castle is confined to a very few.

Is there an élite among Christians? Is a pedagogy of prayer unavailable or disdained? Do our acceptable models of being-Christian-in-the-world call for no great virtuosity in prayer? Is there a fear of eventualities, ecclesial or political, if soul's-garden were actually to be discovered by 'ordinary Christians'? Is 'real prayer' the work of religious professionals only: even their livelihood? A mute and submissive practice of prayer will only encourage a mute and submissive Christianity among the assemblies of the Lord Jesus. We need nothing less than a prayer that will give the disciple wings to range the innerness and outerness of her experience, with alertness and compassion and irony, as Jesus himself did. As he yearns to do now, in those who name themselves for him. A betrayal of the vocation to prayer is a betrayal of the Lord: because it weakens the readiness of the baptized to deal with the intimations, contexts and priorities of the-one-who-would-liberate-his-oppressed-children. And what of play in our Christian experience? Of course it has been represented in a variety of activities. Christians, like all religious people, have always found ways of shaking and shifting the frameworks of Church life, at least momentarily, and in a relatively circumscribed manner, so as to be reminded of larger breadths and depths that couch the regulatednesses of Church order. Festivals, pilgrimages and carnivals were constantly provided and cultivated; celebrations on the occasions of the great rites of passage, birth, puberty, marriage, consecration, death. Any enlarged vision or shift of consciousness that may have accrued to the one who played in any of the above ways was channelled into the private reservoirs of the individual or group concerned, for edification. No strange loops or vagaries of feedback brought back into Church order the surprise or éclat or trembling of boundaries we associate with play; especially the playfulness of Jesus. Perhaps festivals and pilgrimages are not really play? Or perhaps the play is too well fenced in? Whatever of dance there may once have been in liturgy has by now melted into the crevices of norms and good taste and anxiety; and the songs of soul and body must be sung elsewhere. And elsewhere the urge to play must gravitate, in the unbelievable exodus, to a space where one can drink and dance and laugh and sing and be a little wild.

There is more than a hint here that play has only a limited, even a grudging, place in the official religious experience of Christians. And for all the designed abandon that may characterize our contemporary playfulness, it raises some questions for the Christian Churches. How is the work-of-Yahweh promoted by our endemic commitment to secular play of all sorts? What other gods and goddesses are finding sustenance and incarnation in this outlay of energy (energy that is lost to the Churches)? Is the desire to limit the scope of play in institutional religion based on reverence or fear? Or in an intuition that play might dilute or re-contextualize a certain kind of authority? Is there a presupposition that the God of the Christian Churches is offended or threatened by the possible playfulness of disciples? Or that Jesus himself was always grave and dignified, and never did anything to subvert or deflate the contemporary Church? That he was never a gadfly or a satirist? The possibilities hinted at by these questions, and by those above about the unsatisfactory practice of prayer in the Churches, are beyond the reach of this brief meditation. Fortunately, they are haunting the conscience of many teachers in the Churches: the problematics of prayer and play were never so urgent. The world-reality that we struggle in as Christian disciples is rich in attractive alternatives; the ancient gods and goddesses who all but eclipsed Yahweh and those who embodied his endeavours in the world (including the Lord Jesus), are now in full cry, and present themselves at every interface of our experience under a plethora of new disguises. And the soul of the baptized Christian, starved of adequate incentive to prayer and play within the frameworks of the Churches, is exorably drawn away into these outer divine contexts (albeit with a kind of innocence); while still retaining the claim to, and of, Jesus, in a debased fashion.

Because soul yearns to laugh, it must both pray and play. If frustrated in one way, it will find another. Like Zorba, and like the Hasidim, it loves narrative and dance and irony: it loves ambivalence. Apparently soul also loves to hide. Even a Christian sensibility will not easily discern it, so far-weaving and strange and deep is its nature, yet so obscure behind the veils of what we call body. The great psychologists have done much to offer a glimpse through the veil, but as yet the Churches have hesitated to avail themselves in practical ways of this new knowledge. This is not the only reason for the low valuation among Christians of soul, as the central phenomenon of their human experience. Other factors have conspired to banish soul from our awareness (though not fully, as yet, from our



language). Emphases in education (both secular and religious) tend to value intellect and its possibilities above those of imagination; the result is that imagination, arguably the core of soul, is neglected and undisciplined and unskilled. Linked with this is the flood of images, created by others and manipulated for their own purposes, that inundates us in all our waking moments, numbing the proper exercise and celebration of our own interiority. While others write our lines, and subtly shape our stance, and mould our images, why bother to acknowledge or seek the transcendent self? Again, a complex tissue of evaluation that could be described as body-identification, appears to assure us that what we call body is all there is, and that we should attend to the perceived needs of body above everything. If soul claps its hands at dream or mood or bodily symptom or coincidence or yearning, conventional wisdom prescribes a range of explanations and palliatives that absolve us from attending more listeningly to the potent whisper. Not that there is blame here, that we have been so seduced into body-identification! Because soul in its ambivalence may not be entirely innocent of collusion in this, either. Just that one suspects that our human experience would be very different if we were soul-identified. What would this be like? The writings of Eckhart and other mystics, mentioned above, might give a clue. So might an imaginative symbiosis with the Jesus-narratives. But such intimacy would have to be sustained by a more courageous and creative commitment on the part of the Christian Churches to what might be called soul-work, as distinct from management activities. Nothing is simple of course, either in the saying or the doing: because soul, though absent, is also present. And all of this is by way of hint: hints these, that have been expanded and debated by others. But through it all, there persists the whisper: not everyone who just learns and repeats the sacred formulae will have put on the strangeness of Jesus's-way-in-the-world!

- \* What is Caesar's? What is God's?
- \* Who would image heaven as unending laughter?
- \* The cost of prayer? acknowledgement of soul . . .
- \* The cost of play? breaking of moulds . . .
- \* If soul tends to prayer, to play:  
   what frustrates this tendency? dogmatism . . .  
   what promotes/encourages it? heart . . .

- \* The greater part of soul is outside the body . . .
- \* If soul is our unacknowledged laughter,  
what then would be the movement of soul toward God?
- \* What are you spending on your soul?
- \* The strangeness of prayer . . .  
arduous like moving a mountain:  
simple like a smile . . .
- \* For the body-identified, how can there be prayer?
- \* Is there any religion or teaching that finds room for laughter?
- \* Is prayer more of intellect or intuition or imagination? And what  
are these for—soul?
- \* What factors will induce a playful, prayerful holiness? Maybe  
connecting, doubting, touching, remembering, splitting infir-  
mities, revealing images, verbing nouns, tickling formulae, re-  
introducing the reluctant neglected stories.
- \* Prayer is a release-into-dance of the imprisoned . . .
- \* Where is your fountain of energy?
- \* What keeps you going?
  - \*\* Open your eyes and laugh  
Yearn with my breathless sighs  
Find the pearl in the chaff  
Grasp the chance to-be-wise . . . !