

Spirituality and Humour

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Third Age Learning Kitchener-Waterloo
David Seljak, St. Jerome's University
October 14, 2025



Decisions
were made.

Not all of the
perfect.

2



Senior parentin g

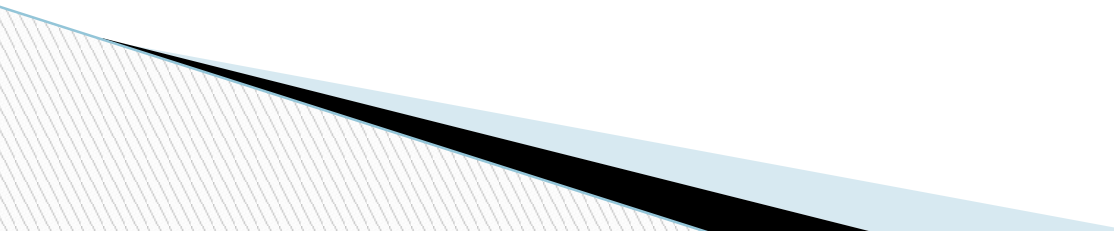
3



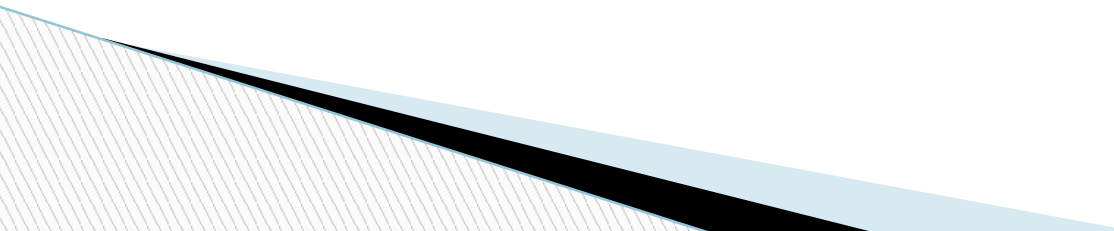
What is spirituality?

- “Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is **an unseen order**, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”
 - William James (1842-1910), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

Spirituality is a solution to a problem

- Seeking our supreme good by living in a way that connects us to the reality of an unseen order with its rules, structures, values, etc.
 - Provides meaning, direction, purpose
 - Inspires life choices and life ways
 - Gives energy to pursue the supreme good
 - Connects and divides people
- 

Spirituality

- Has cognitive and practical dimension
 - Has individual and social dimensions
 - Creates, defines, sustains, and changes community
 - Can be religious or secular (SBNRs, etc.)
 - Is pluralistic, dynamic and fluid: takes new forms in new situations
- 

Religion and spirituality

RELIGION

Mo
ral
ity

Rit
ual

Bel
ief
s

Spi
rit
ual
ity

SPIRITUALITY

v

Rel
igi
on

Pol
itic
s

Cu
ltu
re

Da
ily
life

Peter Berger

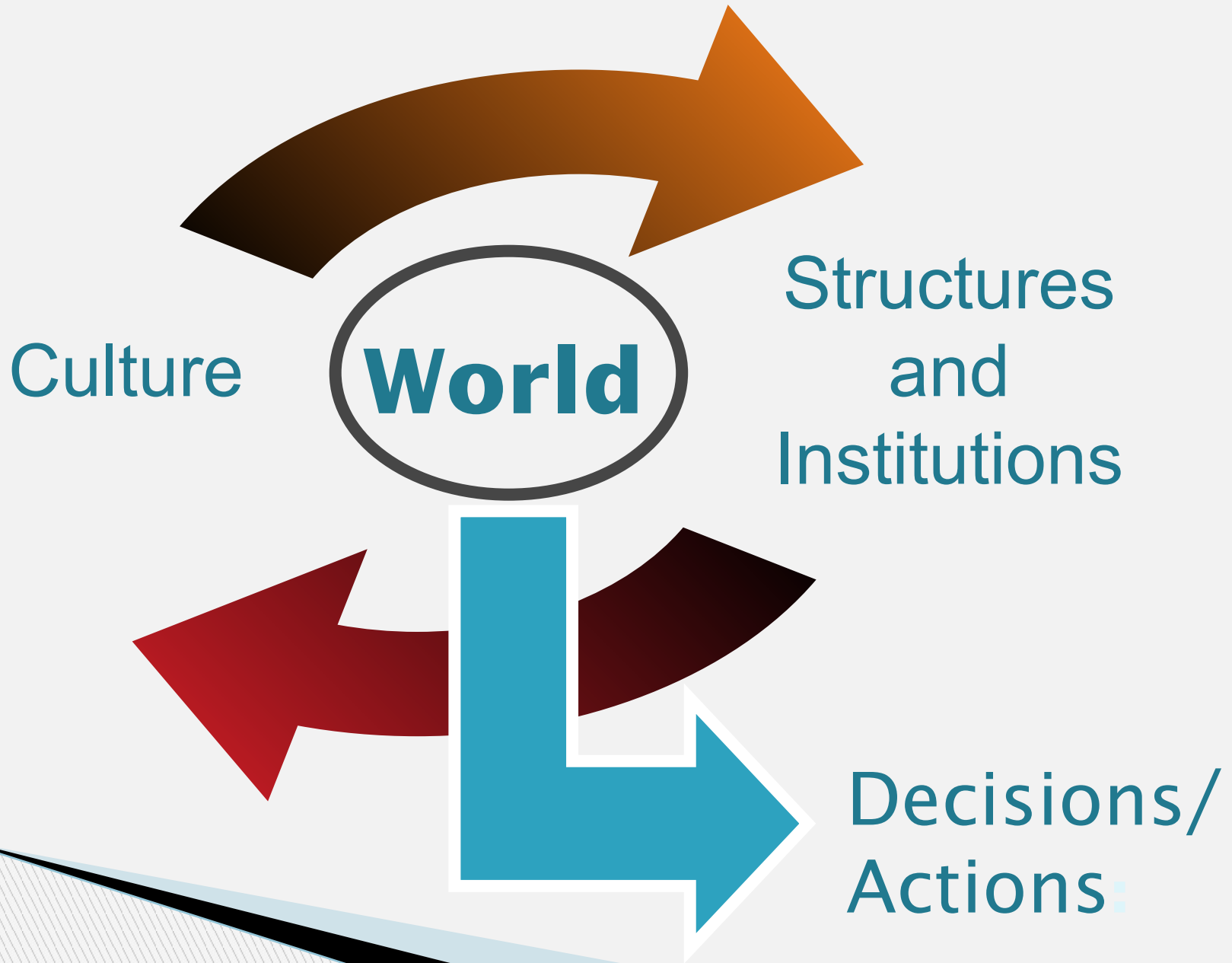
- » The social construction of reality

Peter Berger, 1929-2017

- Austrian-born American sociologist
 - The New School for Social Research
 - Rutgers University
 - Boston University
- Liberal Protestant (Lutheran) theologian
- Co-authored with Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966).
- *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967).

Social construction of reality

- Externalization ->
- Objectification ->
- Internalization
 - E.g., gender roles



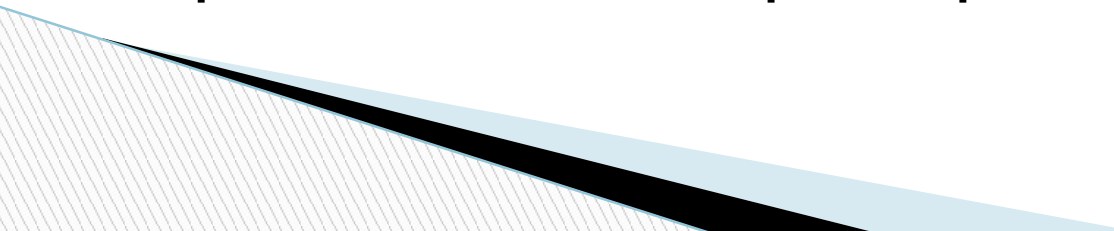
The “reality” of the “world”

- Alienation and “bad faith”: taking the constructed world as “real”
- This “world” is inherently unstable
 - Full of incongruities
 - E.g., Social roles v. personal desires 12
- Needs “religion” as a “sacred canopy”
 - Religion or other systems of legitimation

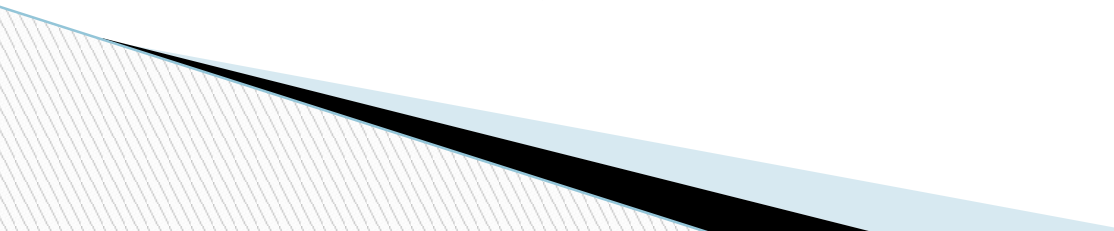
Peter Berger on “The Comic”

- » The Comic as universal human experience

Berger's definition of the Comic

- The comic is a universal human phenomenon
 - Highlights incongruities (i.e, social pretensions v. humiliating realities)
 - Violates the implicit, shared order of things (that's not supposed to happen!)
 - The body and its urges and needs intrude on pretentious self-perceptions or social norms
- 

Berger's definition of "the Comic"

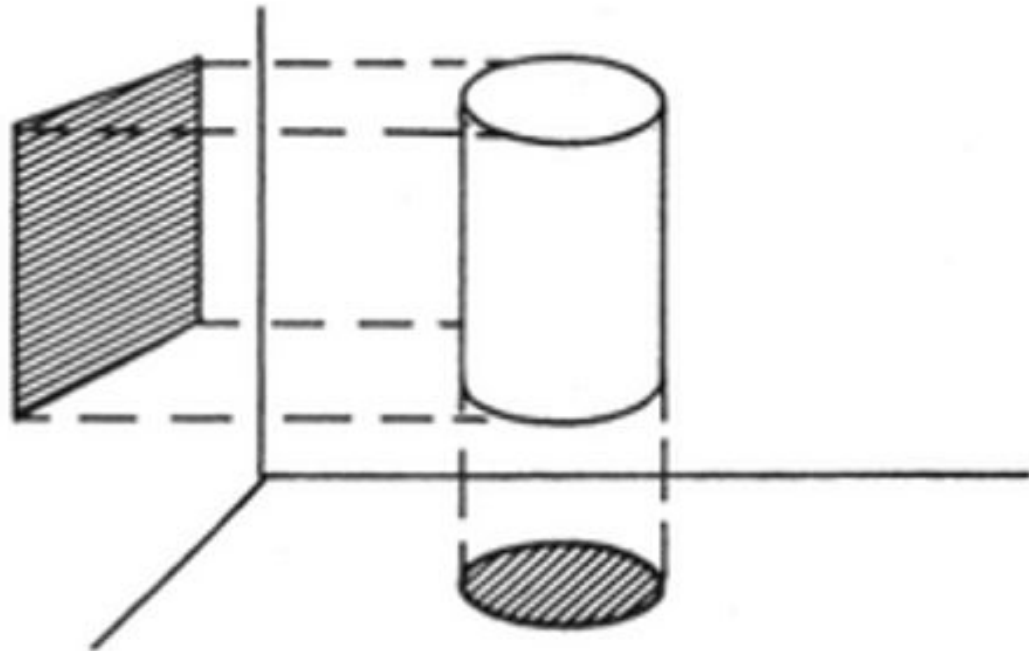
- Implies an intuitive grasp of normalcy ("what should be")
 - Comedy "transcends" the established order
 - Creates an alternate world with its alternate logic (defies the logic of our "world")
 - The Comic is potentially dangerous (therefore, it is controlled and contained)
- 

The Comic and Human Nature

- The universality of comic laughter
 - Laughter plus meaning = comedy
 - Excludes automatic responses (tickling)
- The Comic and the mind/spirit-body dualism
 - The highest and lowest forms of being human
 - Involves the most recent and most ancient parts of the brain
- Laughter is the best medicine
 - Why comedy can heal

What I would add

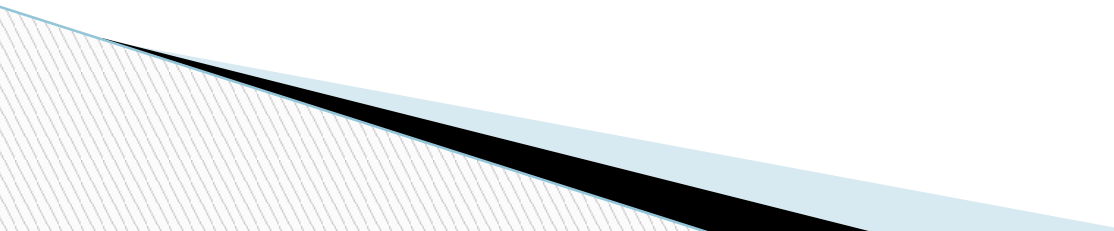
- Incongruence, yes. But the funniest jokes are about ambivalence and ambiguity.
 - Less intellectual, more emotional.



Comedy, spirituality and society

»» A sociological approach

Comedy and society

- Social order and the world: constructed, contested, and fragile
 - “Naturalness” of the world is contested by magic, religion, and comedy
 - Comedy, like mysticism, must be contained or domesticated
 - A functionalist interpretation of the comic (comedy as relief valve)
- 

Comedy and society

- The Comic as “popular sociology” provides insight into society
 - Sebastian Maniscalco on “[Unexpected Company](#)”
- The economy of jokes: a lot of insight in a brief joke
- Jokes as “an attack on control” (e.g., jokes in former Soviet Union)
- Marginality and comedy: Why all the good jokes are Jewish jokes **20**

What I would add

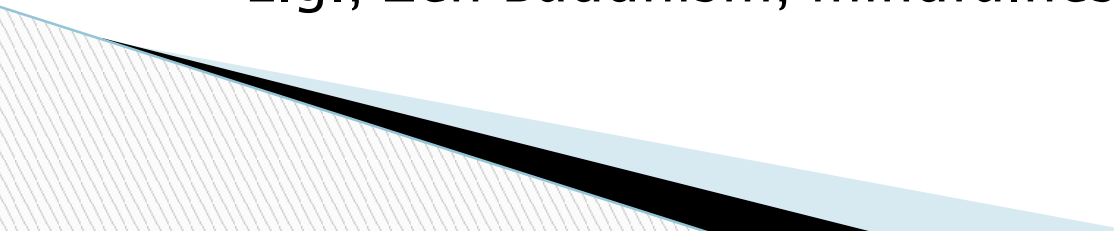
- Community: Comedy creates community
 - “I see you.”
 - “I get you.”
 - “We find this funny.”
- Violates the implicit, shared order of things (that’s not supposed to happen!)
- The body and its urges and needs intrude on pretentious self-perceptions or social norms

21

Moral ambiguity of the Spirituality and the Comic

»» The Good, the Bad,
and the Ugly.

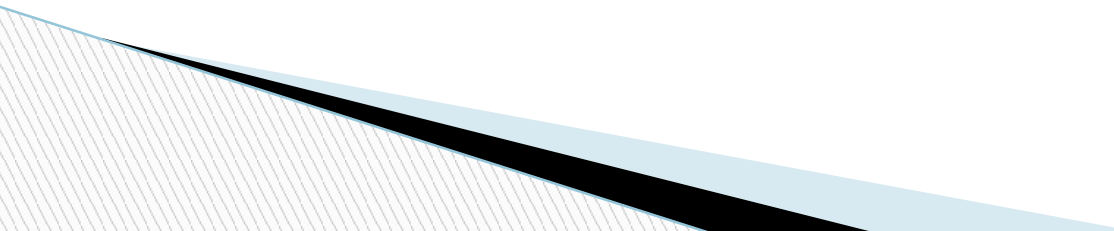
The moral ambiguity of spirituality

- Transcendence can degenerate into “absolutism”
 - Human-made institutions are deemed infinite, transcendent, natural
 - Spirituality unites and divides
 - Defines in-group and out-group
 - Justifies harm to others
 - Out-group is defined as opposing not only geo-political goals but “God’s will”, etc.
 - Facilitates participation in crimes against humanity
 - E.g., Zen Buddhism, mindfulness, and WWII
- 

Vladimir Putin, Russkiy Mir and Orthodox Spirituality

- Post-Soviet crisis of 1990s
 - Economic contraction
 - High inflation (1992: 1500%)
 - Life expectancy falls dramatically
 - Decline of 4 years in 5-year period
 - Mortality rates rise 33%
 - Birth rates collapse
 - Widespread crime and trafficking
 - Corruption and kleptocracy
- Putin's remedy: patriotism, collectivism, solidarity and *derzhavnost* (destiny to be a great power)

Faith in Russian Public Life

- No separation of Church and State:
 - Moscow as the 'Third Rome'
 - 19th century nationalism: 'Orthodoxy, Nationality, and Autocracy'
 - Putin opposed persecution of church under communism
 - Orthodox Christianity to serve Russian nationalism and expansionism
- 

Putin's use of Orthodox spirituality

- Church instills ideas in the population about “Russia’s `unique vocation,’ ` **the Russian soul**’ and `**Russian Spirituality**’-that are contrasted with the `**Western superficiality**’, `**Western materialism**’, and `**Western consumerism**’. These ideas are completely consistent with the ultra-nationalist goals of the Kremlin.

- Marcel van Herpen. 2013, *The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 123. Qtd in Amarasinghe, Punsara. 2021. “The Depiction of ‘Orthodoxy’ in Post-Soviet Space: How Vladimir Putin Uses the Church in His Anti-Western Campaign.” *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 25 (2): 235–52.

Moral ambiguity of the comic

- The dark side of comedy: Comedy as a barrier to transcendence
 - Avoidance
 - Failing to take life seriously
 - Avoiding responsibility
 - Judgementalism
 - Cruelty and callousness
 - Laughing at the suffering of others

Comedy as a weapon

- During 2024 Super Bowl, Don Trump Jr. posted a photo of former Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker Levon Kirkland: “I found this rare Michelle Obama rookie card.”
- “Just a little Super Bowl nostalgia. LOL 😜.”
- “Deer [sic] fact checkers I'm told that this is a joke. So please treat it accordingly though I personally am not 100% sure.”

Racism, ethnic chauvinism, racism, sexism, homophobia+ in comedy

- Jokes can allow us to feel distant from / better than “others”
- Raúl Pérez: “Amused racial contempt”
- “aligns those who engage in social ritual of racial ridicule and amused contempt against those who are racialized, mocked, and alienated as targets”

THE SOULS OF WHITE JOKES

**HOW RACIST HUMOR
FUELS WHITE SUPREMACY**

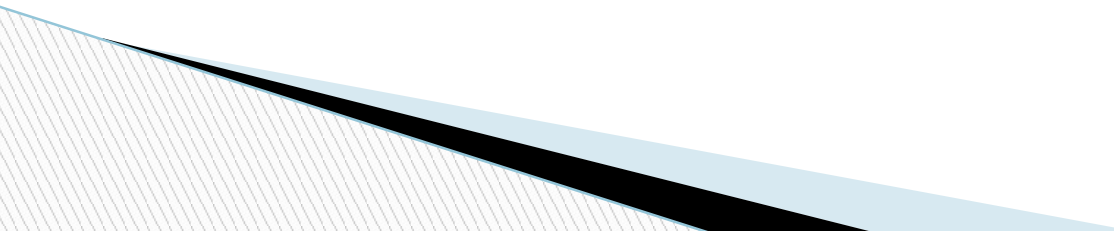
RAÚL PÉREZ

Stanford University Press,
2022.

Comedy, spirituality and religion

»» A theological
approach

Are there universal incongruities?

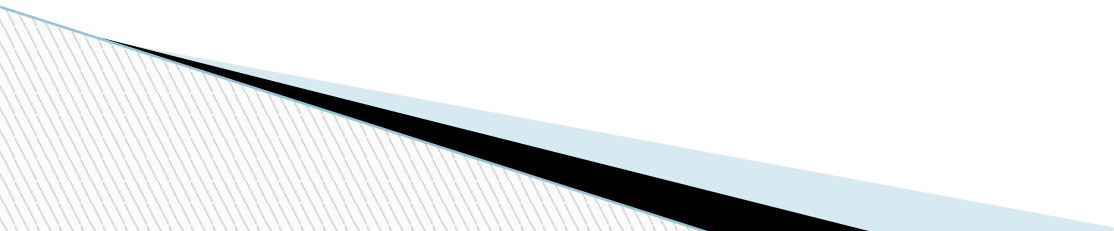
- Rooted in human nature and universal human experience
 - Secular incongruity #1: *Having* a body v. *Being* a body
 - Secular incongruity #2: Human greatness v. human insignificance
- 

Universal incongruity #3: The real world is trying to kill

us

- Parents' duty: instill a basic trust in the world
- But this trust is unwarranted
- “Yet, speaking empirically, this trust is misplaced, is an illusion. The world is not at all trustworthy. It is a world in which the child will experience every sort of pain, and it is a world that in the end will kill him. Everything is *not* all right; on the contrary.” (197) 32

Comedy and transcendence

- Two forms of transcendence attach to the comic
 - 1. “Transcendence in a lower key”
 - The comic transcends ordinary life
 - Rules of ordinary life are suspended
 - No spiritual or religious implication
- 

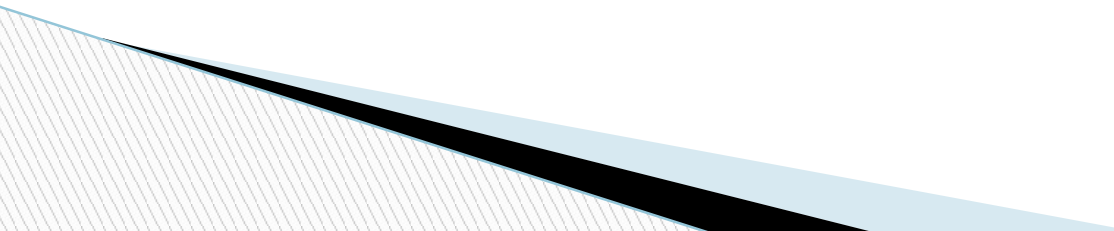
Redeeming laughter

- ▣ 2. “A signal of true transcendence”
- ▣ Some comedy has “redeeming qualities that are not temporary at all, but rather that point to that other world that has always been the object of the religious attitude.”
- ▣ Transcendence in a higher key
 - “religion in the full, proper sense of the word.”

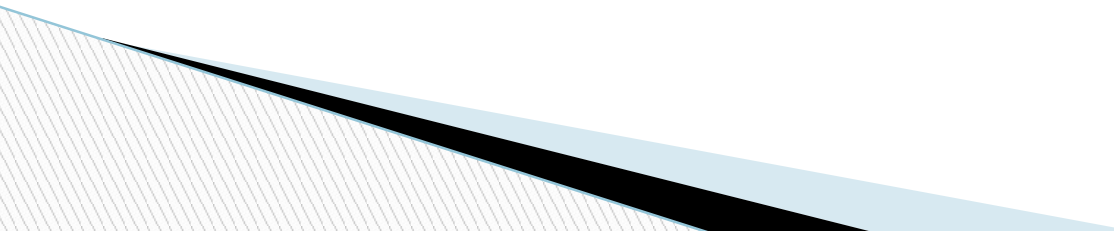
Faith, Humour and incongruities

- Humour -> the immediate incongruities
- Faith -> the ultimate incongruities
- Any joke can provoke laughter, which makes the world easier to bear. But sometimes the comic is “**a signal of true redemption**, that is, of a world that has been made whole and in which the miseries of the human condition have been abolished.”

Comedy and faith

- Comedy and faith show us another world is possible
 - Points to that “unseen order” (William James)
 - God as *totaliter aliter* (Totally Other)
 - This world is not ultimately real
- 

Faith: a response to universal incongruities

- The clown and pratfalls: The hurts of this world are not real
 - The jack-in-the-box: When we are hurt, we get up again
 - Peek-a-boo: The presence and absence of God
- 

Berger's “signals of transcendence”

- “phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality”
 - Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 1970, p. 53
- Faith is ultimately trust:
 - Not “rational” but not contrary to reason
- Faith as another perspective on the world
 - The comic as a visible sign of an invisible reality
 - Parallels religious rituals, “sacraments”, etc.

Thank you!

»» David Seljak
St. Jerome's University
At the University of Waterloo
dseljak@uwaterloo.ca

39