2 White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1948), pp. v-xii.
White, *Selected Messages,* book one (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1958), pp. 15-23.

Theology and Comedy

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THE FEAST OF FOOLS
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More than anything else Harvey Cox wants to get several theological and social movements to sit down at his *Feast of Fools.* He wants the death-of-God theologians to break bread with those propounding the theology of hope, and he wants the neo-mystics or hippies to celebrate with the militants or radical-revolutionaries. He thinks that festivity and fantasy will bring the death-of-God theologians and hippies, who are absorbing the present, into fellowship with the theologians of hope and the militants, who are busy creating a new future.

Because festivity draws men away from their ordinary lives into a new existence, it appeals to the hippies. Because festivity inevitably puts value in the uncommon, the unprescribed, and the disorganized, it undermines authority and so should appeal also to the militant. If the two groups can celebrate together, the hippies will learn to "transform celebration into a way of being *in* the world, not a way of getting out of it" (p. 112), and the militants will learn that "in certain festive and fanciful moments history allows us to taste in the present the first fruits of what we hope for in the future" (p. 119).

Cox glories in the fact that his feast is a *Feast of Fools.* He lectures to the death-of-God theologians that "it is the very oddness, incredibility, and even at points weirdness of traditional faith that makes it interesting to us today" (p. 132). The clash of symbols precious to the past with experience of the present and visions of the future creates incongruities that are the essence of the comic. Cox suggests preserving these incongruities through juxtaposing symbols of the past and future with the activities of present experience. He realizes that fostering discontinuities and incongruities may result in chaos and silliness and that "the juxtapositional approach is a method for theological jesters" (p. 133). He admits there are dangers in a juxtapositional theology, just as there are in any comic style — "when comedy fails it becomes ridiculous." Still, "when comedy succeeds it shakes us into a new stance, it prepares us for new experiences" (p. 137). So Cox invites theologians announcing

the death of God and those propounding hope to join him at the *Feast of Fools,* where theologians, as jesters, will perform Cox's juxtapositional method.

Cox is a virtuoso at showing everything that festivity and fantasy can do. But after the performance is over, one realizes that he has left his audience confused as to what festivity and fantasy are — especially festivity, his more important category. Cox would justify his exercise in showing us the benefits of festivity if he held to his statement that "festivity is never an end in itself. It expresses our joy *about* something" (p. 46). But forty pages earlier, Cox has said, "Festivity, like play, contemplation, and making love, is an end in itself" (p. 5). If it is, then Cox would have a difficult time showing that it is of the essence of festivity to achieve social change.

Cox discusses festivity inconsistently. When he describes the nature of festivity, he tries to describe too much of human experience with the one term. His description refers to human experiences that can be regarded as ends in themselves, but also includes aspects of festivity that are instrumental.

Cox says, "A festive occasion has three essential ingredients: (1) conscious excess, (2) celebrative affirmation, and (3) juxtaposition" (p. 22).

Conscious excess is that "overdoing it" and "living it up" that we call revelry. The discharge of energy implied conforms to analyses of play found in many contemporary psychologists and those theologians building on their work (notably Johann Huizinga, Ralph Neale, and David Miller). According to these men, play can be instrumental but can also be engaged in for its own sake. It can lead to a freer future or it can be a frolicking in the present.

Celebrative affirmation, according to Cox, is "saying yes to life," and "includes joy in the deepest sense" (p. 23). For Langdon Gilkey, to experience joy is to encounter ultimacy. For Peter Berger, it is a sign of transcendence. For both men, and surely for anyone who has experienced it, joy is an end in itself. It does not depend on future events to make the present a delight. Instead of using his omnibus word "festivity," Cox would have been clearer if he had said that play sometimes and joy always are ends in themselves, and if he had analyzed each as clearly distinct from his third aspect of festivity, juxtaposition.

Juxtaposition actually describes the comic. Festivity as juxtaposition is the contrast and incongruity of special occasions with everyday life. "Festivity, however, cannot be reduced merely to the unusual. It is not *just* not working; . . . the reality of festivity depends on an alternation with the everyday schedule of work" (p. 23). Juxtaposition is the essence of comedy. It is never one thing soaring by itself, but one element or incident or quality encountering another in surprise and the resulting clash leading to a laugh. Comedy is instrumental; it does aim at a target; it can undermine pomposity and authority; it can contribute to social change, to the making of a better future.

Cox performs a service by showing that contemporary theological and social movements emphasize the present or the future. He succeeds in showing how the comic relates to the theologians of hope and to the political radicals who wish to undermine present authority to create an improved future. But before he can use the idea of festivity to bring these groups into closer proximity with the death-of-God theologians and the hippies, more thinking needs to be done. First, on the distinctive nature of play and joy, and then on their relation to the comic.