

- 3 Richard W. Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg: American Health Reformer* (University of Michigan: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation 1964), p. iv.
- 4 Doctor Kellogg made these remarks in a personal conversation with me in approximately 1942.
- 5 Gerald H. Carson, *Cornflake Crusade* (New York: Rinehart 1957).
Ronald Deutsch, *Some Nuts among the Berries* (New York: Ballantine Books 1957).
- 6 Horace B. Powell, *The Original Has This Signature — W. K. Kellogg* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall 1956).
- 7 Powell, pp. 285-287.
- 8 Members of the church contributed heavily to the founding and advancement of the Battle Creek Sanitarium.

75

The Witnessing of Wit

ROY BRANSON

SENSE AND NONSENSE IN RELIGION

By Sten H. Stenson

New York: Abingdon Press 1969 255 pp \$5.95

In *Sense and Nonsense in Religion* Stenson responds to the loss of faith dramatized by the death-of-God theology and to the conviction that "religious Jews and Christians" either must preserve their "rational integrity as members of twentieth-century technological culture by giving up their religion" or must preserve their "religion in a secular world by giving up their rational integrity" (p. 155). Stenson reacts to this contemporary dilemma with a defense of paradox made familiar by neo-orthodox theologians. Making paradoxical statements is the appropriate, "reasonable" way for the religious person to affirm simultaneously the empirical world of nature and the mysterious truths grasped through "metaphysical intuition" (p. 220). Karl Barth could have said the same thing.

Stenson's original contribution is discussing paradox in terms of humor. Not that he identifies religion with wit and punning — that would be adopting a sort of natural theology. But Stenson wants to show the appropriateness of religious language by comparing its logic with that of humor.

The most relevant characteristic of humor is its ambiguity. "There could be no puns or witticism if it were not for the fact that the same words, pictures, movements, and so forth can be intended and interpreted in several different ways at the same time" (p. 106). Religious language is characteristically ambiguous. It points at the same time to both immanent and transcendent reality.

Stenson pursues specific parallels between religion and humor. Wit, he says, forces contrasting ideas together by pointing to an area of similarity. The logical or psychological incompatibilities exposed among the terms surprise listeners into laughter — or even anger. The shock we feel in recognizing the new truth revealed in wit is like the astonishment that comes to us in the moment of revelation or conversion in religious experience.

Less convincingly, in the collision of ideas Stenson also sees that wit forces a mirror of the conflicts wracking human beings. "Our phenomenological description of wit suggests that it too is an experience — similar in certain important respects to the agony and ecstasy of the 'twice born' soul — in which both creative and destructive forces, the divine and the demonic, vie in the soul of man for his eventual allegiance" (p. 119).

Finally — because wit takes men's familiar ideas, juxtaposes them, and creates a new reality — Stenson can describe wit as immanent and transcendent, and even assert "God is like wit in this respect." To experience a witticism, then, is to encounter a Moment of Truth (crisis theology, p. 115), to be fascinated and a little awed by a new reality (Otto, p. 123), to be drawn to the edge of a new world of absolute freedom (existentialism, pp. 118, 122), or to be apprehended by God (traditional theology, p. 117).

What wit is to conversion, puns are to the sacramental. Wit directs attention to the one point of convergence between two terms in order to shock us with how at other points these terms clash. Puns, on the other hand, emphasize how two dissimilar terms can be drawn together. "We have likened puns to the places where two or more lines of thought easily join each other with only a nervous clatter to mark the ambiguity where the lines intersect" (p. 109). Puns, then, while recognizing differences, can show the similarities between two orders of reality (for instance, the sacred and the profane). "In puns several different lines of thought go through the same sign at the same time, and if one of those lines of thought is religious in some heightened sense, then that pun — which might be any sort of object or event, and not a conventional sign — will be sacramental in that way" (p. 107). The Christian must have the "witty," sudden illumination of conversion, but he also needs the "gradual sacramental enrichment of religious 'punning'" (p. 157).

Stenson succeeds in demonstrating the paradoxical nature of humor and in showing its similarities to religious affirmations. But he pushes his two methods — phenomenology and linguistic analysis — too far. He identifies existentialism as a part of the phenomenological school, almost ignoring authors more often used in phenomenological studies of religion — Otto, Eliade, van der Leeuw. This restricted view of phenomenology leads him to include chapters on Sartre and Heidegger that do not seem to be necessary to the central development of the book.

More disconcerting is his preoccupation with existentialism, which warps his analysis of humor, especially wit. Not satisfied to show the similarity between wit and conversion (which he accomplishes brilliantly by illustrating the element of suddenness and surprise in both), Stenson demands that wit reveal anguish, pathos, despair, the demonic, the abyss, even the tragic (pp. 111, 116, 118, 119). He talks of a witticism being a disaster or catastrophe leading us into a world of chaos. With incon-

gruity and conflict I can agree — but tragedy? Stenson's interest in existentialist categories leads him to turn humor inside out. If a comic statement is essentially tragic, what has happened to our language? Wit and humor reveal important aspects of human experience. They should not be forced to encompass all reality.

Wit is violent and painful. It deals with the conflicts and tensions of significant reality described by existential philosophers. Puns are gentle and tame; they reveal the similarities in life. Puns enrich our apprehensions and are therefore inherently sacramental. Yet Stenson relegates sacramentals, or "lesser blessings," to puns and preserves the more complex and important sacraments for wit (p. 149). His first analysis would make the comparison of wit with conversion and pun with sacraments more consistent. But having ascribed to wit the importance of the tragic and the serious, Stenson wrenches the logic of his own position, to keep such an important aspect of religious practice as sacraments within the scope of wit.

In spite of some excesses, Stenson's overall effort is a success. He stresses wit because he thinks it is a kind of paradoxical language that can make sense (meaning) out of the nonsense (logical self-contradictions) of religious affirmation. Contemporary man, including those who proclaim the death of God, must see that religious statements, like humorous ones, deal with two realities at once. Humor may surprise sometimes, but often it tells the truth. Can't religion be recognized as doing the same? Today's cultured despisers of religion may regard statements of faith as silly. But really, Stenson says, they are the pitifully obtuse folks who remain sober-faced at a party, who in the midst of laughter fail to see the point. Stenson makes his.

77

The Timely Man

JAMES W. WALTERS

APOLOGY FOR WONDER

By Sam Keen

New York: Harper and Row 1969 218 pp \$5.95

Sam Keen is a representative of the post-death-of-God theology, a theology that tries to make the Christian faith acceptable to modern man by appealing to phenomenology — an appeal that works toward the conception of God (or religion) by beginning with a study of universal phenomena pointing to a transcendent aspect of life.

Keen's basic a priori is theological: that common grace makes possible "trust in the context within which action must take place and confidence in the ability of the self to undertake appropriate action" (p. 203). This affirmation is not an explicit theme in the book, but it must be recognized in order for one to understand the perspective of Keen's analysis of human nature and life.