



The Cynic and The Church

A young theologian explains why it isn't necessarily sacrilegious to feel like laughing.

by Gary Chartier

MANY PEOPLE COULD ECHO THE WORDS OF pastor and theologian William Willimon: "For me, the real scandal of the ordained ministry, the ultimate stumbling block, the thing I avoid and fear most, is the Church. . . . My problem . . . is that I am yoked to the Church." Willimon observes that like "many today, I love Jesus. I want to serve him. But he married beneath his station."¹ And numerous Adventists could resonate with Jonathan Butler when he says that,

as the good Christian Paul had a "wretched body" to contend with every day, so the Adventist church has its wretched body. As a people Adventists mean as much as the Christian Paul meant in his great love-letters and general epistles. But as a people we also are weighed down with a body of death which we must fight daily. It pervades us with its languor, and discontent, and provincial grasp of mankind and systems, and

cliche patterns of thought, and legalism, and PR faces, and materialism, and cliquish sociability. And we have sensed this flesh pervade our very selves, and well up within us—from we know not where—as a great current of darkness. . . . We wallow in the flesh of Adventism—bored, frustrated, left-wingers or stragglers.²

The "scandal" of the church evokes a certain kind of cynicism. Indeed, cynicism about the church follows naturally from Christian faith. Cynicism, in and of itself, can never be judged to be *necessarily* inappropriate, even from within the community of faith. In short, I want to justify the cynic to the church and the church to the cynic. I believe cynicism about the church is a part of fidelity to the church.

By "cynicism," I mean an attitude of dryly humorous suspicion about human activities—especially motivations. While more extreme accounts of the cynic's perspective may be offered, this one seems to me to capture the understanding of cynicism presupposed in ordinary discourse. The cynic doubts that things are as they should be. He or she also doubts that this is caused solely by poor

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information or inadequate coordination; pure human cussedness is at least partly responsible. The cynic believes in "original sin."

Measured suspicion of the church is appropriate, first of all, because of the "in-between" character of Christian existence. The *identity* of the church and its members is clear. That identity is shaped by God's self-gift in Jesus of Nazareth; by the hope inspired by Jesus' resurrection, by the promise of the world's ultimate salvation and restoration in Jesus' *parousia*; and by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church.

But the Christian is called to "become what he or she is." While identity of the Christian as a child of God may be clear, his or her experience and behavior often fails. Thus, Paul distances himself from enthusiasts who suppose that the Christian's new life eliminates the ambiguities inherent in sinful existence: "I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep going on to try to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. Of course, brothers, I really do not think that I have already won it; the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead" (Philippians 3:12, 13, TEV).³

Paul makes the same point in a more general way in his Epistle to the Galatians: the sinful nature "sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it. They are in conflict with one another so that what you will to do you cannot do" (5:16-18, NEB). And,

while in no way condoning their behavior, Paul judges the Corinthian *believers* to be "infants in Christ," not ready for "solid food," and living in accordance with dictates of the "lower nature" (1 Corinthians 3:1-4).

The church cannot *glory* in this shame; the inherent sinfulness of its members can be no cause for gratitude. But this shame must render incredible any corporate or individual claims to perfection. Consequently, Christians always appropriately remain suspicious of churchly pretensions to ultimacy.

The fact that the church is a corporate entity also renders it worthy of suspicion. For corpo-

rate structures give ever-fresh opportunities to sinful people to cloak themselves and their actions in a mantle of respectability. Some involved directly in the church structure are drawn to the argument that the Spirit, who makes Christ's lordship in the church, ensures its infallibility. If one then judges oneself to be "legislating for God,"⁴ the temptation to make absolute whatever one decides be-

comes well-nigh irresistible.

Of course, ecclesiastical history demonstrates that the universal Christian church has strayed, wandered, and been inconsistent. God is always at work in the church to bring good out of its evil or ineptitude, but God does not always *override* the church's mistakes.

It would seem that if one has *exactly* the same informational input as someone else, but relies on divine power, one's judgment regarding an issue of moral or spiritual significance ought to be better.

In fact, reliance on God does not make

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much of a difference in coming to a right decision. There are at least five reasons why.

1. An issue may be so circumscribed that it is of a purely organizational or logistical character. In such a case, moral and spiritual sensitivity cannot make one's judgment better or worse.

2. Other persons with explicit faith in Christ may—indeed, probably will—have differing opinions about an object of dispute, and invoking one's faith as the source of the legitimacy of one's opinion can carry little or no weight in such situations.

3. God's grace is, of course, operative outside the visible church, and thus to assert the superiority of one's opinion over that of someone else *solely or exclusively because one is a Christian* is to ignore the possibility that the person with whom one is disputing is also being transformed in judgment and will by God's Spirit.

4. Whatever one's disposition, one's analysis of the relevant data is a function of one's human history and social locus.

5. Finally, one is never in a position to know with any degree of accuracy either the state of one's own spiritual maturity or the state of anyone else's.

Humans are not only evil, they are also limited. No humans can act on completely adequate knowledge. No human activity can be carried on with perfect effectiveness. Humans do not possess unlimited power or knowledge and so, even under the best of circumstances, their actions and decisions can be faulty.

Because, then, the church has its redeemed identity on the one hand and the imperious demands of the Old Adam on the other, we have every right to be suspicious of any ecclesiastical claim to finality.⁵ We can be suspicious of the church's belief, the church's practice, the motives of the church's members (especially ourselves) because the church is a *human* community.

Suspicion of the church is justified precisely because of the gospel the church preaches. The church does not preach belief in unwavering human goodness. The gospel the church presents highlights not only human possibility but human ambiguity, not only the goodness wrought by the Spirit's work but the evil against which the Spirit contends.

While suspicion and cynicism are justified, they are also dangerous. First, we cannot afford to be suspicious of the Lord of the church. Of course, the prophetic word informs us that it is God who says "come now, and let us reason together." Central to Adventist talk about the "Great Controversy" is the assumption that God is willing to be evaluated by the created universe. Even if we judge that the God whose grace is proclaimed by the church is trustworthy, we may still find ourselves questioning *within* the community of faith, like Job and the psalmists.

Williams argues that our "obedience to God requires us to fight Him. And when we fail in that most radical and paradoxical kind of obedience people smell death in our churches and stay away. . . ." "Whatever God wants in our relationship with Him," Williams maintains, "it certainly isn't respectability. I imagine that the church in Laodicea treated God in the most respectable way. The divine reply to this treatment is invective fitting for youth at its most rebellious: 'I'll spit you out.'"⁶

The temptation to be avoided here is one common to all real and would-be intellectuals: to cultivate tension as a sign of sophistication rather than accepting it as a sign of fallen and finite humanity. To be sure, Christian life is unlikely ever to be free of doubt. George MacDonald wrote, "The man that feareth, Lord, to doubt, / In that fear doubteth thee."⁷ But we must not compel ourselves to *cherish* cynicism about God, not because God is so insecure that human suspicion naturally evokes divine wrath, but because to be cynical about

God is to alienate oneself from the loving source of one's being.⁸

Second, cynicism is dangerous because we cannot exempt ourselves. The others regarding whom we are cynical face challenges not dissimilar from our own. Our loyalties are often divided, our commitment to God and others wavers, our experience is pervaded by ambiguity.

Cynicism cannot be allowed to break down relationships among people. Because we must be suspicious of ourselves, we must be aware that our own suspicion of others is itself questionable.

Perhaps it is easier to maintain appropriate distance when one voices suspicions of the corporate (congregational, denominational, or universal) church. Church structures intensify the inherently problematic character of human decisions, and have wide-ranging consequences for people. One can articulate suspicion, cynicism, and concern about structures in a way that does not bring shame and disrepute to particular individuals.



It is worth noting the distinction between experiencing appropriate suspicion and voicing it. Private wrongs deserve private airing, while public wrongs demand public attention. One's suspicion is most appropriately expressed and directed at those in whom one trusts. After all, they are the most likely to return the favor. It is in the company of one's friends that self-criticism comes most readily. A community of trust and honesty may serve as a paradigm for the church, understood as a community of both loyalty and "suspicion"—of others and, even more, of ourselves.

Thus it seems to me that Butler is absolutely correct when, in the context of Adventist collegiate life, he writes that we

get off the subject when we place all our gripes on the head of a scapegoat . . . , [assuming that] if we can just rid ourselves of these goats everything will be alright. We are off the subject when it is always "their fault," because even if we could drive out all these scapegoats from the camp, we would still be here (I would still be here), and now we're getting back on the subject.

Because after I have exposed all the evils, and smashed all the idols, and burned all the tyrants in effigy, the real enemy still lurks. For the enemy is never the scapegoat we can send out of camp, the problem is never simply "their fault" (if we understand fully the problem), for it is part of me. The enemy must be met within me. I can gripe all I want through the day about the faculty, or the Commons, or the Dean's Council, but it's really only chit-chat until I turn out the lights and wait in the silence for sleep to take me.⁹

Third, cynicism is very dangerous when it is directed at the *point* of the church: the trust and love and worship and service of God. What goes on "in church" (i.e., in congregational life) and "in *the* church" (i.e., in the context of church and supra-church organization) may often fall short of the divine ideal, and deserves to be treated with a healthy skepticism. But responsible suspicion regarding the church is always the suspicion of a

participant, not a bystander. The church is worth getting mad about, but only if the church makes a difference in our life, if one has some reason to care about it.

We must have community if we are to grow, if we are to be the persons God intends us to be. Spirituality is not nurtured in a vacuum; nor are the various worthwhile endeavors the church sponsors likely to be successfully managed by isolated individuals. To experience and respond to the world most adequately, we require the support of a community which helps to shape our interpretations of and responses to reality by a variety of the practices it inculcates, the language and images it employs, the stories it remembers and the self-discipline it fosters. In other words, we need religious communities.¹⁰

We do not start in a vacuum. One begins one's religious reflection with a heritage one cannot simply ignore. Karl Rahner, the great German theologian, is surely correct when he writes:

A man cannot do away with his parents once he is born. The very fact that we are and that we continue to exist assures us of the fact that they continue ceaselessly to be our parents. Hence we cannot be Christians . . . by quitting the church which has been, and remains, once and for all the mother of this Christian existence of ours. Otherwise all that we have, ultimately speaking, is an abstract God and an abstract Christ who continues to exist merely as the projection of our own subjectivity. Community is thus crucial for personal religious experience.¹¹

Though church communities are flawed, they have the capacity to dramatically affect our lives in positive ways.

I have observed that the cynic's *suspicion* is qualified by his or her *humor*. And this reference to humor will be enough, as far as some people are concerned, to legitimate the disfranchisement of the cynic. To the grimly serious pundits who take it upon themselves

to call down divine judgment on the church, humor will seem entirely inappropriate. Issues of consequence are at stake, and the fate of the church is, they will tell us, no laughing matter.

At least two responses come to mind. First, in Scripture, the narratives that shape our moral identities as Christians,¹² combine, with little difficulty, humor and seriousness about matters of ultimate concern. Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal with the suggestion that their deity has not bothered to answer their petition; instead, he is relieving himself. Jesus employs striking metaphors and stories intended to elicit not only reflection but laughter from his hearers. Paul employs sarcasm to good effect in his attempts to shame and woo the Corinthian believers back into fellowship with himself (e.g., 1 Corinthians 4:8). If the moral witness of Scripture is to be taken seriously, then human foibles cannot be taken too seriously.

The second defense of humor is more philosophical. One key ingredient in humor is the sense of incongruity. And a sense of incongruity should be very, very evident whenever religious issues are discussed by finite creatures.

The reality about which we speak when we speak religiously so far exceeds our language and our imagery that we speak only because we have no alternative. The issues are important ones, and they must be addressed with whatever clarity of thought and courage of will we can bring to bear. But our representations of ultimate reality are separated from ultimate reality itself by infinite decision. Otherwise, we wouldn't be talking about ultimate reality at all. The tension obtains not only when we *speak*, but when we *do* Christianly. That is why H. A. Williams can write, "Thank God when you can take a delighted pleasure in the comic spectacle which is yourself, especially if it is yourself

devoutly at prayer.”¹³

The recognition of this gap can inspire appropriate irony and cynicism about the church. There is something more than faintly absurd about our too-somber religious performance and discourse. Laughter is the only appropriate response.¹⁴

Is there a place, then, for cynics in the church? Perhaps not for cynics whose own self-righteousness prevents them from being cynical about themselves. Perhaps not for cynics who believe that ultimate reality itself deserves to be scorned. Perhaps not for cynics who refuse to opt for the trust, love, worship, and service of God-in-Christ on the basis that their categories of understanding are provisional.

Certainly, however, there is room for worshipful, self-critical, and communally responsible cynics. Christians are impelled to such cynicism by the Christian gospel itself. And since their faith is always in the church's Lord, and not in the church itself, their faith can continue despite battles with their community of faith. Hans Küng articulates this ambivalent understanding of the church with particular clarity and grace:

Why then does the church remain alive as a community of faith? Not because there is no threat to life, no fatal illness, within it. But because God keeps it alive, *despite* all infirmities and weaknesses, and constantly endows it with a new continuity

Why does the church remain in grace? Not because it is itself steadfast and faithful. But because, *despite* all sin and guilt, God does not dismiss it from his favor and grace and constantly grants it a new indestructibility

Why does the church remain in truth? Not because there is in it no wavering or doubting, no deviation or going astray. But because God maintains it in truth, *despite* its doubts, misunderstandings, and errors.¹⁵

I believe that cynics have cause to remain hopeful. Not everyone, perhaps, can be a cynic *in* the church. Not every church, perhaps, can tolerate cynics. But I remain convinced that individual Adventists possess the capacity to continue their “lover's quarrels” with the church, and that collective Adventism possess the resources to profit from its cynical members.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. William H. Willimon, *What's Right With the Church* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985) p. 131.

2. Jonathan Butler, “Letters to Phillip,” *La Sierra College Criterion*, 38:4 (October 21, 1966), p. 2.

3. Cp. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), pp. 559-565.

4. To use a de-contextualized Ellen White expression employed in the introduction to the new *General Conference Rules of Procedure*.

5. Thus, Ellen White's image of the life to come includes a vision of progressive understanding: “There, immortal minds will contemplate with never-failing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. . . . Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. . . . And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will

be their admiration of His character” (Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911], pp. 677, 678).

6. H. A. Williams, *Tensions: Necessary Conflicts in Life and Love* (London: Beazley, 1976), pp. 30, 31.

7. Qtd. in Williams, p. 48.

8. But cp. Williams, who argues that temporary conflict with God can ultimately be productive of greater intimacy with God: “When we find ourselves sneering at God-associated things we may be pretty certain that the God-associated things are only a cover for God Himself. We often find that too shocking an admission to make to ourselves—are we sneering at Absolute Goodness? Or if not too shocking, then too absurd. We might as well sneer at the Alps. Yet in fact that is precisely what we are doing, not because we are doomed and damned and totally depraved, but because here on earth our sneering and ridicule is a necessary stage or element in our love for the Creator,

who is leading us towards that independence of Him by means of which alone we can finally give ourselves totally to Him. The acceptance of our inevitable ambiguity towards God—with all the tensions, conflicts and guilt-feelings it involves—is part of that cross through which alone we can enter into fullness of life” (p. 34). While I find this plausible, I think we must avoid the temptation to idealize such conflict and to use the truth that it will sometimes come as an excuse for self-indulgence and irresponsibility. It is important to distinguish here between our genuine (and not merely clever and trendy) doubts about the reality and goodness of God and our response to a God whose love we perceive but whom we wish, perhaps, to ridicule because we find that love too demanding.

9. Jonathan Butler, “Letters to Phillip,” *La Sierra College Criterion*, 38:10 (January 20, 1967), p. 2.

10. The dependence of the account of religion offered here upon that of George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Era* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) will be obvious. I am, in fact, more appreciative of the work of Lindbeck’s student, William C. Placher, whose *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) offers an account of “post-liberal” theology less open to relativist or dogmatic misuse than Lindbeck’s. And, in company with Terence Tilley, I advocate a “dirty intertextuality” in contrast to the “pure intratextualism” Lindbeck, Kenneth Surin, and others seem to prefer. Nicholas Lash addresses these issues incisively in his recent book *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville, Va.: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1988).

11. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 12: Confrontations 2*, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, 1974), p. 154.

12. See Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

13. Williams, p. 113.

14. Science fiction and fantasy novelist Ursula LeGuin remarks somewhere that “God is only playing

God.” What LeGuin means I am not sure, but it seems to me that her statement could be interpreted as implying that God does not take the divine majesty too seriously, that God is not easily offended. Were it validated, this affirmation could serve both as a legitimation of comic discourse about the church and as a model for our own self-analysis.

Suppose God really does not take Godself seriously; would this legitimate simply *any* response to the divine reality? I think not. There is a difference between God, the ultimate reality, who knows Godself to be self-giving love, denying with amusement the thought that ultimate reality should be taken as ultimate *for its own sake* and our refusal to recognize our own rootedness in the being of God. While our concepts of God are always provisional, God remains our sure foundation—morally, epistemically, and ontologically. God *is* ultimate in a way that no finite reality is, and it is precisely God’s ultimacy that renders finite claims to ultimacy comic. Further, to make light of God is not to make light simply of one other member of reality; it is to make light of the character of reality itself. Our talk about that reality must be treated with humor, but our judgments relative to the nature of reality itself—is it marked by mutuality or competition, is it self-sufficient or dependent—are vital. There is always a tension here between our own limitations and the significance of the decisions we must make despite those limitations.

It is perhaps in this context that discussions of flippant use of the word “God” belong. God does not take God seriously enough to be offended by such usage. But perhaps we will fail to treat God worshipfully if the only label we have for God is bandied about without much thought. Again, we must prevent our cynicism about our own limitations from encouraging a thoroughgoing cynicism about reality as such. And since our only access to reality as such is by means of our words and concepts, we must make use of them even as we affirm their provisionality.

15. Hans Küng, *The Church—Maintained in Truth: A Theological Meditation*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 16, and cp. Rahner, pp. 159, 160.