

Article

In the Beginning Was Laughter: Human and Divine Laughter in U. Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

Mikael Stæhr Brorson 

Department of Theology, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark; mb@cas.au.dk

Abstract

Does God laugh? This article is a systematic theological discussion of divine laughter and its implications for human laughter. Firstly, I define laughter in contrast to humour and the comical, and I present the most common theories of laughter. Secondly, I use Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* to discuss laughter in relation to Christianity, and I hint at a possible concept of divine laughter. Thirdly, I unfold this idea of divine laughter, not least by drawing on the phenomenon of Easter laughter (*risus paschalis*), and I outline its implications for human laughter and mockery.

Keywords: laughter; divine laughter; comedy; *The Name of the Rose*; Umberto Eco

1. Introduction

"Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh [...]" (Eco 1983, p. 287). These are some of the last words of William of Baskerville, the master of the young Benedictine novice Adso in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. To me, the words are also the answer to the question posed throughout the novel concerning laughter and its relation to the divine: Laughter is no enemy of Christianity. On the contrary, the two are intimately interrelated: "true earnestness is the unity of jest and earnestness," to put it in Søren Kierkegaard's (or, rather, Frater Taciturnus's) words (Kierkegaard 1989, p. 365).

The topic of this article is also the topic of many learned discussions in *The Name of the Rose* between William of Baskerville and his adversary, the blind monk Jorge of Burgos: Did Christ laugh? Or, to take the trinitarian consequence of this question: Did—and does—God laugh? Can one speak of divine laughter? And if so, how are we to understand and describe divine laughter—and what does this, in turn, imply for human laughter?

In the present article, I set out to answer these questions. To this end, I begin by defining laughter and introducing different theories of laughter, as well as giving a brief overview of the biblical testimony of laughter. Having done this, I go on to illustrate these theories and explore their theological potential by applying them to the theological discussions between William and Jorge in *The Name of the Rose*. Lastly, I use this as a point of departure for discussing how we should understand divine laughter—and what this means for human laughter.

To be sure, my interest is neither exegetical nor historical—rather, I deal with this question from the viewpoint of systematic theology. Thus, I will not offer a detailed overview or a discussion of God's laughter in the Hebrew Bible or Jesus' (lack of) laughter in the New Testament (Webster 1960; Patella 2015; Kruger 2014; Gilhus 2011), nor will I delve into Patristic or Medieval debates on whether Jesus laughed or not (Stamoulis 2021; Suchomski 1975).



Academic Editor: Christopher Metress

Received: 30 June 2026

Revised: 10 August 2026

Accepted: 17 August 2026

Published: 20 August 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

2. What Is Laughter?

When we speak of laughter, we are dealing with a human phenomenon known to us all. Aristotle, in his *De partibus animalium*, even defined the human being as *homo ridens*, i.e., as defined by its ability to laugh (Aristotle 1937, 673a). Laughter is a *proprium hominis*. However, this universal aspect of laughter should not make us forget that laughter is also a culturally, religiously, and historically situated phenomenon, always dependent on its specific context (Gilhus 1990, pp. 24–25; Halliwell 2008). This is an important premise when dealing with laughter and theories trying to explain laughter, its meaning and origin.

Furthermore, laughter should be distinguished from humour on the one hand and the comical on the other hand. In this article, I understand their interrelation as follows: Where humour is, as Lenz Prütting has put it in his monumental *Homo ridens*, “an inner attitude” which relates to laughter “as potency to act” and thus designates the ability to find things funny (Prütting 2016, p. 1927), the comical is what causes (or at least attempts to cause) laughter—even though laughter cannot necessarily be traced back to something comical. The comical is thus no necessary precondition for laughter (Lühl 2019, p. 6).

In any case, I take laughter to be the physical and even bodily phenomenon of laughing, and this could be seen as a controversial choice when asking the question: Does God laugh? For God is, of course, neither physical nor bodily in the way that human beings are. Still, I choose to ask the question of God’s laughter, not his sense of humour or his comical talent, for two reasons. Firstly, I do this to stress the incarnation, the fact that God in Christ has fully taken on flesh; and, secondly, I do this to underline God’s action instead of speculating on his being or characteristics *in se*.

For us to be able to further define laughter, we can begin with an everyday distinction between laughing at and laughing with. By this basic distinction, it becomes clear that laughter is, in fact, a highly ambiguous and potentially problematic phenomenon, not least in relation to God. Ingvald S. Gilhus has spoken of two “phenomenological fields” of laughter associated with “life-giving” values on the one hand and “destructive values” on the other hand:

1. creation and birth, joy, sexuality and eroticism; food and intoxicating drinks; feasts and comedies; dancing; ecstasy, madness and wisdom;
2. destruction and death; derision and shame; ridicule and blasphemy; tragedy (Gilhus 1997, p. 4).

With this dichotomy, we can basically distinguish between positive and negative/derogative laughter. This pertains to the basic *function* of laughter—but what of its *cause*, its origin, i.e., the comical which brings it about?

Theories on this topic abound, but traditionally, the field is structured by three sets of theories which I will briefly present: (i) incongruity theory; (ii) superiority theory; and (iii) relief theory. These are often seen as competing; nevertheless, it might be more fruitful to see them as complementary.

For the (i) incongruity theorists, laughter is elicited by juxtaposition of contradicting or surprising elements. Henri Bergson is often quoted as a proponent of this stance—in his view, laughter is a product of the mechanical meeting the living (Bergson 1913). However, incongruity theory represents a quite wide definition of laughter, and Norman N. Holland consequently proposes to distinguish between cognitive, ethical, and formal incongruity. Cognitive incongruity “speaks to our intellect,” as Holland puts it, and could, for instance, be the contrast in simultaneously affirming and denying the same logical proposition. Meanwhile, ethical incongruity concerns “our sense of value” and covers, e.g., the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane. Lastly, formal incongruity is, according to Holland, an Aristotelian category which simply consists of “something harmful presented harmlessly” (Holland 1982,

pp. 22–26). Whether this formal category does not, in fact, swallow up the two former categories remains an open question.

The (ii) superiority theory, on the other hand, understands laughter as stemming from the feeling of superiority over others. One representative of this approach is Thomas Hobbes, who famously claimed that laughter arises from “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (Hobbes 2008, IV, ch. 9). Charles Baudelaire understood laughter in this way, and contrasted *comique significatif*, which is cognitive and concerns the feeling of superiority over other human beings, with *comique absolu*, the grotesque, which, according to Baudelaire, is spontaneous and derives from a feeling of superiority over nature itself (Baudelaire 1956). To Baudelaire, however, laughter is essentially satanic—this is, of course, not the viewpoint of all superiority theorists.¹

According to the last group, (iii) relief theorists, laughter functions as a sort of safety valve which enables human beings to let out steam, so to speak. Sigmund Freud is often considered the father of this theory (Freud 1905), and it stresses the healing and cathartic aspects of laughter. The cathartic element can, of course, be the taboo joke, which allows the human being to let out suppressed thoughts or emotions, but it could also be the tension of the roller coaster ride or of tickling (Holland 1982, p. 43).

With these introductory definitions and a rough sketch of the three most influential theories on laughter, we now have a more nuanced idea of how laughter can be understood and explained.² But what about laughter’s theological significance? To home in on this, I would like to begin by very briefly outlining the biblical approach to laughter.³

Karl-Josef Kuschel provides us with an illustrious typology of laughter in the Bible. According to Kuschel, laughter is (explicitly) mentioned more often in the Old Testament than in the New Testament; in the latter, concepts of joy, which imply laughter as well, are more prominent. And when laughter is mentioned in the Bible, it is in one of the following four forms: (i) Human beings laugh at God; (ii) God laughs at rulers; (iii) God laughs at the wicked; and (iv) God laughs ambiguously (Kuschel 1994; cf. Patella 2015).

An example of (i) human beings laughing at God is found in Gen 18:9ff., where the elderly couple Abraham and Sarah are promised a son—this makes Sarah laugh to herself. Here, laughter expresses human doubt in divine promise. The clearest example of (ii) God laughing at the rulers is Psalm 2, in which the “kings of the earth” are said to conspire against God and his anointed: “The one enthroned in heaven laughs;/the LORD scoffs at them” (Ps 2:4).⁴ In the Psalms, God also (iii) laughs at the wicked and those who do not follow his law: “But you laugh at them, LORD;/you scoff at all those nations” (Ps 59:8). And, finally, divine laughter can be a matter of (iv) divine ambiguity and even inscrutability, as is seen most clearly in the Book of Job (5:22).

Thus, the Bible provides us with a multi-faceted idea of laughter, and the Bible depicts both humans and God as laughing. However, very often, God’s laughter in the Bible also seems to be somewhat destructive. A discussion of *The Name of the Rose* might help nuance the matter further.

3. Laughter in *The Name of the Rose*

Umberto Eco’s masterpiece *The Name of the Rose* is immensely concerned with laughter. In the novel, William of Baskerville is sent with the novice Adso of Melk to a Benedictine abbey. Here, the two are tasked with solving a series of lies, deceit, and murders—all, as it turns out (spoiler alert!), planned by the old monk Jorge of Burgos in order to conceal the secret section of the abbey’s labyrinthine library, containing a range of pagan literature and, most important of all, the only existing copy of the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, concerned with comedy.⁵ But why? Why would Jorge go to such extreme lengths to keep

this book hidden? As William asks him: “why? Why did you want to shield this book more than so many others? [...] There are many other books that speak of comedy, many others that praise laughter. Why did this one fill you with such fear?” (Eco 1983, p. 276).

Jorge answers that Aristotle’s other books, such as the *Physics*, overturned the image of the world. With the second book of the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle would overturn the image of God. For laughter is a parody of God’s established order, which, when used in carnivals, affirms this divine order:

But here, here [...] the function of laughter is reversed, it is elevated to art, the doors of the world of the learned are opened to it, it becomes the object of philosophy, and of perfidious theology. [...] That laughter is proper to man is a sign of our limitation, sinners that we are. But from this book many corrupt minds like yours would draw the extreme syllogism, whereby laughter is man’s end! [...] This book could strike the Luciferine spark that would set a new fire to the whole world, and laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for cancelling fear. (ibid., p. 277)

So, Jorge is drawing on two of the above laughter theories. Firstly, laughter is a product of juxtaposing surprising elements: that is exactly what happens in the carnival, e.g., in the liturgy of the ass, which Jorge explicitly mentions (ibid.), where the ass, a low-status animal, is exalted and celebrated. But to Jorge, the most important thing is the psychological effect: Humans laugh because of sinfulness, because humans are limited. The carnival lets humans laugh, but only as an exception that proves the rule. This is the relief theory in action. But Jorge will never allow the public to know the second book of the *Poetics*, for it makes a rule of the exception. Here, laughter is not a mark of the sinner, but “man’s end,” marking a “perfidious theology” which turns laughter into the “new art.” But when we laugh, we do not fear, Jorge states: “And from this book there could be born the new destructive aim to destroy death through redemption from fear. And what would we be, we sinful creatures, without fear [...]?” (ibid., pp. 277–78).

The laughter that ends up affirming the divine order—which is still, according to Jorge, sinful—is presented to the reader much earlier in the novel, in the form of the illustrations of Adelmo, the first monk to be murdered:

This was a psalter in whose margins was delineated *a world reversed* [emphasis added] with respect to the one to which our senses have accustomed us. [...] As if at the border of a discourse that is by definition the discourse of truth, there proceeded, closely linked to it, through wondrous allusions in aenigmate, a discourse of falsehood on a topsy-turvy universe, in which dogs flee before the hare, and deer hunt the lion. (ibid., p. 50)

Once again, laughter is the result of reversing the natural order and thus juxtaposing elements that, to our natural sense, do not belong together, spurring awe and surprise. Looking at these illustrations is also the first meeting between William and Jorge, where Jorge expounds his own logic: “any image is good for inspiring virtue, provided the masterpiece of creation, turned with his head down, becomes the subject of laughter. And so the word of God is illustrated by the ass playing a lyre, the owl plowing with a shield, oxen yoking themselves to the plow, rivers flowing upstream, the sea catching flue, the wolf turning hermit!” (ibid., p. 52).

Here, it could seem that Jorge is alluding to some kind of superiority theory: The reversing of elements is only acceptable if we laugh *at* it. This laughter seems mocking, destructive, and diminishing, as Gilhus’ first phenomenological field of laughter. And it must stay this way, for this is exactly what is dangerous when reversing the elements; Jorge states: “little by little the man who depicts monsters and portents of nature to reveal

the things of God per speculum et in aenigmate, comes to enjoy the very nature of the monstrosities he creates and to delight in them" (ibid., p. 52).⁶

In the second major dispute between Jorge and William, a range of (interrelated) questions concerning laughter are discussed in condensed form, all as part of answering whether Christ ever laughed or not. William begins by proposing that laughter is healthy, "a good medicine, like baths, to treat humors and other afflictions of the body" (ibid., p. 79)—here, once again, we have the relief theory. But Jorge does not accept the analogy between baths and laughing, since baths restore the balance of the humours, while laughter does the opposite. It "shakes the body, distorts the features of the face, makes man similar to the monkey" (ibid.).

This is, however, an analogy that William cannot accept: He knows his Aristotle and insists that laughter is a *proprium hominis*, so it cannot make the human being similar to the monkey; rather, it is, according to William, a sign of rationality. And while this may very well be the case, as Jorge concedes, speech is also a sign of human rationality—yet "with speech a man can blaspheme against God. Not everything that is proper to man is necessarily good" (ibid.). And this danger of mocking God seems to be Jorge's ultimate reason for denying that Christ ever laughed: "truth and good are not to be laughed at. This is why Christ did not laugh [. . .]. With his laughter the fool says in his heart, 'Deus non est'" (ibid., p. 80).⁷

It would seem that Baudelaire's aforementioned distinction between *comique significatif* and *comique absolu* can help illuminate the discussion further. According to Baudelaire, *comique absolu* elicits spontaneous laughter as a result of feeling superior to nature itself, which is a result of the grotesque. This is exactly the laughter elicited by Adelmo's illustrations of "cows with cocks' tails and butterfly wings" and "zebra-striped dragons" (ibid., p. 50).

Now, Jorge would undoubtedly agree with Baudelaire that all laughter, including this, is satanic. So William attempts to show that we are, in fact, dealing with some sort of *comique significatif*, laughter which is cognitive and has to do with human reason. This, however, is of no comfort to Jorge, because with reason comes the ability to sin, or, in this case, to mock God. And so, laughter should be completely avoided. This makes it even more interesting to notice Jorge's last act, when he thinks that he has defeated William once and for all:

He laughed, he, Jorge. For the first time I heard him laugh. He laughed with his throat, though his lips did not assume the shape of gaiety, and he seemed almost to be weeping. "You did not expect it, William, not this conclusion, did you? This old man, by the grace of God, wins once more, does he not?" (ibid., p. 281)

So, as should be clear, *The Name of the Rose* presents a multi-faceted and highly nuanced discussion of laughter, including all major theories of laughter. Still, one certain idea of laughter, which we have not yet touched upon, remains. As Jorge, William, and Adso meet in the darkest corner of the library, Jorge presents a work by an African alchemist, which he describes as follows:

"He [the African alchemist] attributes the creation of the world to divine laughter. . . ." He [Jorge] raised his face and recited, with the prodigious memory of a reader who for forty years now had been repeating to himself things read when he still had the gift of sight: "'The moment God laughed seven gods were born who governed the world, the moment he burst out laughing light appeared, at his second laugh appeared water, and on the seventh day of his laughing appeared the soul. . . . Folly'" (ibid., p. 273)

Here, we are introduced to a completely new understanding of laughing, which takes it for granted that God laughed—laughter is, in fact, the power by which God creates. With this, let us move to the theological discussion of laughter in relation to the divine.

4. God's Creative Laughter

Even though Christian theology historically has had a sad tendency to share in Jorge's sceptical attitude towards laughter,⁸ Christian theologians have, of course, taken laughter into consideration—and not only from a historical perspective.

However, more often than not, focus has been on laughter or the comic vision as God's gift to humans, as a *human* activity somehow made possible by God. For instance, Conrad Hyers has formulated a hope for a comic reconciliation between humans (Hyers 1987, pp. 118–21), and he has spoken vividly of “the gift of laughter” (Hyers 1981, pp. 9–21). Here, Hyers understands laughter in a soteriological manner, as what happens to humans when they are saved.

Yet if one reinverts scholastic schemas, the unrestrained laughter of the whole person becomes the highest level of laughter and expresses the fullest measure of human freedom. The belly laugh is not the dark descent of spirit into flesh, or of sacred into profane, but the free and unitary expression of one's total being. The repression of laughter, and of the comic spirit, is not salvation but bondage. (Hyers 1981, p. 17)

Peter L. Berger does the same thing when speaking of “redeeming laughter” as a “mode of comic experience” requiring faith (Berger 1997, p. 205). Meanwhile, Harvey Cox takes a quite different approach. He conceives of Christ as a clown or, more precisely, Harlequin, yet he still sees this as a symbol of *the human being's* playfulness and laughter: “So we clothe Christ in a clownsuit, and that way we express many things at once: *our* doubts, *our* disillusionment, *our* fascination, *our* ironic hope [. . .]. We say that *our* whole relation to Christ, to any faith at all, and to the whole of existence for that matter, is one of conscious play and comic equivocation [emphases added]” (Cox 1969, p. 142). And more recently, Max Lühl has developed a theological *anthropology* of laughter in which laughter is understood as the *human* answer to God's disappearance in modernity (Lühl 2019, p. 442).

Common to all of these approaches is that laughter is thought of as a human activity. This also means that God is not properly thought of as laughing—laughter remains a primarily human category. Instead, I propose to follow Karl-Josef Kuschel in rejecting such a “jokological theology” and insisting that a “theology of laughter deserves the name only if it can understand *the reality of God himself* in the light of the category of laughter [emphasis added]” (Kuschel 1994, p. xviii). So, how should we understand God's laughter—and what does this imply for human laughter?

In order to emphasise laughter as a *divine* activity, I propose to use the African alchemist of *The Name of the Rose* as a point of departure. Laughter is God's creative power. In the beginning was laughter, and when God laughs, he creates—*ex nihilo*. However, taken *in abstracto*, the ambiguity of laughter means that we have no way of telling whether laughter is positive or negative, good or evil. Are we hearing God's or Satan's laughter?

To take the first step in overcoming this problem, I introduce two congenial thinkers: Marcus Pound and Hugo Rahner. I cannot build directly on their work, since they do not focus on the concept of laughter specifically, but rather on comedy (in the case of Pound) and play (in the case of Rahner). Still, their contributions are valuable in showing that it is indeed possible to devise theologies which make positive use of concepts related to laughter. However, due to limitations of space, I will not discuss them in length.

First, I want to mention the approach of Pound in *Theology, Comedy, Politics*. Here, Pound takes leave of the tragic understanding of Christianity belonging to a generation

of theologians shaped by the horrors of the Second World War. Instead, Pound proposes to think of the divine and divine participation in terms of comedy: “Properly understood, Christianity started with a joke, and our task *qua* Church is to sustain that joke [...]” (Pound 2019, p. 10).

Thus, Pound is moving near our unnamed African alchemist in claiming comedy to be God’s creative power. And he does so, building on Leithart’s (2006) *Deep Comedy* as well as the thought of Jacques Lacan, by conceiving of comedy in a thoroughly trinitarian manner: “trinitarian structures [...] serve as the condition of comedy, our belief in God, and crucially, our ecclesial self-understanding” (Pound 2019, p. 10; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 115–57). Ultimately, however, Pound’s approach remains focused on the wider concept of comedy, while my focus here is laughter specifically. Pound’s trinitarian focus is, however, a crucial reminder to which we will return.

Another example of an approach that succeeds in underpinning divine activity, yet deals with another, albeit closely related, topic, is Hugo Rahner’s *Man at Play*. Here, Rahner develops a *theologia ludens* and begins with the playing God, *deus ludens*, before moving on to the playing human being, *homo ludens*. From the playing of God follows the playing of humans as a living participation in the divine, Rahner writes in expounding the theology of Maximus Confessor. The point of departure is that “both creation and incarnation are expressions of God’s love.” Under the constraint of negative theology, then, we have the following:

we speak of the Playing of God, who through his creative pouring out of himself makes it possible for the creature to understand him in the wonderful play of his works; who has made for us children’s toys out of the bright and variegated forms of his world. (Rahner 1967, p. 24)

We should now be able to take important insights from these thoughts and apply them to laughter specifically. As we have seen, the danger of laughter as a theological concept is its ambiguity: it can be both positive and negative; it can be of God or of Satan. If we abstractly think of God’s laughter as creation, it is still possible to see God’s laughter as destructive or even satanic, as the laughter of an evil demiurge. God could, for instance, suffer from considerable inferiority complexes and feel the need to create human beings inferior to himself.

A solution to this problem would be to take the cue from Pound and think of laughter in a thoroughly trinitarian matter, making both Easter and Pentecost occasions of laughter; and, with Rahner, to remember that divine laughter is determined by divine love. Hence, we know God’s creative laughter only through his laughter in Christ through the Holy Spirit. When God laughs, he does not just create *ex nihilo*, but he creates *out of love*.

Is this trinitarian and Christological focus tenable, however, given the fact that even though Jesus does weep in the Bible (John 11:35), he never explicitly laughs? I think that it is a very meaningful way of attempting to interpret God’s action in Christ. In this, I follow Kuschel, who has spoken of “the warm current of messianic joy,” which is characteristic of laughter as it is characteristic of Jesus’ life: “No, the God of Jesus is not a God who laughs at human beings, mocks the wicked, and writes off sinners. Instead of any ambiguous laughter of God the New Testament knows God’s joy, a joy which must necessarily express itself in laughter” (Kuschel 1994, pp. 74–75).

In order to show how our understanding of God’s laughter is grounded in divine, trinitarian love, I propose to understand this creative laughter as *risus paschalis*, Easter laughter. Originally, Easter laughter was practised in churches on Easter Monday. Here, the priest would attempt to make the churchgoers laugh with joy, a laughter possible due to Jesus’ resurrection: “‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’” (1 Cor 15:54–55).⁹

However, this concept must be further developed in the direction of *divine* activity. Historically, Easter laughter is a *human* activity. But this human laughter somehow participates in laughter as a *divine* activity. As *divine* laughter, Easter laughter must be the laughter of God himself on Easter Morning, which tears curtains, opens graves, and creates a new reality of festiveness, in which death has been turned into life. A laughter which, in turn, makes us laugh.

A potential problem arises here, however, since the above quote from 1 Corinthians could imply that God's Easter laughter is also destructive, i.e., based on the destruction of sin and death, and thus is yet another example of laughter as a feeling of superiority. In the case of Easter laughter, it is therefore important to underline the creative aspect: God—and, in turn, humans—are not laughing *at* something. Easter laughter is the laughter *of* joy, owing to the new creation in Christ.

Of course, a *new* creation implies something *old* which is left behind. However, properly speaking, there is nothing derogatory in this laughter. It is a laughter *of* joy, having left the old behind, not a laughter *at* the old which has been left behind. For the relation to the old, which has been overcome in Christ, is a question of our reconciliation with God—not of exclusion and derision. In the words of Paul: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:17–19).

If this is the case, Christ is, indeed, the divine clown, God who has entered the world stage infinitely prepared to laugh—thereby spreading laughter, cheer, happiness, and life. This is Easter laughter. And then we can, with Conrad Hyers, say: "The clown is laughter incarnate" (Hyers 1996, p. 132). Yes, indeed: God incarnate.

In continuation of this point, we should also understand the Pentecost as a laughing matter, so to speak. When the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, such euphoria spread that bystanders thought the disciples were simply drunk. And Peter, with a good sense of (divine?) humour, had to clear up things and rebut the bystanders: "It's only nine in the morning!" (Acts 2:15). This, I propose, says something important about what happened to the disciples at Pentecost. Not only did they speak in foreign tongues, but they danced, they partied, they *laughed*. A communal and trinitarian laugh to the praise of God. The Holy Spirit is what sustains Easter laughter and keeps it alive.

Here, the implications of divine laughter for human laughter are clear. On the cross, Christ the clown surrenders himself to mockery and ridicule—yet he does not laugh *at* the mockers; he laughs *with* them, and his divine Easter laughter creates a new reality in which the mocker is already forgiven and, even though dead in his sins, alive. God's laughter is a laughter of infinite surplus. It is the laughter in which, through the Holy Spirit, human beings are enabled to take part and be saved.

Thus, because God laughs first, humans can laugh whole-heartedly and without worry. And this also means that humans are free to mock God, even free to do what Jorge fears the most and say: "I laugh at the Incarnation" (Eco 1983, p. 279). Or, as Brian of Nazareth's mother says in *Life of Brian*: "He's not the Messiah. He's a very naughty boy! Now, piss off!" (Jones 1979). After all, Christ is laughter incarnate.

5. How Does God Laugh?

I began the present article with the question: "Did—and does—God laugh?" As I hope to have shown, it is definitely possible to formulate a theology which is based on the creative laughter of God as a pivotal category and thus answers this question affirmatively.

Still, I would like to push this argument a bit further by suggesting that all theologies imply some sort of divine laughter. In that case, it is not a question of *whether* God laughs or not, but rather, it is always a question of *how* God laughs.

This claim is based on the widening of the concept of laughter implicated in the theories of laughter above. In the first section, I stated the ambivalent nature of laughter as potentially both destructive and life-giving, and I presented three main theories of laughter: incongruity theory, superiority theory, and relief theory. Hence, theologies that deny or abstain from asserting a role for divine laughter, but nevertheless make use of elements of incongruity, superiority, or relief, might still be said to somehow imply divine laughter, albeit implicitly and perhaps unintentionally. In the following, I seek to illustrate this point.

The clearest example may be provided by examining the last chapter of Tertullian's *De Spectaculis*. Here, Tertullian writes about the spectacle on the day of judgement, and he enthusiastically describes the great joy in the hearts of the blessed in Heaven, when they see the flames of Hell devouring the souls of the wicked:

Yes, and there are still to come other spectacles—that last, that eternal Day of Judgement, that Day which the Gentiles never believed would come, that Day they laughed at, when this old world and all its generations shall be consumed in one fire. How vast the spectacle that day, and how wide! What sight shall wake my wonder, what my laughter, my joy and exultation? as I see all those kings, those great kings, welcomed (we were told) in heaven, along with Jove, along with those who told of their ascent, groaning in the depths of darkness! And the magistrates who persecuted the name of Jesus, liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against the Christians! (Tertullian 1931, pp. 297–99)

Here, Tertullian is explicitly concerned with laughter; the Gentiles laughed at the day of judgement, Tertullian states, denoting this with the term *de-risus*, clearly showing this to be a destructive laughter, a laughing *at* something based on a feeling of superiority. But on the day of judgement, the saints shall be the ones to laugh (*ridere*) as the Gentiles are burning in the flames of Hell.

This concept of laughter has elements of all three theories: of superiority, clearly and perhaps most importantly, but also of juxtaposition (which is clear in the juxtaposition of Heaven/Hell and blessed/damned), and of relief, since some of this joy and laughter is also a long-awaited retaliation for the many persecutions of Christians. So, according to Tertullian, on the day of judgement, Christ and his followers shall laugh and rejoice in Heaven, while the Gentiles shall cry and moan in Hell.

To be sure, Tertullian explicitly writes about laughter here, and so, he is no example of a theology which denies laughter but nevertheless depends on it. However, Tertullian's rather unpleasant vision of this spectacle mirrors many other theologies, which are not as unsavoury, but nevertheless exhibit the same structure.

For instance, the same could be said of the treatment of this question in the supplement to Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologia* (Aquinas 1947, Suppl., q. 94, a. 1–3). Here, Aquinas concludes that “in order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned” (ibid., a. 1, *co.*). However, in claiming this, and in clear contrast to Tertullian, Aquinas emphasises that the saints are not passionate in their rejoicing in the sufferings of the damned (q. 94, a. 3, *co.*), nor are they passionate in their pitying of the damned (q. 94, a. 2, *co.*). They only rejoice “by reason” (*ratione*) and pity “by way of choice” (*per modum electionis*).

Hence, no human or divine laughter is implied here, and laughter would seem to be considered inappropriate and much too passionate. Still, drawing on the Tertullian example, the element of superiority seems to be in place. The blessed see perfectly the sufferings of

the damned, for it enhances their own happiness. Here, an element of laughter on the side of God and his saints seems to be implied, even though it is almost explicitly rejected.

So perhaps one might say that God is always understood as laughing in one way or the other, including when this is not explicitly stated and even when this is actively rejected. The question is not *whether* God laughs, but *how* God laughs: In a destructive or life-giving manner (perhaps both at the same time), and owing to some sense of superiority, juxtaposition, or relief?

Thus, all theologies imply a vision of God as laughing. This makes the question of *how* God laughs much more important. If one denies the creative, life-giving laughter of God, the alternative is not no laughter at all. Rather, it might very well be the destructive laughter of God and his saints, asserting their superiority over the wicked and lost souls.

6. Conclusions

Does God laugh? Yes, and it would seem that a more appropriate question is: *How* does God laugh? Every theology can be said to imply a vision of God as laughing. However, if divine laughter is understood in line with traditional theories of laughter—incongruity theory, superiority theory, or relief theory—it runs the risk of depicting God in a destructive and unloving way.

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* hints at another form of laughter, which is creative in the literal sense of the word: When God laughs, he creates. Yet, in order for this laughter not to be ambiguous, it must be thought of in a trinitarian manner and as a result of divine love. So, when the triune God laughs, he creates *out of love*. Divine laughter can thus be understood as a form of Easter laughter. With this, God creates a new reality, in which life is greater than death, a universe of infinite joy and festiveness. Here, human beings are allowed to live, to laugh, and even to mock the divine, to mock God himself. For on the cross, God has surrendered himself to human mockery—and overcome it. After all, Christ is laughter incarnate.

In the beginning was laughter.

Funding: The work presented here is supported by the Carlsberg Foundation, grant CF25-0539.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in support of this research. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For an overview, see Scheel (2017, pp. 14–15).
- ² For a concise overview of the three groups of theories, see also Taylor (2005, pp. 2–3). Other approaches, such as those deriving from linguistics, neuroscience, and computer science, will not be treated here. On this, see Goldstein (2021).
- ³ As already mentioned, the purpose of this article is not a discussion of laughter's role in the Bible. Hence, the following is only supposed to help the reader create an overview and to better ground the following systematic discussion.
- ⁴ All Bible quotations are cited from the New International Version (NIV).
- ⁵ To be sure, this second book of the *Poetics* has never been found, and the actual existence of the book is hypothetical, based primarily on Aristotle's remark that "[w]ith the representation of life in hexameter verse and with comedy we will deal later" (Aristotle 1996, 1449b). For further arguments that a second book of the *Poetics* did in fact exist, see Watson (2012). For an attempt to reconstruct the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* using the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, see Janko (1984). For the argument that there in fact never was a second book of the *Poetics*, see Rozik (2011, pp. 10–11).

- ⁶ Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 52. That this laughter is destructive and diminishing is exactly what William insists on later, when he points out that Jorge, even though he restrains his facial muscles, is in fact “tacitly laughing at something [. . .]. You are laughing at laughter, but you are laughing” (ibid., p. 81).
- ⁷ Cf. Jorge’s warning to William: “But if one day somebody, brandishing the words of the Philosopher [Aristotle] and therefore speaking as a philosopher, were to raise the weapon of laughter to the condition of subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were replaced by the *rhetoric of mockery* [emphasis added], if the topics of the patient construction of the images of redemption were to be replaced by the topics of the impatient dismantling and upsetting of every holy and venerable image—oh, that day even you, William, and all your knowledge, would be swept away!” (ibid., p. 278).
- ⁸ On the historical relation between Christianity and laughter/humour, see Lippitt (2005).
- ⁹ On the historical practice of Easter laughter, see (Jacobelli 1992; Wendland 1980). For a philosophical and phenomenological discussion of Easter laughter, see Prütting (2016, pp. 556–88). See also Hyers (1987, pp. 24–38) for a theological discussion of Easter laughter.

References

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1947. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Revised by The Aquinas Institute. Available online: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/ST.III.Supp.Q94.A1> (accessed on 6 August 2026).
- Aristotle. 1937. *Parts of Animals*. Translated by Arthur Leslie Peck, and Edward Seymour Forster. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Aristotle. 1996. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin Classics.
- Baudelaire, Charles. 1956. The Essence of Laughter. In *The Essence of Laughter and Other Essays, Journals, and Letters*. Translated by Gerard Hopkins. Edited by Peter Quennell. New York: Meridian Books.
- Berger, Peter L. 1997. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.
- Bergson, Henri. 1913. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comical*. Translated by Cloudesley Brereton, and Fred Rothwell. New York: Macmillan.
- Cox, Harvey. 1969. *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1983. *The Name of the Rose*. Translated by William Weaver. San Diego: Warner Books.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1905. *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*. Leipzig and Wien: Franz Deuticke.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. 1990. Carnival in Religion: The Feast of Fools in France. *Numen* 37: 24–52. [CrossRef]
- Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. 1997. *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*. London: Routledge.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. 2011. Why Did Jesus Laugh? Laughing in Biblical-Demiurgical Texts. In *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*. Edited by Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck. London: Continuum, pp. 123–40.
- Goldstein, Jeffrey. 2021. Humor and Comedy. In *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory*. Edited by Peter Vorderer and Christoph Klimmt. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 438–61.
- Halliwell, Stephen. 2008. *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 2008. *Human Nature*. Edited by John Aubrey. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, Norman N. 1982. *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Hyers, Conrad. 1981. *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter*. New York: The Pilgrim Press.
- Hyers, Conrad. 1987. *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Hyers, Conrad. 1996. *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World*. London: Routledge.
- Jacobelli, Maria Caterina. 1992. *Ostergelächter: Sexualität und Lust im Raum des Heiligen*. Regensburg: Pustet.
- Janko, Richard. 1984. *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*. London: Duckworth.
- Jones, Terry. 1979. *Life of Brian*. London: Cinema International Corporation.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1989. *Stages on Life’s Way*. Translated by Howard W. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kruger, Hennie A. J. 2014. Laughter in the Old Testament: A Hotchpotch of Humour, Mockery and Rejoicing? *In die Skriflig* 48: 1–10. [CrossRef]
- Kuschel, Karl-Josef. 1994. *Laughter: A Theological Essay*. Translated by John Bowden. New York: Continuum.
- Leithart, Peter J. 2006. *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy, and Hope in Western Literature*. Moscow: Canon Press.
- Lippitt, John. 2005. Humor and Religion: Humor, Irony, and the Comic in Western Theology and Philosophy. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Lindsay Jones. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, pp. 4218–23.
- Lühl, Max. 2019. *Lachen als anthropologisches Phänomen: Theologische Perspektiven*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Patella, Michael. 2015. And God Created Laughter: The Eighth Day. *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69: 156–68. [CrossRef]
- Pound, Michael. 2019. *Theology, Comedy, Politics*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Prütting, Lenz. 2016. *Homo Ridens: Eine phänomenologische Studie über Wesen, Formen und Funktionen des Lachens*, 4th ed. Freiburg and München: Verlag Karl Alber.
- Rahner, Hugo. 1967. *Man at Play*. New York: Herder & Herder.

- Rozik, Eli. 2011. *Comedy: A Critical Introduction*. Brighton, Portland and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press.
- Scheel, Tabea. 2017. Definitions, Theories, and Measurement of Humor. In *Humor at Work in Teams, Leadership, Negotiations, Learning and Health*. Edited by Tabea Scheel and Christine Gockel. Cham: Springer, pp. 9–29.
- Stamoulis, Chrysostomos A. 2021. Did Christ Laugh? Umberto Eco's Question and Saint John Chrysostom's Response. In *Ludics: Play as Humanistic Inquiry*. Edited by Vassiliki Rapti and Eric Gordon. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Suchomski, Joachim. 1975. Die sittliche Beurteilung von Lachen und Scherz. In *"Delectatio" und "Utilitas": Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur*. Bern: Francke, pp. 9–65.
- Taylor, Jane. 2005. Introduction. In *The Anatomy of Laughter*. Edited by Toby Garfitt, Edith McMorran and Jane Taylor. London: Routledge.
- Tertullian. 1931. *Apology. De Spectaculis*. Translated by Terrot R. Glover, and Gerald H. Rendall. Loeb Classical Library 250. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Watson, Walter. 2012. *The Lost Second Book of Aristotle's Poetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Webster, Gary. 1960. *Laughter in the Bible*. St. Louis: The Bethany Press.
- Wendland, Volker. 1980. *Ostermärchen und Ostergelächter: Brauchtümliche Kanzelrhetorik und ihre kulturkritische Würdigung seit dem ausgehenden Mittelalter*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.