Sunday, September 11, 1988
CAN ONE TAKE RELIGION TOO SERIOUSLY? (No. 6 in a Series: Everyday Questions)
Matthew 6:16-18,25-34

Can one take religion too seriously? The other day I came across someone who said, “There are three kinds of people in this world, N.R.s, O.R.s, and A.R.s,” meaning respectively, Non-Religious, Overly Religious, and Appropriately Religious. Today we are talking about the “Overly Religious,” those who take religion too seriously. There are people who are so serious about their religion and in their practice of it, that they seldom if ever even smile, especially in church, and they do not want anyone else to smile or laugh or have any fun either. Life for them is a solemn and cheerless journey, and their God is a stern judge with no sense of humor. People who are overly religious are those who smother you with religious language and quote the Bible continually. And they especially want to protect the rest of us from anything which might lead us astray.

An example: As I read the letters to the editor in the newspapers and magazines protesting the film, The Last Temptation of Christ, the letters seem to come mostly from individuals who have not seen the film and who take their religion too seriously and want the rest of us to do the same. I have not personally had the chance to see the movie and may not even see it if I had the opportunity, but I certainly have no objection to others seeing it. And I resent it when people try to keep me from seeing it. Many of the reviews I’ve read by people I respect and who have seen the film, say that it’s not a very good movie from an artistic point of view. The acting is only average. The movie is too long. As one reviewer said, “It’s a flawed film that doesn’t deserve the publicity that fundamentalist Christian preachers have given it.”

Can one take religion too seriously? Yes, and it can be harmful, not only to them, but to others. Taking one’s religion too seriously can shrink one’s mind and perspective. A new book just published entitled, The Altruistic Personality, attempts to uncover how good people got that way by studying individuals in Europe, who became rescuers of Jews in Hitler’s time. After extensive study into the backgrounds of those who risked their lives to help Jews escape, the authors argue that although chance sometimes provided rescuers with an opportunity to help, it was the values learned from their parents that prompted and sustained their involvement. And these people came from non-authoritarian families, where the parents did not demand “Old Testament obedience.” Where religion was practiced, it was in the most democratic, family-of-human being aspects.

The study further concludes that identification with a religious body does not ensure that one will be tolerant or altruistic. In fact, there is an inverse relationship. More intense religiosity, taking one’s religion too seriously, is frequently associated with greater prejudice and less altruism.

Jesus knew about people who take their religion too seriously. In the Sermon on the Mount, he warned against being so grim, gloomy, and self-righteous, especially in our religious practices. He said, “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites.”

What is the alternative? It is to have a sense of humor. A sense of humor and humility go together.

William Willimon wrote: “Among all of God’s creatures, human beings are the only animals who both laugh and weep — for we are the only animals who are struck with the difference

between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In those priceless moments when we are struck with the incongruity of this world, humor results. A stern, smug gentleman slips on a banana peel and ends up sprawled on the sidewalk; W.C. Fields throws a pie in the face of a haughty woman in an evening gown; a mischievous peasant puts the cruel landlord in his place — we laugh."

"In these moments when the human situation is exposed, when the so-deadly-serious ones are made to look like fools, Christians sing with Mary before us that such fun is the divine result of a God who has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts ... has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree." (Luke 1:51-52)

Humor occurs when we are put in our place. And whenever we take religion too seriously so that we become self-righteous pompous, know-it-alls, we need to be put in our place.

Justice takes place, says Jesus when God puts all of us in our place, when the first end up last and the last move up to the front of the line. Thus there is something fundamentally good and holy about our humor.

People who like to think of themselves as so serious about justice, so concerned about the attainment of righteousness, are often guilty of taking themselves too seriously, of ascribing too much of their own efforts, their own ideals, their righteous indignation. Thus Reinhold Niebuhr says somewhere that the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously.

If the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously, then the very essence of grace is to receive the gift of laughter, especially when the joke is on us, particularly when the most laughable incongruities consist of the gap between who we are and who God would have us to be.

To be sure, there are some kinds of humor which are mean and insulting — ethnic jokes, racial slurs, sexist put-downs. Here we are laughing at the expense of others and excluding ourselves.

In all good humor, however, there is truth. And yet many church people seem to want to avoid humor especially in church. Maybe it's because we think in church we come face-to-face with so many serious problems — injustice, sin, hate, war, hunger. And we wonder how dare someone laugh in the midst of such seriousness? In church, we confront the things of God. Where is there a place for laughter in that?

And yet, as Jesus' own critics demonstrated, we religious people can take ourselves and our religion too seriously.

We need to remember that both revolutionaries and tyrants are noted for their lack of humor. Is this so surprising? The tyrant cannot tolerate any suggestion that he or she is not invincible, omnipotent, and right. The revolutionary cannot stand the possibility that perhaps the revolution is filled with a variety of mixed motives and the results will be as mixed as the tyranny the revolution seeks to overthrow.

According to Conrad Hyers, who has written a new book entitled, And God Created Laughter: The Bible is Divine Comedy, "In the early Greek Orthodox Christian tradition, an unusual custom developed... On the day after Easter, clergy and laity would gather in the sanctuary to tell stories, jokes, and anecdotes. The reason was that this was the most fitting way of

celebrating the big joke that God had pulled on Satan in the resurrection. A similar custom has been preserved in some rural Slavic areas where, on the day after Easter, folk dancing and feasting take place in the church yard."

In an attempt to recover this ancient tradition, Mike Tighe, the managing editor of the Minneapolis Catholic Bulletin, sponsored a religious joke contest after Easter this year. Here are two examples of those that were published:

It's the first Easter Sunday and the Apostle John excitedly approaches the Apostle Peter. He tells him the good news and bad news. "Give me the good news first," Peter says. "The good news is that Jesus has risen just as he promised," John says. "That's terrific," Peter says. "But what's the bad news?" "He's still pretty steamed about last Friday," replies John.

The contest winner was this one:

A young man was talking with the Virgin Mary in heaven and asked her if he could ask a personal question. Mary agreed. "Mary, I noticed that you always look sort of sad on the statues and picture of you holding the baby Jesus," said the young man. "Why were you so sad?" Mary pulled the young man aside. "I have never told this to anyone before," she whispered, "but I was kind of hoping for a girl."

Conrad Hyers in his book tells about an elderly Scottish Presbyterian woman who believed firmly in divine predestination and who, after falling down the stairs, got up, brushed herself off, and exclaimed, "Well, thank God that's over with."

My personal view of Jesus is that of an individual who enjoyed laughter and fun — a man who had a delightful sense of humor and a sparkle in his eyes. I believe he was a happy person who enjoyed life in God's world because he knew that God created the world good and that God is with us and God loves all the world and us. The Christian faith is good news, not bad news.

Although the word laughter is never used in direct relationship to Jesus in the New Testament, there is a lot of evidence that Jesus laughed and had a good sense of humor. He was a frequent guest at parties and wedding feasts. People don't ordinarily invite a sour-faced, sad, grim person to a party, at least not more than once. Remember the labels pinned on Jesus by his critics? He was called a wine-bibber and a glutton, labels which come from those who take their own religion too seriously and resent anyone else who does not follow their lead.

I'm convinced that Jesus was a vital, exuberant, radiant person. Thus the crowds heard him gladly. And he was a friend of children, so much so that the disciples thought they had to pry children away from him. Children, above all, can sense when a person has a sense of fun within him.

Furthermore, Jesus must've smiled when he told many of his stories and the people who heard him — those who did not take their religion too seriously — must've laughed. Can you imagine, for example, a man straining his water for a gnat (one of his parables) and then swallowing a camel, without noticing it? Or a person trying to remove a speck of dust from his friend's eye while a plank is hanging out of his own? Or a woman going to the trouble to light a lamp and then hiding it under the bed or a basket, instead of putting it on a lampstand?

Can one take religion too seriously? Yes. And the alternative is a sense of humor. It can show us the foolishness of our pretensions and actions. Humor can provide a needed sense of perspective on life.

The kind of humor I'm talking about here has to do with more than being funny. It is a reminder that nothing in this life should be taken too seriously. The world is important, but not ultimately so. We are in the world, but not of the world. Or as the Apostle Paul wrote in another place, "The foolishness of God is wiser than all of us, and the weakness of God is stronger than all of our power."

In other words, our Christian faith reminds us that we can laugh at the pretense of anyone who over-rates his or her importance, and that includes laughing at ourselves. Thornton Wilder once said that "The cosmic tradition in the theater carries the intention of exposing folly and curbing excess." That is also its purpose when we take religion too seriously.

In the Bible we are told that God laughs at the wicked because God can see their downfall. God knows the wicked cannot win in the long run.

Can one take religion too seriously? Yes! What I am calling for here is a kind of "irreverent spirituality." As Christians, we can laugh and be joyful because life, despite its darkness and tragedy, is ultimately in God's hands. "Be of good cheer," said Jesus, "I have overcome the world." Be of good cheer, laugh! Amen.