

# Review: The Wit and Humour of Life



How do you review a book from 1886? Do you review it on its own terms or do you consider it as an indirect commentary on its own era? Perhaps you have to do both.

I read this book for an “easy read” during the summer and out of mild curiosity. Designed to be a “familiar talk with young Christians” (presupposing that young Christians know latin and greek of course!) it is not intended to be substantial.

The topic is the use of “wit” and “humour” by Christians, and, in particular, Christian orators and writers. Both terms – “wit” and “humour” – are extensively defined in a manner that would give endless enjoyment to the semantically pedantic. Interestingly, the common device of puns (much used and abused in my familial banter) is considered to be such a worthless device as to not fit in either category:

*...everyone is ashamed of a pun: when convicted of having just made one, he is apt to look like a convict; and when one takes him by surprise, he thinks it is just like its impertinence – it hurts his dignity, and though he may laugh, he laughs under protest... To pun is to pound, or beat with a pestle. Can pun mean an empty sound, like that of a mortar beaten, as clench, the old word for pun, seems only a corruption of clink?” (page 19,20)*

The main thesis of the book is that wit and humour can and should be used by Christians, although they can also be abused

by Christians. Much is made of an evangelical tendency to avoid humour as worldly frivolity (“evangelical Christians have all something better to think of” (page 39), although the author can find an example of humour in the writings of our friend Mc’Cheyne:

*“A camel once provoked our beloved McCheyne to the only approach to a smile in print of which he has been convicted, when, speaking of how a pilgrim feels as he mounts a camel, and as the great thing slowly rises, the good man remarked – I quote from memory – ‘As he goes up, with you on his back, you feel as if you were bidding farewell to all sublunary things; but when he begins to move, you are again strongly reminded of your terrestrial affinities.’” (page 46)*

With more profundity, however, the connection is made between the use of humour and the consequence of freedom that is inherent to the gospel.

*“Why tell the Creator that in it [humour] He has created within you a sinful energy, which you must fight against directly you become a follower of His Son? Believe me, Christ will not destroy that, nor anything else that helps to make a complete, symmetrical man. He came not to destroy, but to save.” (page 58)*

And elsewhere he derides those who have a “gloomy religion” and exhorts, “Levity! brothers, distinguish between light-headed and light-hearted” (page 69).

Stanford does not avoid the *abuse* of humour. An entire section is devoted to speaking against scoffing and mockery and self-centred speaking. He speaks of what he calls “counterfeits” – devices such as hoaxes that mimic humour but are vacuous rather than substantial. Of particular interest, and personal anachronistic amusement was his reference to the device of a “Bull” which gives me insight into our contemporary phrase, “a

load of bull”!

*“A bull has nothing to do with wit : it is not even a poor relation... The pleasure arising from with proceeds frm our surprise at suddenly discovering two things to be similar in which we expected no similarity; the pleasure arising from bulls proceeds from our discovering two things to be dissimilar, in which a resemblance might have been suspected.. practical bulls originate from an apparent relation between two actions, which more correct understandings immediately perceive to have no relation at all.” (page 148-149)*

Such linguistic curiosities also extended to the use of the adjective “electric” (pages 48, 86) and the noun “parachute” (page 43) which I had always assumed would have been 20th Century additions to the English language.

The book ends with an entire chapter devoted to a presentation of the gospel and what it means to be a true Christian – an evangelistic message at the end of a curiosity. Perhaps this book is the 19th Century’s equivalent of “rock band and altar call” youth ministry!



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## Review: Metavista



Metavista, written by Colin Greene & Martin Robinson is a socio-philosophical, cultural, ecclesiological and missiological commentary. “Our context in the twenty-first century... is radically different,” they say in the introduction (page xiv), and continue:

*We shall argue that it is post-Christendom, post-secular, post-colonial and post-individualistic, in no particular order of priority, and therefore post-postmodern. And that “postist” reality requires an entirely new mission agenda that will not be adequately understood through adherence solely to church-planting strategies.*

Those who know me will understand my engagement with this book. I share a frustration with typical church-plant/growth/renewal strategies. I resonate with the authors’ premise which is later on expressed thusly: “the technology of mission... we are dealing here [is] art, not science” (page 187)... “an organic process rather than a ready-to-go formula” (page 197) and of “tension” between “a more sophisticated recalibration of the church” to “a deeply postmodern context” and those who look, rather, for a “**fundamental reimagining.**” (page 180)

I’m one of those seeking a reimagining. But what are the whys and wherefores, where is the framework, what gives it life, how is it found? The value of this book is that it helps to remove the blinkers to the Holy Spirit at work.

Greene spends the first part of the book considering the cultural and sociological landscape. He unpacks the powerful narrative of modernity and secularisation from the 19th century – looking at it not just in philosophical academic terms but with regard to how it all engaged with the people’s

imagination.

*At this moment in history... these creative ideas came together to form a stirring emancipation narrative that caught the public imagination and led irrevocably to fundamental changes in the way people experienced the world. To “indwell the world” no longer meant to be bound inevitably to the accepted social order instituted by God and maintained by the authority of the aristocracy. Neither did it mean to accept one’s appointed lot in life which, for most, was one of grueling poverty, hardship and suffering. Nor did it mean to view religion and the church as the only safe refuge from a harsh and mercurial world that did not appear to operate according to any particular inbuilt order... The sociological achievement of the Enlightenment was the rise of the new bourgeoisie, and it was among this new class of rich merchants, bankers and industrialists that the narrative of emancipation was most venerated. (page 14)*

He then unpacks postmodernity in the normal terms – touching on the “incredulity towards metanarratives,” the rejection of absolutes and “fiduciary frameworks”, and the “preference for individualized spirituality over and against organized religion” (page 42).

Greene wants “a way out of the postmodern impasse of no legitimating foundations to knowledge, ethical and political practice and, indeed, religious belief.” (page 42). Indeed:

*To date postmodernity has been unable to provide us with a satisfying or legitimating account of why local stories are any more credible and authentic than the universal theories and archetypal myths we once found determinative of human existence and therefore believable. (page 50)*

And so the “cultural transition we are presently experiencing, that which we have called ‘metavista,’ the age of imagination”

is introduced. And at its heart lies not just subjective postmodern mininarrative, or imposed modernistic metanarrative, but the **“power of retold stories.”** (page 51)

This framework imperative to “retell the story” resonates with current experience. The ills of the First World can be seen in the loss of a defining story. What does it mean to be Australian, or British, for instance? Modernity reduces us to economic units, postmodernity reduces us to individual characters in our own self-centred fantasy. How do I fit in the larger whole, what gives me purpose and reason-for-being?

I watched the inauguration of President Obama last night and recognised within his speech the ability to retell the American Story – spinning phrases such as “Yes, we can” that are not mere words but reimaginings, calls, echoes of longing that seems to be speaking to Americans and giving them a metanarrative that is not imposed but to which they run. **Similarly, the church story, the Jesus story needs retelling.**

And so Greene tackles the main locus of that story – the Bible. He critiques the historical-critical hermeneutical and exegetical approach that modernistically asserts that the Word of God is reserved to the domain of the educated and academic. He suggests a return towards allegorical or typological reading – certainly not to the level of medieval excess but, dare I say it, with the same heart as biblical theologians such as Goldsworthy, and in the same vein as “many of the biblical writers [who] linked the two testaments into one unified story” (page 106):

*Now it is very interesting that while the typological and the allegorical meaning was what the Reformers must distrusted... it is precisely this convention... figuration, that allows the Bible to be perceived as a unified narrative. (page 105)*

And so **Greene and Robinson place the Bible at the heart of the story that needs retelling in a metavista age.** They identify,

in particular, the “four subplots” of the Bible – The creation story, The Israel story, The Jesus story, and The church’s story. The gospel as theological assertion – you sinned, Jesus died – is replaced by gospel with flesh and bones – no less centred on the death and resurrection of the Messiah – but well-rooted, flourishing, bearing fruit in the reality of history and the imagination of today – a perichoresis of narratives that reveals Christ to us.

A crucial aspect of this perichoresis is the story of God at work in the church. **The Church is no longer relegated to the epilogue** of Christ’s passion but is caught up in the gospel dance itself. This is no heresy, and no surprise. After all, even Bill Hybels holds to the vision of “The local church is the hope of the world”!

Greene finishes his contribution by considering the church in this respect, retelling the church story particularly in terms of political engagement against the modernistic relegation of the church to the merely private.

*Here, at times amidst the fleshpots of Babylon, at others under the oppressive strictures and tyranny of empires, where the mission of the church is curtailed or controlled, the church must, nevertheless, fulfill her task to image the kingdom of God, proclaim judgment, and actively resist the idolatry of the oppressors. (page 149)*

Robinson then completes the book delivering one of the best overviews of nineteenth and twentieth century church history I have ever read.

In recent year

s, observing my own church – Anglican in Tasmania – I have noted how the vigour (and orthodoxy) of nineteenth century Anglo-Catholicism seemed to have collapsed across the world wars to a generation who ended up retaining the tradition but not its content. Having ministered in congregations defined by

this generation I can testify to the contemporary echoes of the death-throes of Christendom which crescendoed, as Robinson states, in the 1960's.

Robinson continues the story through the 70's, considering the Lausanne evangelical resurgence of mission. He helpfully notes what many often ignore – the transition in Pentecostal churches from sect to mainstream, and, in the 80's from what I call "classical pentecostalism" focussing on the work of the Holy Spirit to "new-style pentecostalism" focussing on entertainment techniques and management programs.

*It had become apparent by the 1980s that the revivalist hopes of the charismatic movement were misplaced. However much some individual charismatic and Pentecostal congregations had grown, the hoped for scenario in which a renewed church would see hundreds of thousands clamoring to become Christians in the context of signs and wonders came to be seen as a false hope... New solutions would need to be found. The 1980s and 1990s saw a succession of solutions presented... programs of one kind or another. (pages 176-177)*

All of this provides the background for the necessity of a "fundamental reimagining" of the church. Robinson picks up on contemporary concepts of Emerging Church and offers some critique and balance while working towards a presentation of a "Missional Community" at the heart of his reimagining. **He tells a counter-cultural story of church** "constituted not for itself, nor even for the world in an abstract sense, but towards the remaking of human communities as deeply incarnational expressions of the church in mission." (pages 188-189).

His comments provide a helpful balance that has been missing in contemporary urgings to be more missional. We don't always realise that the dying Christendom story can express itself outwardly as well as inwardly in activities that look like



mission but are no longer missional. In my own experience I have heard a call to mission answered by yet another round of people volunteering for charitable programs or “doing their bit” for the “work of the church.” Why did I find such goodness frustrating? Because such “mission” would not retell the story or reimagine the church and live out the gospel. Robinson provides an excellent quote from Robert Jenson:

*All that talk a few years ago about the world setting the agenda, about seeing where God was at work in the world and jumping in to help, etc., was just **a last gasp of the church's establishment in the West, of its erstwhile ability to suppose that what the culture nurtured as good had to be congruent with the good the church had to bring.** (page 189)*

Even the best intentions can fail to resonate when they either merge with culture, or find no point of connection. Robinson, rather, calls for a reimagination of a counter-cultural life. “To live counter-culturally will mean to confront rival ideologies and not to be subverted by them.” (page 189).

Again, I find this resonates with my own kerygma in recent times to bring to the church the eschatological impetus to actively, passionately, “do life well” all the more as the Day approaches – for each to know their place in the story so that they can retell it in their living.

This lies at the heart of the difference between “attractional” models of church and missional models of church that happen to be “attractive.” Such attractive communities “are that way partly because they have a high threshold of expectation in terms of what members will do” (page 195). **Participation is expected – but not a simple volunteerism for programs, rather a participation in counter-cultural life itself.**

There are many other gems in Robinson's thoughts – comments on leadership for instance and citations of a book by Alan

Roxburgh that I have bought and will review at some point.

I will finish with one final quotation. Like most of the book it gives voice to my heart that I hear echoing in others. In this case let me note a congruence with Mark Driscoll's theory of "reformation" in the collision of the three "narratives" of Gospel, Church and Culture where the church has to "live adventurously":

*To live this kind of counter-cultural life the church has to "risk" living at the interface of the collision of all three narratives... It has never been a safe option to live a genuinely counter-cultural Christian life, because such a life deconstructs old cultural verities and ignites new habits of the heart. It invites old men to dream dreams and young men to have visions. (pages 226-227)*

Amen.

