

'SEND IN THE CLOWNS?'

PREACHING, GOSPEL AND THE ART OF THE COMEDIC

Joseph M. Webb
Associate Professor of Homiletics
The School of Theology at Claremont

"Tragedy makes our burdens a cross, comedy a sense of joy."
-Hugh Dalziel Duncan

Over the past few years, humor, the comedic, has gradually been admitted to the staid recesses of the pulpit. Among many preachers, though, there is still a deep skepticism, even fear of it. Under the influence of homileticians like Fred Craddock though – who has made us all laugh – we have learned that humor can make a good sermon even better.¹ But despite a general sense that "laughter is good," we have done relatively little serious thinking about it. We tend to stay away from jokes, since we know that joke-telling and sermons do not go well together. Moreover, we still think of humor as a nice "icing" on a cake – instead of pressing ourselves to think seriously about the nature of humor and whether the comedic could possibly become – even in the sermon – more the cake itself.

It is also true that very little serious study of comedy exists in the larger fields of literature or "social theory." One scholar who has delved significantly into the nature of comedy as a social phenomenon is Hugh Dalziel Duncan, author of several influential books, a scholar and teacher whose work crossed back and forth from literature and the arts to social theory and sociology.² This paper represents a brief exposition of Duncan's theory of comedy, along with some exploration of its far-reaching implications. These, as we shall see, extend not just to the relationship between comedy and preaching, but to the very heart of what the Gospel is and what we do with it.

1. Comparing Comedy and Tragedy

The problem with comedy in Christianity is that the Christian religion – which Duncan does, in fact, discuss – is "essentially a tragic tradition." At the root of Christian theology is the tragic vision itself. "We are saved by God's sacrifice of his only son, who suffered and died for us. We are born in sin, live in sin, and will be released from sin only in death. Man's corruption, his original sin, finds expression in human association, religion teaches us, in guilt, redemption, hierarchy and victimage."³ We ourselves are "created," Christian theology says, as tragic figures, our hero(s) are tragic figures; and while there may be "victory" in the end for a chosen few, for most of humankind this vision holds a decidedly tragic outcome. Little wonder that the comedic can find few openings into Christian theology or preaching.

This awareness, though, takes us to Duncan's central thesis: that comedy is not merely a way to add laughter to something, even though that is our usual take on it. Comedy, as much as tragedy, is itself an orientation to life – and, as such, to theology and

preaching as well.⁴ So it is possible to draw on classic tragedy and comedy to contrast their divergent views of life and art, views that raise serious questions about the nature and presentation of classic Christianity.

The tragic view of life is essentially "other-worldly" with ultimate reality lying somewhere beyond human "reason" or "thought." The comedic view, on the other hand, represents a "this-worldly" or social view of fundamental things. The comedic focuses on the processes and problems of human relationships and ethics; it believes in the human capacity, if not to solve problems, at least to confront them humanely and live with them. Great comic artists, Duncan writes, "do not believe that salvation can be achieved by controlling forces outside of man – either in 'Society,' 'Nature,' or 'God' – but only in the struggle of (people) to communicate in love and hate." From a comedic point of view, humans must confront as openly and candidly as they can "the miseries of life and keep staring them in the face." Only by so doing is there any hope of controlling those miseries: "Only so long as we keep our minds flexible and alive in discussion, talk and laughter do we survive as human beings."⁵

In Duncan's analysis, though, the contrasts between the tragic and the comedic are subtle and pervasive. Both tragedy and comedy require suffering, he says, but the outcomes of the suffering are different: "Religion (i.e., tragedy) teaches us," he writes, "the dignity of man in his suffering; comic art teaches us that dignity begins in suffering, but must end in reason," a term to which we shall return shortly. "In laughter, reason is refreshed and courage is born."⁶ Both tragedy and comedy are purgative, providing "atonement" for guilt. "Tragedy purges through sacrifice of victims whose suffering and death serve as a vicarious atonement.... Comedy purges through victims (i.e., clowns) who assume our degradation and suffering so we can confront it together in rational discourse." Both tragedy and comedy, Duncan argues, depict a struggle between good and bad social principles. Tragedy, though, begins with a "firm statement of belief in social principle and dooms those who threaten it." Comedy, on the other hand, begins with an exploration of a social principle, and "ridicules those who place it beyond reason."⁷

Both tragedy and comedy take evil seriously, but they appeal to different "authorities" for its eradication. In tragedy, with its other-worldly orientation, the address is to a supernatural power "beyond question, and thus beyond reason;" the tragedian "must keep alive belief in the mysterious and dread power of the principle he invokes." That is not the way, though, that comedy works. In it, our shame and guilt are resolved through "confession of our sins" within the group or community. We assume, in comedy, that "open and free communication with each other will tell us what our guilt means so that we can expiate it."⁸ We all laugh it away together.

The "heroes" and "villains" of tragedy and comedy are strikingly different as well. The difference is that in tragedy, the hero must suffer and die, so that the "villains," who live in "sin," can be mysteriously "saved." In classical comedy, the "hero" must "suffer," often intensely, but not die; there is, instead, just the "clown," who vicariously takes the "sins" of "everyone" upon himself so that he can, as Duncan puts it, "mend his ways." Always, in comedy, there is the never-ending sense that things can and will be made right – but without death at the heart of the process.

The tragic villain "does not, like the clown, live in error, but in sin. If he is killed, the sin is killed. But it is not necessary to kill the clown, for he can mend his ways" and do so for the entire community.⁹ In tragedy, heroes and villains are clearly distinct, and neither can be saved; nor can they save themselves. All must somehow "die." In comedy, heroes and villains merge and the distinction between them become blurred. In such blurring, the hero/villain can be saved once he allows laughter to be turned

against him. He will be laughed at, but he is also being laughed with. We are laughing at him to purge him – and ourselves – of folly, not to torture and kill him.¹⁰

2. Comedy As Doubt and Questioning

There is more to it, though. At the root of the "comedic," Duncan argues, is a fundamental and unrelenting exercise of "doubt." Comedy, in short, is based on open, candid doubting and questioning. This, in fact, is what Duncan means by his use of the words "reason" or "reasoning:" to think is to ask questions, to "reason" is to remain ever the skeptic. "Such faith in reason," he writes, "is possible only when doubt is considered a way to truth, as in reasoned discourse among equals. Where doubt is considered weakness or heresy, (comedy) cannot be used ... and where reason in society is not a value, (comedy) easily offends those in power, as the fate of Socrates, the creator of 'Socratic irony,' warns us."¹¹ Tragedy, whether as art or religion, Duncan says, must "treat difference as heresy and doubt as weakness." In comedy, though, the "hero" by incessant doubting "detaches himself from belief in any one course of action, so that he can respect and reflect on others." Duncan adds that the comedic hero "does not want to mock or 'debunk,' but to keep faith open to reason in action."¹² It is comedy, in fact, that makes human questioning "an ultimate value" by turning "doubt" into a "principle of social order." In doing so, Duncan says, it is the comedic that, in the final analysis, that keeps society "flexible and open to change."

Comedy, in short, "institutionalizes" doubt and questioning. It becomes what Duncan calls "sanctioned disrespect."¹³ It represents a society's efforts to "express problems so we can communicate about them – to the self as well as to others." The comedian in this respect "does not reject authority" but uses doubt and questioning to open up authority to scrutiny, and does so in an "acceptable" (i.e., "sanctioned") way. The king is burlesqued. The queen is satirized. The foibles of those in power are lampooned. Such is the classic role of the comic jester. As Duncan summarizes it: "Such thoughts (and acts) are born only in the discourse of free (people) who must learn to distrust all revelations – even those of their gods. Laughter guards reason because it reduces fear and submits priestly mystification to reason."¹⁴

3. The Nature of Comedic Incongruities

All classic comedy, from Shaw to Wilde to Gilbert and Sullivan, is based on the conflicts, incongruities, and disparities within the social order. It is also based on the belief, in Duncan's words, that "as long as we are able to express differences in humor, adjustment of differences is possible."¹⁵ The disparities are everywhere, of course – among classes and situations of people, between institutions and populations, between our "ideals" and our "actions," and between what we pretend to be and what we know that we are. But the complexities of this are everywhere as well; hence there is the potential for the comedic everywhere:

Comic incongruities arise as we confront one audience with what is meant for another, or as we let one audience 'overhear' what is supposed to be kept secret from it. The enjoyment of such moments derives from sudden clarification of the ambiguities arising out of incongruities between social ends and means. The great comic heroes ... give such incongruities a form that serves to light up the path all men take as they act toward each other in love and hate.¹⁶

The problem with thinking about profound social and personal incongruities is that they tend to be "hidden" from us. We lack awareness of them, despite their pervasiveness. Thus, the jolt of good comedy. We are pressed to see things that otherwise

we do not see. This happens, Duncan suggests, because comedy, by inducing laughter, creates a "distancing" for its audience. We are able to laugh because comedy lets us distance ourselves from the "clown" – unlike tragedy, which tries to "implicate" the audience or pull it in. It is the "distancing" of the comedic, though, that enables us to become aware. Hence, comedy, in Duncan's words, "exposes motives which the actors (audience) do not know or seek to hide," and everything can be taken up in asides or in soliloque "which audiences are allowed to overhear."¹⁷ Such soliloque, "while 'internal,' is really an expression of the problem of internalizing 'outer' aspects of roles which are in conflict because the roles themselves are in conflict."¹⁸ The comedy comes, then, in our being confronted with our own conflicts or incongruities in an indirect, rather than in a direct, way. Duncan suggests that there is always a kind of "superiority" in comedy, but "it is the superiority of detachment."

Perhaps this is why two old friends or husband and wife so often greet each other ironically (comedically) in formal and ceremonial occasions where protocol and ritual 'company' manners must be followed. We mock slightly the grand manners we have been putting on to meet the formal demands of the occasion. It is as if we say: 'You and I know what trumpery all this bowing and scraping is, but it's the way you keep things going.' There are many expressions which convey this kind of (comedic) comment. The wink, the shrug, raised eyebrows, eyes opened wide in mock amazement – any gesture which expresses doubt over the seriousness of what we are saying – all ways of telling others that while we must do what we are doing, we realize how silly it is after all.¹⁹

There is, as Duncan's notes, the "tragically comic" as well – another kind of strange incongruity. We know very well that tears are often a part of the comedic, and that while we are laughing intensely, our hearts can be breaking at the same time. It is the comedy of Chaplin whose actions and antics point to profound – and robustly funny – disparities, but whose pervasive sadness always arises from those disparities. It is the comedy of M*A*S*H, the laughter of which was unceasing, and yet its ability to evoke tears was as genuine as any art can be. Duncan explains it like this: "In all great comedy, we hear the lonely, sad cry of (people) who yearn for glory in love and beauty, and yet must live in hate and ugliness. In such moments," Duncan adds, "the heart opens to the great clown."²⁰

It must be noted, too, that such a clown always takes the form of an "innocent," whether that be the "child," the "fool," the "country cousin," or some other "pure soul." We give the "innocent" clown freedoms to open up our "hidden sides" that we would not give to anyone else. Only the child ("clown") could ask why the king has no clothes; "adults" must pretend not to notice. "We permit the comic ('innocent')," Duncan writes, "to ask questions that would be considered rude, insulting or heretical if asked by a responsible adult. The wide-eyed wonder of the innocent opens up to full view incongruities, which have been hidden or suppressed because their expression might subject those in power to mockery or disdain." It is the "comic as innocent" – the one who asks "what do I know?" – who is given permission to "expose" the presence of incongruity who can bring it to laughter by distanced awareness.²¹

4. Irony as Comic Paradigm

To a certain extent, we have already suggested how Duncan defines the comedic. It is a calling attention to the deep incongruities with which we live, of setting things together that, by their very disparity, do not "play" well together. It is the tuxedoed bunch falling one by one into the swimming pool. It is the treatment of a common, simple activity such as the brushing of one's teeth with religious form and ritual pomp. It is the

Freddy the Freeloader fastidiously, with flowers and candles, setting himself a garbage can lunch on an old door propped on two oil drums. And so on. All of these represent what, for Duncan, is the prototypical comic form, which is irony.

Irony is a kind of double-talk. One says one thing but by it means something else. "Irony permits us to say things we must say to superiors and inferiors to uphold conventions necessary to social order, and yet express our disquiet over those conventions. In ironic address, all become equal, since we 'let them in' on what is really the truth about the convention."²² For Duncan, all major forms of verbal comedy, or comedic speech, are some variant of the ironic. In this view, comedy (irony) always arises from profoundly serious motives. Laughter is never for the sake of laughter. It is motivated by an unflinching desire that things be better, that the charades of life and human interaction be punctured. Comedic speech is serious speech – appropriate, moreover, in virtually any public situation or setting.

Ironic speech "uncovers the magic and mystery which lurks in every social bond," Duncan says; and the ironic clown "can take the point of view of one toward the other without seeming treacherous to either." In all great comedy, Duncan adds, the struggle has been to "overcome (human) madness through irony, as at other times we struggle to subdue the senses through mortification."²³ As long as we confront our madness, moreover, there is hope – at least in the comedic worldview – of "controlling" it. Duncan adds:

The ironic clown lacks the mystery of community priests, but his social office is no less real. Bob Hope ribbing the President at the annual Washington gridiron dinner is not outwitting a censor but performing as a highly honored public functionary – the people's Fool. His laughter, like the incantations of the priests, is sacred because his jokes create comic forms which we use to ward off threats to the public order. The incongruities and follies of the President and his staff are brought to light. The mystifications and grandeur of the President's office is opened for examination.²⁴

What irony in all its various forms seeks is a "public unmasking." That "moment of unmasking," as Duncan puts it, "is the moment of comic truth."²⁵ But it is never unmasking for the sake of unmasking, at least not in classic comedy. It is unmasking that believes that under the mask – under the "surface," under that which is "put on" – is indeed something worthwhile, something that has been lost in some form of artificiality. "We laugh together," Duncan notes, "as long as we share deep conviction in what our group thinks is right. Comedy exposes transgression of rights, but does not question the rights themselves. We cannot long enjoy unmasking and anticipate further unmasking unless we are convinced that something beyond the mask is better than the mask itself."²⁶

In this sense, laughter is the "scourge" of vice, in Duncan's words, "just as tears are the purge of evil." He adds, "Vice is ridiculous, for its pleasures turn to pain and suffering. Great comic artists distrust tragedy, not because they do not suffer or take a melancholy view of life, but because they think tragedy alone is not enough to purge (humans) of folly."²⁷ At its root, comic irony wants to see the deceiver deceived and then laugh when his punishment is exactly what he deserves. What we "learn" from such ironic comedy is that whenever we try to deceive others we are really, in the end, deceiving ourselves. The result is that in such laughter, pride is inevitably deflated and the "deified self" is reduced to human scale.²⁸

The goal and the end of classic comedy, Duncan contends, is social solidarity. Comedic atonement is collective atonement – but without a "death principle" at its heart

as in tragedy, joy, not sorrow, is at the root of the collective experience; joy, not sorrow. It forms the social bond that connects human spirits with each other. Comedy tells us that we are in this world together. It does not shield us from each other. "As we laugh together, loneliness and alienation vanish."²⁹ Laughter at who we are, at our foibles, at the incongruities which we socially create, becomes a way not only of keeping our humility available to each other, but it also lets us "re-create our social bonds even as we recognize our differences." In laughter, we flounder about, as it were, in the swimming pool together, in a "mad but glorious moment of solidarity" as we affirm our common plight and the very nature of that which makes us human together.³⁰ Human barriers tend to be broken down in comedy.³¹ We laugh at each other because we are all "trapped" together, sharing the same pretenses and "games." Only equals, Duncan says, "can laugh and tease each other."³²

5. Implications for Theology and Preaching

There is no way in a brief paper to explore all of the questions or implications that arise from a theory like this. It is possible, though, to indicate three significant directions in which Duncan's theory of comedy points, or three "issues" related to the comedic in preaching that are worth our time and "practice."

The first has to do with the issue of "unmasking" as a key component in the creation of comedy. I take the unmasking to be related to the ethos of "doubt" or doubting that Duncan sees as central to the comedic ethos. It is to be a constant question-asker, and to use questioning, doubting, wondering, probing, all as a means to "see" the comedic or the potentially comedic. It is at the heart of enabling ourselves and others to see who they (we) are so that we can work at shedding the pretences and artifices with which we live. It is part, one would think, of learning to let our nays be "nay" and our yeas be "yea." It would be part of helping us understand the contents of our own whitened sepulchers.

The issue may turn more, though, on how we do this. If we follow Duncan's lead, we would "take on ourselves" the "sins" of the people. We, as preachers, might become the "clowns," not with clowning, but with "unmasking" ourselves in public. It sounds grotesque and out of place, at least as we are used to thinking about preaching. But it probably is not if we really think about the processes involved. It is a form of the preacher as "witness," but a comedic form. The preacher, it is assumed, is like everyone else – human, vulnerable, in need of a serious comedic twist, so if we can all laugh at the preacher as he/she "unmasks," then we find ourselves in a position of "seeing" and "laughing" at ourselves. But this requires that the preacher be willing to "play the clown," be willing, with sensitivity and wit, to be the unmasking comic. It is a startling idea – some will say utterly unfit for the pulpit. For others, though, it is more than worth the effort to think through the strengths and pitfalls of it as we turn toward the comedic.

The second implication has to do with the nature of the ironic at the heart of all classical comedy, as Duncan suggests. Irony, though, is an extraordinarily difficult rhetorical form and process. Irony must always have something serious to say, and how we say it is at the heart of getting it "heard." The process (or "art") of ironic speech, though, can be learned, and Duncan's notes (while not trying to "teach" it) suggest some useful directions. We can study ironic speech in its classic forms, making room for it, not as a theological or homiletical afterthought, but as a crucial part of how we frame our approaches to practical theology and sermon-making. In doing so, we can study together as teachers and students, the nature of the comedic – not to make ourselves "funny" and

more interesting, but instead to speak in new and potent ways about the nature of good and evil, about the "principalities and powers" that affect human behavior in the world.³³

Third, at the heart of what Duncan describes is that the tragic and the comedic views of life are distinctly different, conjuring up, in our case, different theological orientations. As we said at the outset, the tragic view is at the center of classic Christian theology. In addition to having "death" at its heart – one or more must die for the "sins" of the group – it also must be a "transcendent" theology, one in which the "real" and the worthwhile are "out there" someplace and what is "here" is of little avail. The comedic view, however, is no less serious about evil and "redemption" and such things than the tragic, but its "theology" is unmistakably "immanent." It sees the "here and now" of human and social relationship as the place where evil must be confronted, and where God can be found in our efforts to create a humane and "rational" world. In our laughter, in the comic probing of our struggle (always a "struggle"), we find our "purging" and our ways of living creatively together, collectively and universally, whoever we are.

In the comedic view, though, there is no need for killing or "dying" in any kind of religious sense. Dare we ask the questions that arise here? Can we have a comedic theology? Can we have a theology that does not require an emphasis on suffering and death? More pointedly: Is it possible that in our tragic "theologies" of Christianity and its various roots, we have (and do) contribute to an ongoing "violence" in the world by our very "sanction" of such things? Death and dying are tragic acts: our theology tells us so. Is it just a Pauline idea that "one died" so no more have to die? But since we are conditioned to the need for dying, is it possible that human death in whatever forms can be easily and painlessly assimilated into our "theological" frameworks? Is it possible that Duncan might be right, that the comedic "theology" – and immanent theologies are still theologies – could "speak" in the world with an emphasis on "life" more than on death? Are there any openings within a biblical milieu that might let us rethink theology from the tragic to the comedic? Instead of martyrs, could we have clowns?

Such are speculative questions at best, but they should not be dismissed lightly. There are others, too. For example: Is it possible that in recent years we have been more willing to court humor and comedy in our preaching because our theologies have become less "transcendent" and more "immanent?" Is it possible that Christian theology itself has turned more toward "immanence" – i.e., existentialist theologies, narrative theologies, process theologies – over the past few decades and thereby opened the door to the comedic more than ever before? If that is the case, and I tend to think that it is, then we may be ready to at least explore a different kind of Gospel – I will say Christian Gospel, though I realize how strongly some will take issue with the implications of that.

Nonetheless, what is suggested here is that the turn toward humor, toward the comedic, in recent preaching is not just a quirk; nor is it just a discovery that laughter keeps people more interested in sermons than they otherwise would be. It is to realize, instead, that our concern with humor in preaching reflects a shift not just in our preaching but in our "practical theology" itself. Our turn toward humor and the comedic may very well represent, however unbeknownst to us just yet, the emergence of a new theology, a Comedic Theology. It would be a kind of theology that might very well turn the spotlight away from a preoccupation with death and toward the social bond of laughter and the clown.

For some time now, I have been a fan of comedy clubs in the Los Angeles area. I marvel at the good comics – and the fact that people will pay significant amounts of money regularly to sit for two hour stretches and listen to someone talk, just talk. And the laughter can be non-stop. The good stand-up comics know all about the sheer hilarity of

the ironic. They know something, whether consciously or not, that preachers and practical theologians have been very slow to acknowledge. Say what one will about "entertainment" from the pulpit. The Comedic may be the emergent theology that our world needs. It may be time to "send in some clowns."

ENDNOTES

¹ A major part of Prof. Craddock's well-deserved reputation is based on his incisive and persistent humor. And while his sermons and workshops on story-telling are filled with it, he has written relatively little about the subject. He did argue for its use early on, in As One Without Authority (Abingdon, 1971), noting that those who criticize humor in the pulpit are "more influenced by a Puritan heritage than by the Bible." The value of humor for preaching, he added, is that it is a form of celebration, an expression of fellowship, "a confession of trust in the Creator who made all things as they are and who does not need the protection our humorless piety can afford" – itself an example of the Craddock wit. (pp. 90, 91)

² While Duncan scatters brief notes and asides about comedy throughout his extensive work, his most sustained study and reflection on the subject is found in Communication and Social Order (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), predominately Part Eight: "The Social Function of Art in Society." This paper is based almost entirely on that section of his work. Duncan was first a student and then a thorough expositor of the work of the eminent critic Kenneth Burke. What is striking is that where Burke worked extensively on the question of "tragedy" and its role in human society – which Duncan thoroughly absorbed – Duncan turned the tables and did with comedy what Burke had done with tragedy. Duncan, it should be said, while giving full recognition to Burke's influence on him, became a highly-respected and original scholar in his own right. Duncan's other key books include Language and Literature in Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), Symbols in Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) and Symbols and Social Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969). All of the footnote references that follow referring to Duncan are from Communication and Social Order.

³ Duncan, p. 373, 374. "Tragedy and religion are so closely linked in our (Christian) tradition that it is extremely difficult to keep them apart," Duncan noted.

⁴ Duncan took pains in opening his discussion of comedy to underline its importance, saying that "It is necessary to point this out because tragedy has a much higher status than comedy, especially among those who do not create art." He added that historically art is both tragedy and comedy and if the tragedy was admitted to the sacred festivals of Athens, so was comedy. He pointed out that "like Cervantes, Mozart and Verdi, Shakespeare wrote his greatest comedies at the end of his life, and thus we must assume that he, along with many other artists who created their comic masterpieces in the fulness of experience and creative power, regarded comedy as a profound expression of art" (p. 375, 376).

⁵ Duncan, p. 407.

⁶ Duncan, p. 407.

⁷ Duncan, p. 395.

⁸ Duncan, p. 397.

⁹ Duncan, p. 399.

¹⁰ Duncan, p. 395.

¹¹ Duncan, p. 381. It is easy to criticize Duncan's use of the idea of "reason" and many have charged him with a kind of liberal naivete about the potential of human "reasoning." What is missed, however, is that Duncan uses the word to express the power of skepticism, of questioning and of doubt. His work is very much about elements of myth, ritual and the powers of "unreason," but he believes intensely that human "skepticism" is the locus of "sanity."

¹² Duncan, p. 385.

¹³ Duncan, p. 387.

¹⁴ Duncan, p. 402.

¹⁵ Duncan, p. 414.

¹⁶ Duncan, p. 407. "Gilbert and Sullivan parody Verdi and the Italian opera. Mozart and Shakespeare poke fun at their own art, as well as the art of others. Thus we use comedy to address inner as well as outer selves. Deep incongruity between what we, as artists, censure in others, and what we ourselves do, suddenly becomes clear" (p. 403); and "In Shaw, Dodgson and Gilbert and Sullivan the attempts of very disparate people to communicate often becomes central to dramatic action" (p. 413).

¹⁷ Homileticians and preachers will immediately call to mind Craddock's 1978 Lyman Beecher lectures at Yale, published as Overhearing the Gospel (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978). What should become clear is that Craddock's own well-known humor is also well-grounded. His background in literature and language study is not merely coincidental. Craddock knows Shakespeare and other comic classics, as those who have taken his courses can attest.

¹⁸ Duncan, p. 381. Duncan draws at several points on Freud's discussions of humor and comedy. At one point like this: "As we address the Super-Ego whose 'calls of conscience' demand response, we feel, at the same time, the call of the Id. Such quandaries are met in ironic comedy by exposing, not by hiding, inner conflicts. The Ego confronts the Super-Ego with the Id, as the comic actor confronts the audience with another, to let them reconcile demands made upon him" (p.385). Duncan notes at one point that the "comic vein" in Freud is wide and deep and very rich. "The incongruity of an ego, not master in his own house, attempting to rule over others never fails to evoke Freud's irony." For Freud, he adds, it is always a matter of "the passions struggle to outwit reason" (p. 416).

¹⁹ Duncan, p. 386.

²⁰ Duncan, p. 412.

²¹ Duncan, p. 393.

²² Duncan, p. 384.

²³ Duncan, p. 386.

²⁴ Duncan, p. 387.

²⁵ Duncan, p. 411.

²⁶ Duncan, p. 411.

²⁷ Duncan, p. 390. Duncan argues that all comedy is highly moral, but that it is the morality of "reason in society," a morality that desires the construction and maintenance of human community itself. There is, of course, a great deal of what he refers to as "comic obscenity," which,

Duncan says, "is a kind of angry plea to others to 'make sense,' to conform to the demands of the situation. We curse in jest to relieve ourselves of burdens so we can act together" (p. 409).

²⁸ Duncan, p. 403.

²⁹ Duncan, p. 389.

³⁰ Duncan, p. 389.

³¹ Some will be quick to point out, correctly, that what is funny in one language may not be funny when translated into another language. My Korean students who are working on English skills do not "pick up" English ironic speech very easily or quickly. But this is a linguistic problem and not a comedic one. The processes of comedy themselves appear to be the same from culture to culture and Duncan would argue that, language aside, humor unites people by emphasizing human plight.

³² Duncan, p. 403.

³³ Let me give only one example so that the flavor of the "comedic" as Duncan describes it can be seen in sermonic form. This short segment of ironic speech is from Craddock's "The Hard Side of Epiphany," a sermon that would not appear to lend itself well to anything comedic:

When first I entered the ministry – or I was dreaming, that's what it was, dreaming of ministry at seventeen years old – I fantasized the enemy. I loved the enemy. I idealized, I needed the enemy, because in my fantasies I was a martyr. I could lie on my little cot in summer camp out beside the lake of Weeki-Weeki, or Noki-Noki, or whatever it was, and imagine what it would be like to give my life to Jesus Christ, because we'd sung that hymn around the lake that night, you know, holding candles. 'Are you able? Are you able to drink the cup? Are you able? Are you able?' I said yes, yes, yes. I'd lie up there on my bed in that dormitory and imagine I'm able to give my life for Jesus Christ. I could picture myself being boiled in a pot somewhere, frozen to death in the tundras of the North, stood before a gray wall early in the morning and someone saying, 'Do you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Deny him and live.'

I'd say, 'I believe.'

'Ready, Aim, Fire!'

Flags at half-mast, widows weeping in the afternoon – oh, I fantasized. I needed Herod in those days. I needed an enemy. I needed opposition. Into the arena; king turns the thumb down; the cage opens; in comes the lion to tear me apart; and a monument is erected: **HERE'S WHERE FRED GAVE HIS LIFE**. People come with their Polaroids: 'Stand over there, Charles. Let's get your picture next to the monument where old Fred gave his life.' Boy, did I fantasize ministry.