

Fall 1999

World Order

TAKING DOGMATISM SERIOUSLY

EDITORIAL

RADICAL SOCIALITY AND CHRISTIAN
DETACHMENT IN ERASMUS'

PRAISE OF FOLLY

ROBERT HARIMAN

WHERE DOES A "JEST'S PROSPERITY" LIE?
COMEDY AND COMMUNITY

JIM STOKES

TURBULENT PRAIRIE: POLITICS,
THE PRESS, AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH
IN KANSAS, 1897

DUANE L. HERRMANN

LAUGHTER IN THE DARKNESS:
LA VITA È BELLA (LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL)
BY ROBERTO BENIGNI

FATIMA NAQVI-PETERS

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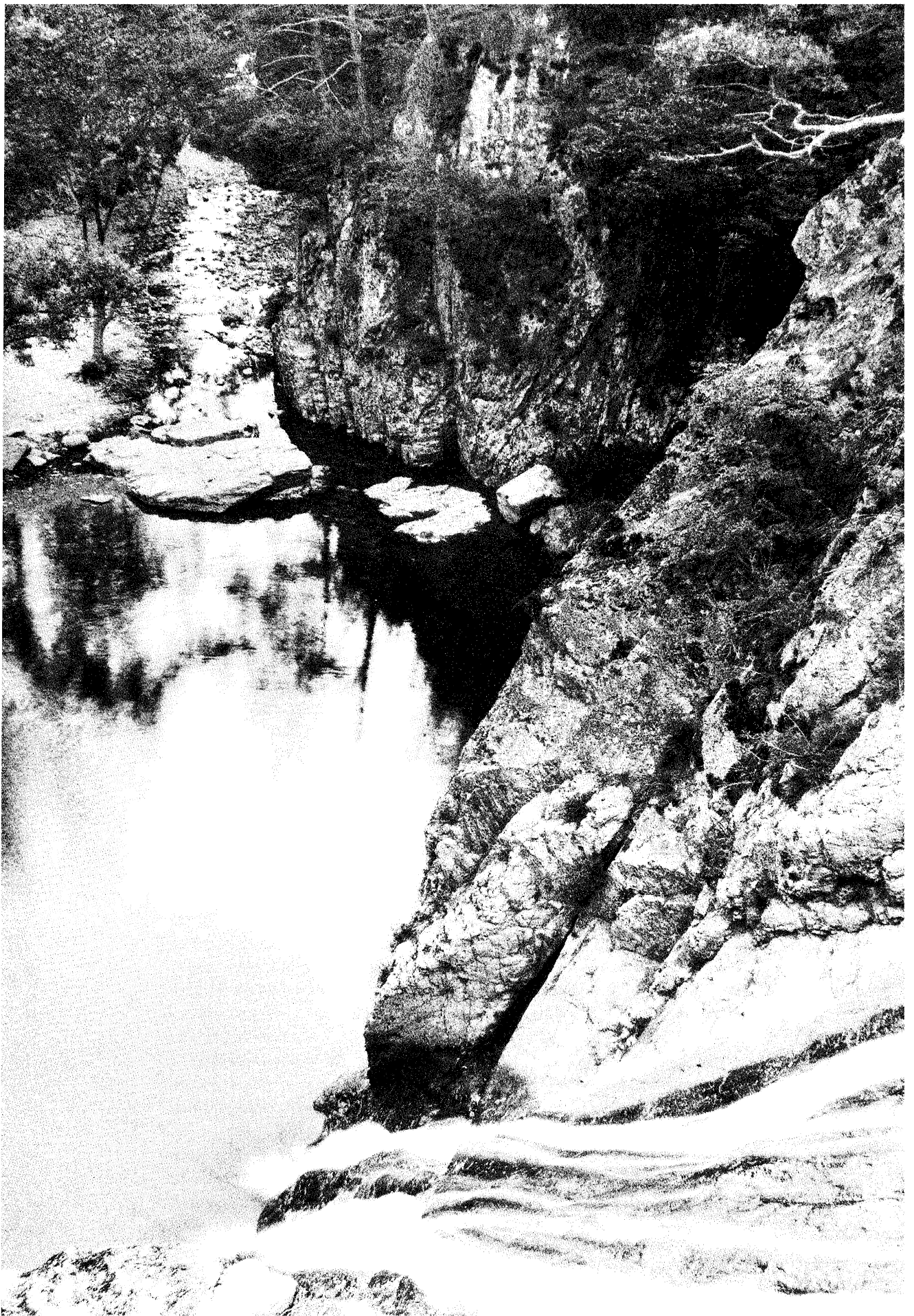
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IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Taking Dogmatism Seriously
Editorial
- 4 Interchange: Letters from and to the Editor
- 7 Wordplay
poem by *Cynthia Sheperd Jaskwich*
- 9 Radical Sociality and Christian Detachment
in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*
by *Robert Hariman*
- 25 Where Does a "Jest's Prosperity" Lie?
Comedy and Community
by *Jim Stokes*
- 29 Turbulent Prairie: Politics, the Press, and the
Bahá'í Faith in Kansas, 1897
by *Duane L. Herrmann*
- 46 Laughter in the Darkness: *La vita è bella*
(*Life Is Beautiful*) by Roberto Benigni
reflections on Benigni's Holocaust film
by *Fatima Naqvi-Peters*

Inside Back Cover: Authors & Artists in This Issue



Taking Dogmatism Seriously

THE intolerant religious dogmatism that sharply divides the world into righteous believers and ungodly infidels is not confined to any one epoch or part of the world. The polytheistic Romans persecuted early Christians; for centuries ostensibly Christian countries ruthlessly persecuted their Jewish minorities in Europe; and in the last century the partition of India witnessed the bloody massacres of countless Muslims and Hindus unwilling to tolerate each other's presence. Today the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, to give only one contemporary example, is "justified" in terms of a deeply intolerant interpretation of Islam—a religion that ironically has provided humanity, throughout pre- and early modern history from Arabia to Spain, examples of societies whose treatment of minorities was among the most enlightened of their age.

The New World, and the United States in particular, has from the outset been populated by peoples fleeing from religious intolerance in the Old World. Given the early history of the United States, it is accordingly ironic that religious fundamentalism, as the term is used today, originated in the United States among Protestants in the early part of the twentieth century, as a reaction against a perceived decay of moral and religious values. Fundamentalism is a brand of religious dogmatism particular to the modern world: as its name implies, it represents a reaction to modernity and change.

Religious dogmatism taken to its fanatical extreme invariably engenders intolerance because of its insistence on a monopoly on truth, a monopoly that excuses its possessor from tolerating any differences of opinion or critical reasoned debate. Religious dogmatists, insensitive to the fallibility of human knowledge, take themselves and their beliefs very seriously indeed—and their seriousness is all too often a deadly one. Perhaps what needs to be said is that religious dogmatists invariably lack a sense of humor. In particular, the sorely missed sense of humor is the capacity to laugh at our own human selves and to see the moment of humorousness in all our necessarily fallible human knowledge.

Of course, dogmatism is not confined to religion. Dogmatic secularism is simply religious dogmatism turned upside down. Intolerant of any religious belief, fanatical secularists, like religious dogmatists, fail to maintain a critical distance between themselves and their own

beliefs. One might even say that dogmatic secularism is modernity without a sense of humor. It represents a faith in human rationality not yet deflated by a healthy dose of skepticism. The Jacobins of Revolutionary France and the Communists of the Soviet Union are ample testimony to the fact that intolerance and inflexibility are no more acceptable when they are motivated by lack of religion than when they arise from a conflict between religious beliefs.

Enamored with a Faith that offers so much to the lives of its practitioners, Bahá'ís could, like anyone else, fall prey to dogmatism, absolutism, and exclusivism. However, the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith forcefully warn against such fundamentalism, and the Bahá'í scriptures provide numerous instruments for self-correction. Chief among these is the principle of the independent investigation of truth. The faithful are exhorted to read the Bahá'í writings, to investigate diverse belief systems, to discuss them, to question their own beliefs, and to accept that their own belief in what is true is necessarily filtered through human and fallible understanding. As a result of this process, and with a dose of humility and good humor, individual Bahá'ís can recognize the limitations of their own thinking and consequently tolerate views and opinions that differ from their own.

Interchange

LETTERS FROM AND TO THE EDITOR

WITH this issue the editors reestablish a practice that was once a regular part of *World Order's* Interchange column—the opportunity to chat with you about a variety of things such as our thoughts on films or exhibits we have seen, our enthusiasm about various topics, our comments on social issues from a Bahá'í perspective. Our purpose is to extend our conversations, which arise spontaneously during Editorial Board meetings, to include you, our readers, thereby inviting your responses and ideas.

A topic of recent discussion is the film *Magnolia*, which follows the lives of eight troubled characters living out seemingly unrelated lives: a dying father, his distant and much younger wife, his long-lost, male-chauvinist, huckster son, and the father's male nurse; a famous game-show host and his estranged daughter; a former child game-show prodigy; and a rising game-show child star, all of whose lives come crashingly but also, in some cases, epiphanously together.

One of the editors declared his conviction that *Magnolia* is the first great film he has seen in several years. He observed that it has all the ingredients that one has come to associate with the representation of excess and cultural decay in American film—violence, profanity, dysfunctional families, moral depravity, cacophony in the sound track and its visual equivalent in the camera technique, and a seemingly disjointed set of plot lines. It even has a comic plague of biblical proportions. So how, he asked

himself, could that unlikely concoction leave one with a transcendent feeling, even a sense of awe and joy?

Many who watch films would have to agree that the genre of late has tended to have an apocalyptic bent, presenting us with dark scenarios ranging from personal or social disaster to unfriendly encounters with extra-terrestrial beings to apocalypse itself—perhaps exploiting millennialism, our editor wondered, or perhaps reflecting problems within a deteriorating culture. In tone, such films have ranged from parody to ironic commentary to seriousness that verges on tedium. These films are too facile, our editor argued, and ultimately adolescent. Essentially they are action films that offer disaster packaged as quick and easy solutions. They contribute, as critic Pauline Kael put it some years ago in challenging some of Steven Spielberg's early films, to “the infantilization of American film.”

However, *Magnolia* is different in that it asks questions—an interesting, important set of questions. What do you do after the apocalypse? What do you do the morning after and for the rest of your life? How do you find and contribute to meaning? The answers, as the film suggests, are to rediscover (or discover for the first time) compassion, forgiveness, humanity; to connect in such a way that you begin to see the soul within the damaged goods (the body and psyche of another person); and, finally, to see a mysterious and luminous interconnection among all the people whose lives seem disconnected from your own, and beyond them

with the lives of all of humankind—all just by connecting with one person.

One of *Magnolia's* greatest achievements is that it poses and answers important questions by alternately evoking tears and laughter from its audience. One laughs at the freak occurrences, the random absurdities; one cries at the chance encounters, the missed opportunities. The use of humor initially shocks us by juxtaposing philosophical questions and popular culture, dense logic and irreverent laughter. *Magnolia* thus actualizes Kierkegaard's observation that "Pathos that is not reinforced by the comic is illusion; the comedy that is not reinforced by pathos is immaturity. . . ."

Similarly, many of the essays in this issue, which all consider deeply serious themes, do so in terms that include humor. Several of the articles also engage in some way with the theme of detachment. Such an effort requires the facility for a kind of serious play, a method that intellectually curious humans use to examine reality in concrete terms through the broader perspective of art.

Just as the editors have reestablished the practice of extending conversations to include our readers, we also introduce with this issue an attempt to facilitate conversations among authors. As *World Order* continues to renew itself, a process to which we referred in our Spring 1999 Interchange column, the editors are experimenting with the magazine's format and approach, which continue to reflect our interest in and commitment to fostering civilized dialogue on matters of serious religious, social, and philosophical concern.

In our Fall issue Dr. Robert Hariman con-siders detachment from a Christian perspective in his "Radical Sociality and Christian Detachment in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*." Erasmus, one of the greatest Renaissance scholars, was also one of the most influential and controversial literary figures of his time. His writings oscillate between sharp criticism and vitriolic satire, centering on his concern over the state of the Catholic Church. *The Praise of Folly* satirizes the dogmatic views of scientists and the superstitious religious practices of Erasmus' day. By drawing on Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, Dr. Hariman shows how much influence Erasmus continues to exert. Indeed, the purposeful mix of "high" and "low" culture—and its comic effect—was a technique often used by the artists and scholars of the Middle Ages, whose purpose was no less than to represent the entire cosmic dance of reality and its meaning within a divinely inspired redemptive scheme. It could be argued that some of the contemporary arts, such as Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and P. T. Anderson's *Magnolia*, are rediscovering that kind of metaphysically perspicacious art.

Dr. Hariman's provocative essay stimulated Dr. Jim Stokes to ruminate on the social implications of comedy from the perspective of a literary scholar and a Bahá'í. In "Where Does a 'Jest's Prosperity' Lie? Comedy and Community" Dr. Stokes considers Shakespeare's play *Love's Labor's Lost* and the set of questions it raises: "Can mirth 'move a soul in agony'? Should

it even try?" Through an analysis of the meta-themes that link all of Shakespeare's plays, Dr. Stokes considers the nature of comedy and the possibility that comedy has a value not just for individual, personal stances but for collective, social change in which individuals have a responsibility both to themselves and to their community.

Like Dr. Hariman, Fatima Naqvi-Peters, too, looks at film in her analysis of Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* [*Life Is Beautiful*]. She explores the possibility of

laughter's liberating potential while also reminding us of its limits to effect change.

Duane L. Herrmann looks to a different form of media—that of print—in analyzing the way a new religion, in the earliest days of its infancy in the West, was received by and portrayed by the press. Herrmann's "Turbulent Prairie: Politics, the Press, and the Bahá'í Faith in Kansas, 1897" is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the history of the Bahá'í Faith in North America.

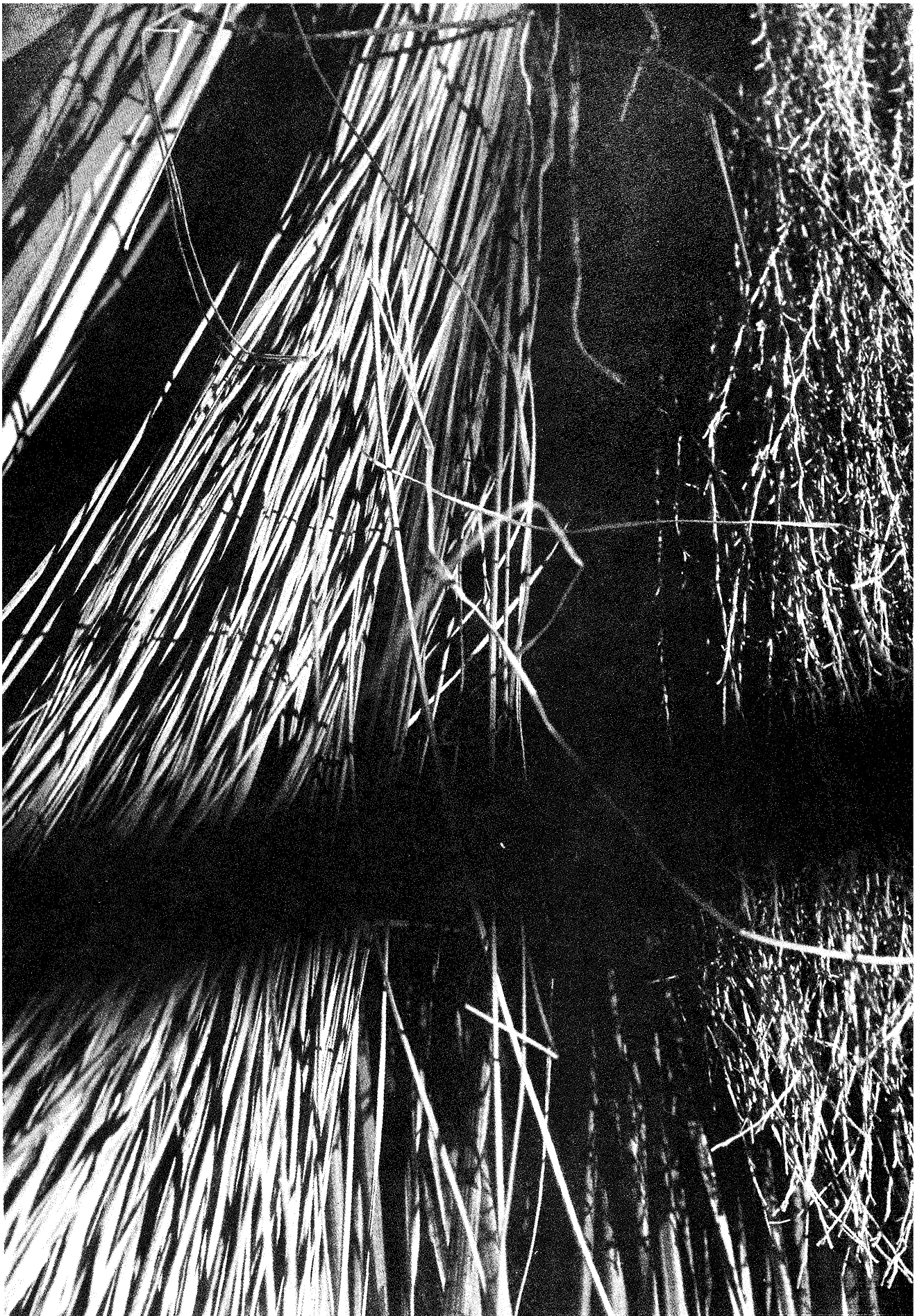


Wordplay

Between teaching fourth grade
 creative writing classes,
 I pass six-year-olds, standing silent
 in a straight line for Art;
 one little girl cranes her neck back
 to look me eye to eye
 (as much as is possible
 with my height near six feet
 and hers under four).
 "My brother says why you're here," she grins.
 "Why?" I squat to give her a better shot.
 "To make kids laugh."
 Direct hit. Now I know why too.
 I had thought it was for metaphors,
 higher BSAP scores, subject/verb agreement,
 and the comparative degree
 that I travel the state teaching poetry.
 But like the clown of primitive tribes
 who taught children to play (and other
 lessons along the way),
 I know from that first grader
 that kids learn better when they laugh.
 So now I don't go to work, I go to play.
 I teach them the games: we cartwheel couplets,
 leapfrog dialogue, jump rope rhymes,
 call all-y-all-y-in-free verse,
 and whack a syntactical grand slam.
 And by the end of the week,
 their team poem lights up
 the scoreboard. All players get points
 for assists in wit, skill and endurance.
 And as their poem takes the Title,
 amidst our cheers and high fives,
 we laugh that what we learned
 was to play on words.

—Cynthia Sheperd Jaskwlich

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Radical Sociality and Christian Detachment in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*

BY ROBERT HARIMAN

Introduction

LET'S face it: to see things as they are can be depressing. Erasmus (1466–1536), the great Dutch humanist and theologian, gets to the heart of the matter at the midpoint of his comedic encomium, *The Praise of Folly*. Human happiness requires being deceived. Too often, human beings are naturally dismayed by themselves—the human body is not inherently beautiful; words of love are false or deluded; acts of cooperation are invariably self-interested. The list could go on and on. The natural reaction to seeing humanity is to detach oneself, to withdraw, to study the beast perhaps but not to love it.

To see things as one wishes them to be is to become attached to them, to approach and admire and court and cherish them. One admires one's beloved who sits in the candlelight with false shoulders, a practiced smile, and mixed motives. And this is happiness. Fortunately, Erasmus says, "the human mind is so constituted that it is far more taken with appearances than with reality."¹ Indeed, human beings are twice blessed, for their

happiness costs them so little: "nothing more than a touch of persuasion."²

The most difficult relationship one could have with the world would be to see the world as it is and still love it. This is what God does. In the biblical tradition (and others) humanity is made in the image of God. Human beings have the capacity for objective analysis and for love, but they have a much harder time than God practicing both at once.

Detachment is at once the means for achieving objectivity and its likely consequence. Detachment is also singled out in many cultures as the key to spiritual knowledge. Jesus and Socrates, the two great figures of Western civilization, were masters of detachment. Both had the uncanny ability to see through the social construction of reality; both taught that human freedom could be achieved only by personal indifference to the rewards and demands of social life; both taught by example; both were martyred. What is often overlooked is that they were political in the same way: each was killed because his very being was a profound threat to the social order. As biblical scholar Duncan Derrett has remarked, a person who can be neither frightened nor bought is inherently threatening to any polity.³ When that person not only challenges authority but mixes together different classes of people . . . well, only a foolish leader would not take precautions.

There are significant differences between

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1. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 71.

2. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 73.

3. J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Primitive Christianity as an Ascetic Movement," in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 98.

Socrates and Jesus, however. As the social philosopher Michel Foucault has argued, Socrates is fundamentally oriented toward the care of the self.⁴ Jesus would have us let go of that as well.⁵ (No wonder that Socrates is the preferred model of detachment in the modern era.) More important, as classical

scholar Gregory Vlastos has demonstrated convincingly, Socrates' detachment includes a terrifying "frigidity," a total absence of emotional connection with other people.⁶ Socrates shows no anxiety about the loss of his money nor about the loss of his children; it is all the same to him. Socrates lusts after the beauty of Charmides, and he loves truth, but he dismisses the rest of the world. No wonder he was so serene during his death scene. What is odder, perhaps, is that one would admire that attitude. One may even see those grieving around him as weaker individuals than was Socrates himself. Modern intellectuals are familiar with Nietzsche's scathing criticism of Socratic rationalism, and most people also habitually condemn the modern tendency to turn humans into machines, but few want to exchange the Socratic model for a world composed solely of emotions, compassion, and suffering.

Erasmus was gentler than Nietzsche in his criticism of Socratic rationalism but equally blunt:

Who would not flee in horror from such a man, as he would from a monster or a ghost—a man who is completely deaf to all human sentiment, who is untouched by emotion, no more moved by love or pity than "a chunk of flint or a mountain crag," who never misses anything, who never makes a mistake, who sees through everything as if he had "x-ray vision," measures everything "with plumb line and T square," never forgives anything, who is uniquely self-satisfied, who thinks he alone is rich, he alone is healthy, regal, free, in brief who thinks he alone is all things.⁷ One might add, who thinks he alone is wise.⁸ In other words, detachment can be too much of a good thing, and when one is too detached from others, a sure result is the folly of excessive self-love.

There are other consequences of excessive detachment, including a greater capacity for excusing evil. For example, over a long de-

4. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self*, vols. 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random, 1985, 1986).

5. Mark 8:31–35. The Christian concept of self-emptying (*kenosis*) comes from Phil. 2:5–11. For a discussion of Erasmus' understanding of *kenosis* and his use of the theme in *Folly*, see M. A. Screech, *Erasmus: Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin, 1988) 15, 25 ff.; Walter M. Gordon, *Humanist Play and Belief: The Seriocomic Art of Desiderius Erasmus* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990) 214–16. Thomas Merton has illuminated the parallels between Christian mysticism and Zen regarding emptying or surrendering the self; see, for example, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

6. "Introduction: The Paradox of Socrates," in Gregory Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971): "Jesus wept for Jerusalem, Socrates warns Athens, scolds, exhorts it, condemns it. But he has no tears for it. . . . One feels there is a last zone of frigidity in the soul of the great erotic; had he loved his fellows more, he could hardly have laid on them the burdens of his 'despotic logic,' impossible to be borne" (16–17). I am indebted to Martha Nussbaum for highlighting this brief but profound argument from Vlastos' extensive scholarship on Socrates and Plato; see her review essay, "The Chill of Virtue," *The New Republic* (16 and 23 September 1991) 34–40.

7. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 45–46.

8. For Socrates' claim to be the only wise Athenian, see Plato, *Apology*, 20d–23b. I should add that the immediate target in *Folly* was Stoicism and that Erasmus elsewhere celebrated Socrates and compared him favorably with Christ. Such comparisons follow the lead of the neo-Platonists who had influenced him, and they have been a staple of humanist sentimentality. See the section on "Socrates, Jesus, and Christianity" in Lois E. Navia and Ellen L. Katz, *Socrates: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1988). If Erasmus had read Plato as critically as he did the Christian literature or had had the benefit of subsequent scholarship regarding the Greek world, he probably would have been more circumspect.

cade American bombers rained death on the Vietnamese people with more tonnage than the United States dropped in all of World War II, including the indiscriminate use of antipersonnel bombs and napalm and toxic chemical burns of vast areas of the countryside. Much of the American public, buffered by distance and prosperity, did not comprehend the extent of the destruction. The pilots continually described their activities in occupational and technical terms: “we were doing a job, applying our expertise.” When asked about the carnage, the supreme commander of the war effort explained, “Well, the Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient, and, as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it: Life is not

important.”⁹ Such comprehensive patterns of detachment are political, and they are also obscene.

One should ask how such perverse forms of detachment can be countered. One might answer that perhaps all that is needed is to practice the examined life. Perhaps—but within this supposition lies a problem that Socrates could not have foreseen: one reason that human beings are not drawn to the examined life is because the unexamined life really *is* worth living. And, as Jesus taught (following the Deuteronomist), it is not enough to conquer death; one must choose and celebrate life. This commitment goes far beyond the examined life, the rational life, the ordered life, or the life of self-control (just as loving one’s neighbor is not to be limited to when that person is being reasonable).¹⁰ What is needed is a form of detachment that allows human beings to see the world as it is but still love it, a detachment that is capable of countering injustice while still nurturing human solidarity. This detachment might require simplicity, discipline, training—in short, it might be ascetic—but it must also be oriented toward an abundant life. It must see and work with humans as they are, which requires accepting their myriad forms of self-deception. It must understand that the excessive ornamentation gilding the human world offers many economies for human relations. It must be willing to persuade and to be persuaded. Most of all, it must recognize that effective work for justice requires the ability to detach oneself from the rewards and demands of one’s society, while still celebrating human community. These tasks are not easy.

The Christian Predicament and the Abundant Life

ERASMUS’ *Praise of Folly* has been categorized by modern scholars as a literary *tour de force*, albeit one that might be hard to enjoy.¹¹ It is admired as a monument to erudition, but

9. General William Westmoreland, speaking to the camera in *Hearts and Minds* (prods. Bert Schneider and Peter Davis, dir. Peter Davis, 112 mins., Rainbow Pictures, 1974). This film also documents technocratic detachment with testimony from pilots Randy Floyd (who came to oppose the war) and George Croker (who became a government spokesman for the war). See also Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *The March of Folly: from Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Knopf/Random House, 1984).

10. I wonder what a difference it might have made if Socrates had said, “the unattached life is not worth living.” That, too, would not have been entirely true, but it points us in a very different direction. If the end point could be, for some, the perversity of excessive group loyalty, that would only match the perversity of excessive individualism.

11. Pertinent studies include Walter Kaiser, *Praises of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963); Geraldine Thompson, *Under Pretext of Praise* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973); A. E. Douglas, “Erasmus as a Satirist,” in T. A. Dorey, ed., *Erasmus* (London: Routledge, 1970); Clarence H. Miller, “The Logic and Rhetoric of Proverbs in Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*,” and Myron P. Gilmore, “*Apologiae*: Erasmus’s Defenses of Folly,” in Richard L. DeMolen, ed., *Essays on the Works of Erasmus* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978). See also Kathleen Williams, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Praise of Folly: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969). For more extended consideration of Erasmus’ comedic

rarely is it read as a profound work of religious or social thought.¹² The assumption seems to be that Erasmus is no Augustine. Yet *The Praise of Folly* does confront a fundamental if somewhat comic feature of the human condition. Its insight into modern social life has a religious counterpart that one might label the Christian predicament, a predicament summarized in the paraphrase from John that one should be “in but not of the world.”¹³ The most fundamental social fact of the world in biblical times was that people knew their place. Social status was the

intelligence, see Gordon, *Humanist Play and Belief*. For discussions of *Folly* and rhetoric, see Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985); Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994); Thomas O. Sloane, *On the Contrary: The Protocol of Traditional Rhetoric* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1997).

12. There are exceptions. The case for *Folly's* theological significance is made by Screech, *Erasmus: Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*, and Gordon, *Humanist Play and Belief*. Robert P. Adams declared it to be “a tremendous forward step in social criticism,” in *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, and Vives, on Humanism, War and Peace, 1496–1535* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1962) 51. *Folly* has been taken seriously by intellectual historians and biographers at least since Johann Huizinga, *Erasmus*, trans. Charles F. Hopman (1924; London: Phaidon Press, 1952, who calls it his best work. (The volume also has been published as *Erasmus of Rotterdam and Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*.) See also Cornelius Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*, trans. J. E. Grayson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991); James D. Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996). Generally, however, this is a story of isolated moments or small circles of interest. In the twentieth century the influence of both *The Praise of Folly* and its author has been almost nil. For the starkest contrast, and one that should tell us something about ourselves, we need look no further than Machiavelli's *Prince*.

13. John 17, 18. I am greatly indebted here and throughout this paper to Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992).

14. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* 113–23.

substance of one's identity, the determination of every aspect of one's dress, speech, conduct, relationships, and obligations, the fundamental condition of intelligibility and action. In contrast, the most certain characteristic of Jesus' ministry was that He disregarded status. He dined with outcasts, associated with women, honored children, defended the poor, held up Samaritans and a Roman centurion as models of piety, and denounced conventional wisdom. The radical nature of His acts includes but exceeds inversion of the social hierarchy—the last shall be first—or identification only with the underclass, for He also dined with the wealthy and affirmed the law. Perhaps it would be similar today if someone were completely indifferent to money while still using it—using it to buy things but also leaving it on the counter when given change, throwing it in the trash when it was in the way, and so on. The result would be not to make pennies into dollars but to deconstruct the entire system.

Most people cannot live in the human world without recognizing and using the prevailing social forms—the conventions of wealth, prestige, and power that shape all expression and action. To give oneself over entirely to those conventions is to lose one's freedom while tacitly supporting all the injustice endemic to the system. Note also that Jesus makes no distinction between political and religious institutions—to be completely invested in a religious order, whether theocracy or monastery, would provide no excuse.¹⁴ People get no points for piety or lawfulness if those virtues are the means for reproducing an unjust world. Moreover, Jesus singles out elites for special condemnation. All people are subject to ideological determination and all should be freed from it, but judgment and reproach are reserved for those who operate the ideological apparatus. So it is that the conventionally wise are fools, while to live in the world but not “subscribe to the present

values and standards of the world” would seem foolish yet would, in fact, be an expression of a higher form of wisdom.¹⁵

Early Christianity struggled with the dilemma of being both in and not of the world. One result was the development of asceticism. All cultures require some form of self-discipline, and all religions make a point of it, but Christianity gave special emphasis to the discipline of the body for spiritual development.¹⁶ This emphasis led to the remarkable movement, continued over several centuries, of men known as the Desert Fathers—monks who retreated from the world into virtual canyons of isolation and self-mortification. These hermits were in the world in only the most reductive sense—a body barely sustaining itself in a small physical place—and they believed that there was a direct relationship between withdrawing from

society and drawing nearer to God. They were social (and political) in spite of themselves, of course—caught up in biblical narrative, becoming objects of pilgrimage, providing a spiritual counterweight to the dominion of the Roman empire—but their legacy was to make detachment synonymous with hermetic withdrawal from the world.¹⁷ Subsequent development of this movement into organized Christian monasticism perfectly exemplifies the observation made by Kenneth Burke, a theorist of symbolic action, that the monastic order “*institutionalizes the mentality prevailing at the point of crisis*. It fixes the transitional.”¹⁸ All too often, of course, the attempt to create a separate community of discipline resulted only in more intensified forms of worldly failings in miniature.

The early institutional church was also supposed to embody the dual identity of being in yet not of the world, although the history of its development became another story. By Erasmus’ time the church was thoroughly given over to all the corruptions of the social world. While condemning this excess, Erasmus was, however, no ascetic (for that matter, neither was Jesus).¹⁹ Historians have wondered why Erasmus did not leave Catholicism for the Protestant reformation, and to a modern reader he can sound like a mainstream Protestant. What Erasmus did do was find a way to be in the church but not of it. He stands in contrast to Luther, Calvin, and others who, as the philosopher Max Weber demonstrated, not only broke with the Church but were creating a new and very worldly asceticism.²⁰ *The Praise of Folly* is an important work in both social theory and religious thought for this reason: Erasmus works out a program for Christian detachment that is grounded not in self-control or in withdrawal from the world but in an appreciation of abundance and charity. This perspective may be called his radical sociality.

15. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* 60.

16. For an extensive discussion of asceticism as a transcultural phenomenon, see Wimbush and Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism*. For an insightful discussion of how it is reproduced within modern culture, particularly as aestheticism, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

17. Recent studies of the relationships between asceticism and monasticism include Wimbush and Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism*, and W. J. Sheils, ed., *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

18. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1937) 70.

19. Actually this is a vexing question in discussions of Erasmus’ theology, and not merely because asceticism is always relative and has so many affinities with other forms of piety. See, for example, Kenneth Ronald Davis: *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1974), especially 266 ff.

20. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958). See also Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965).

Folly, Prudence, and Allegory

ERASMUS claims that his celebration of human duplicity was inspired by a pun on the name of his friend the English humanist Thomas More (*moriamur* is the Greek word for folly). There is no doubt that the work is a marvel of verbal excess and social transgression. The narrator is Folly herself: a woman who speaks in public, who proclaims herself the heir of the ancient Sophists, who exults in her sophisticated rhetorical performance as she lambastes every social character from pimp to pontiff. The work follows a progression from the everyday illusions of ordinary people, to the hypocrisy of the elites, to the holy foolishness of being filled with the spirit of God. These themes are developed through a stunning mastery of rhetorical technique, an adroit commingling of a wide range of popular and learned genres, and a supple fusion of scholarly erudition and self-professed verbal playfulness. The work also is a study in paradox: because the fool claims that all people are fools, the reader is caught from the start in a logical trap identical to that set by the Cretan who claims that all Cretans are liars. This logical loop is then the basis for a fugal development of a dizzying series of inversions. For example, Erasmus

elucidates higher and lower forms of satire, prudence, folly, wisdom, madness, piety, and interpretation, suggesting that sometimes one should choose one, sometimes the other, sometimes both. Contemporary readers may be attracted to the hall of mirrors in which Folly has placed herself, but Erasmus probably would see that approach as a distraction from the didactic intention he claimed for all of his work.²¹

The foundational idea of Erasmus' theology was that one should imitate Christ's model of living in the world. Piety is achieved in the practice of everyday life, not in assertions of doctrine. One should imitate Christ Himself, not those who profess to be imitating Him. One should imitate His intentions of living in peace, justice, and tolerance, if not every literal detail of His speech or action. According to Erasmus, this process of imitation should be equitably adapted to the actual circumstances of one's own world, it is best done by acquiring the interpretive skills that come from the study of humane letters, and it will result in happiness. Erasmus insisted that Jesus enjoyed life; while He exemplified a simple life, it was not one that was dour or isolated.²² This ethical program of imitation is perfectly of a piece with Erasmus' hermeneutical method: both emphasize attentiveness to the original text, criticize literal interpretation, orient the part toward the intention revealed by the whole, depend on a sense of decorum, and historicize the model to assist its application in different historical circumstances, all the while maintaining a sense of fair-mindedness that allows for human fallibility.²³

One might expect Erasmus' hermeneutical perspective to lead to the writing of primers rather than to the production of a literary *tour de force*. Erasmus accomplished both, of course, but his own hermeneutic counsels against reducing the one to the other. One should ask what the excessiveness of *Folly* adds to the understanding of Erasmus' idea

21. "In the 'Folly' I had no other aim than I had in my other writings, but my method was different." (letter to Martin Dorp (1514), in *The Praise of Folly*, 142). DeMolen's introductory essay for the *Essays on the Works of Erasmus* provides a succinct account of the consistency of intention across Erasmus' *opera*.

22. "Completely mistaken, therefore, are those who talk in their foolish fashion about Christ's having been sad and gloomy in character and calling on us to follow a dismal mode of life." (from "The Epicurean," in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965] 549).

23. Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*; Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997).

of the right way to live. Indeed, its performative abundance and charity are crucial elements of Erasmus' Christian humanism, while its allegorical form provides an important basis for articulating faith in a postmodern world. Christian detachment liberates one from the tyranny of social hierarchy, but it also can dispose one to condemn the world rather than save it. Only by recourse to the advice of Folly is one reminded that there is no wisdom in a comprehensive denunciation of humanity.

Key features in this perspective are found in Erasmus' celebration of ordinary foolishness. He draws a portrait of life as one continual round of reciprocating deceptions. How could it be otherwise, for one's "nature is such that no personality can be discovered which is not subject to many faults, and when you add to this the great variety of temperaments and interests, the many mistakes and errors and accidents to which the lives of mortals are subject," how could one get along for even an hour if one accounted for every fault?²⁴ Erasmus does not stop there. Just as so many forms of deceit are reciprocating, as when lovers each overlook the other's imperfections, so it is that "it is just such laughable absurdities that fit and join together the whole framework of society and make the wheels of life run smoothly."²⁵ In short, without folly

no companionship among friends, no blending of lives in marriage can be either

pleasant or stable. The people would no longer tolerate their prince, nor the master his servant, nor the maidservant her mistress, nor the teacher his pupil, nor one friend another, nor the wife her husband, nor the landlord his tenant, nor a soldier his barracks-buddy, nor one messmate another, in their relations with one another if they did not sometimes err, sometimes flatter, sometimes wisely overlook things, sometimes soothe themselves with the sweet salve of folly.²⁶

Such a litany might seem merely delightful to some, while others might find it contaminated with ideological preferences, but both reactions miss the basic point. The text is above all an assertion of an attitude: what Burke calls the comic frame. As Burke states: "Like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from *crime* to *stupidity*. . . . Henry James made an essentially comic observation when saying that his plots required the intervention of *fools*." Burke adds that

The progress of human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle.²⁷

The importance of Burke's observation can best be appreciated by looking at the synoptic assessment of human nature made by Erasmus' contemporary, Machiavelli. While setting out his famous argument that a prince (or ruler) must be willing to violate morality if he is to acquire and hold power, Machiavelli breaks into a denunciation of human duplicity:

For it may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful, voluble, dissemblers, anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain; as long as you benefit them, they are entirely yours; they offer you their blood,

24. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 32.

25. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 33.

26. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 33–34.

27. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* 41. As Kaiser notes in *Praisers of Folly*: "The fool is the comic character par excellence" (11). Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) emphasizes the importance of playfulness within a sophisticated rhetorical sensibility such as Erasmus possessed.

their goods, their life, and their children, as I have before said, when the necessity is remote; but when it approaches, they revolt.²⁸

The vehemence of this passage is striking; it seems to be a heartfelt statement by a bitter man. Machiavelli and Erasmus see the same thing, but they express very different attitudes. Machiavelli declares that human fallibility is criminal, and so it justifies criminal actions by anyone who desires to rule over human beings. Erasmus sees the same failings in a comic light: he does not condemn or reject them; he accepts them and sees unexpected value in their operation.

Machiavelli and Erasmus are worlds apart in many ways, but they are engaged in a common theological dialectic: Machiavelli's detachment from the social world in a single-minded pursuit of power is a return to, or a reoccupation of, medieval asceticism.²⁹ The Machiavellian actor is a paragon of self-control obtained by disciplined training and accompanied by deep suspicion of beauty, luxury, and other inducements to drop one's guard and enjoy life. (From reading *The Prince* one would never know that Machiavelli lived amidst the cultural florescence of the Italian Renaissance.) Erasmus' celebration of the human comedy is an attempt to save that world from the twin perversions of renuncia-

tion and corruption and to provide a means for moving from expediency to a practical wisdom that is both pious and livable. This salvation is at ease with an abundant life, but it still requires a sense of detachment lest one lose sight of the kingdom of God and become merely worldly. The question becomes, therefore, what is the comic form of detachment?

One answer can be located in Folly's discussion of prudence. There is much to recommend this passage as a clear statement of Erasmus' own beliefs: prudence would seem to be a prime target for Folly's attack but, instead, becomes an example of her most fundamental perspective. The movement through three kinds of prudence mimics the structure of the work as a whole. The passage exemplifies many of the hermeneutical principles Erasmus espouses. Above all, it imitates Christ's revaluation of values.

The lowest form of prudence discussed is the sense of caution and expediency that would guide one to worldly success. Folly dispenses with this form easily, offering in its stead the claim that "good judgment" begins with the realization that "life will turn out to be death; beauty will become ugliness; riches will turn to poverty; notoriety will become fame; learning will be ignorance," and so on. In fact, it turns out that "all human affairs . . . have two aspects quite different from each other."³⁰ Prudence might then seem to be the ability to discern and value the reality behind the appearance, but it is not that simple.

If someone should try to strip away the costumes and makeup from the actors performing a play on the stage and to display them to the spectators in their own natural appearance, wouldn't he ruin the whole play? . . . This deception, this disguise, is the very thing that holds the attention of the spectators. Now the whole life of mortal men, what is it but a sort of play. . . . True, all these images are

28. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci, in Max Lerner, ed., *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 61.

29. The concept of reoccupation comes from Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert W. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). I discuss the concept with additional application to Machiavelli in Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

30. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 43, 42.

unreal, but this play cannot be performed in any other way.³¹

Erasmus then introduces another shift in perspective:

If at this point some wiseman, dropped down direct from heaven, should suddenly jump up and begin shouting that this figure who everyone reverences as if he were the lord god is not even a man because he is controlled by his passions like an animal, that he is a servant of the lowest rank because he willingly serves so many filthy masters, or if he should turn to another man who is mourning the death of his parent and tell him to laugh instead because the dead man has at last really begun to live, whereas this life is really nothing but a sort of death. . . . I ask you, what would he accomplish except to make everyone take him for a raving lunatic? Just as nothing is more foolish than misplaced wisdom, so to, nothing is more imprudent than perverse prudence.³²

This is a remarkable passage, for this “wiseman” seems to be setting out the core beliefs of Christian faith and affirming the Pauline assertion that the Christian will appear as a

fool to the wise. But it is just this last allusion that gives the game away, for the speaker here is not labeled a fool, but a “wiseman.” Note how Erasmus quotes Paul near the conclusion of the work: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the prudence of the prudent I will reject.”³³ This wiseman gives us a semblance—the deceptive appearance—of the Christian revaluation of values but not the real thing. Ordinary prudence has given way not to a higher form of wisdom but to a perversion of itself. Caution has been replaced by overbearing righteousness, a sense of restraint by the willingness to trample another’s grief, sincere imitation by literal recitation of Christian doctrine.

So it is that the reader arrives at Erasmus’ third form of prudence:

True prudence, on the other hand, recognizes human limitations and does not strive to leap beyond them; it is willing to run with the herd, to overlook faults tolerantly or to share them in a friendly spirit. But, they say, that is exactly what we mean by folly. (I will hardly deny it—as long as they will reciprocate by admitting that this is exactly what it means to perform the play of life.)³⁴

At the end of *The Praise of Folly*, as in the ideal Christian life, folly and wisdom merge into a single perspective of tolerant acceptance of human fallibility. Detachment does not endorse the viciousness of ordinary rulers or succumb to the mean-spirited skepticism of those who condemn all of humanity. Indeed, “Christ’s whole teaching stresses nothing so much as gentleness, tolerance, *contemptus mundi*.”³⁵ Erasmus’ hermeneutical principle of equitable interpretation of the text is matched perfectly by his theological principle of comic acceptance of humanity. Furthermore, in each case the necessary sense of detachment is supplied by attending to the formal features of the subject. By examining the rhetorical techniques that compose a text, and the dramaturgical conven-

31. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 44. This passage could double today as an excellent statement of the social theory known as dramatism that was developed by Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, and others. For a discussion of the theological implications of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor for Erasmus, see Gordon, *Humanist Play and Belief*, 157 ff.

32. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 44.

33. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 129, citing 1 Cor. 1:19, referring to Is. 29:14. This passage in Erasmus is thick with the Pauline revaluation of wisdom and folly in 1 Cor. 17–31, a text that sets folly over wisdom in order to ascend to the higher wisdom of God’s revelation through Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 30), which also is the pattern of Erasmus’ encomium.

34. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 44.

35. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 125.

tions that script human affairs, one can see something as it is while still recognizing that it contributes to the meaning of the whole. By seeing actors as stock characters, one can identify their faults while still accepting that one cannot compose a play without them. By seeing social conventions as conventions, one can use them as expedient means for developing a better way of life.

Erasmus can still be critical, of course. *The Praise of Folly* includes a no-holds-barred denunciation of the deceitful practices of social, political, and ecclesiastical elites. The work as a whole corresponds to what the literary theorist Northrup Frye calls second-phase satire, which breaks up “the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement (not necessarily, of course, the progress) of society.” As Frye would expect, Erasmus is least patient with the Church when it peddles superstition, pedantry, and dogmatism; his satire is “a tactical defense of the pragmatic against the dogmatic.”³⁶ This defense makes allowances for human limitations but has no sympathy for those who press human life into the artificial limitations of one social order. Folly does not condemn the world, but she has to save us from ourselves, and she uses her many inversions to combat the human tendency to invert social hierarchy and human value—that is, to act as though humanity were made for the Sabbath.

The dramatic perspective provides the means for a tolerant, humane detachment from human affairs on behalf of human

dignity, justice, and righteousness, but it needs to be buttressed. It becomes too easy to believe there is only one play and to want to perfect the script. Then one is on the road to another tyranny—another affirmation of a single hierarchy of values that makes no allowances for the variety of religious and human experience. This is why the copiousness of Folly’s discourse is important: this excessiveness is an iconic performance of the richness of human life. Furthermore, it is this sense of abundance (and charity) that allows one to accept deception—and persuasion, and being persuaded, and artistry and erudition—as a part of life. As the thousands of proverbs, puns, allusions, citations, bad jokes, winks at the audience, and other such tricks pile up, one is overcome by the sheer abundance of the text. But there is also a serious edge to Erasmus’ comic amplifications. He concludes the first part of the encomium with a long riff that begins, “God lord, what a theater, how manifold the feverish fretting of fools.”³⁷ There follows in a three-page paragraph a litany of follies evident in the many anxieties of marriage, business, politics—indeed, all of life as it would appear while looking down “from the moon as Menippus once did, and see the innumerable broils of mortals, you would think you were looking at a great cloud of flies or gnats quarreling among themselves, warring, plotting, plundering, playing, frisking, being born, declining, dying.”³⁸ The Menippian satire has encyclopedic scope, as does the Christian vision (here known by allusion to the “cloud of witnesses”). This long amplification of the *theatrum mundi* becomes a call to compassion. Detachment leads to the recognition that the folly, and tragedy, of human life will continue if only because of the sheer abundance of that life. The human being is “such a tiny creature, so frail and short-lived,” yet ever active, ever generative.³⁹

The epiphany leads directly to the second section of *The Praise of Folly*, where Erasmus

36. Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 233–34.

37. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 76.

38. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 78.

39. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 78.

makes it very clear what one should *not* do to humankind. His condemnation of exploitation and oppression is not ambiguous. It is the third section that, not surprisingly, presents some difficulty, since it concerns what one should do if one is to live in but not of the world. How can one be detached, yet thoroughly involved in human affairs? How can one live, foolishly or wisely, once one sees the world as a play? Stated in terms of the postmodern condition: how can one have any commitment to a universal or transcendental reality within a world of signifiers? To answer these questions, one can focus on Erasmus' use of allegory.

The radical sociality in Erasmus' vision of the human world has its counterpart in his use of allegorical coding to represent that world. Allegory can be defined as the rearticulation of a text or genre in figural language for persuasive effect.⁴⁰ Such compositions are patently artificial, and they evoke multiple

interpretations. Exegetical allegory of a certain kind was developed by Christian intellectuals as the means for holding together sacred and secular (classical) literatures; allegories typically are distinguished by their mixing of media, genres, or high and low forms of discourse. *The Praise of Folly* is replete with allegorical techniques, while the text as a whole is a radically polysemic play of signifiers generating a range of interpretations that can rarely be stabilized. Folly herself is patently allegorical—a wholly textual character, a stock figure from a prior literature who becomes a vehicle for the interpretation of still other texts. Indeed, the questions of the unity of the encomium and its relation to Erasmus' other work dissolve once one recognizes that Folly is not a mimetic narrator or fixed symbol: she has no essence, does not unify language and reality, secular and sacred literatures, piety and prudence, or anything else for that matter. Her speech begins by flaunting its textuality while confounding its relationship to its subject, author, and audience, and it then showers the reader with a myriad of adages, allusions, and other such textual fragments, some of which are artfully flawed, many of which are taken from classical texts and medieval popular culture, and all of which create a text teeming with other voices and unstable meanings. Organizational devices become merely artificial, as the aborted conclusion makes clear. Along the way Folly champions figural interpretation of scripture and, in perhaps her most eloquent moment, justifies herself through a subtle analogy to Mary, who stepped out of her woman's role to enjoy the company of Jesus.⁴¹ The analogy is also a pun on Folly's Greek name (*Moria* = *Maria*), which in turn echoes the pun on Thomas More's name that inspired the work. Even high eloquence draws on the lowest form of humor, as the allegorical code simultaneously asserts and denies the hierarchies informing its own composition.

40. For the literary history and characteristic techniques of allegory, see, for example, the following works: Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1921); Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977); Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (1959; New York: Oxford UP, 1966); Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1964); Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in Charles S. Singleton, ed., *Interpretation: Theory and Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1969); John MacQueen, *Allegory* (London: Methuen, 1970); Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History*, 25 (1994): 549–67; Zhang Longxi, "Historicizing the Postmodern Allegory," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 36 (1994): 212–31.

41. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 137.

As Mary stepped out of her role to become a disciple of Jesus, she assumed a higher calling thought to be ridiculous by the world. Folly does the same, stepping out of woman's (silent) place to subject herself to greater laughter in the service of a higher spirituality. Allegory does the same, allowing the interpreter to step out of a hierarchy to reimagine one's relationship to the world. Thus *The Praise of Folly* presents a powerful model for Christian detachment: first, the humane, charitable acceptance of the fact that human beings are irredeemably social (and, therefore, inevitably persuading and persuaded, mistaken and misleading); second, the use of allegorical coding to keep any one social order subject to the liberating play of interpretation.

The Praise of Folly and Pulp Fiction

WHAT does Erasmus' model of Christian detachment have to do with modern, twenty-first century readers? The quest is no different today, though it takes different forms—as one can see in a contemporary work of art. The film *Pulp Fiction* received both popular and critical acclaim for its creative screenplay and sharp acting.⁴² What was not noticed is that the film is shot through with allegorical techniques. It begins by bringing visual and verbal conventions into the foreground of the viewer's awareness—the opening scene has wide, black borders, while the title is accompanied by its printed dictionary definition. The film then follows a wholly paratactic organization that scrambles temporal sequence—for example, a leading character dies midway through the film and reappears in additional scenes thereafter. It includes a narcotic (and dreamlike) scene that

presents popular culture as a museum of iconic simulations—the restaurant where the maitre d' is Ed Sullivan. It contains a distinctively allegorical figure, the cosmological ornament—in this case, the mysterious contents that glow when a briefcase is opened and cause a character to remark while shaken with awe, "It's beautiful." The most surprising feature of the film, however, may be its unapologetic presentation of a religious conversion.

The two central characters, Vincent and Jules, are paradigmatic sophists—nomadic professional assassins who, when not practicing their profession, spend their time together enjoying virtuoso dialectical contests. Near the end of the movie, however, they find themselves living in different worlds. This difference first appears in a scene in which the two are eating breakfast after a hit job. They begin sparring over the question of why Jules will not eat bacon. Eventually, Jules' wit draws laughter, and Vincent concedes defeat, remarking that he is glad to see that Jules finally is starting to "lighten up," as he has been too serious lately. But, in fact, Jules *is* serious—dead serious: he informs Vincent that he is planning to leave "the life." Shaken by a near miss earlier in the day, Jules sees his deliverance as a "miracle" demonstrating the grace of God. Vincent disagrees, insisting that the event was a "freak occurrence," and they enter into a second debate. Unlike in their previous verbal contests, however, Vincent becomes profoundly rattled. "What will you do?" he asks. Jules replies, "I'm just gonna walk the earth. . . . You know, like Cain in Kung Fu." Vincent retorts: "You'll be a bum!"—just like the homeless beggars who are "without a job, a residence, a legal tender." Without hint of irony, Vincent has called on the conventional social authority he needs to protect his most basic sense of reality. The outlaw nomad craves stability; the killer reveres the social order; the heroin user sounds like a bourgeois father arguing

42. *Pulp Fiction*, prod. Lawrence Bender, dir. Quentin Tarantino, 154 min., Miramax Films, 1994.

with a wayward child. Vincent wants to continue to live in his wholly human world. He carries a gun in one hand and a book of detective stories in the other; together they maintain a world where the fundamental reality is a hierarchy of the strong and the weak maintained by professional violence. Confronted with Jules' folly, he can only withdraw to the men's room.

Vincent's withdrawal sets the stage for the next scene. Two petty crooks hold up the restaurant where Vincent and Jules are eating, and as the scene evolves "Ringo," one of the hold-up artists, points his pistol into Jules' face. Distracted by the glow from the briefcase, he ends up disarmed and staring into the barrel of Jules' handgun. Jules explains to the crook that ordinarily he would be dead by now, except that Jules is "in a transitional period." Instead of killing him, Jules gives him \$1,500 as a ransom for his life. In case the parallel with Christ is not obvious enough, Jules asks the crook if he reads the Bible. Jules then recites the text that he has always intoned before murdering his victims—a pastiche of prophetic injunctions that culminates in the promise of the Lord's vengeance given in Ezekiel 25:17. The significance of this text was not immediately apparent earlier in the film, but now Jules provides an account of what it might mean.

43. For one description of the fourfold method, see McQueen, *Allegory*, 46 ff. Keep in mind that throughout the Middle Ages there was considerable variation in the definition and application of allegorical exegesis. The first level of interpretation could be literal or historical or both. The second could be called allegorical or typological. The third could be called tropological or moral. The second and third levels could be reversed in order of exposition. Although the final level of anagogic interpretation seemed more stable, it was affected by all that came before. All these variations could be used with more or less critical imagination, and the interpretive criteria could vary for any level. For a discussion of how Erasmus understood allegorical exegesis, see Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, chapter 3.

In effect, there are four possible meanings, which correspond to the fourfold method of medieval allegorical exegesis.⁴³ First, Jules says, "I never gave much thought to what it meant. It was just" something to say to a victim "before I popped a cap in his ass." The passage had merely literal sense, and this literalness is equated with relatively meaningless episodes of his past life. But Jules has been thinking, and now the words might mean that "You're the evil man, and I'm the righteous man, and Mr. Nine Millimeter here, he's the shepherd protecting my righteous ass in the valley of darkness." This interpretation is clearly tropological: symbolic meaning is brought out to guide conduct, in this case, the conduct appropriate to a Machiavellian world where the first duty is to protect oneself. But there is more: the text also could mean that "You're the righteous man, and I'm the shepherd, and it's the world that's evil and selfish. I'd like that." This is the typological meaning, where Jules is identified with Christ and the Church Militant confronting a fallen world. If his change of heart were sentimental—one of the delusions of ordinary life—Jules might have stopped here, but he goes on to the anagogic interpretation that asserts the fundamental nature of reality while directing the attention to God: "The truth is, you're the weak, and I'm the tyranny of evil men, but I'm trying, Ringo, I'm trying real hard to be the shepherd."

With such words, Jules simultaneously reasserts the reality of the world's hierarchy of power and takes himself out of that hierarchy. The hard hierarchy of political realism remains intact—just as Jules is using his murderous skills to control Ringo—yet it now has been fundamentally complicated by his personal transformation on behalf of the values of a righteous community. This stepping out of the hierarchy while still acknowledging its power is doubly transformative: Jules is liberated, and the world becomes incarnational. The other ways in which he

differs from Vincent now fall into place: Jules is religious; he reads the Bible; he believes in miracles, in God, in God's grace, and in the mystery of how it all fits together. Following his conversation with Vincent, instead of withdrawing from the world Jules sets out to walk the earth—to be in the world though not of it. More important is the fact that, whereas Vincent is locked into the natural attitude of his society and, because of that, doomed to be a slave to those above him, Jules is detached and free from that hierarchy. One sees that Vincent really is dead—he was, in fact, killed in a scene that takes place later in the story but that was placed earlier in the film—while Jules chooses life.

Jules is a model of Christian detachment because he sees the world as it is while remaining capable of feeling compassion toward those who are weaker than he is. Everything he does in the restaurant when the petty crooks enter is foolish: he could have killed without risk rather than wait for the gun to be pointed directly at him, and he could have kept his money rather than giving

it away. (Vincent is so appalled by the gift to Ringo that he threatens to shoot him on general principles.)⁴⁴ Jules' folly, of course, reveals the greater wisdom. Earlier in the day Jules had casually murdered some kids while idly chatting with them and tasting their fast food. What disturbed Jules about the episode was the inexplicable near miss when one of the kids had shot at him from close range, not his murdering three human beings. This worldly wisdom includes continual detachment of the self from others and particularly from those who are weak. The higher wisdom of Jules' later folly in the restaurant replaces that kind of moral distance with detachment from the hierarchy that justifies its practice. Only then can Jules become capable of seeing a potential victim as a fellow human being.

Conclusion

JULES demonstrates how Christian detachment works as a pattern for action. He sees the world as it is, and he still loves what he sees. Ringo is weak, yet Jules acts to help him, not kill him. (He says so directly at one point, and one can surmise that neither man will return to a life a crime.) The difference in outcome results not from seeing things other than they are but from detaching oneself from the hierarchy that would ordain a killing.

Jules' actions provide the answer to the basic question of what one should detach oneself from. Christian detachment is not detachment from the world or even from the social world or from the world of power. Such acts cannot succeed on their own terms, and they do not lead to the abundant life God has promised. The model of Christ places one squarely in the world but free of the tyranny of status. Christian detachment is detachment from status, especially as it is evident in the operation of hierarchy. (What could be more an affront to the principle of hierarchy as it is defined through the ranks

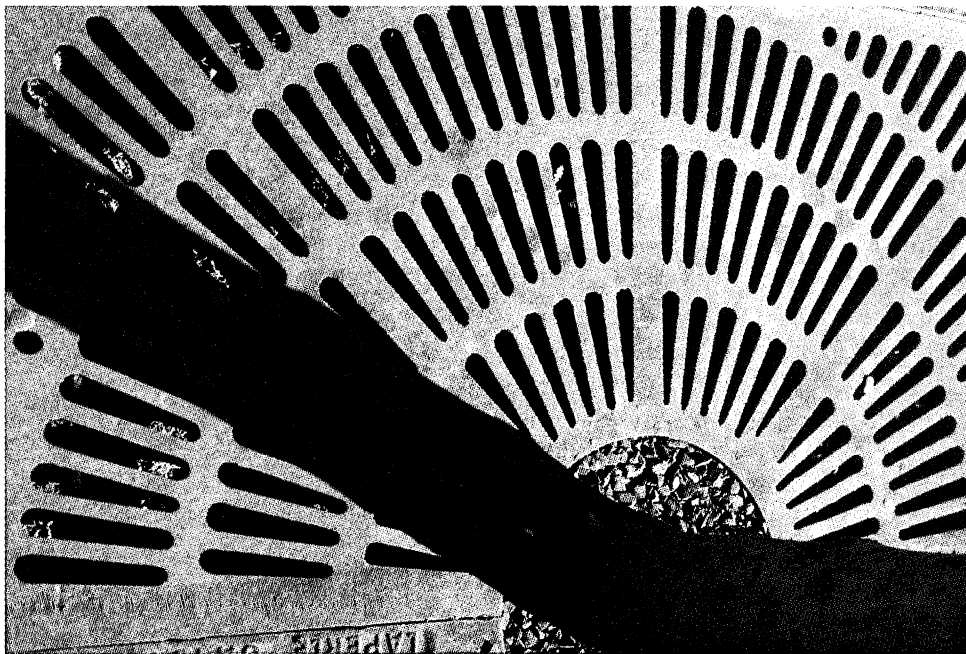
44. It becomes evident that Vincent is a model of the lesser prudence modeled by the pulp fiction he reads: for example, the movie begins with Vincent conducting an exercise in prudential reasoning about how he should conduct himself when escorting the boss's wife, a dangerous job given her seductiveness and the boss's capacity for violence. Vincent can be adaptive but only within the hard constraints of his world. He can maneuver to hold on to his place in the hierarchy of violence, but he cannot reflect on the hierarchy itself. Vincent exemplifies the conception of prudence that is characteristic of modern usage of the concept. For criticism of this reduction of prudence to the vocabulary of political realism, see Alberto R. Coll, "Normative Prudence as a Tradition of Statecraft," *Ethics and International Affairs*, 5 (1991): 33–51; Robert Hariman and Francis A. Beer, "What Would Be Prudent? Forms of Reasoning in World Politics," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 1 (1998): 299–330; Robert Hariman, ed., *The Discourses of Prudence*, forthcoming.

of religious authority upward to God Himself, than for God to lower Himself and assume human form and a humiliating death?) Attributions of status are inevitable—part of our inescapably social consciousness—and they can be empowering or ennobling or goads to great creativity or even the means for demanding justice. They also can cause deep pain and rationalize enormous suffering, and somebody always has to pay the costs of social order. Hierarchy can be the gentle agency of human development, and a false god demanding wholly unnecessary sacrifice. In any case, the ability to free oneself from rationalized inequity in order to help someone else is not easy. It requires a model, someone like Jules.

Jules did nothing by himself, however. In fact, Jules needed Ringo. Because Ringo is

weak, he needs to be loved. Because Jules is strong, he needs to be loving. Without the weak, the strong would have a harder time being loving (really loving, as opposed to enjoying reciprocal admiration). As cultural critic Bill Readings has remarked, “We are, bluntly speaking, addicted to others, and no amount of twelve-stepping will allow us to overcome that dependency.”⁴⁵ This is another dimension of the radical sociality that binds all humanity together in a common vulnerability. This dependency is the source of so many anxieties but also of the human capacity to love. So it is that God is bound to us: A loving God needs our weakness as much as we need His strength. The thought of God being dependent on humanity—sitting among us at a twelve-step meeting, perhaps—may appear scandalous, but only if we allow excessive seriousness (and regard for status) to cloud our vision. From Erasmus’ perspective, the image would be merely ludicrous, another example of how the higher wisdom is to be found amidst folly.

45. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996) 190.





Where Does a “Jest’s Prosperity” Lie? Comedy and Community

BY JIM STOKES

IN *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, one of Shakespeare’s comedies, the King of Navarre and his three young courtier companions have been trying unsuccessfully to woo Rosaline, the Princess of France, and her three ladies-in-waiting, who are present at the king’s court on a diplomatic mission to resolve a land dispute. The king and his companions have been using wit, games, and insincere language—without success—to win the hearts of the four perceptive and distrusting women. These trivial pastimes come abruptly to a halt when news arrives that the Princess’ father, the French king, has died. As the ladies prepare to depart for a yearlong period of mourning, the young men try one last time to extract a promise of commitment from them, to no avail. Instead, the ladies say that, if the men will spend the coming year in penitence to purge their sins of insincerity and self-indulgence, the ladies might consider their suits.

The most severe “punishment” is reserved for the wittiest of the men, Berowne, the leader in the foolish philosophies that the men espouse. His penance, imposed by his favorite, Rosaline, is to spend twelve months, without rest, seeking “the weary beds of people

sick” and visiting the “speechless sick”; he is to use his wit—heretofore known for its “mocks” and “wounding flouts”—for conversing with “groaning wretches” and encouraging “the pained impotent to smile.” Berowne complains that his task—“To move wild laughter in the throat of death”—is impossible because “Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.” It can, Rosaline retorts, if one understands that

A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear

Of him that hears it, never in the tongue

Of him that makes it. . . .¹

Put another way, a jest begins with words, but it can be judged only in its effect.

The exchange between two of Shakespeare’s most disconnected lovers, Berowne and Rosaline, raises powerful questions about the nature of comedy. Can mirth “move a soul in agony”? Should it even try? One might well ask what is funny in the fact that the Iranian courts recently sentenced three Bahá’ís to death for refusing to renounce their religious faith. What is potentially amusing about floods sweeping Africa and leaving thousands stranded to die slow deaths while neighboring nations and those in power in the West dither about how or whether to provide emergency aid? What is humorous in the uncountable moments, planned and unplanned, of suffering and death that might be averted if those with the means to counter them would only do so?

Even Shakespeare’s “lightest” comedies reverberate with deeper themes that lead beyond humor to sober reflection. “What

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1. Shakespeare, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans et al., 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1997) 5.2.822, 851, 843, 844, 852, 853, 855, 857, 861–63.

would it take,” Shakespeare seems to be asking, “to transform this difficult world into a better one?”

One might argue that comedy can generally be judged by one of three standards. It can be mainly about the maker of the comedy (the comedian), or about the content, or about the recipient (the audience). If the comedy centers on its maker, it is about the comedian who is constructing the “mirth.” That is the point Rosaline makes in her unrelenting critique of her callow young suitor. Berowne has mainly been serving up his humor as a display of his own wit. For Berowne and his companions, their humor is justified by their own enjoyment of it, but Rosaline and her ladies-in-waiting remain unimpressed. Judged by the standard of comedy that is about the maker of the comedy, even the wit of those two great Renaissance humanists, Erasmus and More, is, in a sense, self-referential in that it proposes what is essentially a prescription for how an individual should respond to the world’s contradictions and imperfections. It is personal spirituality as a stance, and, from that perspective, Erasmus is the world’s greatest stand-up comedian—or at least a very great wit speaking to a highly select audience.

Comedy can also be about the matter itself, the content. It can be so constructed that one cannot help but respond to it and marvel at the intricacy of the joke or story, or the physical wonder of the pratfall, or the true cleverness of the comment. From this perspective one cannot help but see the jest as a connoisseur would, marveling at the skill of the maker and the splendor in the form of the mirth itself (everything from the multiple plotting of a Seinfeld episode or a Shakespearean comedy to the narrative manipulation of time in the dark comic films *Pulp Fiction* and *Magnolia*). It is a comedy that calls attention to itself. Unless done with great skill, such comedy can engender mere technical appreciation rather than laughter. There is a sense

in which one can look at Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, for example, with a kind of fascination at its sustained literary conceits without finding it, by any means, a thigh-slapper. It is sustained satire that amazes one with both its insights and its techniques.

From a third standard, comedy is valued mainly to the extent that it reaches its audience. In the comedy of wit, satire, parody, and humorous invective, the effects on the audience can range from causing its targets to feel stung or belittled or excluded, even driven out from society; or it can ask the audience to take part in directing that same feeling toward others than the comedian or the audience. In contrast, what might be called the comedy of community is inclusive. It seeks both individual and collective laughter. It is essentially social, communitarian, and festive; for it to work, the audience must share a common sense that they belong to a single and coherent culture. In that it tends to identify and pillory deviations from the social norm as part of a process that educates both the character whose actions or thoughts are being pilloried and the audience as a whole, it might also be called the comedy of social correction. In any event, this type of comedy ultimately draws people into that community because this kind of comedy is essentially social.

But Shakespeare’s female protagonists in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* take comedy beyond the three standards by which comedy is normally judged to a fourth standard, one that operates at an entirely different and deeper level. Shakespeare is concerned with the moral (as opposed to the moralistic) dimensions of comedy—its function as healer, for both the comedian and the audience. Rosaline has directed her adolescent lover toward a uniquely difficult audience: those in the throes of suffering, some of them even at death’s door. She also ignores matters of class, giving absolutely no indication that her would-be paramour should direct his mirth-making only,

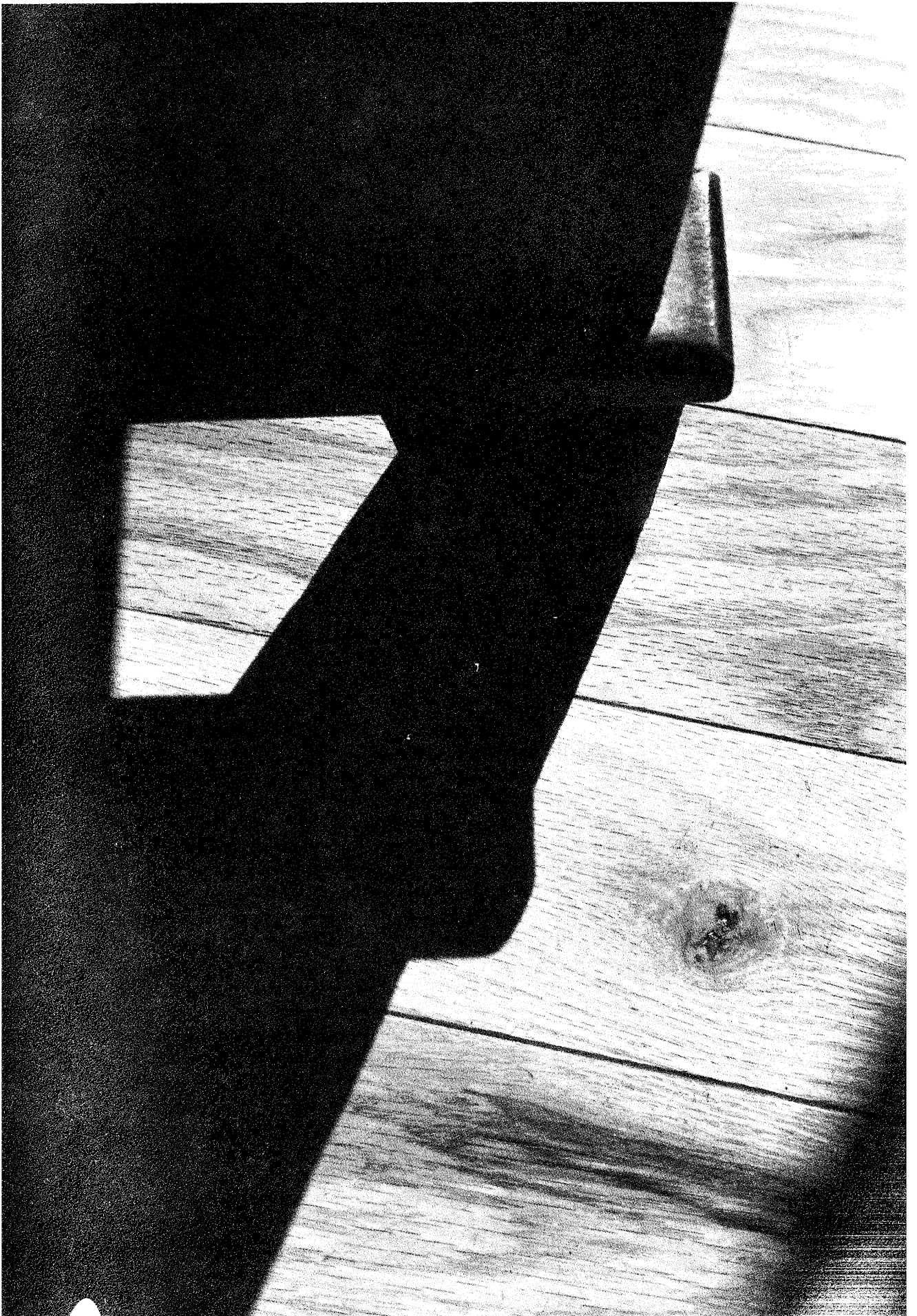
or even primarily, toward the privileged classes. Berowne's assigned task is to move sick and dying people—even the ones unable to speak or to rise from their sick beds—to laugh or at least to smile.

Comedy that reaches, affects, and changes its audience has a deep moral infrastructure that often takes the comedy to the edge of tragedy, leading one more to reflection than to laughter (though in Shakespeare the farcical elements can induce belly laughs). In *Love's Labor's Lost* the playwright is asking, through the directive words of its heroine, that a shallow suitor alter his very understanding of the nature of his relation to the larger community and to the least of its members. In this sense, a comedy such as Shakespeare's is far deeper and more applicable in its goals than those of a Quentin Tarantino or even of Erasmus or More. In going far beyond matters of personal stance, this kind of comedy says that its value is in prompting individuals to take social actions that reflect a transformation both of their thoughts and deeds. This comedy is, in fact, a kind of spiritual comedy, one that asks for no less than a new idea of community and a new idea of one's responsibility to that community. Of course, this spiritualized and universalized notion of community is also a very old idea, many of the values of which were present in the religious communities of the Middle Ages, and the influence of which both Erasmus and More reflect. The difference is that these two authors present such an ideal-based community satirically as being a lost, unreachable goal to be found nowhere (in Utopia), whereas Shakespeare is almost

demanding (theatrically) that such values be applied in his own society.

From the perspective of a comedic author's demand that words be actualized in deeds, and without meaning to force a comparison, the themes and vision in a play such as *Love's Labor's Lost* bear striking similarities, in at least one important respect, to the aims and vision of the Bahá'í Faith. Both see the need for, and offer a vision of, a new kind of community, one that will require something approaching miraculous personal and collective transformation if it is to be achieved. This new community must be one that somehow connects the weakest and the most powerful by links of common humanity; it must transcend class and other forms of exclusion; it must have elements of compassion that extend beyond that shown toward immediate family and friends; it must involve sustained commitment; it must arise from a profound "re-seeing" as one looks at the world and responds to it.

Though the differences between a sixteenth-century playwright and a young, but global, modern religion are obviously great, and any comparison must be sensibly circumscribed, yet both are responding to essentially the same thing in the human condition. As Shakespeare walked the rough streets of sixteenth-century Southwark, going from his lodgings to the Globe Theater, he would daily have encountered scenes of unspeakable cruelty, suffering, and injustice. Anyone with a television set walks similar streets of suffering today—but on a global scale. The issue remains the same: How is one to help mirth in its serious work of displacing agony?



Turbulent Prairie: Politics, the Press, and the Bahá'í Faith in Kansas, 1897

BY DUANE L. HERRMANN

THE Kansas Bahá'í community rightly claims to be the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere. In 1897 a series of stormy events in the city of Enterprise, Kansas, produced the first significant news coverage of local Bahá'í activities in the Western world. The publicity arose from a confluence of religious, political, and social turmoil that occurred when Ibrahim Kheiralla, the first person to teach about the Bahá'í Faith in North America, brought his version of the Bahá'í teachings to Enterprise, where he attracted followers who included controversial local political figures. Their interest in the Faith was used, in turn, for political advantage by their enemies, who derided that interest with articles in many of the state's numerous newspapers. The result was the earliest significant and sustained publicity that has yet surfaced of Bahá'í activities in North America. Using some forty press reports that have so far been found, one can reconstruct

the story of a fascinating episode that provides a record both of Bahá'í activities by "a small band of believers" in Enterprise, Kansas, and of a politically and socially charged moment in the heartland of America on the eve of the twentieth century.¹

Enterprise was a small industrial center in the heart of the American plains. In addition to the Ehrsam Machine Works, which operated for over one hundred years, Enterprise's industrial base included the Hoffman Mills, which ground and refined grain products and processed wool. Enterprise was well connected by railroad to major U.S. cities for marketing its milling products and machine works. Ehrsam milling equipment and farm implements were known nationwide. Products from Hoffman Mills were exhibited at the Columbian Exposition in 1893 and had been the first refined flour to be shipped outside Kansas and the first to be exported outside the United States.² Hoffman aggressively marketed the hard winter wheat grown in Kansas, which was quite different from the soft spring wheat grown in Europe and most of America at that time. The level of gluten in the hard winter wheat was found to be more effective in rising bread than soft spring wheat, which is light and is now used mostly for baking cakes. After an initial period of dramatic growth, the population of Enterprise peaked between nine hundred and one thousand and remained stable during the twentieth century.

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1. Barbara Ehrsam to Maud Lampson, 14 Nov. 1899, Maud Lampson Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.

2. Herman Steen, *Flour Milling in America* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison, 1963) 313.

The leading families of Enterprise were related. Jacob Ehrsam, founder of the Ehrsam Machine Works, had helped Christian Hoffman to construct his mills and then married Christian's sister-in-law, Barbara Hilty. Hoffman's wife was the sister of Barbara Hilty Ehrsam, who, with their brother, Michael Senn, had opened and operated the first store in Enterprise. Senn was also a major figure in the founding of the town and by 1897 was a retired state Senator. The oldest daughter of Barbara Ehrsam was Josephine Hilty, the first of the two children from her first marriage to Joseph Hilty, who was killed by a horse after returning from service in the Civil War.

In 1897 the Bahá'í Faith became a part of life in Enterprise. Josephine Hilty had gone

3. Edward G. Nelson, *The Company and the Community*, (Lawrence, Kansas: Bureau of Business Research, U of Kansas, 1956) 312. Robert C. Haywood in *Victorian West* [(Lawrence, Kansas: UP of Kansas, 1991) 202] notes: "For a young Victorian lady the possession of musical talent and a pleasing voice were valued next to a 'good name.'" "Teaches Strange Things," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 16 Jul. 1897: 1, Kansas State Historical Society Topeka, Kansas (hereafter KSHS); the article was reprinted in the *Topeka Daily Capital* ("Hoffman's New Religion," *Topeka Daily Capital* 14 Jul. 1897: 3, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library).

4. Nelson, *Company and the Community* 312.

5. Robert Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Origins, 1892-1900* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) 108.

6. Glenn Cameron, *A Basic Bahá'í Chronology* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997) 123.

7. In contrast, at the end of the twentieth century, 180 national consultative councils had been constituted for as many national Bahá'í communities to oversee the affairs of 131,933 local Bahá'í communities; see *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, 1997-98*, comp. The Universal House of Justice (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1999) 279, and the 1999 Ridván message from the Universal House of Justice.

8. See letters of Lua Getsinger and others to various believers after meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Velda P. Metelmann, *Lua Getsinger: Herald of the Covenant* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997) 23-45.

to Chicago for advanced musical training. There, the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* reported, she became a follower of Ibrahim Kheiralla; Josephine shared the news with her mother who was known for her search for more spiritual nourishment than the local church had to offer.³ Barbara Ehrsam's brother-in-law, then a minister of the local church, eventually expelled Barbara publicly from the church for her continuing quest and unorthodox views.⁴ Kheiralla, the first person to give the Bahá'í message on the American continent, had started his lessons in Chicago in 1895. In 1897 he came, at the invitation of Mrs. Ehrsam, to Enterprise for a vacation.⁵

To understand the events that followed in the infant Bahá'í community in Enterprise, Kansas, it is necessary to provide some contextual background. At the time of Barbara Ehrsam's spiritual search, more than one hundred years ago, the Bahá'í Faith looked vastly different than it does today. In 1897 it was new to North America, having been first publicly mentioned at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. The religion itself only dated from 1844. It had few adherents and no institutions; none of its scripture had been published in English. In fact, in 1897 the first consultative council of Bahá'ís anywhere in the world was being formed, half a world away, in Teheran, Persia.⁶ By the turn of the twentieth century, similar councils would be formed in Chicago; Kenosha, Wisconsin; and New York City.⁷

Kheiralla's understanding of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith proved to be limited. He came from a Syrian Christian background and had studied the Bahá'í teachings only briefly before coming to America. But he was the first Bahá'í teacher on the continent, and no one here knew his limitations. Only later, when contact was established with the Head of the Faith in Palestine, would a more complete understanding of the Bahá'í teachings become known.⁸

Kheiralla's attempts to earn a living in the



BARBARA EHRSAM
the first Bahá'í in Enterprise, Kansas; the mother of Josephine Hilty Kimmel Abramson, who became a Bahá'í in Chicago; and hostess of Ibrahim Kheiralla, the first Bahá'í teacher in North America.



JOSEPHINE HILTY [KIMMEL ABRAMSON]
a daughter of Barbara Ehrsam.
An Enterprise, Kansas, resident, she heard about the Bahá'í Faith in Chicago and became a Bahá'í.

United States were not successful until he tapped the market for “healers” and unorthodox teachings. He obtained a fraudulent mail-

9. For a review of the life of Ibrahim Kheiralla, see Richard Hollinger, “Ibrahim George Kheiralla and the Bahá'í Faith in America,” *From East and West: Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, ed. Juan R. Cole and Moojan Momen, vol. 2 (Los Angeles, Kalimát Press, 1984) 95–133.

10. The “Greatest Name,” in the Bahá'í Faith, refers to *bahá*, Arabic for “glory, splendour, or light. Bahá, or any of its derivatives, such as Abhá, as well as certain phrases such as Alláh'u'Abhá, Ya Bahá'u'lláh, or Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá, are all referred to as the Greatest Name.” See “Greatest Name, the,” *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, ed. Wendy Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989) 90.

11. Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* 40.

12. Quoted in Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* 229.

order medical degree and combined his healing practice with teaching his limited understanding of the Bahá'í Faith.⁹ Eventually he developed a series of twelve graduated lessons culminating in announcing the existence of a “Greatest Name” whereby the initiate might enter into a special relationship with the divine.¹⁰ The final step of his classes was the imparting of that Greatest Name and the news that “God had returned to earth in the person of Bahá'u'llah [the founder of the Bahá'í Faith] and that his Son, Jesus Christ, [meaning 'Abdu'l-Bahá] was living in Akka.”¹¹ There was some semblance to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in a few of Kheiralla's lessons, but no substantial similarity. He initially claimed to have met Bahá'u'lláh but then amended that to its having been a “spiritual” meeting.¹² Nevertheless, Kheiralla's les-

sons were successful, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the American Bahá'í community numbered about fifteen hundred people, about half of whom lived in or near Chicago.¹³ Enterprise, Kansas, became one of the other, smaller Bahá'í communities.

When Kheiralla visited Enterprise in 1897, only two pieces of Bahá'í literature existed in English, both of which he had written himself.¹⁴ One of these pamphlets, "The Identity and Personality of God," provides evidence of Kheiralla's lack of knowledge about or understanding of the Bahá'í teachings. Among its twenty-five topics only two have a direct correlation with the Bahá'í Faith: "the concept of the oneness or singleness of God" and references to the Greatest Name. Evidently Kheiralla brought this pamphlet to Enterprise because some statements from it were reprinted or paraphrased in newspaper articles reporting on Kheiralla's visit.¹⁵

Kheiralla arrived in Enterprise during the week of 12 July 1897 and began his lessons almost immediately. Because prominent residents attended—among them Barbara Ehrsam's brother (retired State Senator Senn) and nephew (C. B. Hoffman, the center of some political controversy)—the classes became

local news. Because of the principals' statewide political activities, that local news was subsequently broadcast to some fourteen Kansas cities, most in the northeastern part of the state. Without the political connections—Kansas was a political boiling pot at the time—the Bahá'í classes would likely have received much less attention. Studies of the late nineteenth-century American Bahá'í community have shown that, in general, press notice of Bahá'í activities was minimal.¹⁶

News practices common at the time also increased coverage. In the nineteenth century, standards were not as uniform as they are today. It was then quite common for newspapers to copy news articles intact from other newspapers. Sometimes, but not always, the original newspaper or the city of origin would be given credit. Some newsmen prided themselves in rewriting their own stories from other papers so that they could recast the information according to their own understanding or to local interests, but the choice to do so was theirs. In addition, a news collecting system (a forerunner of modern news syndicates and press associations) now called "patent" or "boilerplate" newspapers spread bits of international, national, and regional news far and wide. This process involved printing whole or partial pages of newspapers, including the masthead, in a central location and shipping them by railroad to the distant, local communities where the blank spaces were filled with local news and ads. This packaging allowed small, local newspapers, without the expense of gathering information themselves, to include international, national, and regional news.¹⁷ In consequence, one sentence or paragraph could appear in several newspapers across the state of Kansas. All these methods of gathering news are reflected in the press coverage of Bahá'í activities in Enterprise in 1897.

Kansas, in the late nineteenth century, had a remarkable abundance of newspapers, partially due to the multiplicity of daily as

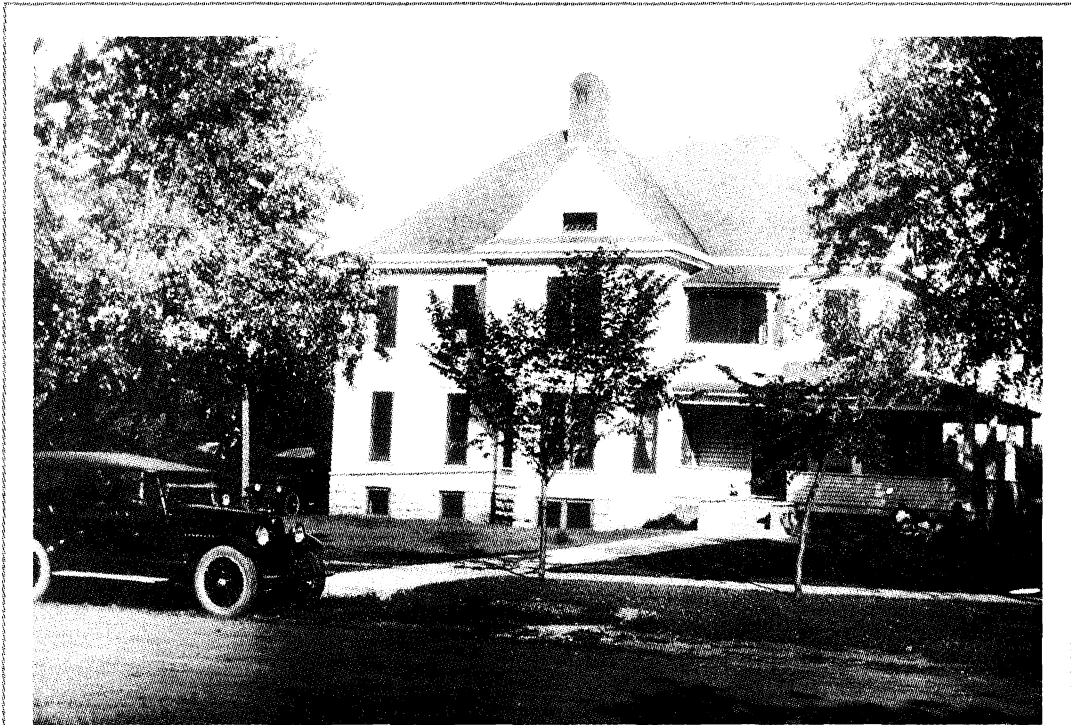
13. Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* 163.

14. Hollinger, "Ibrahim George Kheiralla" 109, and Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* xxvii.

15. I. G. Kheiralla, *Za-ti-et Al-lah: The Identity and the Personality of God* (n.p.: 1896) 3, 5.

16. See Peter Smith, "The American Bahá'í Community, 1894–1917: A Preliminary Survey," in *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History, Volume One* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1982) 85–223; Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* 85–93; and Duane L. Herrmann, "The Bahá'í Faith in Kansas, 1897–1947," in *Community Histories: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, Volume Six*, ed. Richard Hollinger (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1992) 67–108.

17. Merle W. Wells, "'Patent' Newspapers: Their Impact in Kansas (1861–1906)," in Forrest R. Blackburn, et al., *Kansas and the West* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1976) 140–49.



BARBARA EHRSAM'S HOUSE
in Enterprise, Kansas, where she hosted Ibrahim Kheiralla during the summer of 1897
and where he gave lessons on the Bahá'í Faith.

well as weekly editions of many newspapers. The small town of Abilene had two competing daily newspapers, each with its own weekly editions: the *Abilene Reflector* and the *Abilene Chronicle*. Smaller towns, such as Enterprise, had only one weekly newspaper. Objectivity was not a regular part of news reporting.¹⁸ In Kansas many newspapers were profoundly political and even announced their bias in

their name—for example, the *Salina Republican-Journal* and the *Dillon Republican*. To this day Kansas is a predominantly Republican state but was even more so before Populism divided the party in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, some of the information about Kheiralla and his classes that appears in the news articles can be confirmed from sources outside Kansas, such as surviving notes taken by Kheiralla's students in Chicago.

First Reports on Bahá'í Activities in Kansas Newspapers

THE earliest surviving article mentioning Bahá'í activities was one published on 13 July 1897 in the *Abilene Daily Reflector*, perhaps the first mention of Bahá'í activities in En-

18. Bahá'u'lláh urges newspapers to be just for they reflect the affairs of the world. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. [Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1988] 39–40).

terprise.¹⁹ The article was reprinted in toto two days later in the weekly edition of the *Reflector*. This short article uses an unnamed source, saying: "It is reported that C. B. Hoffman is practicing under an Arabian doctor in the art of curing by laying on of hands. Chris will probably add this new department to the State Agricultural college when he masters it more thoroughly."²⁰ The comment seems to have been an intentional political jab at Christian B. Hoffman (1851–1915, son of the millwright, Christian Hoffman), who was at the time a member of the Board of Regents of the State Agricultural College, now Kansas State University, and so well known that no further identification was necessary.

19. [no headline], *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 13 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS. The newspaper articles will not be discussed chronologically but generationally, because the printed dates of the newspaper are not the dates on which they appeared on the street. Frequently an article in one newspaper would be reprinted from paper to paper, sometimes altered, sometimes not. Similarity in wording allows them to be traced from one to another. In that way several different streams of articles have been identified. The dates of the newspapers are no indication of their appearance because many newspapers were only published weekly or were weekly editions of daily newspapers. Sometimes the date of the "original" weekly newspaper was later than the date of daily newspapers that had reprinted from it. Two major news articles were used by several newspapers, copied intact or nearly so, or as the basis of new articles.

20. [no headlines], *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Reflector* 15 Jul. 1897: 6, KSHS.

21. Hoffman Papers, biographical outline data, Spencer Library, University of Kansas and Patricia Michaelis, "C. B. Hoffman, Kansas Socialist," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (Kansas State Historical Society) 41 (1975): 166–82.

22. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 1931).

23. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal* 15 Jul. 1897: 1. The article was reprinted in Abilene, Kansas, a week later: "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 23 Jul. 1897: 1, KSHS.

He had already made substantial changes at the Agricultural College that had drawn considerable ire statewide. In a state the economy of which was, and is, based on farming, any changes at the state-supported Agricultural College rapidly drew attention. Among other things, Christian's establishing the first dormitory, cafeteria, and bookstore on campus, which were not seen as reasonable expenditures of state funds, had caused a great outcry.²¹ A few years earlier he and thousands of others had deserted the Republican Party and had become members of the Populist Party, a largely grassroots movement arising from the earlier Farmers Alliance. Its main concerns were those of the state's many farmers, such as lowering rates for freighting produce to market, and of the working class in general. The split had caused political power to pass to the Democratic Party, generating bitterness on the part of the remaining Republicans, who perceived it as a betrayal.²²

Sensationalism in Reports on the Bahá'í Faith

ON Thursday, 15 July, the *Enterprise Journal* ran the first major news article about Kheiralla's visit. The headline read: "THE BIBLE IS NOT THE TRUTH," clearly intending to attract attention in this church-going state. The headline did not necessarily reflect what Kheiralla taught, nor did it represent Bahá'í belief. This article, as it appeared in the *Enterprise* paper, is sympathetic in tone and, when compared with notes of Kheiralla's lectures in Chicago, is relatively accurate in describing Kheiralla's teachings.²³

The article begins by explaining why Kheiralla is in town:

Dr. I. G. Kheiralla, Chicago, who is spending his vacation with the family of J. B. Ehrsam, is teaching the people of *Enterprise* the religion of his order. Dr. Kheiralla was sent by his Order from the Orient to this country to teach "the truth"

and has a large following in Chicago where he has resided since coming to this country from Egypt.²⁴

Kheiralla promoted himself as an officially designated "teacher," though that status does not exist within the Bahá'í Faith.

The article continues by describing Kheiralla's teachings:

He teaches the Oneness and Singleness of God; also whence we came, why we are here and where we are going. He gives to his private pupils the key to the sealed books of the Bible which he uses to verify his teachings. He believes the truth is in the Bible but that the Bible is not the truth.²⁵

The article does not further explain that apparent paradox.

Next the article describes what might be called his teaching parameters:

One of the strict rules of his Order is that no teacher is allowed to accept any remuneration, directly or indirectly, for teaching the truth; neither is any one allowed to teach unless a most thorough investigation has been made and every statement which they make can be proven.²⁶

The first part of this statement is true of the Bahá'í Faith, which has neither a paid clergy nor professional teachers. The second part was Kheiralla's own assertion, perhaps one of the techniques that he used to maintain control and authority over the community he was building. Yet this assertion bears some simi-

larity to the Bahá'í principle of the independent investigation of truth, which is enjoined on all Bahá'ís, meaning that all are obligated to think for themselves rather than blindly follow others.

The final paragraph of the news story describes the schedule he had established in Enterprise:

On Sunday evenings there will be public talks given in the parlors of the Ehrsam residence, to which all are invited. The private classes which have been held twice, meet Tuesday and Friday afternoons and evenings. There are twenty-seven people taking the private teachings and another class will be formed later. . . .²⁷

It is likely that Kheiralla had not yet been in Enterprise for a full week, since a later article said that a class would be held on Sundays. With private classes described as being held Tuesdays and Fridays, afternoons and evenings, it is unclear whether Kheiralla was teaching four classes a week, thereby condensing his twelve lessons into three weeks, or was holding duplicate classes. He stayed in Enterprise six weeks. If the classes were in the afternoon, how could those with jobs have attended? Answers to these questions have not yet been found. Still, attendance of twenty-seven is a substantial number for a city as small as Enterprise and a remarkable response. The reference to the possibility of a second class being started suggests that even more interest was evident in the town.

The article concludes:

A great interest is manifested by those who have begun the teachings of this religion of which so little is said, for the name of the order is only revealed to those who have taken all the teachings.²⁸

Kheiralla's insistence on secrecy, which is contrary to Bahá'í teachings, was the same procedure he had used in Chicago. It is possible that some level of secrecy had been necessary in Egypt, a Muslim country, where Kheiralla had lived and where even today freedom of

24. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal*, 15 Jul. 1897: 1.

25. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal*, 15 Jul. 1897: 1.

26. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal*, 15 Jul. 1897: 1.

27. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal*, 15 Jul. 1897: 1.

28. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal*, 15 Jul. 1897: 1.

religion is not as open as in the United States. But in Enterprise, Kansas, it raised suspicions. However, the tone of the 15 July article in the *Enterprise Journal* is respectful and straightforward, perhaps because the publisher of the newspaper was Christian Hoffman, father of C. B. and brother-in-law of Barbara Ehrsam, Kheiralla's host.

The article from the *Enterprise Journal* was reprinted the next week in the 23 July issue of the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*, bearing the same headline ("THE BIBLE IS NOT THE TRUTH") but adding negative comments at the beginning and end of the article.²⁹ It begins by mildly mocking the Enterprise newspaper, "The Enterprise Journal discovered this week that 'Dr.' Kheiralla was in its town and prints some facts concerning him and his creed in addition to those heretofore published in the CHRONICLE." The *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* version then deletes the introduction from the *Enterprise Journal* article and begins by saying that Kheiralla had been "sent" here "by his order." Except for omitting the dates, times, and location of the classes, the body of the article is reprinted exactly as it appeared in the *Enterprise Journal*. The article ends by criticizing Kheiralla's secrecy: "Nobody, however, will take much stock in a religion which cannot stand the open light of day and Kheiralla's 'religion' is perhaps as great a fake as his alleged miraculous cures."³⁰ Battle lines for responses to this new Faith had now been drawn.

29. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 23 Jul. 1897: 1.

30. "The Bible Is Not the Truth," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 23 Jul. 1897: 1.

31. "Teaches Strange Things," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 16 Jul. 1897: 1.

32. "Teaches Strange Things," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 16 Jul. 1897: 1.

33. "Teaches Strange Things," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 16 Jul. 1897: 1.

A Stream of News Articles

NO OTHER newspapers appear to have picked up the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* article, but they did pick up others. One week earlier, on 16 July, the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* had printed at the top of page one a major article that appears to be the basis for most subsequent coverage across the state. As was then common, the article had three headlines stacked in descending size and emphasis. The first headline read: "TEACHES STRANGE THINGS." The second read: "An Arabian Springs an Entirely New Religion on the People of Enterprise." The third, in much smaller type, read: "HAS WONDERFUL POWER TO HEAL." Though the article identifies Kheiralla as an "Arabian," he was actually a Syrian whose last permanent address had been Egypt.³¹ But in the middle of Kansas in the 1890s, such a distinction was irrelevant: all Semites were "Arabs," and he did speak Arabic.

The 16 July article reported that Kheiralla "claims not only to teach the only true religion but to possess remarkable powers as a healer of all ills that flesh is heir to."³² Here one can see the result of Kheiralla's having conflated his religious teachings with his healing practice. He would eventually give up the healing business, but in 1897 he had not yet done so. The specific phrase about healing all the ills of humankind caught the interest of many editors and was repeated in many other newspapers, sometimes as the basis of their news articles.

"Dr. Kheiralla," the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* article continued, "has written a book in which he sets forth his peculiar religious ideas, which are to a considerable extent fanatical. By some it is called Neo-Platonism, by others pronounced a combination of Arabic mysticism, German rationalism, mesmerism, etc."³³ The reference to "mysticism, rationalism and mesmerism" is a key to the genealogy of subsequent news articles that drastically condense or summarize the 16 July article to the

extent that sometimes this phrase, or part of it, is all that remains of the original. How these terms could be applied to the Bahá'í teachings remains a mystery, especially the reference to hypnotism (then called mesmerism, after Friedrich Anton Mesmer, who perfected the procedure). Since no Bahá'í scriptures had yet been translated into English, there was nothing the people of the time could use to form an accurate assessment. An assertion that Kheiralla taught "a modified form of Pantheism" is flatly at odds with actual Bahá'í teachings.³⁴ The article described Kheiralla's teaching schedules as "two systems of teaching," public lectures on Sundays and private lectures on Wednesday evenings, a very different schedule from that given in the 15 July *Enterprise Journal* article. One assumes the *Enterprise* schedule to be more accurate, though it is possible that the schedule changed between 15 and 16 July.³⁵

The 16 July article in the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* is also historically valuable in that it provides the names of some of the individuals who attended the classes. According to the article, "An inner circle, or class formed to take the advanced course in the Kheiralla religion, already has several members, includ-

ing, it is said, C. B. Hoffman, C. V. Topping, Ed Haffner etc." C. B. Hoffman's name is not on Kheiralla's own list, though the other two are. The article also mentions Josephine Hilty (referred to as "Josie") as having become a believer while still in Chicago. Others known to have attended the class included family members, Julia Ehrsam and John J. Abramson, a distant cousin. The article also claims that Kheiralla cured one of the Ehrsam boys of colic and helped a blind granddaughter of Barbara Ehrsam ("a little girl named Hilty") to distinguish between light and dark and among colors.³⁶ No other mention of these cures has been found.

On Wednesday, 14 July, the *Topeka Daily Capital* (a morning paper), the *Topeka State Journal* (an evening paper), and the *Lawrence Daily Journal* all reprinted the 16 July article from the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*, or versions of it. Topeka, the capital city of Kansas, is eighty-five miles east of Enterprise and Lawrence a further thirty miles east of Topeka; the news had traveled far and fast. The articles in the Topeka newspapers were essentially the same, having been lifted directly from the original article in the 16 July *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*. Obviously the *Chronicle* of 16 July had appeared before that date when it ran the original version of the article. It is likely that the weekly edition carried a date subsequent to the release date, just as some monthly news magazines still do today to ensure a longer shelf life; hence the newspaper could well have reached Topeka before the issue date.

The *Topeka Daily Capital* gave credit to the *Chronicle*, while the *Topeka State Journal* put "Enterprise" in the headline and byline. The *Capital* titled the article: "HOFFMAN'S NEW RELIGION," signaling that the newspaper's primary interest was political. This version reprinted all except the last paragraph of the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* article, which dealt with calendar dates relevant only to Enterprise.³⁷ The *State Journal* headlined the

34. "Teaches Strange Things," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 16 Jul. 1897: 1.

35. Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* 109. In Chicago, Kheiralla gave his classes only once a week, but it would not have been cost effective for him to stay in Enterprise that long. By conducting the class several times a week in Enterprise he could use his time more wisely and move on to another town. The private classes were later described as the "advanced class," which raises the question of how, or whether, the early lessons were previously given to members of the advanced class.

36. "Teaches Strange Things," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 16 Jul. 1897: 1, KSHS.

37. "Hoffman's New Religion," *Topeka (Kansas) Daily Capital* 14 Jul. 1897: 3, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.



JULIA EHRSAM

a daughter of Barbara Ehrsam and younger half-sister of Josephine Hilty [Kimmel Abramson]. She attended Kheiralla's classes on the Bahá'í Faith in 1897.



JOHN J. ABRAMSON

a distant cousin of Jacob Ehrsam, Barbara Ehrsam's second husband. Possibly of Jewish extraction, Abramson attended Kheiralla's 1897 Bahá'í class in Enterprise and later corresponded with a relative in Palestine and with Thornton Chase, the first Bahá'í in North America.

article: "HEALER AT ENTERPRISE," with a subheading, "An Arabian Teaches a New Doctrine—C. B. Hoffman Investigates It."³⁸ Here again, Hoffman was the center of attention. The *Journal* reprinted the first and second paragraphs of the *Chronicle* article intact and parts of the third and fourth. The *Journal* omitted opinionated comments and the reference to Josephine Hilty, thereby

38. "Healer At Enterprise," *Topeka (Kansas) State Journal* 14 Jul. 1897: 3, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

making the article a more objective news story.

The third news article bearing a date of 14 July—the one published in the *Lawrence Daily Journal*—began a sequence that brought the news full circle. The article contained the phrase "mysticism, rationalism and mesmerism," showing its genealogical connection to the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* article. The rest of the *Lawrence Daily Journal* article was spiteful retaliation. The Lawrence newspaper was radically Republican, and Hoffman, now a Populist, had betrayed the Republican party. The complete text of the article reads:

It is reported from Enterprise, Kansas,

that C. B. Hoffman, the man who has been playing hammer and eggs with the agricultural college, is a member of a new religious sect organized out there by a gentleman by the name of Ibrahim Kheiralla, late of Arabia. The religion is said to be a conglomeration of mysticism, rationalism and mesmerism. With wheels of that kind in his head it is no wonder Hoffman wants to grind things up.³⁹

The game of “hammer and eggs” is not one in which the eggs ever win. The wheels and grinding are apparent allusions to the Hoffman Mills. The paper’s anger at Hoffman is undisguised. This article was reprinted on 17 July in the weekly edition of the *Lawrence Weekly Journal*, where even the word breaks are the same, indicating that this and other sections of type had been lifted directly from one edition of the paper to another.⁴⁰

On 15 July, the day after the article first appeared in the *Lawrence Daily Journal*, the *Abilene Daily Reflector* reprinted it, giving credit to the *Lawrence Journal*, where the images of the hammer and eggs and the grinding had first appeared on 14 July, and retaining the

reference to “mysticism, rationalism and mesmerism” that first appeared in the 16 July *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*. The “news” had now come full circle back to Abilene.⁴¹

The original *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* article dated 16 July is also likely to have been the basis of the 15 July story headlined “New Sect for Kansas” that appeared in the *Leavenworth Times* (140 miles northeast of Enterprise), and reprinted in the *Leavenworth Weekly Times* on 22 July. Significant rewriting is evident, but some of the same terms and phrases reappear—for example, calling the religion “a combination of German rationalism, neo-Platonism and transcendentalism” and saying that Kheiralla was “curing disease by laying on of hands.” It creatively jibes C. B. Hoffman as one who has “passed into the mystic realm” and attributes to him a quote, saying that there “is something to it,” which the other articles do not. It also adds the detail that Hoffman “has sent for his friend Breidenthal to come and be initiated next Sunday.”⁴² Breidenthal was John W. Breidenthal (1862–1910), the then State Bank Commissioner, a Republican turned Populist like Hoffman, the head of the Kansas Populist Party from 1893 through 1897, and also, like Hoffman, a resident (at one time) of Enterprise.⁴³ This is the only mention of Breidenthal in connection with Kheiralla’s classes in Enterprise, but it demonstrates the political network into which Hoffman provided access for Kheiralla. Later in the summer, after departing Enterprise for Chicago, Kheiralla was found in Topeka in the company of the highest state officials.⁴⁴

A very unusual short article apparently generated by Kheiralla’s presence in Enterprise appeared in the 15 July *Atchison Daily Globe* (140 miles northeast of Enterprise). The item stated: “The ‘healer’ business is so profitable that a good many ‘healers’ are springing up. The latest is an Irishman who claims to be an Arabian.”⁴⁵ The editor of the *Atchison Daily Globe* had evidently been keep-

39. [no headline], *Lawrence (Kansas) Daily Journal* 14 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS.

40. [no headline], *Lawrence (Kansas) Weekly Journal* 17 Jul. 1897: 9, KSHS.

41. [no headline], *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 16 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS.

42. “New Sect for Kansas,” *Leavenworth (Kansas) Times* 16 Jul. 1897: 6 and *Leavenworth (Kansas) Weekly Times* 22 Jul. 1897: 3, KSHS.

43. Kirke Mecham, ed., *The Annals of Kansas: 1886–1925* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1886–1925) 162, 259, 300, and William E. Connelley, Sec., *History of Kansas State and People: Kansas at the First Quarter Post of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1928) 2,275.

44. “Ed Pasha’s Jewels: Private Secretary’s Decorations Explained by Dr. Kheiralla,” *Topeka (Kansas) Daily Capital* 3 Sept. 1897: 5, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

45. “News and Comment,” *Atchison (Kansas) Daily Globe* 15 Jul. 1897: 1, KSHS.

ing abreast of statewide events and related them to his immediate experience. The notice is rather cryptic and would only be understood by someone who had read other newspapers in the state and could also read between the lines of this new item. Kheiralla, who was not mentioned by name in the article, was the only "Arabian" in Kansas news at the time; hence the article must be referring to him. Earlier that summer an Irishman in Atchison who claimed to heal people was run out of town; the newspaper seems to have conflated the identities and claims of the two healers.⁴⁶

In an article dated 16 July, the *Kansas City Gazette* (150 miles east of Enterprise) picked up the news about Kheiralla and the Bahá'í Faith, combined it with comments from the 16 July *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* and the 14 July *Lawrence Daily Journal*, and put it in a column of miscellaneous, unrelated, and uncredited news items from all over the state, called "Pen, Paste and Scissors." For some reason the *Gazette* changed the location of

the events from Enterprise to Emporia (55 miles southeast of Enterprise), reporting that:

C. B. Hoffman, who has been playing hammer and eggs with the agricultural college, is a member of a new religious society organized at Emporia, Kansas, by a gentleman by the name of Ibrahim Kheiralla, late of Arabia. The religion is said to be a conglomeration of mysticism, rationalism and mesmerism.⁴⁷

That same day, 16 July, the *Junction City Tribune* (fifteen miles northeast of Enterprise) and the *Salina Herald* (thirty miles west of Enterprise) condensed different parts of the long original news article in the 16 July *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* into single but remarkably different paragraphs of local news using what were becoming familiar phrases.

The version in the *Junction City Tribune* read:

Considerable excitement has been created in Enterprise by "Dr." Kheiralla, an Arabian, who claims to possess power to heal all the ills that flesh is heir to. A little girl named Hilty, who has been blind from birth, is now reported to be able to distinguish light from darkness and note the difference in colors, by the laying on of the doctor's hands.⁴⁸

The *Salina Herald* reported more briefly:

The little town of Enterprise is said to be stirred over the peculiar teachings of one "Dr." Ibrahim G. Kheiralla, an Arabian, who claims not only to teach the only true religion but to possess remarkable powers as a healer of all ills that flesh is heir to.⁴⁹

A week later, in its 23 July edition, the *Junction City Sentinel* rephrased this same "news":

The little town of Enterprise is all worked up over the conversion of C. B. Hoffman to the new religion as taught by Dr. Ibrahim Gkerhemis Kheiralla, an Arabian who teaches the only true religion. He also claims to possess wonderful healing power.⁵⁰

46. [no headline], *Atchison (Kansas) Daily Globe* 15 Jul. 1897, KSHS.

47. "Pen Paste and Scissors," *Kansas City (Kansas) Gazette* 16 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS. One wonders if the change of the city, from Enterprise to Emporia, might have been made to tarnish, however indirectly, the reputation of William Allen White, then the most nationally famous of Kansas newsmen. One year earlier White had gained national fame by his editorial outburst entitled "What's the matter with Kansas," in the 20 August issue of his newspaper, the *Emporia Gazette*. In the editorial he lambasted the East-Coast attitude about Kansas and championed the ordinary citizens of Kansas as being the best resource of the state. Some residents of Kansas disagreed; the *Kansas City Gazette* article may have been a way to attack White's reputation.

48. [no headline], *Junction City (Kansas) Tribune* 16 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS.

49. [no headline], *Salina (Kansas) Herald* 16 Jul. 1897: 5, KSHS.

50. [no headline], *Junction City (Kansas) Sentinel* 23 Jul. 1897: 1, KSHS.

The inclusion of Kheiralla's full, native middle name is the noteworthy feature of this item and shows that some independent research had been conducted; with *Enterprise* only fifteen miles away that would not have been difficult. This item appears to end the stream of eleven articles flowing from the original one published in the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* on 16 July.

Articles of Support

A SECOND group of articles in Kansas newspapers represents an entirely different development—reporting about the Kheiralla meetings as support for freedom of conscience. A 22 July article in the *Enterprise Journal* is the earliest one yet found in the West to defend the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in print. It was prompted by two lines that had appeared on 16 July in the *Chapman Standard* (seven miles northeast of Enterprise), repeating lines from the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* article of the same date stating that “An Arabian is at Enterprise who claims to teach the only true religion. He also has the power to heal all the ills that flesh is heir to.”⁵¹ The *Enterprise Journal*, whose publisher was Christian Hoffman, the father of C. B. Hoffman, responded by repeating these two lines, crediting them to the *Chapman Standard* and retorting,

There you go, jumping at conclusions. Dr. Kheiralla teaches a new religion and one that he believes, like all other sects,

to be a true one, but as to the “only” religion and the power to heal all the ills the flesh is [“]heir to,” you are as far off from the truth as the average pop orator.⁵² Hoffman chastises the *Chapman Standard* for “jumping at conclusions” when it should have investigated Kheiralla's claims for itself. In effect, Hoffman is saying that Kheiralla is teaching a new religion that he believes to be true and that everyone has the right to believe his or her own religion to be true. Hoffman further chastises the *Standard* for going too far in saying that Kheiralla claims his religion to be the “only true religion” and one with the power to heal everything. That claim, says Hoffman, is as unfounded as the claims of someone who jumps on a soapbox to vent steam.

Why Hoffman would take on the *Chapman* newspaper but not the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle* (where the statement had originally been made) is unclear, but perhaps it was a matter of geography; *Chapman* was a small rival town to the east, while Abilene was the county seat to the west. *Chapman* and Enterprise were on a more equal footing than Enterprise and Abilene, though competition between the two existed. Notwithstanding that long-standing rivalry, Hoffman may not have wanted to take on Abilene over this issue.⁵³

Kheiralla, a Part of Enterprise's Summer Social Scene

DURING the next few weeks most newspapers took no further notice of Kheiralla's presence in Enterprise, but the *Enterprise Journal* ran brief notices indicating that Kheiralla and his family had become an accepted part of the summer social scene. One such notice, dated 12 August, matter-of-factly reports: “Ed Haffner, Emmett Hoffman and George Kheiralla are with a camping party on Lyons creek, near Woodbine, and will fight chiggers and mosquitoes for a week.”⁵⁴ Haffner and Hoffman were obviously in social circles high enough to warrant attention, and George

51. [no headline], *Chapman (Kansas) Standard* 16 Jul. 1897: 5, KSHS.

52. [no headline], *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal* 22 Jul. 1897: 4, KSHS.

53. Enterprise had tried to wrest the county government away from Abilene in retaliation for Abilene's slighting of outlying settlers in the earliest days of the county. In the election of 1882, Abilene narrowly held on to the county seat.

54. “Local Items,” *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal* 12 Aug. 1897: 5, KSHS.

Kheiralla, Kheiralla's son, was included as a normal part of their summer.

On 19 August the *Enterprise Journal* ran an innocuous note about the classes that had by then become quite common: "Dr. Kheiralla has a large class taking lectures in the new religion and and [*sic*] the meetings are reported as being very interesting."⁵⁵ This article (with the second "and" deleted) was belatedly reprinted in the 27 August edition of the *Abilene Weekly Chronicle*, after Kheiralla had left Enterprise.⁵⁶

One other brief note about Kheiralla's activities circulated through many distant Kansas newspapers that summer. It was a laconic one-line quip—"Enterprise runs to religion and Abilene to base ball"—that is obviously a product of the patent or boilerplate newspaper system because the notice is found in the exact same line in every newspaper and, in most of them, located in the exact same position on the page. The note appeared in at least one newspaper dated 28 July, in two dated 29 July, and in other newspapers with subsequent July dates. The first of these appearances was in the *Hutchinson Clipper* (95 miles southwest of Enterprise). The second two were in the *Enterprise Journal* itself as part of boilerplate copy and in the *Herington*

Times (33 miles southwest of Enterprise). The one-liner appeared in the 30 July issue of the *Junction City Sentinel* and the following day in both the *Hays Free Press* (130 miles west of Enterprise) and the *Hutchinson Democrat*. Being so brief it many have also appeared in other newspapers but has simply not yet been found in them.⁵⁷

On 30 July the *Abilene Daily Reflector* repeated (from its 13 July daily edition and 15 July weekly edition) its derision of Hoffman's recent "radical" changes at the state Agricultural College, this time adding to its original jab another jibe about departmental changes at the college: "If the new Arabian religion down at Enterprise has a mind-reading department, it ought to give Chris Hoffman a chance to realize how the people of Kansas feel about injury done the Agricultural College."⁵⁸ The issue of Hoffman's activities as a member of the College's Board of Regents would not die a peaceful death.

Disorder in Kheiralla's Class

TWO more articles that appeared in the *Abilene Daily Reflector* give a glimpse into Kheiralla's method of teaching. As previously noted, C. B. Hoffman and the former Senator Senn attended the classes. Both reportedly asked questions, a practice not allowed by Kheiralla either in Enterprise or in Chicago, where one student reported that "there is little chance for any discussion at any lecture" and that those who tried were expelled.⁵⁹ Hoffman and Senn apparently persisted in asking questions and in challenging Kheiralla's statements. Neither activity was acceptable, probably because Kheiralla had no answers to give beyond his prepared lectures. If questions departed from his text, he could not have responded, for his knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith was severely limited.

Hoffman and Senn persisted to such a degree that Kheiralla expelled them from the classes, an act that generated nearly as much press attention as his arrival had a few weeks

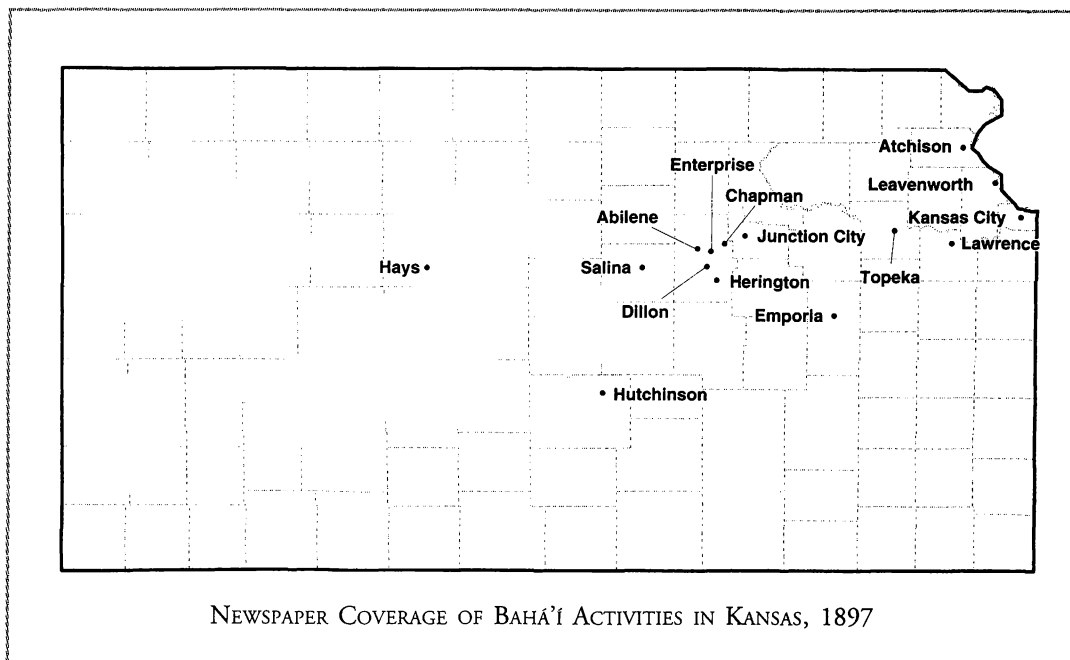
55. "Local Items," *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal* 19 Aug. 1897: 5, KSHS.

56. "Enterprise Items," *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Chronicle* 27 Aug. 1897: 3, KSHS.

57. [no headline], *Hutchinson (Kansas) Clipper* 28 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS; [no headline], *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal* 29 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS; [no headline], *Herington (Kansas) Times* 29 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS; [no headline], *Junction City (Kansas) Sentinel* 30 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS; [no headline], *Hays (Kansas) Free Press* 31 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS; and *Hutchinson (Kansas) Democrat* 31 Jul. 1897: 6, KSHS.

58. [no headline], *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 30 Jul. 1897: 2, KSHS; [no headline], *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 13 Jul. 1897: 2; [no headline], *Abilene (Kansas) Weekly Reflector* 15 Jul. 1897: 6

59. Quoted in Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins* 64.



previously. Under the headline “HOFFMANN IS ‘CHURCHED’” and the sub-head “New Arabian Religion Is Too Much for Chris,” the *Abilene Reflector* on 7 August reported:

An interesting story about the new Arabian religion at Enterprise is in circulation. It is said that Chris Hoffman was one of the first to accept the tenets of the new creed. The Arabian preacher arranged his congregation in classes. He put Hoffman in the highest one. It reached that point a few weeks ago where Hoffman imagined he knew more about the new religion than the preacher did and this so enraged the Arabian that he set Hoffman back in the

primary class as a punishment. The regent still continued to harass the preacher. As a last resort, the Arabian fired him out of the church and will not even permit him to attend his meetings. In order to get even, Hoffmann declares that he will not honor the Arabian now by establishing a chair of that particular doctrine at the Agricultural College. It is said that about 80 converts have been made to the new faith.

On 9 August the *Abilene Reflector* carried a separate notice of Senn’s expulsion.⁶⁰ Newspapers in Salina (twenty-five miles west of Enterprise) and Junction City (fifteen miles northeast of Enterprise) repeated in toto the first article on 9 and 13 August respectively. No reprints of the notice of Senn’s expulsion have been found. Both the *Salina Daily Republican-Journal* (on 9 August) and the *Junction City Sentinel* (13 August) gave credit to the *Abilene Reflector*.⁶¹

On 10 August the *Salina Daily Republican-Journal* ran a commentary on the whole affair and reprinted it on 13 August in its weekly

60. “Hoffman Is ‘Churched,’” *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 7 Aug. 1897: 3, KSHS, and “Recent Reflections,” *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 9 Aug. 1897: 3.

61. “Hoffman Is ‘Churched,’” *Salina (Kansas) Daily Republican-Journal* 9 Aug. 1897: 3, KSHS; “C. B. Hoffman Churched,” *Junction City (Kansas) Sentinel* 13 Aug. 1897: 4, KSHS. This article was reprinted on

edition.⁶² This commentary was reprinted in the *Dillon Republican* on the same day. The motive of political revenge is undisguised in the articles:

Since little Chris Hoffman's faith has been lost in "Arabian philosophy" may he not be turned from his feverish unbelief in everything sensible, and from his jaundiced view of life, to "fields of brighter day?" The little man has a big head, and there should be something more in it than an eternal kick against history, experience, laws of nature and good horse-sense. It is too bad that he should waste his very plentiful grey matter in the arid desert of discontent with everything that is.⁶³

30 July 1997 in the *Junction City Union* (successor to the *Junction City Tribune* and *Junction City Sentinel*) in the "From Our Files" column (p. 5) where news from ten, twenty, fifty, and one hundred years earlier is reprinted. Earlier in 1997 the *Union* had printed two articles about the Kansas Bahá'í centennial. Other centennial coverage appeared in twenty-one issues of sixteen newspapers in as many cities across Kansas as well as two in Missouri; some were the same newspapers that had carried news about the Bahá'í Faith in 1897.

62. [no headline], *Salina (Kansas) Daily Republican-Journal* 10 Aug. 1897: 2, KSHS, and [no headline], *Salina (Kansas) Weekly Republican-Journal* 13 Aug. 1897: 2, KSHS.

63. [no headline], *Dillon (Kansas) Republican* 13 Aug. 1897: 2, KSHS.

64. "C. B. Hoffman Churched," *Junction City (Kansas) Sentinel* 3 Aug. 1897: 4, KSHS.

65. [no headline], *Junction City (Kansas) Sentinel* 20 Aug. 1897: 3, KSHS.

66. Such a Chair would not be out of place at an agricultural university for in the *Lawḥ-i-Dunyá* (Tablet of the World), Bahá'u'lláh (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 81–97) postulates several principles upon which the reconstruction of human society is to be based. In particular, He notes that "Special regard must be paid to agriculture. Although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others" (90). Agriculture and improved farming practices are the focus at an agriculturally based university and the foundation of every society.

Also on 13 August the *Junction City Sentinel* ran the notice that had originally appeared in the *Abilene Reflector* on 7 August.⁶⁴ On 20 August the *Junction City Sentinel* summarized the news of the week and added news of Senn's expulsion:

The Arabian preacher who is doing service over at Enterprise is having all kinds of trouble with his new converts. First little Chris Hoffmann was taken from the advance [*sic*] class and placed down in the primary department and now comes the report that Ex-Senator Senn has been expelled from the church for asking so many fool questions. In explaining the expulsion the Arabian said, "I am willing at all times to argue with a question but not with a man who has no sense."⁶⁵

Hoffman and Senn were news no matter what they did.

The article that first appeared in the *Abilene Reflector* on 7 August announcing Hoffman's expulsion and mentioning establishing a chair at the Agricultural College is the first news of a possible Chair of Bahá'í Studies at what is now Kansas State University. C. B. Hoffman, as a member of the Board of Regents, wielded considerable power over the college and could have instituted such a Chair. A Chair of Bahá'í Studies at that time would likely have meant a steady income for Kheiralla (as long as Hoffman was a Regent) and an accessible student audience.⁶⁶

Kheiralla's Departure from Kansas

KHEIRALLA left Enterprise near the end of August. His departure was first noted in the *Enterprise Journal* dated 26 August:

Dr. I. G. Kheiralla and family left yesterday for Chicago after a few months stay in the city. He had a class of 22 members in his new religion and gave lectures two evenings each week for some time. He teaches his religion but does not endeavor to argue with those who care to differ from his opinions. For that reason a few

members were “churched” and gave up the lectures early in the course. George Kheiralla will attend a medical school this winter, finishing a course in medicine. Dr. Kheiralla may return later and continue his lectures.⁶⁷ The concluding comment of the article suggests that Kheiralla had not completed his classes, a conclusion supported by other sources.⁶⁸ However, no evidence has been found to suggest that Kheiralla or any other Bahá'í teacher returned to Enterprise to nurture the new Bahá'ís there. The item about Kheiralla's departure was repeated in slightly condensed form in the issue of the *Abilene Daily Reflector* with the same date.⁶⁹ No other notice of his departure has been found.

Despite the Bahá'í activity and resultant publicity during the summer of 1897 in Enterprise, a stable and permanent Bahá'í community was not established. That distinction in Kansas fell to the capital city when two of the Enterprise Bahá'ís moved to Topeka in the fall of 1906. A Bahá'í community has been continuous in Topeka since that date.

The American Bahá'í community had not, in 1897, yet developed a sufficient administrative or communication infrastructure to foster cohesion among isolated and widely scattered believers. The closest Bahá'í community to Enterprise was in Chicago, more than five hundred miles away. Though train travel was possible between the two cities, and at least one such trip was contemplated, it was simply not practical.⁷⁰ Many of the “little band of believers” gradually drifted to other interests.⁷¹

The few who maintained an interest and commitment saw the problems of communication resolved to a degree. One who attended Kheiralla's class, remained in Enterprise, and remained a Bahá'í to the end of her life was Elizabeth Frey, wife of the postmaster in 1897. She and her daughter Elsbeth traveled to Chicago in 1912 to attend that year's national Bahá'í convention and to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the leader of the Bahá'í Faith following the death of its founder, His father, Bahá'u'lláh. It was a life-transforming experience.⁷² Her steadfastness and that of other Kansas Bahá'ís provide an unbroken link between Kheiralla's classes in Enterprise during the summer of 1897 and the Kansas Bahá'í community of the twenty-first century.

The newspaper coverage of the 1897 Bahá'í activities in Enterprise, Kansas, is intrinsically interesting on several levels. It documents early activities of the second oldest Bahá'í community in the Western Hemisphere and the first to have major news coverage of its activities. It illustrates early press practices in the heartland of rural America. And it contributes evidence to the cultural mosaic of religious movements that have always found fertile, if not always initially welcoming, soil in America in which to plant themselves and grow.

67. “Kheiralla's Teaching Over,” *Enterprise (Kansas) Journal* 26 Aug. 1897: 1, KSHS.

68. Duane L. Herrmann, “Letters from a Nineteenth-Century Kansas Bahá'í,” *World Order* 28.2 (Winter 1996–97): 27–35.

69. [no headline], *Abilene (Kansas) Daily Reflector* 27 Aug. 1897: 2, KSHS.

70. Barbara Ehrsam to Maud Lampson, 3 May 1899, Maud Lampson Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.

71. Barbara Ehrsam to Maud Lampson, 14 Nov. 1899, Maud Lampson Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.

72. Elsbeth Frey Renwanz Personal Recollections, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois.

Laughter in the Darkness: *La vita è bella* [Life is Beautiful] by Roberto Benigni

REFLECTIONS ON BENIGNI'S HOLOCAUST FILM

BY FATIMA NAQVI-PETERS

"DEATH often is the point of life's joke," says Rex, the caricature of a caricaturist in Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Laughter in the Dark* (1938).¹ Set in the film world of 1920s Berlin, Nabokov's story centers on an ill-fated triangle of desire and on the clichés of the "haunted screen," the expressionist cinema of Weimar Germany. Playing with a dialectic between blindness and insight, the novel evokes a world in which the visual stimulation of the cinema leads people to simulate pathetically film melodramas and horror stories in their actual lives. Laughter, on the part of characters and reader alike, arises out of the disjunction between the main character's skewed perception of his environment and the goings-on of that world; it is macabre humor, always at the protagonist's expense. Whether spent in the haute bourgeoisie or in the demimonde, life is, indeed, one cruel and often

tasteless joke at the expense of a dimwitted fool; death is the punchline.

The grim humor in *Laughter in the Dark* is different from that in Roberto Benigni's acclaimed film, *La vita è bella* (1997). Benigni's project—a humorous treatment of the darkest hours of the twentieth century, namely, the Holocaust—seems, from its premise alone, to open itself to charges of flippancy and denigration of the historical record. The actor and director Benigni admits as much in the introduction to his screenplay; however, the redemptory potential of laughter justifies, in his view, using humor to address the Holocaust.² This daring (*spericolato*) and salvatory (*ridere ci salva*) laughter is not meant to offend. Instead, it is a form of homeopathy, meant to render us immune to the recurrence of Nazism in our midst. Citing Bosnia as an example, Benigni argues:

Il problema . . . è che questi orrori possono ripetersi sempre. . . . Chi ci assicura che non potrebbero ripetersi di nuovo, e persino da noi, se non siamo attenti, se non ci rendiamo immuni da questa follia, anche ridendone, di un riso liberatorio? [The problem . . . is that these horrors can always repeat themselves. . . . Who can assure us that they could not repeat themselves, and even here among us, if we are not careful, if we

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1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark* (1938; New York: Vintage, 1989) 182.

2. Roberto Benigni, introduction, *La vita è bella*, by Roberto Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami (Torino [Turin]: Einaudi, 1998) vi.

don't make ourselves immune to this madness, also by laughing about it, with a liberating laugh?].³

The "liberating" laughter engendered by Benigni's film is of a special sort: it teeters on the brink of the cathartic tears of tragedy and sometimes the sentimental tears of melodrama. True to humor's etymological sources, it is fluid, moving between comic delight and tragic despair.

The fluid humor in *La vita è bella* harks back to a venerable film tradition: Benigni claims to have been influenced by Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin, in Benigni's view, was a great clown who relied on the foil of human fallibility and innate cruelty for his comic effect. Twice in Benigni's film the father, Guido (Roberto Benigni), executes an exaggerated goose step to convince his young son, Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini), that the humiliation and degradation suffered at the hands of the fascists are a game. The goose step is not the contained pace of the Gestapo or the strict military drill of the soldier flanking Guido but the ridiculous march of a knock-kneed clown. As such, it is an homage, one could argue, to the awkward waddle of Chaplin's outcast in the tails and bowler hat, which rendered funny the most "precipitous flights" from the forces

of law and order.⁴ Clowns such as Chaplin, who apply society's rules *ad absurdum*,⁵ are by their nature disconcerting: "*se si guarda un clown da vicino si prende una paura tremenda. La prima impressione che fa è inquietante, la sua risa spaventa. . .*" ["if one sees a clown close up, one is gripped by a tremendous fear. The first impression he makes is disquieting, his laugh is frightening. . ."].⁶ Like the mask symbolizing the tragic and comic halves of drama, the clown's humor is a mixture of comedy, dependent on physical gags, simple slapstick, and word plays, and of tragedy, caused—in the case of Benigni's film—by the viewer's awareness of the Third Reich that forms the backdrop from the opening sequence onward. As Benigni puts it, we as viewers laugh with the sensation of having just escaped a nightmare.⁷

The dual nature of the humor in Benigni's film—dependent on a pristine type of verbal joke and particularly on physical gags (which helps explain the film's international appeal, since the comic effects are not dependent on an intimate familiarity with local custom or a native speaker's appreciation of puns and jokes) and on an extratextual knowledge of history—comes to the fore in the film's enchanted and enchanting style. The title signals that *La vita è bella* is a departure from cinematic realism; it engages with Italian film history, ultimately disavowing this acclaimed stylistic heritage. "Life is beautiful" reverses the vehement "Life is ugly, dirty," exclaimed by the actress (Maria Michi) in *Roma, città aperta* (1946), before she hands over her lover, a leader in the Resistance, to the Gestapo. Director Roberto Rossellini's film, part of his war trilogy, helped mark the arrival to the screen of neorealism, a movement associated formally and thematically with on-location shooting, a combination of professional and nonprofessional actors, a documentary hue, and a focus on society's lower classes.⁸ Benigni's mise-en-scène, editing, and plot emphasize the imaginative dimension of *La vita è bella*

3. Benigni, introduction, *La vita è bella* vii. I would like to thank Nicholas Rennie for improving upon my Italian translations.

4. André Bazin in 1948 astutely pinpointed the subversive potential of Charlie Chaplin's humor in an essay entitled "Monsieur Verdoux," in which Bazin argues, among other things, that Chaplin's film of the same title (1947) is actually a savage critique of society (in André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* ed. and trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 2 [Berkeley: U of California, 1971] 102–23).

5. Bazin, "Monsieur Verdoux" 108.

6. Benigni, introduction, *La vita è bella* iv.

7. Benigni, introduction, *La vita è bella* vi.

8. David A. Cook provides a useful summary of the major figures and developments of Italian neorealism in *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 1990) 438–56.

and depart from Rossellini's sociological bent and his "revolutionary humanism," stressing the battle of the average person against the masses.⁹ Benigni's film shares neorealism's underlying humanism, its melodramatic plot line, and its concentration on the individual story of a common fellow, but conveys its concerns through an abstracted enchantment. For, whether in the bucolic Tuscan *campagna*, in the resplendent white hotel where Guido works, or in the concentration camp with the cardboard cut-out Nazis, the film is imbued with a fairy-tale flavor.

We recognize in *La vita è bella* the morphology of place-transcending tales on which it draws—tales such as the prince on his horse rescuing the enchanted princess from the clutches of an evil suitor or the happy-go-lucky's triumph over adversity because of his pure heart. Like fairy tales, which circulate in many versions globally, inflected by regional customs and color, Guido's fate is one that occurred millions of times over; in basic structure it is similar to others.¹⁰ Even Italy's imperialist dreams in Ethiopia, presented as a pageant with an ostrich sculpture atop a cake carried by costumed Africans, are part of this fairy tale. When the film shifts to the concentration camp and Guido, like Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights*, begins his task of spinning out intricate instructions, rules, and twists to make Giosuè believe that they are battling against other teams for a prize—an armored tank is the boy's big wish—it is enough to summon up a generic

camp-image without attending to historical specificity. *La vita è bella* does not depend on the *effet de réel*, the attention to minutiae, to impart a "realist" cast to the film (as is the case with much of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* from 1993, which tries to convince us of its historical authenticity through attention to detail).¹¹ The roughly sketched surroundings—clothing, cattle cars, barbed wire, bunks—suffice to call up our image-repertoire relating to the Holocaust. Even though Benigni quotes the images of the camp's main gate, the contorted pile of bodies, and the fog from Alain Resnais' concentration-camp documentary *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), these quotations never produce a "reality effect," since they are immediately undermined by other elements of the *mise-en-scène* and by the characters' comportment.

Combining the staying power of the fairy tale—a staying power that suggests these stories fulfill an important social function—with the humor of a great clown (which subverts the tendency of fairy tales to become uncritically accepted, sanctimonious mystical entities, hallowed by their association with childhood), Benigni's film subtly, but significantly, alters the way we approach the Holocaust.¹² With the passage of time, it seems, the function of film in preserving the memory of the past has changed: the horrors of the concentration camps no longer have to be captured through verisimilitude but need to be made accessible through the "most powerfully formative tales of childhood."¹³ With the laughter that arises from such storytelling infused with humor comes the fear and sadness that great clowns can elicit. However, it is questionable whether such laughter can serve to inoculate us against what Benigni sees as history's recurrence. Guido's end, marked by an off-screen burst of machine-gun fire, reminds us that laughter in the darkness has its limits as a means of social action and that this laughter always has death as its cimmerian foil.

9. André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality," ed. and trans. Hugh Gray, *What is Cinema?* vol. 2 (Berkeley: U of California, 1971) 22.

10. See Maria Tatar's introduction in *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Norton, 1999) ix–xviii.

11. Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Littérature et réalité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982) 81–90.

12. Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales* xii.

13. Tatar *Classic Fairy Tales* xi.

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