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THEOLOGY OF LAUGHTER: EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON

The paper considers theology of laughter as a form of the religious post-modernism and at the same time a cultural phenomenon. Theology of laughter has reflected basic transformations of the Western culture in the second half of the last century, a new understanding of theology associated with its involving into wider cultural space and strengthening of the anthropological element, a new vision of the medieval culture including rethinking on the concepts of carnival and play. In the postmodern situation sacralization of carnival and carnival characters, on the one hand, and carnivalization of ritual and sacred sphere in general, on the other hand, came into the complex interaction. It included the attitude to some holy fools as the God's Fool of the Western Christianity – St. Francis of Assisi.

Key words: *theology of laughter, joy, play, God's Fool, St. Francis of Assisi.*

It was Eastern philosophy and religion that gave us samples of paradoxical humor. Western thought reinforced this paradox and added more sadness to it. As Hermann Hesse wrote in his novel *Steppenwolf* (1927): “The lone wolves who know no peace ... for them is reserved, provided suffering has made their spirits tough and elastic enough, a way of reconciliation and escape into humour ...” [8, p. 29]. By the way, Hesse wrote about St. Francis of Assisi not once. In the internet-space, figures of St. Francis and Buddha and bodhisattva are equally popular. One of them shows four moods of Buddha. The seller proposes us to rotate it and to find the preferable version, although symptomatically the seller has chosen to display a laughing Buddha. This is not an original artifact coming from the Buddhist culture but a western version of the Buddha image. Buddhist laughter demonstrates the balance between various forces inside a man and universe. We suppose, the western version of this laughter wishes for a similar kind of laughter but does not deal with it.

Both modern and postmodern man feel the lack of laughter. Almost each time when the western person tries to laugh, he makes a grimace of laughter. During the last decades, the comic element has been considered not simply in correlation to the tragic, but the comic itself revealed those features, which traditionally had been related to tragedy. In the last century the laughter was perceived not so much as spontaneous emotion, but as kind of outlook [Huxley, “*Antic Hay*”, 1923; Heinrich Boll, “*The Clown*”, 1963; Graham Greene, “*The Comedians*”, 1966; Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, “*Chaplinesque*”, Jack Kerouac etc.].¹ We deal mainly not with unequivocal statements, but with semitones, ambivalence, and internal contradictions. However, many authors base their analysis on comedy on the stage performance or at least on the theater plays, nevertheless in their analysis they not only step outside the limits of the dramatic art, but even ignore it. Even if the question is about theatrical masks, the mask is often understood not as result of agreement between us and the comic actor but as a mask, intentionally or the under force of circumstances worn by the spectators, who we are, whereas the comedian tries either to tear it off our faces or to lift it. Nevertheless, this imperative of the fool would be proved and justified for us to accept it. The theology of laughter gives us such

¹ In the recent movie “12” directed by Nikita Mikhalkov one of the heroes tells about his grandmother who smiled while she was dying; the son of another character looks at him with a smile; at the same time he holds cord in his hand intending to hang himself.

substantiation and justification. Therefore, we have the intention to trace internal logic of this phenomenon and to define place of St. Francis in this scheme.

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However, we have first of all to make some notes about the theology itself. Today western theology is rather an attitude, than a doctrine; the Divine word rather than the word about God. Bernar R.Hill supposes, “Theology is both the human capacity to understand and interprets religious beliefs, as well as the recorded product of such an effort. Theology is „faith seeking understanding...” [9, p. 1].

Modern theology is opened to various new interpretations of Christian belief. It means that various concepts can be attributed to it – theology of pleasure, laughter, contradiction, marriage, horror, sin and suffering (Kushel); theology of work (Edwin J. Kaiser); theology of Cross (Mark Heim); Creation Theology (Jose Morales, Karl Schmitz-Moorman); Theology of becoming (Catherine Keller); Theology of the New Testament (Rudolf Bultmann). Today the comedy itself, as we noted, also means the metaphysical dimension more than a dramatic genre. Such definitions appear in W. Whedbee’s book, as “comedy of horror”, “comedy of errors”, “comedy of liberation” [21, pp. 164, 108, 172]. Joy, irony and even comedy have taken their due place in the modern Catholic dictionaries. Although this attitude is not the common rule, in the newest Encyclopedia of Religion (ed. Lindsay Jones, 2005) we can find articles about humor, irony and the comic in western theology and philosophy as well as about humor and religion in East Asian traditions and in Islam. Today Humanities have confidently refused to follow the opinion about absolute inapplicability of laughter to the Christian medieval culture that had dominated in the past. Availability of various humorous forms in the medieval literature, ritual and daily routine, not only among clergymen, but also in the religious collective consciousness and even in monastic life has been proven, although the general monastic orientation towards solitude and prayer has not been disputed. Nevertheless, the theology of laughter goes further. Modern researchers conclude that laughter in the church about the church does not constitute a theology of laughter. According to Kushel, theology of laughter “is not about giving laughter the occasional function of letting a breath of air into the church, but about giving it a fundamental right to a place in talk of God.” [14, p. xviii]. Kushel asserts, “There is something laughable in any attempt seeking to create order in the realm of laughter.” [Ibid., p. xvi].

Nevertheless, he adds his own theory to the previous ones. Our approach is not to evaluate laughter itself, but the world as divine comedy², where attitudes and personages co-exist in their ambiguities and contradictions.

From this point of view genesis of the theology of laughter looks in the following way. An actualization of the joyful spirit in the Christianity can be considered as the main precondition of the theology of laughter. The 1960s were the golden age for publications in this field. It was an epoch of liberalization of the public, cultural and religious life. It was the age of the hippie; the epoch of coming back to naturalness, honesty, and pacifism. It stimulated an optimistic outlook focused on the modern or even the postmodern man, on the young generation of that time which wished to live in the world, free from dictatorship, violence and injustice. H. Cox in his book “Feast of Fools” (1969) idolized Christianity as a celebration of festivity and fantasy. Johann Baptist Metz and Jean-Pierre Jossua define this tendency as Theology of Joy and summarize its features in their book under the same title in 1974. Joy became

² Definition from Dante: “it is clear why the present work [the Commedia] is called a comedy. For if we examine the theme, in the beginning it is frightening and foul, because it is hell; at the end, fortunate, desirable, and joyful, because it is paradise.”

one of the most important topics in the papal documents³. However, new joyful vision of Christianity opened the way to reconsider laughter as well. It provoked an interest for concepts of play and carnival and, accordingly, for those characters who embody the humorous world of the carnival culture. M. Bakhtin in his book about Rabelais employed the idea of Huizinga about the playful content of culture with reference to the grotesque body of the folk laughter culture.

Truly, first of all, Rabelais' work was devoted to Rabelaisian laughter, which we cannot identify totally with medieval laughter; secondly, Bakhtin opposed the humorous, carnival folk culture to the official, serious, clerical one. This paradigm later was put under doubt or even denied, but in any case, it awakened an enormous interest for medieval laughter, and indirectly for the problem of laughter in Christianity as main paradigm of the medieval epoch. Bakhtin provoked sacralization of the carnival. R. Guardini's early work about the liturgy, on the contrary, became sample of the carnivalized ritual. Therefore, comic vision of the Bible and Christianity had emerged. On the textual level, the analysis of irony in the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament is characteristic manifestation of this comic vision: a word play, exaggerations, reversals etc.

The books of Genesis, Exodus, Song of Songs, Jonah, even Job and Ecclesiastes have been used as most common texts to justify this criticism.

However, comic vision itself is neither the Divine comedy, as Dante understood it, nor a holistic world outlook. There is luck of something else that is ambivalence and contradiction, immeasurable combination of light and shadow; and this shadow hides dangerous potential of laughter and main protagonists of the comic spirit. Who are they? First of all, it is Christ Himself.

Theologians of laughter in their investigation of the laughter in Christianity paid attention to the Gnostic theories. The texts discovered in Nag-Hammadi in 1945 gave a new impulse to these researchers and undermined the statement Christ had never laughed. It is not necessary to discuss in details the contents of Nag-Hammadi library, but at least two well-known examples are very characteristic for this theological turn to laughter. We mean the passages about the laughter of Child Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas and the laughter of Christ at Simon, who was crucified instead of Him, in the Gospel of Peter. The Gospel of Judas revealed the same point. Besides, reference to the logos, which is one of the key Gnostic concepts, has been integrated in the definition of "theology" itself. It is remarkable that the polemics about comedy in the Aristotelian aesthetics and the medieval understanding of laughter is the central theme of *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. Some details of this novel are very important in our context. First of all, Eco involved the reader in the conflict within the Franciscan order on the issue of poverty. He chose Franciscan William as his main protagonist. We can also mention that William is a devotee and a student of Franciscan Occam. William seems to interpret Francis as an apologist of laughter in the Christian culture. This question was not discussed in Franciscan writings but for the postmodern period, it became appropriate issue.

³ See, for example, Paul VI, Pope [1975 May 9], Apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino* to the episcopate, to the clergy and to all the faithful of the entire world about Christian joy; Paul VI, Pope [1975 May 21], Address to a general audience about the significance of Christian joy; Paul VI, Pope [1975 Aug 27], Address during the general audience, to groups of pilgrims from Ghana, Uganda and Ireland, about joy and Faith; Pope Pius XIII, *Little more joy, please!* In Sower, July 1952, vol. 184, 57.

Recognition of the religious value of laughter led to the sacralization of the personages who symbolize it – clown, jester, joker, and trickster. However, Christ was the prototype. “Enter Christ the harlequin: the personification of festivity and fantasy in any age that had almost lost both. Coming now in greasepaint and halo, this Christ is able to touch our jaded modern consciousness, as other images of Christ cannot.” [2, p. 209]. On the one hand, Christ was seen as the harlequin, the fool, the clown, and the saints were proclaimed holy hippies. Even phenomenon of clown ministry came up. “Clown ministry is a movement within the North American churches, incorporating clowning in both liturgy and pastoral ministry.” [13, p. 9]. On the other hand, the above-mentioned characters were interpreted as mediators, as channels of the supreme knowledge, and, therefore obtained religious, sacred, metaphysical meaning because they deprived everyday life of stability, predictabilities and intelligence. The problem of a man in the absurd world took central place in the 20th century philosophy. The tragic hero evoked no more interest. No heroic effort helps to man to survive in the postmodern situation but only alienation, overcoming of the existential nausea, or play with the circumstances. However, this play must be organized according to the rules of the world around and the image, which the world imposes on a man, the role of the clown, the harlequin, and the fool. In any case, there is ambiguity, internal discrepancy, and openness to both worlds at the same time, freedom from all taboos and opposition to all these norms. Inevitably, a destructive or even a demonic element became an attribute of these characters. It should be noted that the theme of demonic laughter deserves for the special research in the theology of laughter context. It is useful to define the character of laughter in the situation when non-visible line has been crossed and the negative potential of the carnival as bacchanalia has been turned into reality. The theology of laughter tried to give an alternative to the intellectual eccentricity and grotesque buffoonery of the modern culture. The basic components of this alternative are an apology of a joyful Christian spirit in the theology itself, in the Catholic periodicals, in the mass-media; appeal to the priests and the preachers not to neglect foolishness, to be God’s Fools or even clowns; reference to holy foolishness and to the image of God’s Fool. The theme of abnormality and madness was reflected in the writings of romanticism but some thinkers reinterpreted it in the 20th century (S.Freud, M.Foucault etc.). The fool became the primary focus of this scheme. The rest of personages represent mainly variations of this archetype. Some of them concentrate potential of the evil and oppose to both God and a man. In the medieval discourse, it is possible to find any theological justification only for the fool among all these images. It is said about foolishness in the Bible not once; but the Bible defends foolishness only when it is estimated as hidden wisdom. Concept of Fool incorporates many opportunities and he is subdued to various interpretations. Holy fools like sacred clowns stimulate people to think about common things in new ways. Giving impulse to laugh, they enlighten human mind and make people able to see higher truth.

They teach by God’s example. They mock the order of the ritual, prayer, songs, holy beings and sacred objects. They joke, satirize, and demonstrate a behavior contrary to the norm. They do things that are forbidden and unspeakable within a ritual framework. They create imbalance and disorder in the world in the midst of ritualized social order. Without the clowning disorder, order would not be so obvious and so justified. The holy fool also reveals that there is more to God than those holy rituals can reveal. God’s Fool is Fool for the sake of Christ and at the same time for the sake of a man. He tries through some kind of cultural shock and through the neglecting of all social norms to stir him up, to awaken thought, belief and dignity inside him. God’s Fool has various faces, but we believe, that exactly in St Francis, and not in the Byzantine yurodstvo this image has found its fullest expression and completion. Probably Holy Fool like his prototype Jesus Christ does not laugh often, but he is filled with play, irony and joy and he fills the world and other people with them. In the Euro-

pean philosophy, joy and laughter had been considered as phenomena of the different nature for a long time, and probably only the postmodern religious discourse offered the unique chance to combine them in the new Divine comedy. "It is only in the light of a theology of joy in God and human beings that a Christian theology of laughter is justified; it can indeed be unmistakably defined first in the ambivalent human laughter: if laughter does not have the character of mockery, of malice, of contempt or exclusion, but has the character of liberated and redeemed joy which breaks down barriers and brings integration." [14, p. 92].

So, the laughter that both proceeds from God and addresses Him is the laughter of sympathy; and a joy accompanies this laughter. The joy can be understood as kind of outlook and then laughter is its manifestation, which is not profanation or debasement of the original, but its continuation and natural expression. However, the laughter can be sneer as well, even irony can express sneer as in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. We suppose that the primary position of laughter with or at determine both the character of that person to whom it is attributed, his place in the Divine comedy and the character of the deity itself. Each of the carnival personages is ambivalent⁴, he hides the contradiction inside him, as well as any human being, but the fool does not pretend that he does not know about it. On the contrary, he enjoys his own duality and his superiority over the spectators, who do not want to admit this duality.

He exposes the nakedness of both the world and a man. We understand the fool as the archetypical character who contains actually or potentially a huge set of masks, and versions. From this point of view, the negative or positive position depends on his attitude to God. His Lord is God as a ruler of the Divine Comedy or "Lord of Disorder" as the devil was called in medieval literature.

God, about whom the Christ talks in the parables, is not that Old Testament God, whose laughter divides, separates and condemns. On the contrary, joy, which Jesus feels before people and especially before children, is based on His own joy and joy he finds in God and joy God Himself feels. It is not laughter at human beings, but joy, which not necessarily expresses itself in laughter but to which laughter is not alien. "Jesus' laughter is the expression of a freedom for God which bursts bounds and breaks taboos." [14, p. 79]. God shares such laughter with the clown, trickster, the foolish and the righteous man. A shift can be recognized in the story of Abraham and Sarah: from skeptical laughter at God to everyone's liberating laughter with God. Such laughter is creative; it is the laughter of the creator at creation of the world, the laughter of human joy at the results of creativity. Such creativity expresses a comic vision of the created world and such creativity produces the new world, filled with optimism, and redemption. It is the world of an Utopia⁵ and the world of a carnival, embodiment of the spirit of festivity and fantasy about which Cox talked. However, the laughter of God can be directed at the cheater, the fool and the sinner as well if they neglect Him or sneer at Him. At the Book of Ecclesiastes the fool is opposed to a wise man. What does characterize a fool? Among other features, it is laughter, which reveals his frivolity and poor mind. His laughter is the sign of his frivolity and lack of thought. For the rabbis of Israel the laughter of

⁴ See the images of clowns in some horror movies; in the serial *Ghost in the Shell*; in the story *Laughing Man* by J.D. Salinger.

⁵ The utopian ideal and reality merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. Carnival imagery was used by Erasmus, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Guevara, and Quevedo, by the German 'literature of fools'. "Without an understanding of it, therefore, a full appreciation of Renaissance and grotesque literature is impossible. Not only belles lettres but the utopias of the Renaissance and its conception of the universe itself were deeply penetrated by the carnival spirit and often adopted its forms and symbols" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais...*, p. 11).

the fool is not just the expression of his frivolity and lack of thought, but also an expression of his sinful pleasure. In our opinion, public executions demonstrated a disgusting sample of vicious pleasure but at the same time they were part of a carnival event⁶. To put it in another way, a destructive carnival spirit often reveals itself in revolution, revolt, rebellion⁷. Then the negative carnival is a tragic, eschatological vision, the triumph of anti-Utopia and violence. Carnival turns to destruction, revelry, and bacchanalia, which destroy God's trust in man, and then God Himself destroys the rebellious world (Babel tower) and the rebellious peoples who rise against Israel and prophets. Then God seems incomprehensible, mysterious, and severe. It will be not surprising to think of God as the severe and mocking tyrant. Already ancient gods were capable of derisive laughter. The laughter of the Gnostic god and antique gods was at and with at the same time but in any case this laughter is deprived by the true humanity. There is no dialogue between God and a man here. On the contrary, as we can see, in Christianity the nature of laughter depends on these relations.

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⁶ See, for example, *The Idle 'Prentice Executed at Tyburn* by William Hogart.

⁷ Remember description of Dolchino's rebellion in *The Name of the Rose* by U. Eco. Really, any carnival hides dangerous potential and provocation. During the last Brazilian carnival, the school of samba Viradurro made a platform of carnival procession as a pyramid of exhausted bodies.

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ТЕОЛОГИЯ СМІХУ: ДОСЛІДЖУЮЧИ ФЕНОМЕН

Теологія сміху розуміється в статті як форма релігійного постмодернізму і в той же час культурний феномен. Теологія сміху відобразила основні трансформації західної культури другої половини минулого століття; нове розуміння теології, пов'язане з її виходом в більш широке культурний простір і посиленням антропологічного начала; нове бачення середньовічної культури, що містить у тому числі переосмислення концептів карнавалу і гри. В ситуації постмодерну вступили в складну взаємодію сакралізація карнавалу і карнавальних персонажів, з одного боку, і карнавалізація ритуалу і взагалі сакральної сфери, з іншого, включаючи ставлення до деяких святих, як Блазень Господній західного християнства – св. Франциск Ассізький.

Ключові слова: *теологія сміху, радість, гра, Блазень Господній, св. Франциск Ассізький.*

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А.В. Голозубов

ТЕОЛОГИЯ СМЕХА: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ФЕНОМЕНА

Теология смеха понимается в статье как форма религиозного постмодернизма и в то же время культурный феномен. Теология смеха отразила основные трансформации западной культуры второй половины прошлого столетия; новое понимание теологии, связанное с ее выходом в более широкое культурное пространство и усилением антропологического начала; новое видение средневековой культуры, содержащее в том числе переосмысление концептов карнавала и игры. В ситуации постмодерна вступили в сложное взаимодействие сакрализация карнавала и карнавальных персонажей, с одной стороны, и карнавализация ритуала и вообще сакральной сферы, с другой, включая отношение к некоторым святым, как Шут Господень западного христианства – св. Франциск Ассизский.

Ключевые слова: *теология смеха, радость, игра, Шут Господень, св. Франциск Ассизский.*

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