

Marcus Pound. *Theology, Comedy, Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019. 120 pages. \$18.

As the title suggests, central to Marcus Pound's concern is the place of comedy within theology today. Pound, a theologian and assistant director of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, has focused his previous research largely on Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, French philosopher Jacques Lacan, and the intersection of psychoanalysis, theology, and trauma. In his current work Pound draws principally upon Lacan's work to explore the theological and political implications of comedy.

Noting that "comedy happens when things go wrong and especially when language goes awry" (14), Pound asserts that the trinitarian nature of God is the comedic foundation of theology and ecclesiology. The three-and-one God shows language going awry. Christ's life, death, and resurrection are comedic acts that cross "all sorts of theoretical boundaries and dramatic types" (50). And, since Christianity is born from a joke, the Church is called "to sustain that joke in a manner that literally outwits our current modes of enjoyment and their problematization within the late-capitalist market economy" (18).

Chapter 1 analyzes how and why Western philosophical, historical, and theological traditions shifted away from critically considering comedy. Pound highlights the development of a false binary between tragedy and comedy. For instance, Plato and Aristotle see comedy as a "lesser mode of knowing" (23), and Aquinas describes humor as a respite from "the tension of reason's study" (26). Pound argues that this dichotomous move is exacerbated by secular liberalism of the twentieth century that minimized the church's subversive uses of humor. In response, Pound adapts Donald MacKinnon's theology of tragedy to show that a hard separation between it and comedy is unnecessary. Both can be seen to guard against idealism, frame a kenotic life, and inform ethics.

In chapter 2 Pound examines the metaphysical assumptions of Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard on comedy. This feels as dense as it sounds, but thankfully Pound follows up his analysis with sections that develop proposals for an understanding of comedy. For him, comedy offers an eschatological view of what the world could be. It plays "a key role in the development of humankind contributing to the growth of Spirit and freedom" (61). Comedy can reveal "the hubris of our idealism" or demonstrate "our earthly distance [from] how life might otherwise be" (64). These insights help frame the rhetorical and theological possibilities of comedy.

Pound continues this pattern in the next chapter, examining Lacan's use of Freud. This study of psychoanalysis leads Pound to assert, somewhat unexpectedly, that comedy has a sacramental nature within the church. His argument is that comedy gives "momentary expression to unconscious desire" (75) while also reorienting us to "an invisible and inaudible object that speaks to us through the contours of our desires" (85). Pound correlates this object with Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Further, comedy like communion is both "irreducibly subjective" and that which links us together (82). Finally, Eucharist like humor "escapes all those barriers that oppose it" (88).

I am simplifying Pound's argument here, which seems to be crafted for a certain kind of philosophical theologian who is well versed in the developments of white, male North Atlantic thought. This is not to say that the book is inaccessible for those without such proficiencies or interests. In fact, Pound's recounting of the medieval *risus paschalis* and the York *corpus christi* plays to more modern scenes from Monty Python and *Friends* is humorous and helpful in illustrating key theological points to the reader. These moments left me wanting more examples

and more inclusion of the church's use of humor beyond largely white sources. I am thinking here especially of the subversive uses of humor in the black church.

Still, Pound's project is especially helpful for the ways it examines the intersection of comedy and politics. Pound critiques post-modern capitalism's use of humor as encouragement toward isolated enjoyment. He argues that this move tempts us to settle for market driven solutions to our existential questions that then lead to the denigration of others and contribute to a "superiority theory" (108). Particularly prescient in this moment of pandemic is Pound's assessment that "our commitment to the good of the market can quickly become pathological" (101). By contrast, Pound advances the church's potential as "a counter-joke to capitalism" (95). The "laughter of the saints" reframes desire, works outside of the market, and critiques capitalism (108). The cross of Christ is a "kenotic—comic—outpouring...that disturbs the traditional symbolic balance" (115). As Christ initiates a new order in the church, so the church is called to sustain the comedy of Christ, principally through love. Here Pound points to how both love and comedy can be condensed into a single image, offer the pleasure of surprise, give a gift you didn't know you wanted until you received it, invite a reciprocal and sustained relationship, and look beyond the two partners of a joke. Reflecting on the homiletic possibilities of these modes of comedic love would likely require a little work for most, but such work could provide some possibilities for confronting the political and theological challenges of the present moment.

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