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COMMUNICATING TRUTH THROUGH HUMOR, RIDICULE, AND EMOTIONS

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The main thesis of this article is a controversial and potentially dangerous one—namely that it is sometimes permissible and even quite appropriate to mock, ridicule, satirize, and otherwise make fun of people for holding obviously false beliefs, such as the belief that the Holocaust never happened, or for failing to hold abundantly evident true beliefs, such as the belief that God exists or the belief that there are objective moral values. The goal of these rhetorical techniques is to persuade people to change their beliefs by getting them to laugh at themselves, feel embarrassed, or ashamed—to repent, that is, of their silly and sinful behavior. Ridicule, satire, and jokes belong to the broader category of emotion-evoking rhetorical techniques, which need not amount to irrational manipulation or verbal abuse, but can actually function as legitimate and loving means of rational persuasion.

Before writing this article off for being in direct conflict with the New Testament teaching that Christians are to be gentle and respectful in their apologetic conversations (1 Pet. 3:15) and their admonition of fellow Christians (Gal. 6:1), recall that Elijah mercilessly mocked the prophets of Baal, sarcastically suggesting that perhaps Baal was on vacation or too busy relieving himself to send a fire for their burnt offering (1 Kings 18:27; cf. Isa. 44:12–20). If one of the prophets of Baal had had the sense to laugh at himself for his futile efforts to entreat a false god, he might have repented and saved his soul.

John the Baptist and even Jesus Himself followed in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, often using subtle mockery and even direct insults in an attempt to reveal the foolishness of false teachers and unrepentant idolaters (Matt. 3:7–9; 23:1–33; 11:16–19). Even while allowing for the occasional appropriateness of satire or ridicule, however, it would be a grave mistake to neglect the biblical mandate to love our neighbors as ourselves and cultivate a humble spirit of gentleness, letting our speech “always be gracious, seasoned with salt” (Col. 4:6).¹

RATIONAL EMOTIONS

Rhetorical techniques such as mockery, ridicule, satire, and telling jokes and funny stories are persuasive precisely because of their ability to evoke emotions such as

amusement, embarrassment, and guilt. There are many, though, who believe that emotions are mere irrational impulses and that all attempts to persuade others to change their beliefs or behaviors by means of emotions amount to illicit emotional manipulation. According to this popular view, while it might be possible to persuade someone by causing her to laugh at herself or feel guilty, such persuasion would be manipulative because it would involve taking advantage of the irrationality of the one being persuaded.

Were emotions really opposed to rationality in this way, it would never be appropriate for Christians to attempt to persuade others by means of emotion-evoking rhetorical techniques. Our ability to believe and act for reasons—our possession of rational intellect and will—is one of the primary ways that we bear the image of God; when we act and believe rationally (i.e., for the right reasons) we glorify Him by reflecting His perfect rationality. Just as God does not attempt to circumvent our rationality in His revelation of Himself and His law to us, neither should we devalue the rationality of fellow divine-image-bearers by attempting to persuade them to believe or act for bad reasons, even if the belief we are trying to persuade them to adopt is true and the action right.

Emotions, however, are not inherently irrational. Emotions can and sometimes do give us accurate information about the value of things. As C. S. Lewis explains in *The Abolition of Man*:

Because our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order, therefore emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it). No emotion is, in itself, a judgment; in that sense all emotion and sentiments are alogical. But they can be reasonable or unreasonable as they conform to Reason or fail to conform.²

Emotions, so understood, are an important source of spiritual and moral knowledge. One of the ways that we can come to know that we have sinned against the holy God, for example, is by listening to and trusting our emotions of guilt and contrition—in short, our conscience. Likewise, one of the ways that we can come to know that God is beneficent is through our emotion of gratitude, especially when the benefit for which we are grateful is not attributable to human agency. This is because the emotion of gratitude, far from being a mere physiological feeling, “encodes” the information that something good has been given to oneself by a benefactor.³ This is the truth behind the oft-cited quip that “the worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank.”⁴ Gratitude is a way of “seeing” or experiencing oneself as the recipient of a gift from a benefactor. Therefore, gratitude toward a gift only God can give, such as a miraculous healing or pregnancy, the beauty of a spring morning, life itself, and so on, forces the thoughtful atheist to choose between rejecting her atheism or disbelieving her eyes—that is, the eyes of her heart.

Since emotions can give us accurate information about the values in the world, not all attempts to persuade by evoking emotion are bad. Indeed, sometimes evoking an accurate emotion is the only rational and effective way to help another to see things rightly.

THE MORAL WEIGHT OF (DIS)BELIEF

Among the things that emotions can help us to see aright is the value (or disvalue) of our believing and disbelieving. Disbelief in God is not morally neutral. Indeed, disbelief in God or in the most obvious moral truths never stems purely from a lack of available evidence, but rather from a stubborn and sinful unwillingness to accept the truth as it is. As Paul explains in his letter to the Christians in Rome,

the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:18–20)

In other words, the existence and excellence of the God who created the universe is abundantly evident to all who have not been blinded by their own sinfulness.

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard put the point this way:

People try to persuade us that the objections against Christianity spring from doubt. That is a complete misunderstanding. The objections against Christianity spring from insubordination, the dislike of obedience, rebellion against all authority. As a result people have hitherto been beating the air in their struggle against objections, because they have fought intellectually with doubt instead of fighting morally with rebellion.⁵

Even if fighting intellectually with doubt is sometimes appropriate, the Bible is clear that disbelief in God is not merely an intellectual problem to be addressed with arguments and reason alone, but rather a moral and spiritual failing for which nonbelievers are guilty, perhaps even absurd, and ought to be ashamed. In some cases, the emotions of nonbelievers are not as blind as their reason (it is hard to suppress the truth consistently, after all!) and thus can be evoked to help them see how guilty or silly they are being for refusing to believe in a God whose invisible attributes can be clearly seen in creation. Although the case of disbelief in God is a special one, there are also other beliefs (e.g., the beliefs mentioned above that the Holocaust never happened or that there are no objective moral values) that people are similarly guilty, silly, or absurd for holding and the strategy of emotional persuasion applies to these as well.

CAUTION!

In light of the strong temptation to treat those with whom we disagree in unloving ways, as sadly evidenced by the vitriolic and abusive language employed online and through other mass media by many self-proclaimed Christian apologists today, it is important to pause at this point and consider some principles that can help us discern appropriate usages of persuasive ridicule from illicit verbal abuse.

The first principle to consider is that all attempts to persuade using ridicule, humor, or other emotion-evoking rhetoric ought to be motivated by love for our interlocutors. As Paul warns, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). One way to assess whether your motive is one of love is to imagine how you would feel if your interlocutor responded positively to your ridicule or mockery, by seeing the error of her ways and coming to believe the truth. If you find you are hoping that your interlocutor will not repent, and that her repentance would disappoint and perhaps even anger you, as the repentance of the people of Nineveh angered Jonah (Jonah 4:1–3), or if you discern that your true motivation is simply to prove your interlocutor wrong, you should seek a change of heart before attempting any further persuasion.

Secondly, when attempting this sort of persuasion, it is important to consider your audience. You should only appeal to emotions that are generally reliable. If you try to evoke embarrassment in a person who is easily embarrassed over things she shouldn't be embarrassed by, then you only reinforce a bad habit (trusting an unreliable emotion) that will likely steer her wrong in the future and perhaps even lead her away from God (imagine what she might do if her atheist philosophy professor causes her to be embarrassed for being a Christian). If you manage to evoke legitimate embarrassment in a person not easily embarrassed, though, you may do some real good. Relatedly, you want your interlocutors to be amused or embarrassed or ashamed about the right thing. If they feel embarrassed because your clever mouth made them look stupid, then you haven't accomplished anything good and in fact have likely done plenty of harm. They will just resolve not to look stupid again and possibly to get you back. If they feel a kind of rueful amusement or guilt because they recognize that they have been ignoring the plain evidence that there is a God whose law they fail to meet, however, you are now getting somewhere, because that sort of emotion can prompt them to repent of their sinful rejection of God, and save their souls.

One way to help them not be embarrassed or ashamed for the wrong reasons is to treat them with gentleness and respect; that is, show them you love them, even while ridiculing or lightheartedly poking fun at their silliness. People are more open to learning from and being challenged by someone whom they believe cares about them than from one who merely wants to win an argument. It is often much easier to feel loved by one who gently pokes fun at you than by one who harshly criticizes you or embarrasses you (especially publicly). This is partly because amusement feels more positive than guilt, embarrassment, and shame do. Indeed, evoking negative emotions in the wrong context can often lead to defensiveness and anger instead of self-reflection and repentance.⁶

Lastly, one ought to evaluate one's own gifting before engaging in potentially harmful ministry of any sort. We do not all have the same spiritual and natural gifts and, as the seventeenth-century Scottish pastor-philosopher Thomas Reid wisely observed, "Some have from nature a happier talent for ridicule than others."⁷

SOME PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR AFFECTIVE APOLOGETICS

There are many strategies that can be used to evoke emotions directed at false and otherwise negatively evaluated beliefs. Several have already been mentioned, including mockery or ridicule, satire, telling jokes, and telling funny stories. Stories that are not funny can also be persuasive, but the reason humor is especially well-suited to persuading others to stop being irrational is that humor is a way of "seeing" an incongruity among one's beliefs or between one's beliefs and one's way of life. Moreover, as noted above, amusement does not have a negative feel and is thus less likely to elicit resistance than more negative emotions, such as guilt, shame, or embarrassment.

Of course, the most effective stories will be those that are beautifully written, told, and, in the case of theater and film, excellently scripted and acted. The more profoundly one demonstrates the goodness, truth, and beauty of the Christian worldview, or the dangers and often humorous limitations of false worldviews, the more accurate will be the emotions one is likely to evoke. Likewise, the most effective and persuasive jokes and satires will be those that are legitimately funny. Christians who endeavor to use these media thus ought to become students of the best art, film, and literature.

Implementation of these rhetorical techniques can vary in degree of directness. Sometimes it is best to be rather indirect, letting the truth speak for itself and allowing your audience to discover for themselves the implications of the truth for their own lives. One specific strategy that employs both indirectness and directness is what we might call the mirror strategy. The prophet Nathan's admonition of David is a famous example. Nathan began by telling David a poignant parable about a rich man who stole the prized lamb from his poor neighbor. "Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die'" (2 Sam. 12:5, ESV). Having helped David to recognize the injustice of such an offense by evoking his anger, Nathan then held up the proverbial mirror to David, proclaiming, "You are the man!" (v. 7). Only then did David realize the severity of, and repent from, his sin against Uriah the Hittite and Bathsheba. The basic pattern of the mirror strategy is this: tell a story that helps your interlocutor to see the absurdity, blameworthiness, incongruity, or other sad truth about living with a particular belief or worldview, or about living in a particular sort of sin, and then skillfully turn your interlocutor's gaze on herself, helping her to see that she is the appropriate object of her own emotional evaluation. For another poignant example of the mirror strategy, see Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21–35).

These are nothing more than very brief sketches of strategies that are in need of much further development. No doubt many more strategies for persuading through

evoking emotions could be articulated. We thus leave it to those gifted in rhetoric and the arts to develop and practice such strategies. Many great apologists have already modeled these strategies and we hope that the theoretical framework articulated here will help the next generation of Christian apologists continue to pursue excellence in affective apologetics.

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NOTES

- 1 Cf., Adam C. Pelsler, "Becoming a Seasoned Apologist," *Christian Research Journal* 31, 1 (January 2008), <http://www.equip.org/articles/becoming-a-seasoned-apologist/>.
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2001), 19.
- 3 For an insightful discussion and defense of this understanding of gratitude, see Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), chap. 9.
- 4 G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 251. This quote is often attributed to Chesterton himself, but in the passage cited Chesterton attributes it to the nineteenth-century poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
- 5 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), entry 629.
- 6 Of course, feeling loved and being loved are not the same thing and sometimes love requires communicating painful truths.
- 7 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), essay 6, chap. 4, 606.