

DIDACTICALLY RESPONSIBLE USE OF HUMOUR IN ST. AUGUSTINE'S *SERMO* 53,12-14.

Introduction

Humour and laughter are not the first features one associates with a writer from ancient times, and especially not a church father. In fact the church fathers had problems with any kind of exuberance at all. In their view, civilized people did not indulge in laughter. However, modern anthropological, sociological and psychological research has proved not only that humour and laughter are universally human and have always existed, but also that no community could survive without them. A community without language is not a community, and the same goes for humour.

There must therefore have been humour and laughter in St. Augustine's time.¹ Nearly all the evidence is of a negative attitude to humour and laughter on the part of St. Augustine (and all other church fathers), although between the lines one can find glimpses of authentic humour – humour which provokes contrasts and a particular kind of amusement. This is because the way he preaches follows the way he taught in his previous career. Certainly, his use of humour is mostly didactically based. Education is, after all, based on wonder, and wonder is a very important means of when necessary arousing wonder and of sustaining the interest generated. This is confirmed by theories on education and humour developed in the last decades.

St. Augustine therefore uses humour to support the learning process, to a small extent but with a certain regularity. This article tries to show this through an example: a fragment from a sermon in which St. Augustine unmistakably uses the possibilities which humour offers him: *Sermo* 53,12-14. To this end it is necessary first to talk about the indissoluble link between his preaching and his teaching, before turning to teaching and humour in general. The sermon is then placed in its historical context, after which its didactic and humoristic content are examined. The issues of concern are how, and to what extent, does St. Augustine handle humour, and how are theories about humour and laughter applicable in this context. Finally, an impression is given of his general attitude to humour and laughter.

¹ Raskin 1985, 1-2: "Independently of their age, sex, social or economic status, culture or epoch, people are capable of finding things funny, and laughing at them."

1 St. Augustine, preacher and teacher

In his sermons St. Augustine stands out clearly as the teacher speaking in a gentle and fatherly tone to his pupils. He does it not only implicitly, in the way he approaches his listeners intellectually, but also explicitly by presenting himself directly as a teacher². In the last lines of *Sermo* 53,13 he says: "Now think hard, and instruct me; I'm appointing you the teacher, and make myself the child. Won't you please teach me?"³ Even though he here reverses the roles with a didactic trick and a rhetorical question, thereby giving the impression of being a teacher only indirectly, he is still the teacher (doctor) and his audience are students (here called 'parvuli' – little ones). The firm yet friendly demand for attention in this passage is also characteristic of a teacher: "Please be so kind as to listen to me, because I was so kind just now as to listen to you."⁴

As a preacher St. Augustine is still the teacher he used to be.⁵ And why wouldn't he be? He was a great teacher and he knew it. "Great teachers," says Daniel Doyle in an attempt to show that St. Augustine the preacher developed from the teacher – "are born with innate qualities that dispose them to become great teachers: curiosity, memory, analytical and conceptual ability, passion, hunger for truth, a desire to communicate, a love of wisdom. Yet such grace is insufficient unless it is accompanied by skills carefully cultivated and honed through disciplined learning, mentoring, and experience. Expert teachers master words and play with them in ways that invite others to explore and understand the mysteries of our world and of ourselves. Great teachers change the lives of their students. They teach beyond their subject matter. They make a lasting difference."⁶

Reading his work makes clear why Doyle's description of the teacher fits St. Augustine so well. We are fortunate that a good deal of his voluminous writings has survived – both the practical and the theoretical ones. The sermons are examples of the practical work,

² See also *Sermo* 53A, 1: *Accedentes ergo ad se discipulos suos magister unus et verus docebat ista, (...). Et vos venistis ad nos, ut ipso adiuvante loquamur vobis et doceamus vos.* The English translations of the sermons are from: Hill 1991.

³ *Sermo* 53,13: *Modo iam cogita, et doce me. Adhibeo te doctorem, et me parvulum facio. Doce me – obsecro te.*

⁴ *Sermo* 53,14: *Si placet, audi me, quia in eo quod tibi placuit, audivi te.*

⁵ Verwilghen 1998, 233: "Lorsqu'Augustin siégeait dans sa *cathedra* épiscopale, (...), il se retrouvait en somme dans une situation assez semblable à celle qu'il avait occupée dans sa précédente carrière. Il redevenait un professeur occupé à expliquer un texte venerable."

⁶ Doyle 2000, 81.

while the theoretical writings allow the reader a look behind the scenes of sermon practice.

Two important and very informative works on this subject, which furthermore span almost his entire career, are *De catechizandis rudibus* en *De doctrina christiana*.⁷ Whilst the former is mainly concerned with instruction in faith to individuals or small groups, the latter is about education of larger groups. Although it is outside the scope of this article to discuss both works, it is necessary to give some attention to *De doctrina christiana* on the subject of Christian rhetoric.

As far as rhetoric is concerned, St. Augustine was a man of his time. In full accordance with the Roman education system he was trained in grammar and rhetoric. This curriculum has been discussed extensively in many works.⁸ Due to his commitment to the Christian faith, however, he distanced himself from certain habits inherited from pre-Christian times. At the same time, he became more and more convinced during his career as preacher that it could do no harm to adapt the traditional Greek-Roman rhetoric of Cicero and Quintilian⁹ (but not the Second Sophistic) which in his time determined what rhetoric was and had put it in a bad light) to Christian requirements. His criterion was immediateness.¹⁰ He had no choice, because to put it briefly, Christian preaching then had imposed fundamentally different requirements on preachers than those which rhetoric had imposed on orators. Whilst according to Cicero and Quintilian the orator's main task towards listeners was one of persuasion,¹¹ St. Augustine knew only too well that his aim should be more to keep the attention of an audience already convinced.¹² No easy job, in which he found

⁷ *De catechizandis rudibus* was written around 400 and therefore is an early work. St. Augustine (354-430) was ordained as priest in 391 and as bishop in 395. He preached from his ordination as priest until his death. *De doctrina christiana* was written in two phases. Books 1 and 2 and part of book 3 were written in 397. The rest of book 3 and book 4 (highly important for this study) were written in 427, not long before his death in 430.

⁸ Amongst others, in: Marrou (1958) 1983.

⁹ For a short but clear survey: Leeman/Braet, *Klassieke retorica* 1987.

¹⁰ Brown 1992, 224: "The need to get a message over put such pressure on St. Augustine that the complicated structure of classical rhetoric collapsed." See also Oberhelman 1991, 110-111.

¹¹ Scanlon 1994, 44: "The rhetor must persuade the audience here and now. And plausibility, rather than truth, is the goal."

¹² Scanlon 1994, 44: "Instruction is the primary purpose of Christian rhetoric." Oberhelman 1991, 116: "The primary purpose of the Christian orator/preacher/teacher, however, must always be the clear and, at the same time, not inelegant presentation of Christian truth."

he could only succeed by offering good and interesting teaching (*docere*) and by very seriously taking the listeners' mannerisms into account.¹³ *De doctrina christiana*¹⁴ documents his attempts to make a theoretical change from a classical persuasion-oriented rhetoric to a Christian teaching-oriented rhetoric in which truth and eloquence are bound together following St. Paul's example.¹⁵ The translation from theory to practice is shown most clearly in the sermons.

2 What is good education?

We have seen that for St. Augustine a good sermon did not need to be persuasive in a classical sense. In his time he could assume that most of the audience belonged to the Christian faith. The days of the Apology were over. A Christian preacher would do better to teach his audience, provide explanations, and grasp every opportunity to inform them and deepen their convictions. Not in a forced way, but giving them the means to digest optimally the by no means easy Scriptures. In a manner of speaking, he gave them food.¹⁶

St. Augustine quite rightly did not hesitate to make clever use of his talent, knowledge, and experience as grammarian and orator. Even when preaching he was still a teacher. By then the young church had attained some adulthood and he had gained a certain status, so that he could (and was allowed to) assume that the church congregation in front of him was, in principle, interested in what he had to say. As a result, he found himself in a fairly comfortable situation, by no means dissimilar from that of a (modern) lecturer. To demonstrate this we must first concentrate on the relationship between preaching and education. What is education?

¹³ Kursawe 2000, 12-13: "St. Augustine ist durchaus ein Anhänger der traditionellen Rhetorik, die das Einwirken auf die Affekte für eine wichtige Aufgabe des Redners hält. (...) Für die christliche Predigt gilt dies noch aus tieferen Gründen. Durch die Offenbarung wird die ganze Seele des Menschen angesprochen; Gott wirkt auf das ganze Innere des Menschen ein, biblisch gesprochen auf sein Herz."

¹⁴ Kursawe 2000, 153-161. Kursawe distinguishes three layers: first, the parts which St. Augustine takes from classical rhetoric; second, the parts which he supplements or narrows down; thirdly, the parts which he rejects.

¹⁵ Oberhelman 1991, 116: "St. Paul is the outstanding example of how eloquence and truth are to be conjoined. His eloquence was produced naturally, without any training in, or knowledge of, the rules of rhetorical schools: his own thoughts, sincerity, and the truth led him to his heights of oratory."

¹⁶ Brown 1992, 220.

One of the many theoreticians who have succeeded in getting to the core of education is the philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven. Verhoeven characterizes education succinctly as "an intellectual training based on knowledge of the subject on the part of the teacher and on interest on the part of the pupil",¹⁷ and further on he adds: "a service which assumes a need but, like a restaurant without hunger or appetite, cannot exist without a need."¹⁸ Looked at like this, education stands on two cornerstones: on one hand training and service by the teacher, and on the other the interest of the student. Particularly interesting is the way Verhoeven translates his theory into practice: "The job of education is to maximize interest, not to excite it".¹⁹ His standpoint, therefore, is that in principle the student has to be interested, so that the teacher doesn't have to start from scratch but can jump in at a certain level. Good teaching thus demands an active attitude from both teacher and student.

However, the pupil's assumed interest can only really unfold if pupil and teacher can keep their mutual influence warm and can let it blossom. Interest is like a breeding ground that has to be continuously watered with wonder, or in other words, has to be continuously stimulated. Why? Because "interest is a preamble for possible surprising discoveries."²⁰ Healthy teacher-student interaction holds the student's attention and maintains the need for surprise in both of them. There have to be opportunities for surprise, and it takes time to create them. Good teaching, therefore, cannot be restricted in terms of time. "There is no room for interest", writes Verhoeven, "unless wonder gets the chance to return to a higher degree of chaos where there is as yet no tyranny of preconceptions. In moments of surprise, the rules of practice are broken and the world is unmanageable".²¹ In other words, to avoid drying up, the breeding ground of interest must be kept watered with wonder. It may even be necessary to depart temporarily from the level of thought achieved so far, and to return to a lower level in order to start again towards the top with renewed élan.

"Wonder means a temporary brake on the control of the world, but also a broadening of the view".²² To keep on awakening interest whilst still making progress, there have to be periods of consolidation

¹⁷ Verhoeven 1980, 39.

¹⁸ Verhoeven 1980, 39.

¹⁹ Verhoeven 1980, 39.

²⁰ Verhoeven 1980, 44.

²¹ Verhoeven 1980, 44. Verhoeven's theory is confirmed in practice in: Skynner/Cleese 1996.

²² Verhoeven 1980, 13.

and even some backward steps. Or, as Verhoeven says elsewhere: "Didactics sometimes requires a gear change to a higher state of chaos where preconceptions are challenged in order to reach a higher dimension in a broader context."²³ This means that occasionally the student, directed by the teacher, must let go of what he has learned so far, go back a step, and then allow himself to be given a new challenge. When this happens, a kind of vacuum can occur in which student and teacher – fully aware of the consequences – get the opportunity to look at the problem from a distance or to put it into perspective, and in so doing arrive at broader and deeper understanding than when sticking only to familiar paths. There has to be optimal interaction and trust between student and teacher. It is precisely in an optimal learning situation that the aesthetical experience brought about by humour can play an important role; it is humour – says the philosopher John Morreall – that allows people to mark time.²⁴ A teacher who dares to make use of humour widens his students' awareness,²⁵ even though it takes him more time and effort. "A teacher who integrates humour into the learning experience" – says Morreall – "will have to put more effort into teaching. He or she will be dealing with students no longer as mere receivers of pre-packaged information, but as curious, playful, creative human beings, who experiment with ideas, occasionally ask outlandish questions, and may sometimes even get bored enough to make wisecracks. Such a teacher will no longer be able to present his or her material as neat chunks of knowledge which can be understood in only one way, nor to present trains of thought which move inexorably from a given point to a pre-established conclusion. He or she will not even take it as given that all of class time must be spent in learning something."²⁶ It is noticeable how well, from the standpoint of theory, Morreall's view links up with Verhoeven's. And also how, from the standpoint of practice, Morreall's view ties up with Doyle's description of the ideal teacher which he sees in St. Augustine.

In short, good teaching rests not only on known didactic principles but more importantly on interaction, on the process which takes

²³ Verhoeven 1980, 12.

²⁴ Morreall 1983, 94: "Aesthetic experience generally is important in our lives. We need to be able to stop occasionally amid the practical stream of everyday living to simply enjoy attending to things and situations we perceive or imagine." This fits perfectly with Verhoeven's theory.

²⁵ Morreall 1983, 96-97: "If teachers paid more attention to humour, moreover, they would also find that it is most useful in getting students to see more aesthetically and creatively."

²⁶ Morreall 1983, 98.

place between teacher and student. To put it another way: in the case of an interested audience, persuasion (*persuadere*) is of less importance, so that the emphasis can be on instruction (*docere*) and, if required and/or possible, on amusement (*delectare*). Instruction by itself would lead to a dry and therefore unworkable atmosphere, whilst with pure amusement the teacher would not be taken seriously. The basis for a healthy learning situation is an optimal mixture of good, extensive and clear instruction aimed at learning, combined with some amusement from time to time to provide relaxation, which in turn makes room for more depth.

It is hard to find a more vivid description of education as seen by St. Augustine, shown in both his theoretical and practical works, than that of Verhoeven. What Verhoeven states is actually none other than St. Augustine's theory, although very condensed. If we replace the teacher by the preacher and the student by the listener, we can transport ourselves to the Basilica Tricilarum in Carthage. It was there that St. Augustine deployed his broad expertise to train his listeners by stimulating and maximizing their interest.

3 Humour and laughter

Interest is based on wonder, says Verhoeven. One can only get a sense of wonder if one is prepared to let go of one's normal level of thinking and for a moment move back to an earlier, lower level. Roughly speaking, one leaves order behind and regresses temporarily into disorder. The danger is that familiarity, which is characteristic of order, stifles the need for new thinking. Then one shuts oneself off from new impressions and gets stuck in a closed world. The psychiatrist Skynner and the comedian John Cleese write in their book that in order to function effectively one has to shift from open to closed mode, however difficult that is.²⁷ They are saying the same as Verhoeven. In closed mode there is not the willingness to question things, whereas in open mode it is possible to let new information in.

²⁷ Skynner/Cleese 1996, 86-87. 86: "About the open mode: this is the state we are in when we open up to the world, absorb new information and adjust our mind-map accordingly, so as to make it more complete and accurate. The map then represents the world better and guides us in working out what to do to achieve our goals." 87: "About the closed mode: in this mode we are indeed shut off from the kind of information which could free us. It is like being on automatic pilot. We just follow the programme, which was first associated with certain attitudes or emotions, and was triggered by some need to get into action. The switch from open to closed mode is easy, the way back is not."

Theoretical research confirms practice.²⁸ In closed mode all we do is to add details to what we already know, but in open mode we can change ideas, look for new solutions, and adjust goals.²⁹ Not only experienced comedians like Cleese exploit this mechanism fully, but also good teachers and preachers. Humour is one of the ways to help people to change their behaviour, to be flexible, and to put themselves in open mode.³⁰

To come to grips with the phenomenon humour it is best to start with laughter. Although at first sight people can hardly distinguish the two, they are nevertheless separate phenomena. Humour represents the intellectual side, laughter the physical.³¹ Or, humour nearly always causes a laugh or a smile,³² but a laugh is not necessarily caused by humour. There are other impulses such as aggression and amusement which can cause laughter. Over the centuries, researchers from various disciplines have come to three theories about laughter: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory. The philosopher John Morreall gives an extensive description and a crystal clear historical context.

The superiority theory is based on emotions, and states that laughter expresses a person's feeling of power over, and aggression towards, another. Ridicule, for example, belongs to this theory.³³ The

²⁸ See Morreall 1983, 121; 122; 127-128. 121: "A person with a humorous attitude toward life, (...) has the capacity for distancing himself from the practical aspects of most situations. (...), a person with a rich sense of humour tends to be more relaxed, less disappointed by failure." 122: "Having a sense of humour, then, involves flexibility and openness to experience which a fundamentally serious person lacks." 127-128: "Once we give up the idea that everything is related practically to us too, we are no longer restricted to seeing things in just one way. (...) And, (...) this mental flexibility brings an openness to experience." See also: Gilhus 1997, 3.

²⁹ Skynner/Cleese 1996, 88.

³⁰ Skynner/Cleese 1996, 90.

³¹ If we apply this to a language situation, then the rule is that the sender (speaker or writer) who wants to make good use of humour has to be able to judge exactly which amusing contradictions will make the receiver (reader or listener) laugh, and also how to handle the contradictions to get this effect. The reader or listener exposed to such amusing contradictions experiences a build-up of emotional tension. This has to be released as quickly as possible if he is not to go crazy. The release takes place through hilarity: mental enjoyment usually manifested as laughter whereby one "can express an awareness of fun or excitement" (Winkler Prins Encyclopaedia).

³² Ross 1998, 2: "It is simplistic to say that it [humour] is just for a laugh. There may be a target for the humour – a person, an institution or a set of beliefs – where the underlying purpose is deadly serious."

³³ See Morreall 1983, 4-14. The superiority theory goes back to Plato. It says that laughter expresses a person's feeling of superiority over another (Morreall

incongruity theory has a cognitive and rational basis, saying that laughter is an intellectual reaction to something unexpected, illogical or inappropriate. In this theory, laughter is based on humour,³⁴ provided that the context allows it³⁵ and that the people involved are not only sufficiently competent in the language³⁶ but are also in the right mood.³⁷ The relief theory views laughter as the release of pent-up energy, the result of emotional relief.³⁸ Finding none of these adequate,³⁹ Morreall adds a fourth which combines the best of the others.

1983, 4). This kind of laughter is emotionally determined (Morreall 1983, 20: While the superiority theory focuses on emotions involved in laughter (...)). Laughter, according to Plato, is always harmful: both to the one laughing and to the person being laughed at. The one being laughed at suffers under it, whilst the one laughing being hurtful and so is a lesser a person as a result. Furthermore, laughter indicates that the person laughing has lost control of himself, and that damages his humanity. Aristotle is not so strict about this. He does not only see disadvantages but even sees an advantage. To laugh at someone is not always the same as scorning him. It can function as social correction to get someone to correct himself. Nevertheless, Aristotle advises caution. Centuries later, Hobbes supports this theory by suggesting that people laugh when they are winning. He also agrees with the hurtful side of laughter: as an expression of malicious pleasure it affects one's character adversely. Other writers add further nuances. According to the superiority theory, laughter is the same as scorn. See also Gilhus 1997, 5.

³⁴ See Morreall 1983, 15-19. The incongruity theory stems from an early attempt by Aristotle and is of a cognitive nature (Morreall 1983, 15: (...) for the incongruity theory, amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate in some or other way). The theory covers the objects and the ideas which cause the laughter. According to this theory, humour is about building up a certain expectation and some tension which is then released in an unexpected way. For practical reasons, Cicero and after him Quintilian also accepted this explanation. Centuries later the incongruity theory was elaborated by Kant, Schopenhauer and others. It is this theory which connects humour with laughter. Ross 1998, 7: "[The incongruity theory] states that humour is created out of a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke."

³⁵ Rothbart 1976, 38: "[incongruity can also lead to other reactions like fear, curiosity or a tendency to want to solve a problem]. Failure to resolve the incongruity in the joking situation leads to perplexity or confusion and no smiling or laughter."

³⁶ Apte 1985, 179: "It depends, however, on the speaker's awareness of linguistic structure and vocabulary."

³⁷ Zillmann/Cantor 1976, 93: "(...) that the intensity of the response to humorous presentations critically depends upon the respondents' affective disposition toward the protagonists involved."

³⁸ See Morreall 1983, 20-37. The relief theory is from the last centuries. It states that laughter is an emotional outlet, a kind of relaxation, whereby pent-up nervous energy is released through a bodily reaction (Morreall 1983, 20). This sort of laughter is similar to a form of relief-giving crying. See also: Ross 1998, 63: "The psychic release theory of humour explains the triggering of laughter by a sense of release from a threat being overcome – such as a reduction of fears (...)."

³⁹ Morreall 1983, 38: "(...) that no version of any of these theories is comprehensive enough to account for all cases of laughter."

It has a broad application and roughly speaking states that laughter is the result of a pleasant psychological shift.⁴⁰

Although laughter is the subject of all three theories, only the incongruity theory refers to a direct relationship between laughter and humour. In the other two, laughter has a different cause and function. The practice of laughter and the theory of humour are related to each other in the same way as the practice of the spoken word is related to the theory of rhetoric. In both cases, theory was derived from practice and was therefore of a later date. The difference is that whilst the theory of the spoken word, because of its almost immediately recognized usefulness, reached a high degree of refinement quickly, we had to wait almost until the twentieth century for a good theory of humour, and this was due to the age old negative attitude to it.⁴¹ This is strange, seeing that laughing is as human as talking. Animals have neither humour⁴² nor language⁴³ comparable to humans. Humour and language are typically human phenomena, concludes the anthropologist

⁴⁰ Morreall 1983, 38-59. 39: "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift."

⁴¹ It is only in recent decades that humour and laughter have been studied intensively. Even the social sciences avoided this subject for ages, surprisingly since they in particular are directed towards universal human behaviour. Years of inveterate mistrust of humour and particularly of laughter, humour's external expression, made them so suspect that no-one was prepared to put their professional reputation at risk (see Morreall 1983, ix: "But until a few years ago, the study of laughter was treated in academic circles as frivolous. Because laughter is not a serious activity, the understated argument seemed to run, it is not possible to take a serious interest in it; and so anyone proclaiming an interest in studying laughter probably just wants to goof off"). Nowadays the old objections are swept away. It is suddenly perfectly possible, and even necessary, to study humour and laughter. After all, they are phenomena which can give good answers to questions about why humans behave as they do (see Morreall 1983, ix-x: "The fact that laughter and humor involve a nonserious attitude does not imply that we cannot adopt a serious attitude toward examining them. Nor does the nonserious attitude in laughter and humor render them somehow unimportant as features of human life, and therefore unworthy of our attention. Indeed, our capacity to laugh is anything but a peripheral aspect of human life, and to understand our laughter is to go a long way toward understanding our humanity").

⁴² Apte 1985, 177: "True laughter exists only among human beings" (Hertzler 1970:27). Although we may not share Hertzler's rather strong view, given recent work on animal communication (Linden 1980), the fact remains that the faculties of language and humour have advanced in human beings to a degree considerably greater than that found in any other animals. Gilhus is stricter – Gilhus 1997, 3: "Laughter is a universal human expression, restricted to humans and therefore understood as a dividing line between humankind and animals". St. Augustine too recognized this difference between humans and animals. In *De libero arbitrio* 1,18 (written between 388 and 395) he says: *Sunt alia quaedam, quae iam cadere in feras non videntur nec tamen in homine ipso summa sunt, ut iocari et ridere.*

⁴³ Apte 1985, 177: "(...) defined *Homo sapiens* as a creature with language".

Apte after extensive research, and they belong to all people in all times. There are considerable similarities between humour and language. They share a likeness in the area of their universal technical aspects, for example, and their reception is culturally determined.⁴⁴ Furthermore, they are in some ways dependent on each other. Language provides humour with material, for example. And the way a particular culture uses language determines whether or not a message is perceived as humorous.⁴⁵

Besides similarities between humour and language,⁴⁶ there are also similarities between language and religion, and between humour and religion. Apte says that religion as a structuring and connecting factor⁴⁷ affects human life as much as language and humour.⁴⁸ Religion also has the special feature that it concerns the supernatural, which human beings have little or no control over.⁴⁹ When language is inadequate, humour can come in useful for a religious community.⁵⁰ This will become clear later on.

⁴⁴ Apte 1985, 177-178: "Both language and humour have universal and culture-specific attributes." About language: "The universal attributes are mainly formal in nature, while the culture-specific ones are substantive. (...) In short, human languages exhibit a certain degree of structural similarity in having phonological and grammatical units or similar types, and in using similar techniques to put them together (...)." About humour: "Humour too has both universal and culture-specific attributes. The techniques used in humour are universal, (...). The substantive nature of humour, like that of language, varies across cultures: (...)." See also: Raskin (1985) 1-2.

⁴⁵ Apte 1985, 178-179: "Humour and language show not only similarities but also interdependence, which is manifested in two important ways. Firstly, concerning 'linguistic humour', the very nature of language becomes the subject matter of humour. Its phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic elements and their interrelationships are exploited in creating humour. Secondly, concerning 'sociolinguistic humour', the development, comprehension, and appreciation of humour are determined to a considerable degree by the use and function of language in society, and by the cultural attitudes and values associated with it."

⁴⁶ See also: Ross 1998, 2.

⁴⁷ Apte 1985, 151: "Religion seems highly influential in shaping cultural values and in moulding and maintaining social organizations in human societies everywhere."

⁴⁸ Apte 1985, 151: "Religion resembles humour and language in being omnipresent, pervasive, and yet non-obtrusive at the level of individual consciousness in the way in which it affects the rest of human behaviour."

⁴⁹ Apte 1985, 151: "A primary concept of religion is that of the supernatural, which may include beings, objects, and spirits – in short, all metaphysical forces over which human beings exert little control. (...) The primary purpose of such behaviour is the well-being of a society and of individuals, from both the materialistic and the spiritualistic perspective."

⁵⁰ This is a very interesting observation by Apte. St. Augustine spent his whole life looking for ways to express the inexpressible in spite of the shortcomings of language. See Louth 1989, and: Smith 2000, 66-86.

So we see that next to language (and religion), humour is of great importance for communication.⁵¹ In this connection the sociologist Martineau says that humour can be abrasive and lubricating, or both.⁵² In both cases it has a connecting effect: as lubricant it can oil the communication process and as abrasive it can shake up communication that has got stuck. Humour enables one to correct someone else in a socially acceptable way.⁵³ There is no doubt that the use of humour helps social interaction – in fact it is essential for mutual understanding.⁵⁴ That humour is universal – for all people in all times – has been proved not only by anthropological but also by sociological research.

Although for centuries humour and laughter were looked down upon, they were never ignored, not even in times when little or no research could be done. This is proved by the continuing accusations and warnings.⁵⁵ Underneath all this negative publicity lay a single idea, namely the dogged association of humour and, worse still, laughter, with exuberance. Critics were always drawing parallels between on the one hand humour and laughter, and on the other hand all sorts of other phenomena to do with tension and relief (in the form of lust based on sexuality or power). They saw laughter as evidence of lack of self-control which could not but have a destructive effect.

⁵¹ Martineau 1972, 101-103. 102: "[Humour is a] widely diffused type of social process and specific medium of communication." 101: "Humour is a pervasive phenomenon in the social fabric of most, if not all, societies." 103: "Humour is a part of every social system and can be analysed as one social process affecting the system; humour occurs in every type of human interaction and can be analysed as to how it influences each interaction pattern and the social structure emerging from it." See also Morreall 1983, 115-116. 115: "To laugh with another person (...) is to get closer to that person." 116: "Humour also facilitates social interaction in a number of situations where it is added to a basically serious piece of communication to eliminate the offensiveness which that communication might otherwise have."

⁵² Martineau 1972, 103: "As an abrasive (...), it constitutes a measure of sand. The consequence of such abrasive humour is interpersonal friction and a juncture in the communication process which may modify the character of the interaction. As lubricant: Humour is intended to initiate social interaction and to keep the machinery of interaction operating freely and smoothly." Cf. Morreall 1983, 117: "(...) the frequency of non-manipulative humour in group interaction is a good indicator of intimacy in the group."

⁵³ Bergson (1899) 1993.

⁵⁴ Martineau 1972, 114: "The humorous communicative instance becomes a vehicle or social mechanism employed for interaction. Humour may assume different forms and has different functions in various structural settings." See also: Ross 1998, 2: "Like other aspects of language, humour is a way in which people show their allegiance to a group. (...) The social context is important for the creation and reception of humour."

⁵⁵ Gilhus 1997, 66.

Laughter damaged character. Not that laughter was entirely forbidden, but you had to exert the utmost restraint. This negative attitude is not surprising in view of the origin of the oldest discourses on humour and laughter, initially from philosophers⁵⁶ and later from rhetoricians and church fathers who were in close contact with them. Although rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian undoubtedly recognized the advantages of humour and laughter in a judicious context, they seldom applied them.⁵⁷ Therefore in classical literature, humour and laughter are mostly suppressed or avoided.

⁵⁶ Aristocratic philosophers, in reaction to Sophists, saw dangers in humour. Plato (427-347), for example, agitated for strict modesty regarding exuberant humour, although stopping short of complete abstinence. Aristotle (384-322) took a milder line. He saw laughter as a relaxation mechanism which distinguished humans from animals. But real, refined, humour belonged exclusively to the domain of the upper classes, because they were more used to being modest. All the same, he was not against a joke now and then, as long as it was fitting. The Greeks associated the exuberant form of humour with professional jokers; they were only allowed to practise at feasts, and belonged to a completely different social class. Nevertheless one assumes, although it is not always easy to prove, that humour was by no means unimportant in speechmaking. See Bremmer/Roodenburg 1999.

⁵⁷ The distinction between refined and exuberant laughter was something the Romans took over from the Greeks. At first it was applied mainly to theatre – the playwrights Plautus and Terentius (in the second century B.C.) were for example masters at playing on words and St. Augustine would be influenced strongly by their work. Later on the distinction was applied to rhetoric. A laugh can happen spontaneously but it can also be induced (see for the role of the laughter in ancient rhetoric Martin 1974, 138-147). Due to their practical approach the Romans saw benefits in humour, not only dangers. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43), speaker, statesman and philosopher, was the first of them to recognize the possible benefits and to want to throw light on the phenomenon systematically. In the second book of his work *De oratore* (2,54,219-2,71,290), where it is assumed he was elaborating in his own way on the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetica*, he discusses refined humour in the light of a possible favourable effect on the process of persuasion within judicious speechmaking. He maintains not only that humour connects work with pleasure (2,54,216: "Also jesting and shafts of wit are agreeable and often highly effective" (*Suavis autem est et vehementer saepe utilis iocus et facetiae*)), but also that he had experienced the beneficial effect of humour in many court cases (2,54,219: "(...), I have very often seen things at court being achieved through humour and flashes of wit (...)", *multum in causis persaepe lepore et facetiis profici vidi*). At least, that is what he has Caesar say. In his *De officiis* he established an authoritative terminology by describing the two kinds of humour as follows: "There are, generally speaking, two sorts of jest: the one coarse, rude, vicious, indecent, and the other refined, polite, clever and witty. The latter abounds not only in our own Plautus and the Old Comedy of Athens, but also in the books of Socratic philosophy" (*Duplex omnino est iocandi genus, unum illiberale, petulans, flagitiosum, obscenum, alterum elegans, urbanum, ingeniosum, facetum. Quo genere non modo Plautus noster et Atticorum antiquae comoedia, sed etiam philosophorum Socraticorum libri referti sunt*) (*De officiis* 1,104). Hence we can conclude that there is a type of humour which knows no bounds, and a type which never goes beyond the bounds of decency. The latter is

The same applies to the Scriptures.⁵⁸ Jónsson observes that humour is in fact there if you are open to it.⁵⁹ Jesus himself, he says, stands in the middle of the rabbis' tradition where humour was gladly used to achieve the greatest graphical effect in teaching.⁶⁰ Morreall nevertheless maintains that laughter caused by humour scarcely occurs in the Bible.⁶¹ It is true that there are very few words to do with laughing and telling jokes, and fewer in the Old Testament than in the New.⁶²

nearly always used for mild and constructive criticism within the same social class of freeborn, and is eminently suitable for (refined) drama (F. Graf, *Cicero, Plautus en de Romeinse humor*, in: Bremmer/Roodenburg 1999, 43-54). From Cicero's actual speeches it is evident that he employed subtle humour where possible. But he was of course very careful not to go too far and be taken for an entertainer. In his sixth book in *De Institutione Oratoria*, the rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilian (35-100) – obviously inspired by Cicero – distinguishes the various aspects of humour (6,3,1-112). Quintilian too saw many benefits in a well-dosed application of humour in an address, since this “arouses the judge's laughter and so dispels these gloomy emotions, frequently diverts his attention from the facts, and sometimes also refreshes or restores him when he is bored or tired” (*risum iudicis movendo et illos tristes solvit adfectus et animum ab intentione rerum frequenter avertit et aliquando etiam reficit et a satietate vel a fatigatione renovat*) (6,3,1). Humour was thus an important means to loosen up the stick-in-the-mud and put stiff people at their ease, to wake up the inattentive and divert pernickety critics.

⁵⁸ It is almost impossible to discover the position of humour and laughter in the Scriptures because Scriptural writers, as opposed to classical heathen authors, left us no theory to consult. The only possibility of getting a glimpse of the subject is to analyse the practice shown in the texts themselves. See Jónsson 1965: his research reveals that the Scriptures, in particular the New Testament, are by no means lacking in humour for those who can or want to see it. See Morreall 1983, 94: “And yet if students were educated to read literature sensitively, they would find humor in practically every writer.”

⁵⁹ Jónsson 1965, 90/92. 90: “It is no easy task to discriminate between the different types of humour and irony that may be found in the New Testament. This cannot be done with any mathematical exactness as so much depends on the subjective feeling of the scholar.” 92: “Considering the subjective element in the valuation of humour in all ages, some of my examples may become a matter of endless discussion, but even if the readers might disagree with regard to some texts, it should not necessarily disprove the general conclusion regarding the question as to whether the New Testament authors make use of humorous expressions and terms.”

⁶⁰ Jónsson 1965, 90: “The literature of the rabbis is of special importance in this connection as it was a common homiletic method in their circles to include comical and humoristic examples in their illustrative teaching and preaching. Similes, parables and terms that Jesus made use of quite often are akin to such expressions in the haggadic literature and there is no reason to believe that this was felt differently by those who were listening to Jesus.”

⁶¹ Morreall 1983, 9: “(...) the laugh of derision (...) is almost the only kind of laughter found in the Bible.”

⁶² The verb *ridere* and its derivatives occur a number of times in the Old Testament but seldom in the sense of the incongruity theory. One case is Gen. 17-18, the story of God's healing of the childlessness of Abraham and Sarah. In the New Testament the verb *ridere* occurs only three times (always in contrast to crying): “How

And even then, these verses disapprove highly of laughter.⁶³ It is these texts which formed the attitude to humour in the early church.⁶⁴ Morreall says that the Scriptures use ridicule only (i.e. laughter according to the superiority theory).⁶⁵ Gilhus shares this opinion.⁶⁶ The result of all this is that thinkers, teachers and writers from classical and Biblical times managed together to establish their suspicions against humour and laughter most securely. So much so that it was not until the last two centuries that, first very cautiously but later openly, people dared to see that they also held blessings. It must be emphasized that this old-fashioned view of humour and laughter comes from intellectual circles. We know hardly anything about the attitude of the man in the street although we can draw some conclusions from the Bible text.

4 St. Augustine's *Sermo* 53

On January 21st 413, the festival of St. Agnes, St. Augustine preached on the Beatitudes (Matt. 5,3-10) in the Basilica Triclarum in Carthage. This sermon has been kept though the ages and is known as *Sermo* 53.⁶⁷ Right from the start he gets the attention of the

blest are you who weep now; you shall laugh" (Luke 6,21); "Alas for you who laugh now; you shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6,25); "Be sorrowful, mourn and weep. Turn your laughter into mourning and your gaiety into gloom" (James 4,9). *Deridere* and *irridere* are found a number of times in both the New and the Old Testament, but only in the sense of ridiculing.

⁶³ Gilhus 1997, 60: "These sayings are stamped with a negative attitude towards gaiety in this life, combined with an expectation of great happiness to come, at least for some. (...) Laughter has moved out of the present world and has become a subject of eschatology and apocalypticism, a sign of the joy which will be released at the end of time."

⁶⁴ Gilhus 1997, 60-61: "The critique of worldly laughter reflected in the sayings from Luke found fruitful ground in the early Church and took root."

⁶⁵ Morreall 1983, 9: "In the Bible, too, laughter has negative connotations. It is seldom mentioned, but when it is, it is almost always the laugh of derision."

⁶⁶ Gilhus 1997, 22-27. In the Old Testament: 22: "Divine laughter in the Old Testament is a mocking laughter." 24: "Jehovah's divine laughter was the derisive laughter of male power." 26: "Divine laughter was a destructive force, it came from a wide open mouth (!), more powerful and terrible than those set with teeth and swords, ready to swallow and destroy. (...) Jehovah's laughter crushed and destroyed those who opposed him." In the New Testament: 27: "This laughter is instrumental in preserving the divine/human hierarchy, putting humans in their place in relation to divine beings, making order in the world. In short, divine laughter appears as a mechanism of control that contributes to a rational management of the cosmos."

⁶⁷ See Verbraken 1994, 19-20. *Sermo* 53 was probably preached in 413 but it may have been shortly after 415. See Verbraken 1976, 65.

listeners by using a double antithesis to tell what had happened to the martyr: she was publicly slain and secretly crowned.⁶⁸ Without saying it in so many words, he also suggests that even after all the adversity the world could impose she had at last found happiness (i.e. a good life in heaven). The message is that to get to heaven we have to make an effort on earth. But we do not need to stand alone in these attempts, since the Scriptures offer us advice. The blessings in the Sermon on the Mount⁶⁹ are an example, where Jesus provides his followers with directions to guide and support them.⁷⁰ The blessings inspired St. Augustine to remind the audience in Carthage (and particularly on the feast day of the martyr) that a happy life in heaven was within their reach as long as they worked for it on earth.⁷¹

In *Sermo* 53 St. Augustine adheres to the enumerating character of the Beatitudes. So the sermon is a collection of more or less complete sub-sermons of varying length, each beatitude being covered separately. In some sub-sermons there are longer and shorter more or less independent elements.⁷² In this manner St. Augustine devotes extra attention to the sixth beatitude (Matthew 5,8: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God") – in fact more than half of the sermon (chapters 6-16). In this sub-sermon, chapters 12-14 are fairly autonomous. In these chapters he advises the audience not to imagine God as a person, and he does this in his own particular style and not without humour.

⁶⁸ *Sermo* 53,1: (...) palam occisae, occulte coronatae, (...). A razor-sharp double antithesis: the martyr was dead on earth but crowned in heaven. And on top of that, everyone had seen how she had died whilst no-one had seen her being crowned. It had been possible, through (physical) eyes, to see her suffering and her death, but not to see her happiness. It was therefore hardly surprising that not everybody cherished the wish to follow her example.

⁶⁹ In The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus teaches his pupils as a real lecturer. See Mathew 5,2: (...) docebat (...). See also Wenneker/Van Reisen 2000, Introduction, 14-16. The Beatitudes are in Matthew 5,3-12 and Luke 6,20-23. St. Augustine, in a practical way, describes the Beatitudes as advice for attaining a happy life. See *Sermo* 53,1: (...) multas causas beatae vitae (...) ((...)) several ways to attain a life of bliss, (...)).

⁷⁰ Right from the start Jesus is teaching. See Mathew 5,2: (...) docebat (...). See also *Sermo* 53A, 1.

⁷¹ *Sermo* 53,1: Quod volumus, quod desideramus, quod petimus, post erit; quod autem iubemur ut faciamus propter illud quod post erit, modo sit. (What we want, what we desire, what we are aiming at, will come afterwards; but what we are told to do for the sake of what will come afterwards, must come now).

⁷² Cf. *Sermons* 56-59 on the Lord's Prayer. These sermons have a similar structure.

Sermo 53,12-14

The advice which Jesus gives in the form of beatitudes is not as clear as it seems at first sight, at least not immediately. People naturally tend to take things they hear literally. So on hearing the sixth Beatitude, and bearing in mind the corporeal and anthropomorphic image of God, they are inclined to think incorrectly that God can physically be seen.⁷³ But since chapters 1-6 have already explained that God is spirit, this incorrect concept, although a universally human tendency, is not allowed. To make sure this comes across, St. Augustine tackles the problem in chapters 7-11 mainly in a serious way, but becoming slightly more playful later on. In chapters 12-14 he uses humour to emphasize the insights. In chapters 15-16 he finishes the sermon on a serious note.

In chapter 7 St. Augustine teaches: "Don't start thinking here about a corporeal face."⁷⁴ You have to look for God with your heart, not with your eyes. It sounds very definite: "It talks about God's countenance, about God's arm, about God's hands, about God's footstool, about God's seat," he says, "but don't think about human limbs,"⁷⁵ however tempting that is. The limbs and objects have a deeper, figurative meaning which he then carefully explains: "God's hands mean God's power, God's face is God's knowledge, God's feet are God's presence. God's seat, if you wish, is you."⁷⁶ Now that it is clear that man can perceive God only spiritually, it is also clear that he cannot see Him in the normal way with his eyes, because they can only see something which takes up space. And He, being omnipresent, has no physical size. Therefore only the eyes of the heart can see God.

In chapter 9 St. Augustine answers the question why the Scriptures so often ascribe limbs to God. It is done for reasons connected to mnemotechnics: "It's as though physical activities were allotted to various parts of the body, and someone were to say for example: Blessed are those who have feet, because they shall walk; blessed are those who have hands, because they shall work; blessed are those who have voices, because they shall shout; blessed are those who

⁷³ A sermon in which St. Augustine very subtly approaches God, as Trinity, via the philosophical road, is *Sermo* 52.

⁷⁴ *Sermo* 53,7: Non hic corporea facies cogitetur.

⁷⁵ *Sermo* 53,7: Dicitur Dei vultus, dicitur Dei brachium, dicitur Dei manus, dicuntur Dei pedes, dicitur Dei sedes, dicitur scabellum pedum eius; sed noli membra cogitare.

⁷⁶ *Sermo* 53,7: Manus Dei, potentia Dei. Facies Dei, notitia Dei. Pedes Dei, praesentia Dei. Sedes Dei, si vis, tu es.

have mouths and tongues, for they shall speak; blessed are those who have eyes, for they shall see.’⁷⁷ For the purposes of good instruction, he relates a part of the body to its practical usefulness. This reasoning is not as naive as it seems. The Beatitudes do exactly the same but in a spiritual sense: “In the same way, he was as it were putting the parts of a spiritual body together, and teaching us what belonged to what. Humility is suited to possessing the earth; mourning is suited to being consoled; hunger and thirst for justice are suited to being satisfied; mercy is suited to obtaining mercy; a pure heart is suited to seeing God.”⁷⁸ Thus the comparison between the physical and the spiritual body is complete.

In chapters 10 and 11 St. Augustine explains that through belief we can purify the eyes of our heart. Not through any old belief, but through true belief rather than the devil’s: “So let us distinguish our faith, and see that believing is not enough. That’s not the sort of faith that purifies the heart. *Purifying their hearts*, it says, *by faith* (Acts 15,9). But which faith, what sort of faith? The one, surely, which the apostle Paul defines when he says *Faith which works through love* (Gal 5,6).”⁷⁹

a *Sermo* 53,12

“And now what does faith itself actually do? With so many testimonies from Scripture, so many different readings, such a plentiful variety of sermons and exhortations, what does it actually do, if not ensure that we now see by a mirror in the riddle, later on face to face? But not so that you should turn your thoughts back again to that face of yours. Think of the face of the heart. Force your heart to think about divine matters, compel it, drive it on. Anything that occurs to it in its thinking which is like a body, fling it away. You cannot yet say,

⁷⁷ *Sermo* 53,9: Quemadmodum si corporalia opera membris corporalibus coaptaret et diceret verbi gratia quisquam: ‘Beati qui pedes habent, quia ipsi ambulabunt; beati qui manus habent, quia ipsi operabuntur; beati qui vocem habent, quia ipsi clamabunt; beati qui os et linguam habent, quia ipsi loquentur; beati qui oculos: ipsi enim videbunt’.

⁷⁸ *Sermo* 53,9: Sic, tamquam spiritalia membra componens, docuit quid ad quid pertineat: apta est humilitas ad habendum regnum caelorum, apta mansuetudo ad possidendam terram, apta luctus ad consolationem, apta fames et sitis iustitiae ad saturitatem, aptas misericordia ad impetrandam misericordiam, aptum mundum cor ad videndum Deum.

⁷⁹ *Sermo* 53,11: Discernamus ergo fidem nostram, nec credere sufficiat. Non est talis fides quae mundat cor. *Fide*, inquit, *mundans corda eorum*. Sed qua fide, quali fide, nisi quam definit Paulus apostolus, ubi ait: *Fides quae per dilectionem operatur*?

"This is what He is"; but do at least say, "This is what He is not." When, after all, will you be able to say: "This is what God is"? Not even when you see him, because what you see is inexpressible. The apostle says he was snatched up to the third heaven and heard words that cannot be uttered. If the words cannot be uttered, what about the one whose words they are?

So perhaps, while you are thinking about God, some vast and wonderful shape in vaguely human form crosses your mind. You have set it up in the sight of your mind's eye, something huge, massive, vast, its enormous bulk spreading in all directions. Somewhere you reached the end of it. If you've reached the end of it, it isn't God. If you can't find the end of it, where is its face? You are thinking of some bulk or mass, and in order to distinguish its various members or parts, you have to define the bulky mass, give it an outline or limits. Unless you give it an outline you can't distinguish its parts. What are you up to, you foolish materialist way of thinking? You have constructed a vast bulky mass, and the more enormous it is, the greater is the honour you imagine you are giving to God. If someone else adds just a yard or a pound, he makes it even bigger."⁸⁰

a 1 Commentary on *Sermo* 53,12

The core of chapters 12-14 is the contrast between knowing and believing, visible and invisible, reality and illusion, spirit and body. The question is: what is the use of belief which is founded on such complex and multiform Scriptures: "with so many testimonies from Scripture, so many different readings, such a plentiful variety of sermons and exhortations"? To find the answer it's best to leave the

⁸⁰ *Sermo* 53,12: Et modo ipsa fides quid agit? Tantis testimoniis scripturarum, tam multiplici lectione, tam varia copiosaue exhortatione quid agit, nisi ut videamus *per speculum in aenigmate*, postea *facie ad faciem*? Sed non iterum tu redeas ad istam faciem tuam. Faciem cordis cogita. Coge cor tuum cogitare divina, compelle, urge. Quidquid simile corporis cogitanti occurrerit, abice. Nondum potes dicere: 'Hoc est'; saltem dic: 'Non est hoc'. Quando enim dices: 'Hoc est Deus'? Nec cum videris, quia ineffabile est quod videbis. Si dici potuit, non est hoc. Raptum se dicit apostolus in tertium caelum et audisse ineffabilia verba. Si effabilia sunt verba, quid est cuius sunt verba? Cogitanti ergo tibi de Deo occurrit aliqua fortasse in humana specie mira et amplissima magnitudo: constituisti eam in conspectu cogitationis tuae tamquam magnum aliquid, amplissimum, grande, ingentissima mole diffusum. Finisti alicubi. Si finisti, Deus non est; si non finisti, facies ubi est? Cogitas molem et, ut membra distinguas, definis molem. Aliter enim membra distinguere non potes, nisi moli dederis finem. Quid agis, stulta et carnalis cogitatio? Grandem molem fecisti, et tanto grandiore quanto te putasti Deum amplius honorare. Addit alius unum cubitum et facit tibi maiorem Deum.

complexity and multiformity for what they are (St. Augustine emphasizes them stylistically by means of an anaphora and an asyndeton), and to take another approach: "But not that you should turn your thoughts back to that face again." The admonishing tone brought about by the subjunctive *redeas* together with the personal pronoun *tu*, which is always used to give heavy emphasis, show that St. Augustine now addresses himself as teacher to a (fictitious) student who is running around in circles and can't escape. The student displays obstinacy, in other words mechanical and compulsive behaviour which must be corrected.⁸¹ Corrections should primarily be done privately. Only as a last resort should outsiders be brought in.⁸² To correct those who felt touched by his criticism, St. Augustine had to step back from his personal involvement with the audience and be formal for a time. This is why he uses *tu* instead of the usual pronoun *vos*.

In this earthly life there is only belief, but in heaven there is knowledge. This at first sight paradoxical idea, originally platonic, is borrowed by St. Augustine from St. Paul (1 Cor. 13,12). What the body's eyes see is transient and unreal, the opposite of what the heart's eyes see. To conceive of God is the job of the heart not the head. The modest admonishment in the subjunctive *redeas* now changes to hard commands in the imperative: "Think (...). Force (...), compel (...), drive (...) on. (...) throw (...) away. (...) do (...) say, (...)." He does this because his experience tells him how difficult it is for a human being to avoid a corporeal image of God. To build up one's belief one certainly needs a concept of God, but an anthropomorphic image is strictly forbidden. He then proceeds to explain the rule. He makes it clear that in this life on earth, God can only be approached from the opposite: ("You cannot say," "This is what He is"; but do at least say, "This is what He is not. "). You can't say what He is, only what He is not. Even someone who had seen Him would not be able to describe Him. And if he pretends he can, then he cannot be talking about God. God is beyond words ("that human lips may not repeat them", 2 Cor. 12, 2-4: adapted by St. Augustine by the firm but unmistakeable "ineffable (inexpressible)"), and if something can be explained in words it can't be divine.

However, many people think of God as a person, although bigger and better, something colossal, or worse still, a bulk. They do God no justice and even make a joke of Him. To point out the incongruity

⁸¹ To discover incorrect behaviour but not correct it, would be remiss. See for example *Sermo* 82,4.

⁸² According to *Regula* 4,9.

of this kind of thought, St. Augustine uses a hyperbole: "You have set it up (i.e. "some vast and wonderful shape in vaguely human form") in the sight of your mind's eye as something huge, massive, vast, its enormous bulk spreading in all directions." This rather coarse imagery and the use of a hyperbole are the first steps towards humour. Then he says: "Somewhere you reached the end of it." In an image like this, God is limited. And: "If you've reached the end of it, it isn't God." God is not only ineffable but also infinite. The logic is watertight. The question now is: how do you assign a countenance to God if He is infinite ("If you can't find the end of it, where is its face?")? St. Augustine continues along the lines of the hyperbole: "You are thinking of some bulk or mass," and "in order to distinguish its various members or parts, you have to define the bulky mass." Because of the importance of this conclusion it is repeated in somewhat different words: "Unless you give it an outline you can't distinguish its parts".

At this point it seems that in a formal sense the teacher in St. Augustine is not addressing his listeners so much as their thoughts; in other words, he doesn't blame the individual directly but attempts to reach him via his (personified) mind, which is determined by his body: "What are you up to, you foolish materialist way of thinking?" This makes it easier for him to say something unpleasant. The listener's mind is not only fleshly, which in itself is bad enough, but also foolish. Now the hyperbole changes into derision: "You construct a vast bulky mass, and the more enormous it is, the greater is the honour you imagine you are giving to God". Man imagines a bigger God in order to be able to honour Him more intensively. As if this was not enough jeering, in the last sentence of this chapter he cuts down the (anonymous) dissidents: "If someone else adds just a yard or a pound, he makes it even bigger." In this statement both the emotionally-determined superiority theory and the intellectually-determined incongruity theory are in play. According to the first theory, St. Augustine puts the dissidents at a disadvantage. According to the second, he exaggerates the incongruity of a physical deity by suggesting that God can be made taller by anyone who puts his mind to it. There is an element of hyperbole here too. The logic is so compelling that the "way of thinking (*cogitatio*)", or the listener himself, will have a tough job to find arguments to defend an opposing standpoint.

b *Sermo* 53,13

"'But I've read it,' you say. What have you read, you who have understood nothing? But tell us all the same what you've read. Don't let's brush aside the child playing with ideas. Tell us, what

have you read? *Heaven is my throne, while the earth is my footstool*. I hear you; I've read it too. But you perhaps think yourself the better for having read it and believed it. Well, I too believe what you have read. Let's be companions in believing. What am I saying? Let's be companions in seeking!

So there you are, hold on to what you have read and believed: *Heaven is my throne*. That is, "my chair" – "throne," you see, is a Greek word, for which the English is "chair", while the earth is my footstool. Haven't you also read that other text, *Who measured heaven with the palm of his hand*? I think you have read it; you recognize it, and affirm that you believe it. We both, after all, read each text in that same place, we both believe each of them. Now think hard, and instruct me; I'm appointing you as the teacher and making myself the child. Now will you please teach me? Who ever sat in the palm of his own hand?"⁸³

b 1 Commentary on *Sermo* 53,13

The opponent reckons to have found defensive arguments in the Scriptures: "'But I've read it', you say. What have you read, you who have understood nothing?" St. Augustine pretends to interrupt the other person in order to rub in again the fact that he has understood nothing. "But tell us all the same what you've read." Whoever has read the Scriptures would seem to be fairly sure of himself with the quotation from Isaiah (66,1): *Heaven is my throne, while the earth is my footstool*. This verse, taken out of context, makes a non-anthropomorphic image of God almost impossible. At first sight St. Augustine seems to agree with his student, except that he treats him like a child. This evokes a teaching situation in which the student is a beginner. St. Augustine says he has read the Isaiah verse too ("I hear you; I've read it too"), and also believes it ("I too believe what you have read."). This is no argument. Scholarship appears to say that the (imaginary) opponent is right: "'throne' you see, is a Greek word, for which the English

⁸³ *Sermo* 53,13: 'Sed legi', inquis. Quid legisti, qui nihil intellexisti? Et tamen dic. Quid legisti? Non repellamus parvulum corde ludentem. Dic. Quid legisti? '*Caelum mihi thronum est, terra autem scabellum pedum meorum*'. Aio: 'Legi et ego'. Sed tu forte potiorum te putas, quia legisti et credidisti. Credo et ego quod dixisti. Simul credamus. Quid dico! Simul quaeramus. Ecce tene quod legisti et quod credidisti: *Caelum mihi thronum est* – id est sedes – ('thronus' enim graece, latine 'sedes' est) – *terra autem scabellum pedum meorum*. Non legisti et aliud: *Qui palmo mensus est caelum*? Puto te legisse: cognoscis, et te credere confiteris. Ibi enim utrumque legimus, utrumque credimus. Modo iam cogita, et doce me. Adhibeo te doctorem, et me parvulum facio. Doce me – obsecro te – quis est qui sedet in palmo suo?

is 'chair'." This logic gives St. Augustine the chance to bring in another verse from Isaiah (40,12), with which he can not only ridicule his opponent's reasoning but defeat him completely, and also, more importantly, strengthen his belief. If God has a throne, He must have a backside too. St. Augustine now applies the incongruity theory in the extreme: *Who measured heaven with the palm of his hand?* The listeners' reaction is to agree because they begin to feel where the speaker is leading them, and St. Augustine observes: "I think you have read it; you recognize it, and affirm that you believe it." This marks an intermediate phase in his speech, that in the meantime is directed to the fictitious listener again. Speaker and listener are familiar with both texts: "We both, after all, read each text in that same place, we both believe each of them." And now what? At this moment, the experienced teacher in St. Augustine, like a stand-up comedian, reverses the roles and goes on in a way that many a cabaret artist would envy: "Now think hard, and instruct me; I'm appointing you as the teacher and making myself the child. Now will you please teach me? Whoever sat in the palm of his own hand?" The crux is the word heaven. In the two quotations from Isaiah, God does two things with heaven which are incompatible: 1) He sits on top of heaven and 2) He measures heaven with the palm of his hand. Now everyone understands why a physical and anthropomorphic image of God is not realistic.

c *Sermo* 53,14

"What you've done is to copy the shape and outlines of God's limbs and features from the human body. Perhaps the notion crept into your mind that we are made in God's image as far as our bodies are concerned. I'll accept that concept for the time being, as something to be considered, discussed, examined, and thrashed out by argument. Please be so kind as to listen to me, because just now I was kind enough to listen to you. So, God is seated in heaven, and He is measuring heaven with the palm of his hand. Does this same heaven become wider when He is sitting in it, and narrower when He is measuring it? Or is God Himself the same size in his seat as He is in his palm? If that's the case, God didn't make us in his own likeness, because we have palms which are much narrower than the part of the body we sit with. But if He is as broad in the palm as He is in the beam, then in our case He made these parts very unequal. No, that's not where the likeness lies. Such an idol should be ashamed of itself in a Christian mind."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ *Sermo* 53,14: Ecce figuras et liniamenta membrorum Dei a corpore humano duxisti. Sed forte subrepsit tibi ut secundum corpus putares nos factos ad imaginem

c 1 Commentary on *Sermo* 53,14

In chapter 14 St. Augustine expands on the problem of heaven in order to improve his audience's notion of God. The quotations from Isaiah might lead them to conclude that God is physical and anthropomorphic, which would have a comical effect here due to the highly contrasting imagery. Then comes, very cynically: "But perhaps the notion crept into your mind that we were made in God's image as regards our bodies." One is expected to think about this working hypothesis before concluding that it is untenable: "I'll accept this, for the time being, as something to be considered, discussed, examined, thrashed out by argument." What is accepted is the contradiction in: "God is seated in heaven, and He is measuring heaven with the palm of his hand." St. Augustine exaggerates the assumed ridiculousness of this statement even further by putting two rhetorical questions: "Does the same heaven become wide when He is sitting in it, and narrow when He's measuring it?" and: "Or is God Himself the same size in his backside as He is in his palm?" The first rhetorical question focuses on heaven, the second on God. St. Augustine skips the first but not the second: it is associated with Genesis 1,26-27. If we take Isaiah literally, the words in Genesis can't be true: "If that's the case, God didn't make us in his own likeness, because we have palms which are much narrower than the part of the body we sit on. But if He is as broad in the palm as He is in the beam, then for us He made our parts very unequal. No, that's not where the likeness lies." It is because everything in the Bible is true that the listeners are not allowed to have an anthropomorphic image of God. And if they have it nevertheless, they are not honouring God but an idol, and a Christian should be deeply ashamed of this: "Such an idol should be ashamed of itself in a Christian mind." The conclusion is that God is indeed not to be captured in words because language is inadequate. The only thing left for mankind to do, is to praise Him.⁸⁵ This thought rounds off the digression about a human image of God and the introduction to the last chapter.

Dei. Interim accipio considerandum, discutiendum, requirendum, disputando excutiendum. Si placet, audi me, quia in eo quod tibi placuit, audiui te. Sedet Deus in caelo, et palmo metitur caelum. Idem caelum fit latum cum sedet, et angustum cum metitur? An ipse Deus tantus est in sedendo, quantus in palmo? Si hoc ita est, non ad similitudinem suam nos fecit: nos enim palmum angustiores valde habemus, quam partem corporis qua sedemus. Ille autem, si tam latus est in palmo suo quam latus est in sessione sua, disparia membra nobis fecit. Non est ista similitudo. Erubescat ergo tale idolum in corde christiano.

⁸⁵ See Smith 2000 and: Louth 1989.

5 The physical, anthropomorphic God

Before St. Augustine's time, but also during it, it was not uncommon for Christians to imagine God as physical and anthropomorphic.⁸⁶ The Scriptures gave every reason to do so. From the first book of the Old Testament (Genesis) up to the last of the New Testament (Revelation) there are allusions to God in human form.⁸⁷ And although, under the influence of Neoplatonism, Christians gradually began to adopt a new, incorporeal and non-anthropomorphic image of God which in the end would definitively dominate the whole of Christian theology,⁸⁸ there were still movements which didn't choose this road and held to a human-like God. An example of such a movement was Manicheism, to which St. Augustine belonged for nine years before his conversion in 386. Dissatisfied with Manicheism because it had no answers to a number of questions he considered critical⁸⁹, he gradually lost interest in the movement. Also at this time (384) he moved to Milan to take up the post of city rhetorician. His interest in other speakers then led him to the church of the Catholic Bishop Ambrose in Milan.⁹⁰ Within a year his initial purely professional interest turned into commitment. This was due not only to the exhortations of his mother Monica who had joined him at the beginning of 385, but also to the new way of thinking with which Ambrose had managed to broaden his horizons.⁹¹ It was also indirectly thanks to Ambrose that St. Augustine got to know the work of the Neoplatonists, and via St. Paul started to reassess the Scriptures which until then he had rejected. Furthermore, Ambrose confronted him with allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures. And so he found answers

⁸⁶ Griffin/Paulsen 2002, 97: "It has been recognized by at least some scholars that many early Christians, and not only the *simpliciores*, believed God to be corporeal (materially embodied) or anthropomorphic (humanlike in form), as some Biblical narratives portray Him." In this article they disagree (successfully) with Kim Paffenroth who holds the opposite view.

⁸⁷ Gen 1,26-27. 26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness (...)' 27: "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Rev 20,11: "Then I saw a great white throne, and the One who sat upon it; (...)."

⁸⁸ Griffin/Paulsen 2002, 97: "(...) that Christian theology which developed, primarily under the influence of Platonism, a non-anthropomorphic and incorporeal conception of God that has come to dominate all subsequent theology and philosophy".

⁸⁹ Firstly, is God good? Secondly, is He spiritual? Thirdly, is He righteous? See O'Donnell 1994, 27.

⁹⁰ Ambrose (339-397) was the bishop of Milan.

⁹¹ Patout Burns 1990, 373-374.

to his questions.⁹² Now that he completely accepted Christian belief he could make a clean break with Manicheism. His spectacular conversion followed in 386.

Breaking with Manicheism did not mean that Manichean concepts went entirely out of sight. Although he certainly did leave the theory behind, some of the questions stayed with him all his life.⁹³ One in particular concerned the picture people had of God. He refers to this many times in his works, always taking the opportunity to prove that God is incorporeal, non-anthropomorphic, spirit, and often reasoning from the tangible via the absurd to the abstract.

It is hardly surprising that also in his sermons for the public St. Augustine addressed the issue of the image of God. The sermons not only gave him the chance to "test" new ideas, which were intended for his main works, on his audience.⁹⁴ But they also enabled him to elaborate on established ideas for the benefit of those already familiar with them.⁹⁵ The fragment from *Sermo* 53 (chapters 12-14) shows he occasionally went so far as to steal the show.⁹⁶ This passage is about generally-accepted ideas.⁹⁷ The question is well-known – whether one may conceive of God in human form – and the answer is well-known

⁹² O'Donnell 1994, 27: "Ambrose's sermons, with their emphasis on the Pauline distinction of letter and spirit as a means of interpreting the chasm between the Old and New Testament, rescued God's justice. The first encounter with the books of the Platonists, revealed to him a God who was not like the all-penetrating sea soaking into the sponge of material creation, but who was instead a spirit. The final stage in that revelation came on second look to the Platonists, when the doctrine of evil as a privation of good made itself understood to him, and he could see that all that was created was good, and thus that the creator Himself was good." See also: Patout Burns 1990, 373-377, and: Griffin/Paulsen 2002, 108.

⁹³ O'Donnell 1994, 31: "My own view is that Augustine fully shook off his Manicheism in every matter of doctrine, but never shook off the questions they had asked. The God he clung to so insistently was precisely the God who would ward off the Manichean God, and so in that way there are dim shadows of Manichean doctrine lying across Augustine's words down through his whole career."

⁹⁴ Dolbeau 1998, 96: "(The sermons) sont au coeur même de la création d'Augustin, le reflet au quotidien de ses pensées et souvent un banc d'essai pour l'argumentation d'ouvrages en cours de rédaction." See also Mohrmann 1948, LIII: "But even his study room remained open for unsophisticated listeners. Augustine had the extraordinary gift of being able to explain insights he had found as scientific thinker and theologian in simple and clear terms, understandable to the man in the street. So we see how year in, year out his sermons reflected his scientific work."

⁹⁵ An example of an ultra-subtle incorporeal and non-anthropomorphic approach to God and the Trinity in a sermon can be found in *Sermo* 52.

⁹⁶ Brown 1992, 220: Most of Augustine's sermons were very successful performances before an enthusiastic Carthage public.

⁹⁷ These ideas can be found, amongst others, in *Confessiones* (written between 397 and 401) 7,1,1-2. A translation of the *Confessiones* is in: Boulding 1996.

too: no, it is not right. His criticism is directed not only to the Manicheans (this sermon was given nearly twenty years after his break with them) but also to contemporary Catholic Christians who see God as corporeal and anthropomorphic. The latter, being Catholics, may be considered superior to the Manicheans, but they are still far inferior to “good” Catholics: their belief is carnal and their behaviour childlike. Children have to be brought up to develop from carnal to spiritual beings. It is therefore important to ensure that their development does not stagnate.⁹⁸ And who can do this better than a teacher? What makes this passage so remarkable, preached as it is not to a group of Manicheans but to a church full of Catholic Christians? Not the ideas; or rather, not what was actually said, but how it was said.

6 St. Augustine and humour

St. Augustine never made propaganda for laughter, quite the reverse. In a number of places he makes no doubt of his aversion to it. It might even be that his dislike was a formal (but nonetheless serious) reaction to his Manichean background. Manicheism was a Gnostic sect. The Gnostics – who subjected Christian learning to critical analysis and so helped to develop it⁹⁹ – were not against humour and laughter, because of their dualistic world view. For them the spiritual world was present in the material world and at the same time hidden in it. Their dynamic approach in relation to this contrast (incongruity theory), in which they distanced themselves from other movements like Jewry and Christianity, often led to laughter (laughing at the opinions of others sounds like the superiority theory). So did the

⁹⁸ Griffin/Paulsen 2002, 109-11. 109: “He frankly confesses that some do believe this, but they are children in their understanding.” 110: “Carnal and childish Christians err concerning anthropomorphic language in Scripture, understanding it literally instead of allegorically. St. Augustine’s view on this gives another slant to the matter, because it brings up the question as to why the Scriptures use carnal images. The reason is that man develops from the carnal to the spiritual. The carnal image is a sort of first step towards the spiritual image.” 111: “The Scriptures include carnal images for their sake, as stepping stones to higher conceptions of God.”

⁹⁹ Gilhus 1997, 69/75. 69: “The Gnostics were important participants in the Christian movement, and they flourished at a time when the Christian doctrine was not yet firmly established. Early Christianity was a complex phenomenon, and it was in part shaped through dialogue and conflict with Gnostic groups and their texts.” 75: “Humour and laughter open up the body and the mind, laughter is a sign of receptivity; with it the body literally opens up.” Cf. Skynner/Cleese 1996.

resulting insight, this time following the relief theory. The Gnostics found salvation through knowledge (gnosis). To achieve this was like solving a puzzle or seeing a joke.¹⁰⁰ The dualism was mainly applicable to Jesus, who was both God and man. In Jesus lay the essence of Gnosticism, namely that the material had been mistaken for the spiritual.¹⁰¹ For them too, true humour was based on incongruity – particularly the contrast between spirit and body – but still had a purpose: to learn.¹⁰²

For Christians, and thus for the converted St. Augustine, the body including physical reactions like laughter were formally suspect. He brings up all the old objections to laughter again. Like all Christians, he sees laughter as proof of irrationality and weakness of character.¹⁰³ In addition, he chooses for his sermons subjects out of the most venerable Scriptures, because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴ However, he was in heart and soul a teacher, and a man of language and rhetoric. And so he was impelled to use the possibilities which humour offered him to meet the demand for laughter and amusement, which everyone is born with. Humour and laughter have been shown above to be universal; in other words, for all people and all times. For this reason St. Augustine regularly wielded the powerful weapon of humour, albeit always with great subtlety. He had no time for boisterous laughter, at least not on paper, since he was steeped in the classical heathen tradition and, later on, in the Biblical tradition. These two traditions together formed a grand corpus of texts which he knew like the back of his hand.

a Laughing as an expression of irrationality

In St. Augustine's eyes the ability to laugh (as we have seen earlier) is an important difference between humans and animals. In his early philosophical dialogue *De libero arbitrio*, written between 388 and 395 (between his conversion and becoming bishop) when

¹⁰⁰ Gilhus 1997, 70: "The process of acquiring salvific knowledge was akin to solving a riddle or seeing the point of a joke. (...), the Gnostic approach was dynamic and incorporated the laughter of insight and understanding."

¹⁰¹ Gilhus 1997, 72: "The heart of Gnostic ideology: matter mistaken for spirit."

¹⁰² Gilhus 1997, 75: "(The Gnostic laugh is) seeing through, understanding a point, acquiring new knowledge, an exploitation of the universal connection between wit and learning; 'ha-ha' and 'a-ha'. The laugh creates openings: laughter represented a passage from the hidden to the revealed, (...)."

¹⁰³ Gilhus 1997, 61/62. 61: "In its inarticulate outbursts, laughter violates rational thought and speech." 62: "Excessive laughter reveals weakness of character and destroys discipline."

¹⁰⁴ *De doctrina christiana*, 4,21,59.

through study and prayer he throws off his 'old' life, he says: "But there are other things which apparently do not pertain to animal life, though even in man they are not his highest endowments, such as the power to jest and laugh".¹⁰⁵ Animals, he says, differ from humans in that they do not seem able to make jokes and to laugh, and a good thing too. Why? St. Augustine gives an explanation of his disdain for this ability, a disdain most clearly confessed. This change took place very soon after his conversion: "Anyone with true discernment of human nature will say that this is a human quality, though of a lower order."¹⁰⁶ Although joking and laughing are only human, they are not marks of good character.

Thus the tone is set: people may laugh, but it doesn't earn them respect. They had better do it as little as possible. And if they do laugh, it is evidence of an unfitting lack of a sense of reality. There is after all no need to laugh. The fact that at birth we don't laugh but cry, says it all: "The newborn infant might first laugh before he wept," he says in a sermon from 412 - "why doth he commence life with weeping? He knoweth not yet how to laugh: why doth he already know how to weep? Because he hath begun to enter upon this life."¹⁰⁷ Life on earth gives cause to weep but not to laugh. In this statement we get a glimpse of the difference between the physical and the metaphysical laugh which we also see in the New Testament. It had considerable influence on the church fathers, and so on St. Augustine too.¹⁰⁸ People cry immediately after birth but nevertheless start to laugh very early on: "After this I began to smile, at first only in my sleep and then when I was awake,"¹⁰⁹ writes St. Augustine in the first book of his *Confessiones* (397). Even this uncontrolled reflex laugh, which he produced as an infant, proves that physical laughter points to irrationality. Inarticulate children were considered not yet rational by the standards of ancient times.

It is strange too that society told children in infancy and puberty to control the unbridled reflex laugh (and other physical

¹⁰⁵ *De libero arbitrio*, 1,18: Sunt alia quaedam, quae iam cadere in feras non videntur nec tamen in homine ipso summa sunt, ut iocari et ridere; (...). The translation of *De libero arbitrio* is in: Russell 1967. There are a number of quotations from this translation.

¹⁰⁶ *De libero arbitrio*, 1,18: (...); quod humanum quidem, sed infimum hominis iudicat, quisquis de natura humana rectissime iudicat

¹⁰⁷ *Enarratio in psalmum* 126,10 (sermon in Carthage in 412): Poterat ridere prius puer qui nascitur? Quare a fletu incipit ridere? Ridere nondum novit; quare plorare iam novit? Quia coepit ire in istam vitam.

¹⁰⁸ See Gilhus 1997, 60-61.

¹⁰⁹ *Confessiones* 1,6,8: Post et ridere coepi, dormiens primo, deinde vigilans.

expressions of exuberance) at all costs.¹¹⁰ This attitude is in complete contrast with certain kinds of adult laughter which from a child's standpoint are uncompassionate, and here we see the superiority theory at work. Although in adulthood he had no problem with this, the young St. Augustine saw the far too nonchalant attitude of adults (including, to his astonishment, his own parents) towards children as the ultimate in unfairness: "But if this person (...), who are terrified of such tortures, could he still make light of them, as did our parents, who laughed at the torments we boys suffered?"¹¹¹ It seems that for the first time he realized that he lived in a topsy-turvy world where people laughed at the wrong things.

Laughing at the wrong things happens also in the theatre. Before his conversion St. Augustine often went to the theatre, although over the years he managed to free himself completely from its magnetic attraction. There too, laughter evidenced irrationality, falling under both the superiority and the amusement theories. By its very nature theatre is the prime example of all that is deceptive and counter to truth: after all, actors are always pretending and therefore violating truth: "(...) nearly all those who make jokes lie."¹¹² In this respect heathen playwrights made actors speak ill about heathen gods. "Quae si adoranda sunt, cur ea rident in theatris? Si autem ridenda sunt, plus ridendum est, cum adorantur in templis."¹¹³ In this passage St. Augustine compares the physical laugh, which exhibits ignorance, gullibility or irrationality (in the theatre they laugh at gods which in the temple are praised), with the intellectual laugh which shows that one is in control. In *De civitate Dei* he denounces even more sternly the sordid situation around the authority of the various gods – a situation which in a way reminds one of modern bureaucracy: "(...) which, when it is done by mimics knowing what they are doing, is deservedly laughed at in the theatre, but when it is done by foolish persons who do not know better, is more deservedly ridiculed in the world."¹¹⁴ The comparison between theatre actors and everyday idiots illustrates clearly how false heathen gods are: "(...) and though

¹¹⁰ As for example the *puerilem levitatem* in *De ordine*, 1,21.

¹¹¹ *Confessiones*, 1,9,15: Estne quisquam (...), qui (...) varia tormenta (...) ita parvi aestimet, (...) quemadmodum parentes nostri ridebant tormenta, quibus pueri a magistris affligebamur.

¹¹² *Soliloquia* 2,16 (written in 387): (...) et omnes fere qui iocantur, mentiuntur.

¹¹³ *De consensu evangelistarum* 1,13 (written in 400).

¹¹⁴ *De civitate Dei* 6,1 (written between 413 and 427): Quod cum fit ab scientibus mimis, digne ridentur in theatro; cum vero a nescientibus stultis, dignius irridentur in mundo. A translation of *De civitate Dei* is in: Schaff 1979. There are a number of quotations from this translation.

the gods who are laughed at in the theatre are not other than those who are adored in the temples.”¹¹⁵

Heathen gods were often victims of St. Augustine's sharp tongue. In an early letter (390/1) to the enlightened heathen Maximus, devotee of a kind of heathen monotheism, he writes that if they want to laugh at themselves there is no shortage of material: “Verum tamen si ridere delectat, habes apud vos magnam materiam facetiarum: deum stercutium, deum cluacinam, Venerem calvam, deum timorem, deum pallorem, deam febrem et cetera innumerabilia huiusce modi, quibus Romani antiqui simulacrorum cultores templa fecerunt et colenda censuerunt.”¹¹⁶ In this sentence it becomes quite clear that what he means by the word *ridere* and all its derivatives (like *deridere* and *irridere*) is not so much “humorous” as “ridiculous”, or rather, the humorous via the ridiculous. Up to this point he has used *ridere* meaning corporeal and senseless.

b Laughter as expression of elation

Real laughter does however occur with St. Augustine, usually as a reaction to cases of refined humour. As said earlier, we find examples of the practical application of humour at various places in his works, and we find his theoretical ideas reflected in, for example, *De catechizandis rudibus* and *De doctrina christiana*. Reading the sermons, it is noticeable how easily he handles humour and laughter: he does it professionally, i.e. in the right dosage and yet spontaneously. The idea behind this is his conviction that a preacher's enthusiasm will nearly always infect listeners, but that in some cases it will do no harm (and might even be necessary) to heighten a sense of elation with a bit of humour, not for its own sake but always within the subject, and in a refined way, never farcical.

Real humour does not have to lead to loud laughter, rather it should be an extension of enthusiasm. “Indeed, people listen to us with much greater pleasure when we ourselves take pleasure in this same work of instruction. The thread of our discourse is affected by the very joy that we ourselves experience, and as a consequence is delivered more easily and received more gratefully,”¹¹⁷ he says. If a

¹¹⁵ *De civitate Dei* 6,6: (...) nec alii dii rideantur in theatris, quam qui adorantur in templis.

¹¹⁶ *Epistula* 17,2 (written in 390/1).

¹¹⁷ *De catechizandis rudibus* 2,4: Et re quidem vera multo gratius audimur, cum et nos eodem opere delectamur: afficitur enim filium locutionis nostrae ipso nostro gaudio, et exit facilius atque acceptius.

listener gets tired, humour can help to liven him up: "When we observe this, we should either refresh his mind by saying something seasoned with a becoming liveliness and suited to the matter under discussion, (...)." ¹¹⁸ This fun (*hilaritas*, but in particular *honesta hilaritas*) has to do with stimulation: "or something calculated to arouse great wonder and amazement, (...)." ¹¹⁹ "Nunc tamen nemo ambigit, et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri." ¹²⁰ Whatever incites wonder and amazement can incite laughter, according to the incongruity theory. It can be a simple pun. It can also be a stimulating train of thought in a longer passage, as occurs in the refined humour of the classical heathen and Biblical traditions, both of which had a strong influence on St. Augustine. For example: in a dialogue with his son Adeodatus he starts reasoning in such a complicated way that Adeodatus must almost certainly have had to laugh (inwardly): "You have made an intelligent mistake. But in order that you may be mistaken no longer, pay closer attention to what I have to say, if only I can express it the way I want to. Now dealing with words by means of words is just as bewildering as intertwining and scratching one's fingers, when it is almost impossible to tell, except for the person doing it, which fingers are itching and which are relieving the itch." To which Adeodatus replies: "Look, I am all attention! That analogy has stirred my curiosity." ¹²¹ Humour here is clearly a question of intellect and for the purpose of instruction. This is stated in *De vera religione*: "(...) id est mentis acie, qua videntur omnes, qui docti aut urbani aut faceti nominantur, excellere (...)." ¹²²

Humour and laughter are primarily of a social nature: "Perhaps because it is not easy to enjoy a joke by oneself? Not easy, to be sure," ¹²³ writes St. Augustine. But people can still experience hilarity on their own: "but it does sometimes happen that people who are

¹¹⁸ *De catechizandis rudibus* 13,19: Quod ubi senserimus, renovare oportet ejus animum, dicendo aliquid honesta hilaritate conditum et aptum rei quae agitur, (...).

¹¹⁹ *De catechizandis rudibus* 13,19: (...) vel aliquid valde mirandum et stupendum.

¹²⁰ *De doctrina christiana* 2,8,13.

¹²¹ *De magistro* 5,14 (written in 389): Aug. Acute quidem falleris, sed ut falli desinas, acutius attende quod dicam, si tamen id dicere, ut volo, valueris: nam verbis de verbis agere tam implicatum est, quam digitos digitis inserere et confricare, ubi vix dignoscitur, nisi ab eo ipso, qui id agit, qui digiti pruriant, et qui auxiliuntur prurientibus. Ad. Et toto animo adsum, nam ista haec similitudo me intentissimum fecit. A translation of *De Magistro* is in: Russell (1968) 1990.

¹²² *De vera religione* (written in 389).

¹²³ *Confessiones* 2,9,17: An quia etiam nemo facile solus ridet? Nemo quidem facile, (...).

entirely alone, with no one else present, are overcome by laughter if something very funny presents itself to their senses or their thoughts.”¹²⁴ But however much fun there is in secret amusement, humour works best in group situations.¹²⁵ There is an example of this in *De beata vita*: “While the others laughed at the fact that they were misled through their own admissions, our mother, stunned for a while, requested that through an explanation I should loosen and untangle for her the logical knot I had been compelled to present.”¹²⁶ The very fact that Monica does not join in with the laughter shows that the situation is illogical. In passing it should be noted that the humour in these cases arises from intellectual stimulation.

c True laughter

It is surprising that the physical laugh, as opposed to refined humour, hardly appears anymore in St. Augustine’s later works. The words *ridere* and *iocari* and their derivatives do however occur in the later works, quite frequently in fact. But the way they are used follows the excerpts from the New Testament quoted earlier, and is also in line with the traditional basic attitude to laughter which he had in the meantime adopted. Later on he makes a structural association between physical laughter and foolishness. The ultimate true laughter, however, has nothing to do with humour and cannot even be known in this life. It belongs to the life to come. From this argument it follows that all laughter in this life is false and a sign of irrationality, and thus should be avoided. In *Sermo* 175 (preached in 412) St. Augustine states this very clearly: “People who have lost their minds through fever are much more dangerously ill. They laugh, and sane people cry. What’s more, those of sound mind cry for the crazy ones who are laughing. If you propose a choice between these two things – which is better, to laugh or to cry – is there anybody who wouldn’t prefer to laugh? And then, because repentance involves salutary sorrow, the Lord presented tears as a requirement, laughter as the resulting benefit. How? He says it in the Gospel, “*Blessed are those who cry, because they shall laugh*” (Luke 6,21). So crying is a requirement,

¹²⁴ *Confessiones* 2,9,17: (...), sed tamen etiam solos et singulos homines, cum alius nemo praesens est, vincit risus aliquando, si aliquid nimium ridiculum vel sensibus occurrit vel animo.

¹²⁵ See also Bergson (1993) pages 31-32.

¹²⁶ *De beata vita* 3,19 (written in 386): Hic cum se ceteri concessionibus suis deceptis riderent, postulavit mater, cum diu stupida fuisset, ut ei hoc ipsum, quod conclusionis necessitate intorte dixeram, explicando relaxarem atque solverem. A translation of *De beata vita* is in: Schopp 1948.

and laughter the reward, of wisdom. He says laughter, meaning joy: not guffawing, but jumping for joy. So if you put the choice between these two things, if you ask which of these is the better, to laugh or to cry, everybody wants to laugh and would rather not cry. But now if you add particular individuals to these expressions of feeling, and put the choice with persons included: which is better, for a crazy person to laugh or a sane person to cry; everyone prefers tears with sanity to laughter with madness. Such is the value of mental health, which is preferable even with lamentation."¹²⁷

The distinction between crying and laughing is connected in a paradoxical way with life on earth and life in heaven: whoever laughs now will cry later, and whoever cries now will laugh later. Someone who laughs now is ill (*aegrotant*), silly (*phreneticus*) or blind (*caecus*). "Insane," says St. Augustine threateningly in *Sermo* 122,2, referring to the Scriptures, "Madman, the stone is lying here, and that's why you mock it. But if you mock, you are blind; if you are blind, you stumble; if you stumble, you are shaken to pieces; (...)." ¹²⁸ Life on earth is a vale of tears: if you are ill you move from "crying with laughter" on earth in this life to "crying without laughter" in the other life. In other words, you move from one form of crying to another. ¹²⁹ Laughing in this life therefore means that one has the delusion of being healthy whilst in fact one is sick or mad, and it means that weeping is a sign of health. The latter is true laughter: "He wrote laughter, meaning joy: not guffawing, but jumping for joy."¹³⁰

¹²⁷ *Sermo* 175,2: Periculosius aegrotant, qui mentem febris perdiderunt. Illi rident, et sani plorant. Ridet enim phreneticus: sed non est sanus. Porro autem qui qui mentis est sanae, plorat phreneticum ridentem. Primum, si duo ista proponas, quid est melius, ridere, an plorare? Quis non sibi eligat ridere? Denique propter dolorem salubrem paenitentiae, in fletu Dominus posuit officium, in risu beneficium. Quomodo? Quando ait in Evangelio, Beati qui plorant, quoniam ridebunt. Ergo in ploratu officium est, in risu est praemium sapientiae. Risum enim pro gaudio posuit, non cachinnationem, sed exultationem. Ergo si duo ista proponas, et quaeras quid horum sit melius, ridere, an plorare: omnis homo plorare non vult, et ridere vult. Porro si addas personas ad istos affectus, et ita proponas cum personis: Quid est melius, ridere phreneticum, an plorare sanum? Eligit sibi homo fletum cum sanitate, quam risum cum amentia. Tantum valet mentis sanitas, ut etiam cum planctu eligatur. See also: *Sermo* 31,4.

¹²⁸ *Sermo* 122,2: Insane, iacet lapis, et ideo rides. Sed cum rides, caecus es; cum caecus es, offendis; cum offendis, conquassaris; (...).

¹²⁹ *Sermo* 31,3 (preached before 405): (...) a fletu ad fletum, a fletu cum risu ad fletum sine risu.

¹³⁰ *Sermo* 175,2: Risum enim pro gaudio posuit, non cachinnationem, sed exultationem.

7 Conclusions

Chapters 12-14 of *Sermo* 53 are clearly about a form of elevated, and to our eyes modern, teaching. In an unpretentious way this teaching employs an elevated kind of humour, pleasing to the ear, both stimulating and instructive; in fact a kind of humour which falls within all definitions of refined humour. In spite of an attitude to humour which is consistently negative, the church fathers including St. Augustine do indeed use humour, as is to be expected in view of the universal character of the phenomenon. It is clear even from the excerpt selected that St. Augustine applies the incongruity theory, but he also uses the superiority theory (the only kind of humour in Christian times, according to Morreall) in a refined way. St. Augustine makes his imputations only indirectly, by addressing a fictitious opponent or, even more simply, the opponent's thoughts. Because St. Augustine knows what he is talking about, he is aware of his strengths. Not everybody can use this humour. An approach like this to such a subject (God) could lead to a chaotic atmosphere or even to self-mockery. The teacher in St. Augustine, however, is master of the technique. He even dares to create such a situation deliberately, with the express purpose of bringing his listeners into the open mode. St. Augustine is able to apply both the superiority theory and the incongruity theory in a complex way. The tension inherent in the humour works roughly speaking on two subjects. On one hand there is the contrast between the Most High and the disproportionate outward human form ascribed to Him. On the other hand there is the contrast between the learned bishop at one with his subject matter and the (fictitious) ordinary man who hardly knows anything about the Scriptures, or in any case not enough to be able to play with them. Behind the first subject lies the incongruity theory and behind the second lies the superiority theory. The latter appears in an extremely mild form, since St. Augustine's purpose with it is didactic, as also with the incongruity theory actually. Didactic goals, after all, assume an optimal atmosphere of communication and trust in which the method is not to find fault but to correct. In the field of religion an atmosphere of trust is a prerequisite.

The ultimate capability of St. Augustine lies in the effect of his presentations to enable the listener, or in our times the reader, to identify with both preacher and fictitious opponent. Along the way the listener is alerted to his shortcomings so that he can remove them and end up on the right road. The great value of St. Augustine's knowledge and experience leads imperceptibly to a form of differen-

tiated teaching. Everyone can benefit from it in his own way, by eliminating faults and correcting inadequacies. More convincing proof of his superior qualities as teacher can hardly be imagined. His humour is abrasive and lubricating at the same time, and as has been shown, this is only possible with an optimal relationship of trust. It is therefore not likely that he preached this sermon to dissidents or unbelievers; nothing points to this. It seems probable that he preached to Catholic Carthaginians who knew the subject backwards and – as was then the case – were intellectually curious as to how the famous bishop would tackle the subject matter this time. And they knew only too well that there was a chance that the teacher-preacher St. Augustine would shine like a real cabaret artist. His sermons were becoming more and more like workshops.¹³¹ And, as his friend and biographer Possidius says: “there are no words to express how much Christians admired him and unanimously praised him.”¹³²

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¹³¹ Van Bavel 1992, Introduction, VII: “Nowadays we would sooner call these sermons “workshops”. See also Brown 1992, 220-222.

¹³² Possidius, *Vita sancti Augustini*, 5.

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