

HANS LASSEN MARTENSEN AND THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COMEDY: APOCALYPTIC HUMOR

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Abstract

Hans Lassen Martensen's analyses of the concepts "comedy," "humor," and "irony" were informed by a unique theological vision. According to his literary theory, comedy included the moments of irony, which promoted distance from the mundane world, and humor, which encouraged the discernment of the infinite in the superficialities and brokenness of that world. The element of humor was rooted in the theological conviction that the drama of the cosmos is governed by the dialectic of differentiation and happy reconciliation. Given that conviction, Martensen redescribed traditional Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity, creation, the Incarnation, salvation, and eschatology so that they all contributed to the assurance that the cosmos is moving toward the ultimate fulfillment of all things. That joyous certainty undergirded comedy's ability to compassionately embrace the failings and trivialities of finitude.

Key Words: Martensen, irony, humor, comedy, theology, eschatology.

Resumen

El análisis de Hans Lassen Martensen de los conceptos de "comedia", "humor" e "ironía" se caracterizan por una visión única. De acuerdo con su teoría literaria, la comedia incluye los momentos de la ironía, la cual sugiere un distanciamiento con respecto a lo mundano, y el humor, que promueve el discernimiento de lo infinito dentro de lo superficial y descompuesto de este mundo. El elemento del humor radica en la convicción teológica de que el drama del cosmos está gobernada por la dialéctica de la diferenciación y la reconciliación feliz. Dada esta convicción, Martensen replanteó las doctrinas cristianas tradicionales, tales como la Trinidad, la creación, la encarnación, la salvación y la escatología, de modo que contribuyeran en su conjunto a la certeza de que el cosmos se dirige al cumplimiento máximo de todas las cosas. Esta certeza feliz es el fundamento de la habilidad de la comedia para abarcar de forma compasiva las imperfecciones y trivialidades de la finitud.

Palabras clave: Martensen, ironía, humor, comedia, teología, escatología.

Søren Kierkegaard's master's thesis, published as *The Concept of Irony*, was just one (somewhat unconventional) contribution by a young theology student to an already wide-spread and sometimes heated academic conversation in Denmark about the significance of the related concepts of "irony," "humor," "comedy," and "tragedy." The discussion in northern Europe had been sparked by the controversial literary theory and practice of such Romantics as Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, and by G. W. F. Hegel's critical response to them in his philosophy of aesthetics.¹ The passionate exchange featured such luminaries of Denmark's "Golden Age" as F. C. Sibbern (1785-1872), a professor of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, Poul Martin Møller (1794-1838), another professor of philosophy and a poet, and Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860), poet, philosopher, literary critic, and arbiter of taste for many of Copenhagen's cultural elite. One of the somewhat less well-known participants was the rising academic star, Hans Lassen Martensen (1808-1884), who would soon ascend to prominence as a theology professor at the university, court preacher, and eventually the primate of Denmark. Martensen's reflections on literary forms serve as a case study of the way in which these conversations about aesthetics were functions of even deeper debates about foundational theological and philosophical world-views. As we shall see, Martensen's literary theory was informed by a specific theological agenda; his conclusions about irony, humor, and comedy were governed by his unique speculative eschatological vision (which he calls "apocalyptic") that rooted comedy in an extreme cosmic optimism.

I. *The Beginnings of Martensen's Literary and Theological Authorship*

In 1836 Martensen returned from a two-year tour of Europe in which he had studied or at least conversed with many of the continent's leading thinkers.² He had been drawn to aspects of Hegel's dialectical idealism, in

¹ Cfr., K. Brian Soderquist, *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's "On the Concept of Irony,"* Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2007. See also: George L. Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002. David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Imagination*, New York: Peter Lang 1989. Uffe Andreassen, *Poul Møller og Romantismen*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1973.

² For Martensen's life, see Hans Lassen Martensen, *Af mit Levnet. Meddelelser*, vols. 1-3, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1882-83.

which provisional differentiations are progressively reconciled into higher unities, but he had also been disturbed by the possible pantheistic implications of this ideology. According to his own admission, the lure of pantheism had temporarily undermined his faith in a transcendent deity. After a debilitating spiritual crisis Martensen experienced a renewed appreciation for the personhood of God. He became certain that God is much more than an impersonal dynamic inherent in the history of the human spirit. The resolution of his theological struggles generated the twin themes that would define much of Martensen's authorship: the Hegel-like optimism that the reconciliation of apparent opposites is the *telos* of history, and an abiding conviction that God is a transcendent personality.³ Both of these themes would combine to form the background for Martensen's reflections about comedy, irony, and humor.

Upon his return to Copenhagen, Martensen renewed his friendship with J. L. Heiberg, whom he had met in Paris and who was actively promoting the philosophy of Hegel as an antidote to all of Denmark's cultural ills.⁴ Heiberg employed themes derived from Hegel in his literary criticism and even tried to embody them in his own "speculative poetry." Hegel's work was used by Heiberg to critique the excesses of reflective irony by some of the Romantics and to discredit the celebration of immediacy by other Romantics. He mobilized these criticisms to promote his own vision of a more conceptual and speculative form of art. Heiberg was by no means alone in this critical endeavor, for the Hegel-inspired critique of Romantic irony was becoming common throughout northern Europe. Martensen's association with Heiberg would contribute much to his own integration of aesthetic and theological concerns, particularly the relationships between comedy, dialectic, and eschatology.

In 1836 Martensen entered the scholarly fray by favorably reviewing Heiberg's *Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course at the Military College*, which overtly revealed the influence of Hegel in his enthusiasm for a dialectical logic based on the mediation of apparent opposites.⁵ Martensen's

³ Cfr., Horn, Robert Leslie Horn, *Positivity and Dialectic: A Study of the Theological Method of Hans Lassen Martensen*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2007, pp. 63-68.

⁴ Cfr., Henning Fenger, *The Heibergs*, trans. by Frederick J. Marker, New York: Twayne Publishers 1971.

⁵ Hans Lassen Martensen, "J. L. Heiberg: *Indledningsforedrag til det i November 1834 begyndte logiske Kursus paa den kongelige militaire Høiskole*," in *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 16, 1836, pp. 515-528. English translation: "Review of the *Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course*," in *Heiberg's Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course and*

dissertation on human autonomy continued his engagement with Hegel, although he critiqued modern philosophy's failure to do adequate justice to the self's dependence on God.⁶ Modern philosophy, he warned, had misleadingly valorized the self's determination of its own existence. This regrettable impulse to become self-sufficient inevitably terminates in despair. Martensen contended that God is not just an historical process, but is a self-conscious personal subject. Moreover, he claimed, the human self is structured to recognize that it is created, sustained, and loved by this divine subject. Martensen's concern for sweeping metaphysical and theological issues, particularly the rhythm of differentiation and reunification, was also evident in his 1840 monograph on the thought of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart.⁷ In addition to his theological and philosophical work, it was at this period of his life that Martensen devoted much of his attention to aesthetic matters, writing a review of *Faust* by the Austrian poet "Lenau" (Niembsch von Strehlenau, 1802-1850) in 1837,⁸ a review of Heiberg's *Fata Morgana* in 1838,⁹ and a review of Heiberg's *New Poems* in three installments in 1841.¹⁰ As is evident from this chronology, in his early writings Martensen was simultaneously developing his thoughts on theological and aesthetic matters, which were constantly being interwoven.

Other Texts, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2007, pp. 73-86.

⁶ Hans Lassen Martensen, *Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie i vor Tids dogmatiske Theologie*, trans. by L. V. Petersen, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1841. English translation: *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard*, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 77-147.

⁷ Hans Lassen Martensen, *Meister Eckhart. Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1840. English translation: *Meister Eckhart: A Study in Speculative Theology*, in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard*, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 149-243.

⁸ Hans Lassen Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust. Med Hensyn paa Lenaus *Faust*," in *Perseus*, ed. by Johnan Ludvig Heiberg, C. A. Reitzel 1837, no. 1, pp. 91-164.

⁹ Hans Lassen Martensen, "*Fata Morgana: Eventyr-Comedie* af J. L. Heiberg," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur* 1838, vol. 19, pp. 361-397.

¹⁰ Hans Lassen Martensen, "*Nye Digte* af J. L. Heiberg," *Fædrelandet*, vol. 2, no. 398, January 10, 1841; no. 399, January 11, 1841; no. 400, January 12, 1841.

II. *Martensen's Early Literary Reflections*

Martensen's review of Lenau's *Faust* reveals the beginnings of a style of thinking that would inform his ruminations about irony and humor. He notes that the literary work, while using mythic themes, is really an exploration of the dynamics and potentialities of human subjectivity in relation to religion's "absolute idea."¹¹ The figure of Faust epitomizes humanity's aspirations to use reason to resolve all existential problems and to answer all questions without reliance upon God. This quest, if pursued consistently, inevitably leads to doubt. Martensen's reflections about doubt parallel what he will also shortly say about irony. Doubt is a necessary moment in the progress toward spiritual maturity, for doubt liberates the individual from the restrictions of a worldly pragmatism and a reductive empiricism. In an analogous way, irony frees the individual from the tyranny of social norms and the allure of purely temporal satisfactions. But, Martensen warns, Cartesian doubt can solidify into a world-view of debilitating skepticism, just as irony can be misused as a justification for nihilism. Doubt and irony should be moments or dimensions in the progress toward spiritual maturity, and not ultimate resting places.

In the review of *Fata Morgana*, Martensen outlines the contours of his literary theory. Here he treats the crucial issue of the nature of comedy, distinguishing it from tragedy.¹² According to Martensen, the dramatic tension in tragedy involves merely ethical concerns. Tragedy assumes the validity of social norms and does not promote critical distance from them; the given ethical values and ideals are taken to be absolutes. Tragic conflicts only generate real anguish if it is taken for granted that the clashing ethical systems have legitimate prescriptive force. In tragedy, the beleaguered hero must try to negotiate the tensions among divergent but equally valid ethical commitments. In modern literature, Martensen observes, tragedy's ethical collisions typically occur between diverging world-historical value systems.

According to Martensen, comedy, as opposed to tragedy, calls into question the very significance of the finite world, including its ethical principles. In various ways, all comedy is animated by a sense of the incongruity of essence and phenomenon. Martensen proposed that comedy occupies a position beyond the ethical sphere and that it challenges the absolutizing

¹¹ Martensen, "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust," p. 98.

¹² Martensen, "*Fata Morgana: Eventyr-Comedie* af J. L. Heiberg," pp. 378-379.

claims of ethics.¹³ Comedy exposes the finite, relative, and fallible aspects of all human endeavors, including ethical projects. More generally, comedy ridicules those who immerse themselves in the mundane world in any way, and subverts their illusion that the finite realm of ordinary duties and pleasures enjoys some sort of ultimacy apart from its relation to the infinite and the eternal. Comedy recognizes the infinitude of subjective consciousness and freedom, and celebrates their inherent value over against the paltry vicissitudes of mundane life. Not only are the myopic desires of vulgar materialism and the flights of fancy of pure idealism inadequate expressions of spirit, but so also is the self-satisfaction of the cultural conformist. By themselves, the joys of the complacent and dutiful citizen can never truly satisfy the spirit.

In the review Martensen proceeds to subdivide comedy into two different expressions: irony and humor. Irony promotes an appreciation of subjective freedom by exposing the pretensions of finitude. However, irony can become more than a critical tool and can grow into a comprehensive disposition toward life in general. When this happens, irony can degenerate into a world-denying, self-absorbed nihilism. Unrestrained irony breeds a debilitating narcissism and solipsism.

Humor, the other dimension of comedy, is very different, although it includes a moment of irony. Martensen maintained that humor views life from a higher metaphysical position than does irony. After relativizing the finite, humor then affirms that the finite can be brought back into relation with the infinite.¹⁴ In spite of the obvious incongruities, the seeds of the ideal can be discerned in the real. Truth can be found in appearances. Consequently, the finite can be embraced and affirmed, in spite of its contingency, fallibility, and fallenness.

Martensen's review of Heiberg's *New Poems* further elaborated this analysis of comedy, irony, and humor, reiterating themes from his "*Fata Morgana*" essay and gesturing toward its theological basis. Martensen focused on Heiberg's poem "The Soul after Death," which was described as an "apocalyptic comedy" by its author. According to Martensen, the poem warrants the characterization of "apocalyptic" because it imagistically points to the ultimate judgment of the finite realm. It is also appropriately called a "speculative" poem, for it deals with the most basic features of existence, seeing them in the light of a unifying idea, rather than merely focusing on

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Martensen, "*Fata Morgana: Eventyr-Comedie* af J. L. Heiberg," pp. 380-381.

some limited and idiosyncratic situation. In the poem, a deceased business person, sounding very much like a stereotypical member of Copenhagen's bourgeoisie, seeks admission first to the Christian heaven and then to the pagan Elysium. This particular individual, who is the epitome of superficiality, mistakenly believed that a life devoted to familial duties and civic responsibilities exhibits sufficient virtue to merit a heavenly reward. Upon being questioned about how he had sought to understand the divine, the soul protested that God is incomprehensible and that seeking knowledge of God is pointless. However, the soul's recourse to the theme of divine ineffability and the espousal of a cavalier agnosticism was dismissed by St. Peter as an evasion of responsibility. To claim that God is utterly ineffable is to evacuate the concept "God" of all meaning and thereby to render it innocuous.

Having been rejected by heaven, the soul then sought admission to Elysium. But Elysium has its own admission requirements: the soul must have been genuinely devoted to the pursuit of truth and beauty. However, this poor cultural philistine had sought beauty and truth only in finite phenomena. He had wrongly imagined that art is nothing more than the life-like representation of empirical reality. He had not learned to discern the infinite and the eternal in the depths of the finite and the temporal. Similarly, the soul had foolishly imagined that knowledge is nothing more than a congeries of empirical data, unsynthesized by any concept to reveal its deeper meaning.

The poor rejected soul finally gets a warmer reception in Hell, which bears a marked resemblance to Copenhagen. Hell is not the domain of pure moral evil, but is rather the sphere of "the bad." "Bad" in this context has resonances of the Hegelian notion of a "bad infinity," meaning the endless repetition of particulars without any integrating significance or purpose; the bad infinity is the merely quantitative extension of a series of identical items. Here "bad" does not suggest intentional opposition to the good, but rather indifference to all the higher things of the spirit. The hellish soul remains naively focused on purely temporal and pragmatic concerns. Although there seems to be much activity and the pretense of engaging in important tasks, the frenetic busyness is essentially meaningless. The infernal soul does not pursue anything ideal, nor does it aspire to discern the ideal in the real. Hell exhibits no teleology, manifests no significant history, and is intrinsically repetitious and boring. Hell is a place of apathy toward everything that ennobles life. It represents the triumph of vacuity and mediocrity. In cultural

terms, it is the culmination of a pragmatic society's lack of concern for ultimate questions of truth and beauty. For Martensen, Heiberg's description of Hell functions as a critique of uncultivated bourgeois sensibilities and crass philistinism. Because the lost souls remain satisfied with mere societal conventions, ephemeral fads, and ersatz appearances, they possess no inner stability and no coherence. The denizens of Hell are buffeted by idiosyncratic whims that have no rhyme or reason. Therefore, Hell, or bourgeois pragmatism, is really a species of nihilism and relativism.

Martensen applauds Heiberg's plot-line for exposing the folly of ascribing ultimate significance to the trivialities of worldly life and trying to find fulfillment within the bounds of finitude. As Martensen had argued in his previous review, irony like that practiced by Heiberg uncovers the emptiness of the immediate life. The consistent ironist perceives the vanity of the entire realm of actuality. Such irony is essential for sensitizing people to the differences between the ideal and the actual world. It warns the reader to distance herself from mundane concerns. As a critical tool, irony provides the invaluable service of pointing to more expansive horizons that transcend the narrow confines of conventional thinking.

But Martensen's endorsement of irony is qualified, as was Heiberg's. He warns that irony as practiced by the Romantics can become a way of life in which everything is relativized. The proponents of such "uncontrolled irony" satirize all mundane phenomena in order to arbitrarily experiment with them. Here irony, which should be a critical tool to unmask finitude's pretensions, degenerates into self-absorption. Irony as a life-view mistakenly takes subjective nihilism to be the absolute truth about human existence, scoffs at all external norms, and cavalierly mocks everything. Because conventional values are discredited, the individual is liberated to invent his own values and projects, and to irresponsibly play with the world. In this way finitude is not entirely rejected, but is rather transfigured into a toy. This proudly and defiantly self-legislating self is in danger of becoming arbitrary, erratic, and immoral.

As he had done in the review of *Fata Morgana*, so also here Martensen explains the difference between tragedy and comedy. "The Soul after Death" is not a tragedy of cosmic proportions like Dante's misnamed *Divine Comedy*.¹⁵ The drama in Dante's celebrated poem revolved around moral failings and consequently Dante's tone was intensely judgmental. The themes of punishment for sin and the prospect of moral rehabilitation and

¹⁵ Martensen, "Nye Digte af J. L. Heiberg," no. 398, columns 5209-5210.

spiritual progress pervade the work. The threat of eternal damnation, which is a cornerstone of the “Catholic” apocalypse, is not a suitable topic for comedy, but demands the sort of tragic treatment that Dante gave it. Martensen insists that the Protestant apocalypse is different from the Roman Catholic apocalypse, for the Catholic non-comedy ends in the eternal damnation of some souls. Drawing on his Lutheran heritage to support his view, Martensen laments that Catholic eschatology is governed by law rather than by grace, and therefore its version of the history of the cosmos concludes with a woeful eternal dualism of the saved and the damned.

In the review of *New Poems* Martensen proposes that comedy, over against tragedy, points to a happy reconciliation of the finite and the infinite, and not their eternal disjunction. As he had argued in the review of *Fata Morgana*, he reiterates that the category of the comic includes both irony and humor.¹⁶ The comic, which contains irony within itself, presupposes the oppositions of existence and essence, and of appearance and reality. But humor, the other moment of comedy, advances beyond the ironic stance. Again echoing the review of *Fata Morgana*, Martensen contends that humor employs metaphysical rather than merely ethical categories. Humor is a speculative form of comedy, or the speculative moment within comedy, which can vanquish the nihilistic tendencies of unrestrained irony. “The humorous,” he writes, “which belongs only to Christendom, holds within itself not only all of irony, the poetic justice over the fallen world, but in addition the fullness of love and reconciliation.”¹⁷

Humor can restrain irony because it expands irony’s critique to include the emptiness of the ironist’s own self. It is not only conventional society and worldly individuals that are vacuous, but so also is the stance of the ironist. In humor, the individual’s own self is seen as participating in the folly and triviality of the world of actuality. The humorist is cognizant of his own fallibility and recognizes the superficiality of his own existence. He realizes that he himself is not exempt from humanity’s ridiculous obsession with inconsequential matters. Unlike the arrogant ironist, the humorist exemplifies the virtue of humility. Whereas irony leads to isolating egoism, humor encourages a sense of solidarity with the fallibility of the human race. Seeing himself as comic, the humorist is not reluctant to laugh at himself.

According to the review of *New Poems*, humor adds an even more important element to comedy. Humor, Martensen asserts, is a Christian cat-

¹⁶ Martensen, “*Nye Digte* af J. L. Heiberg,” no. 398, column 3212.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

egory. To accentuate this, he even claims that humor belongs exclusively to Christianity.¹⁸ Christianity is presupposed by humor, and humor is an essential dimension of Christianity. It is at this point that connections between Martensen's literary theory and his theology become overt.

Humor and Christianity are related in at least two different ways for Martensen. First, humor presupposes an awareness of sin. The humorist sees the mundane world as not just superficial, but also as fallen. Something has gone deeply wrong with the world; this is the negative moment in humor that is even more critical of temporality than is irony. However, the fact that something has gone wrong also implies a more hopeful prospect: things could be put right again; the emptiness of life in the world is not a structural necessity. Secondly, humor loves and affirms the world in spite of its triviality and its sin. Comedy, enriched by the dimension of humor, gestures toward the final triumph of felicity. Comedy points to a resolution of the contradiction between actuality and ideality, the finite and the infinite. At its heart, the humorous dimension of comedy anticipates a cosmic reconciliation. Humor presupposes that God, who is not construed as a punitive judge as in tragedy, will embrace everything. Comedy is only possible because God loves this world in spite of its folly and fallenness.¹⁹ The exuberantly optimistic mood behind comedy is the implicit conviction that this world is not so hopelessly fallen that God cannot graciously redeem and reconcile all things. Martensen rhapsodizes that humor "contains all the pain of the world overcome in a deep well of joy."²⁰ In the final consummation, all sorrow will be transfigured into blessedness as "the whole everyday-world is preserved in eternal happiness."²¹ Martensen adds that this mundane sphere will be preserved only as a world of appearances in which its non-ultimate status will be evident. Somehow the finite and transient phenomena of the temporal realm will provide the raw material for eternity.²² Put in more traditional religious language, in heaven the blessed souls will have their world restored, only in a reconciled and perfected form. Therefore, comedy is intrinsically Christian because the cosmic story must end happily; only Christianity guarantees that all will be well.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Martensen, "Nye Digte af J. L. Heiberg," no. 398, column 3211.

²² Martensen, "Nye Digte af J. L. Heiberg," no. 398, column 3210.

Martensen briefly hints at some metaphysical arguments to buttress his contention about the ultimate reconciliation of the finite and the infinite. A purely abstract infinity would be completely vacuous. Temporality and finitude must be taken up into the infinite and the eternal, or else eternity would be devoid of content. Furthermore, the very nature of personhood requires a sweeping reconciliation of the mundane and the transcendent. Assuming that personhood continues in eternity, any type of self-consciousness presupposes that the self can distinguish itself from that which is not itself. For the self to be conscious of what it is not, some sort of phenomenal dimension must serve as its environment, which implies that the phenomenal realm will somehow be preserved. Moreover, comedy critiques an erroneous view of life, and every mistaken position implicitly points to its opposite which corrects its inadequacy. The acknowledgement of sin implies sin's overcoming, which is forgiveness. The recognition of the alienation of the finite from the infinite implies their reconciliation. Given all this, Martensen concludes that in a way, we may discover that heaven contains London and Paris.²³ Heaven will be much more than the unmediated presence of God; we will find the entire world there.

III. *The Theological Underpinnings of Martensen's View of Comedy*

Martensen's creative appropriation and elaboration of Heiberg's reflections on irony and humor, evident in his literary reviews, are informed by his broader theological project. Martensen lauds the virtues of speculative comedy because Christianity's basic message, in his view, is the cosmically good news that all will be well. The hilarity of comedy is one aspect of the joy of recognizing that the drama of the cosmos is the teleological movement from unity, to difference, and then on to unity-in-difference. That movement is found in the Godhead itself, as the interaction of the persons of the Trinity, and it is manifested outside God in the movement from creation to incarnation to consummation. At the heart of this vision are three motifs: his articulation of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity, his contention that creation implied the need for incarnation, and his cautious flirtation with the theme of *apokatastasis*. The contours of this vision were evident in Martensen's early work, and they came to explicit articulation in his *Christian Dogmatics*. Significantly, he was developing the main motifs of his theology

²³ Martensen, "Nye Digte af J. L. Heiberg," no. 398, column 3211.

at the same time that he was composing his reflections about comedy, irony, and humor. A chronology of his more theological writings will show how these themes were regularly reiterated, thus showing their centrality to his theological vision, and that their progressive elaboration clarified the basis for his understanding of comedy.

In his essay of 1839 “Rationalism, Supernaturalism” Martensen began to articulate some of these themes.²⁴ Most particularly, he pointed to the need for a doctrine of the immanent Trinity in order to understand God’s actions *ad extra* as being rooted in God’s inner life. God’s life *in se* is the basis for creation, although creation is an uncoerced act of divine freedom. The movement from differentiation to reconciliation is so important for Martensen that he locates its foundation in the inner dynamics of the Trinity, which he describes as the key to the whole world system. In the same essay Martensen insists that God’s act of creation is oriented to incarnation; God’s decision to become incarnate was implicit in God’s decision to create. Martensen described Christ as “the central point of the universe, and the goal of the whole teleological development of the world.”²⁵ He adds, “Another way of expressing it is that creation exists only for the sake of incarnation.”²⁶ Nature is teleologically oriented toward supernature; nature was created so that it could be taken up into the supernatural, into the life of God.

In his monograph on Meister Eckhart of 1840 Martensen reinforced the centrality of the cosmological dialectic of difference and unity for his theology.²⁷ He commended Eckhart’s appreciation of the paradoxical rhythm of separation and unity in God’s relation to humanity. Martensen approvingly describes Eckhart’s view that finite creatures issue forth from God in order to return to God; God posits that which is different from God in order to transcend the difference through the union of the soul with God. Mar-

²⁴ Hans Lassen Martensen, “Rationalisme, Supernaturalisme, og *principium exclusi medii*,” *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*, vol. I, 1839, pp. 456-473. English translation: “Rationalism, Supernaturalism and the *principium exclusi medii*,” in Mynster’s “*Rationalism, Supernaturalism*” and the Debate about Mediation, trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2009, pp. 127-143.

²⁵ Martensen, “Rationalisme, Supernaturalisme,” p. 463 / p. 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hans Lassen Martensen, *Meister Eckhart. Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1840. English translation: *Meister Eckhart: A Study in Speculative Theology*, in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard*, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 149-243.

tensen approvingly explicates Eckhart: “The soul is that point where the created and the uncreated become one and through which the finite world, which is only fragmentary, can return to its originary source... This infinite process of self-objectification, a circle turning back into itself, is both God’s life and the creature’s life. God makes God’s own essence creaturely, but the creature’s issuing forth from God is only for the sake of the return.”²⁸

In *Outline to a System of Moral Philosophy* of 1841 Martensen shifted attention from the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation to the relation of God and humanity. He declares that the union of God and humanity accomplished in Jesus must be actualized in the human community.²⁹ In Christ humanity is reborn as Christ’s mystical body and objectively elevated to a higher plane of life. He does add the qualification that this corporate new life must be internalized in the lives of individuals. But Martensen quickly returns to the objective fact of the new life available in Christ, and observes that “the humorous is the innermost background in all Christian considerations of the world.”³⁰ Humor’s joy is an anticipation of the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God; humor is animated by confidence that the anticipated goal will indeed be actualized. Behind this assurance is the joyful and resilient conviction that God is both the foundation and the ultimate end of the whole cosmic drama.

In 1843 Martensen entered the ecclesial fray concerning the nature and purpose of Christian baptism, and in so doing raised the question of eschatology and the possibility of the restoration of all souls.³¹ The controversy that captured his attention had been triggered by the state’s decision to forcibly baptize the infant children of sectarian Christian parents who sought to restrict baptism to adult believers. The Baptists insisted that baptism should be contingent upon a voluntary, responsible profession of faith which preceded the individual’s regeneration. While expressing reservations about coerced baptism, Martensen defended the practice of infant

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91 / pp. 207-208.

²⁹ Hans Lassen Martensen, *Grundrids til Moralphilosophiens System*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1841. English translation: *Outline to a System of Moral Philosophy*, in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard*, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 245-313.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60 / p.287.

³¹ Hans Lassen Martensen, *Den christelige Daab betragtet med Hensyn paa det baptistiske Spørgsmaal*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1843. English translation: “Christian Baptism,” trans. by Henry Harbaugh, in *The Mercersburg Quarterly Review*, vol. 4, 1852, pp. 305-321, 475-485; vol. 5, 1853, pp. 276-310.

baptism by affirming the priority of the nurture provided by the church. The ecclesial channels of grace, including baptism preeminently, precede the individual's free response to God's solicitude. In fact, baptism implants the seed that will blossom in regeneration. God is portrayed by Martensen as the active agent in regeneration, which could suggest that salvation occurs through some sort of divine necessity. However, Martensen balked at this deterministic prospect, and vociferously denied any sort of pretemporal predestination of some individuals to salvation and others to damnation. That arbitrary restriction of salvation to the elect would compromise the theme of God's universal love. But Martensen also rejected the notion that God predestines all individuals to a salvation that will be effectuated automatically. Such a "magical" and deterministic view would negate the finite freedom of the human subject. Martensen wanted to see the grace of baptism as inspiring the individual's free participation in the process of her own spiritual growth, but not as necessitating it. That, however, opened the possibility that free resistance to God's grace could frustrate God's universally redemptive purpose. These considerations led Martensen to posit an antimony between God's sovereign love and human freedom. Although that antimony cannot be resolved, Martensen did point to the possibility of a non-fatalistic universal restoration.

The connections of all these themes became more explicit in Martensen's *Christian Dogmatics* of 1850.³² After a methodological prolegomena, the doctrine of the Trinity is foregrounded and serves as the foundation and organizing principle of his entire theological system. The centrality of the Trinity in his work was motivated by an epistemologically prior conviction that the Incarnation is the principle fact of Christian revelation, the "real and proper substance of Christianity."³³ Through his Trinitarian ruminations, Martensen was in effect seeking the transcendental conditions for the possibility of the Incarnation. Martensen asserts that pre-existence of Son with the Father in the Trinity is the ground in eternity of the Incarnation in time.³⁴ The Incarnation reveals the fact that God most basically desires to love human persons in a most intimate way; God most essentially wills this reconciliation of the soul and its world with God's own self.³⁵ God's

³² Hans Lassen Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, 2nd ed., Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel 1850. English translation: *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. by William Urwick, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1866.

³³ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 245 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 239.

³⁴ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 243 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 237.

³⁵ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 103 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 99.

reconciling work, evident in the Incarnation, enables a person to perceive God's love in the other two divine works of creation and consummation. The Incarnation is the crucial pivot of God's three-fold actions *ad extra* in creation, redemption, and consummation, for these three divine activities are three streams of love flowing from the fountain of the eternal love that became visible in the life of Jesus Christ.³⁶ The creative power of God is the presupposition of the love revealed in Christ, and the sanctifying work of the Spirit is the consummation of this love. Using the Incarnation as a prism, God's decisive reconciling act in Christ can be seen as the original purpose of God's activity as creator and as the content of the Spirit's revelatory and consummating work.

But, according to Martensen, reflection on the Trinity cannot rest with an appreciation of God's economy. Faith cannot be satisfied with a description of God's actions, no matter how loving they may be. Faith yearns for knowledge of God in God's own self, and cannot be content with a darkly mysterious hidden God; only a comprehension of God's inner being (even if that grasp is provisional and partial) will fulfill the heart's desire for communion.³⁷ Faith seeks nothing less than an understanding of love-in-itself. To achieve this, Martensen draws on the Trinitarian reflections of Augustine, the speculations of the mystic Jacob Boehme, and the dialectical logic of Hegel, particularly his analysis of self-consciousness. In order for God to be conscious of God's own self, God had to distinguish himself as a knowing "I" from himself as a known "Thou," and then comprehend himself as the loving unity of both "I" and "Thou."³⁸ As Augustine had proposed, the Trinitarian distinctions arise through the movements of God's self-knowledge and self-love. In God's own self, God is an eternally ecstatic dynamic of differentiation and reconciliation. In this way, reflection on the economic Trinity leads to a recognition of the immanent Trinity. According to Martensen, that perfect joy in the fullness of love is the very essence of God. He writes, "We have seen that the divine attributes find their harmonizing completion and unity in LOVE; love, which is not one single aspect of the divine essence, but that essence in its fullness."³⁹ This is truly divine comedy enacted in the heart of God.

³⁶ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 106 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 102.

³⁷ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 111 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 107.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 106 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 102.

Martensen borrows from the mystical tradition to connect God's inner joy with God's actions *ad extra*.⁴⁰ When God perceives God's self in his self-image, the Son, God perceives the manifold of pure possibilities that are implicit in the Father. The Father's eternal begetting of the Son generates an ideal world of potentialities, which the Spirit displays as archetypes of the possible expressions of God beyond God's inner life. The otherness contained in God's self-communion is the basis for the projection of that otherness beyond God into the temporal sphere as the drama of creation, reconciliation, and consummation. God freely desires a world of self-conscious beings, differentiated from God, who can know and love God. The love that is God is the foundation for the creation of that which is beyond God. God lovingly creates the entire finite realm in order to be reconciled to it as an expression of the divine hilarity.

Martensen does not hesitate to conclude that the entire created order is oriented to the Incarnation. It is in the Incarnation that the decisive act of reuniting God and God's objectification of God's self occurs.⁴¹ Martensen insists that the Incarnation was an ontological reality, not merely a phenomenon in the religious self-consciousness of Jesus. Following the ancient Alexandrian theologians and the main thrust of the Lutheran tradition, Martensen affirmed the doctrine of the "*communication idiomatum*," the view that the characteristics of Jesus' divine nature were communicated to his human nature. The narrative of Jesus is primarily the story of God's assumption of finitude, and, by doing so, God's elevation of finitude. In Christ, God has condescended to be in solidarity with humanity and the entire created realm.⁴² This new theanthropic life, including Christ's glorified human nature, becomes the fountain of a new animating principle of the human race in general. To support this claim Martensen quotes Paul, "As in the first Adam all die, so in the second Adam all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22).⁴³

Martensen makes it clear that the drive toward reconciliation unconsciously animates all of nature, not just free, self-conscious beings. Martensen

⁴⁰ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 114-115 / *Christian Dogmatics*, Ibid., pp. 111-112.

⁴¹ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 265-266 / *Christian Dogmatics*, Ibid., pp. 260-261.

⁴² Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 278-279 / *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 273-274.

⁴³ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 313 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 307.

en contends that significance of Christ “is not only ethical, but cosmical.”⁴⁴ The Incarnation synthesizes spirit and nature in the life of Jesus Christ, for Jesus possessed a very physical body. By extension, Christ’s embodiment points to integration of nature and spirit in those who participate in the new life in Christ. To support this claim, Martensen notes that between the resurrection and the ascension Jesus’ body was transfigured, revealing in the present a new bodily reality that for the rest of creation remains future.⁴⁵ He concludes that the Incarnation affects creation as a whole; all of creation is teleologically oriented toward the reconciliation accomplished in Christ. As the kingdom of Christ is actualized, nature will be recreated in order to be a more appropriate vehicle for spirit, eschatological reconciliation will embrace the entire cosmos which is being prepared to serve as Christ’s temple.⁴⁶ The risen Christ is the font of a new vital principle that will lead all things back to their divine source. Christ’s advent introduces a higher principle of life into the human race and into the universe as a whole.

More particularly, Martensen insists that human nature is teleologically oriented to the Second Adam, Jesus Christ. The theanthropic life is not an alien imposition upon human nature because human nature had been originally created by God to be capable of union with God. He writes, “Hence the point of unity between the natural and the supernatural lies in the teleological design of nature to subserve the kingdom of God, and its consequent *susceptibility* to, and *its capacity of being molded* by, the supernatural, creative activity.”⁴⁷ Human nature attains perfection not in prelapsarian Adam, but in the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ. Adam was not spiritually mature, but rather possessed seeds for growth which required completion through Christ. According to Martensen, Adam’s created human nature was always intended to be sublated into the theanthropic new creation, Jesus Christ. From the very beginning the conclusion of the cosmic comedy was intended by its divine author.

Martensen reiterates that the need to redress sin is not the primary motivation for the Incarnation. He asks, “Are we to suppose that that which is most glorious in the world could only be reached through the medium of sin?”⁴⁸ Given the fact of the creation of finite beings, the Incarnation was

⁴⁴ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 21 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 327 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 321.

⁴⁶ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 333 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 327.

⁴⁷ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 23 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 265 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 260.

a necessity, but the atonement was not. The Incarnate One had to function as the atoner only because of the contingent fact of sin. The reality of sin certainly does disrupt the dynamic movement from differentiation to unity-within-difference, and does add a secondary purpose to the Incarnation. But, claims Martensen, God would have become incarnate even if there had been no fall of humanity. Even in regard to Christ, the comic note of joyful incarnation should predominate over the somber note of atonement.

For Martensen, the reality of sin is an adventitious fact that complicates the divine comedy; sin was not necessitated by the differentiation of Creator and creature.⁴⁹ Contrary to the views of the Calvinists, God certainly did not ordain the Fall as a presupposition of salvation. Rather, the mere fact of the existence of a finite world as the context for human freedom generated the possibility that the self could turn to the creature rather than remain oriented toward the Creator. The world of finitude could be mistaken as the ultimate object of the individual's hopes and yearnings. This contingent world can be erroneously construed as being self-subsistent, and such illusory self-subsistence could become the goal of the deluded and misdirected self. Sin is a derailment of the intended spiritual development from Adam to Christ, but it is not the most basic driving force in the divine comedy's plot.

In *Christian Dogmatics* Martensen emphasizes the Incarnation so much that he claimed that the ideal union of the divine and the human was accomplished beyond time in the person of the Logos, who existed from all eternity as the God-man.⁵⁰ The life of Jesus of Nazareth was the enactment in time of this eternal reality, so that the unity of God and not-God could become actual not only in essence, but also in existence, under the conditions of finitude. In other words, the reconciliation of God and humanity was eternally actualized even before humanity had been created in time. No greater guarantee of a happy ending for the cosmic comedy could be imagined.

Martensen's joyful optimism continues in his discussion of the salvation of individual persons. The Holy Spirit enables the new life objectively actualized in Christ to become subjectively effective in the lives of other human beings. Although humanity is an organic whole and as such participates in Christ, this participation must be subjectively appropriated so that it becomes the animating principle in the individual's inner life.⁵¹ For Mar-

⁴⁹ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 170 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 168.

⁵⁰ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 243 / *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 237-238.

⁵¹ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 339 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 331.

tensen, Christ's righteousness does not remain external to the individual as a merely forensic transaction. Through union with Christ, a real regeneration takes place in the individual's heart. Of course, he adds, the Spirit does not work mechanically upon the individual's spirit, but operates through the will. Humans must cooperate with the Spirit's activity by voluntarily surrendering to its power, a fact which introduces an element of uncertainty into the process of salvation.⁵² But even here Martensen did not want to give too much credit to human capabilities, for all the will can do in this process is refrain from resisting the Spirit's transforming activity. Christianity is primarily the story of the triumph of grace, and only derivatively the story of the human effort to respond appropriately.

Christian Doctrine continues the eschatologically cosmic and corporate trajectory of Martensen's earlier works. The Incarnation has propelled the entire cosmos, including nature, society, the church, and human individuals toward reunion with God.⁵³ He rejoices that the principle of new life is overcoming the current tension between nature and spirit. Again Martensen reflects upon the theme of *apokatastasis*.⁵⁴ The range of reconciliation is universal, for the Incarnation manifests the fact that the entire finite realm is being caught up in the reunion with the infinite. As the power of Christ's theanthropic life spreads throughout humanity, nature itself will be transformed into a more adequate expression of spirit, governed by a new set of natural laws, as has already been accomplished in the life of Christ. The new heaven and the new earth will shout with joy, for all will be made in well in the end. Accordingly, Martensen repeats his conviction that the comic is higher than the tragic, for the history of the cosmos is indeed a divine comedy.

The ultimate destinies of individuals, a theme which Martensen had touched upon in his essay on baptism, must be considered in this light. The Incarnation of Christ reveals that God's reconciling intention in regard to individuals has an unrestricted scope: God's will is to save universally.⁵⁵ God's desire is that all individuals will be gathered into one body under the headship of Christ. Once again Martensen insists that the universal extent of God's desire for reconciliation precludes any doctrine of predestination

⁵² Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 394 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 384.

⁵³ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 22-23 / *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁴ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 484 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 474.

⁵⁵ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 271-273 / *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 362-364.

in which some individuals are saved and other are either damned or passed over. God's election and the power of Christ's reconciling work are not limited to a specific portion of humanity. But, Martensen admits, the potency of God's universally reconciling love does not seem to be efficacious in all instances. Given the sad reality that many individuals seem to leave this temporal world in an unreconciled condition, Martensen speculates about an intermediate state of further spiritual growth for the departed, functionally equivalent to a Catholic doctrine of purgatory. This life on earth is a mere fragment of an individual's existence, and the individual's progressive regeneration cannot be restricted to that brief earthly interval.⁵⁶

But even this vision of a future state of progressive development does not settle the issue of whether all individuals will eventually be reconciled with God. As he did in the essay on baptism, here Martensen again embraces an antimony: the power of God's sovereign will to save all people versus the free opposition of the created human will. Martensen states the conundrum: "It thus appears that the last catastrophe must issue in a general restoration, with the bringing back of all free beings to God. Yet here the great question suggests itself, whether, in virtue of the power of free self-determination in man, some individuals may not carry their opposition to grace so far as at last to cease to be in any degree the subjects of gracious influences."⁵⁷ On the one hand, the power of God's love and the fact that the saints could not really enjoy full blessedness knowing that other people had been damned point to the universal salvation of all individuals. On the other hand, given God's high valuation of human freedom, God will not coerce, compel or necessitate a human being's response to the offer of reconciliation. Therefore, it is at least theoretically possible that an individual's will could be so obdurate as to resist God eternally. To draw the antimony of God's universally saving intention and the individual's freedom to resist it as sharply as possible, Martensen notes that Scripture contains some passages that suggest universal salvation, and other passages that point toward a dichotomistic separation of the blessed and the damned.⁵⁸

Martensen admits that in this life the antimony can be resolved neither through speculation nor through the testimony of revelation. However, the entire thrust of Martensen's theology is oriented toward the ultimate triumph of unrestricted joy. For Martensen, *apokatastasis* can be an article

⁵⁶ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 467 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 457.

⁵⁷ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 392 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 282.

⁵⁸ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, p. 485 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 475.

of hope, although it cannot be a certainty for theoretic knowledge.⁵⁹ The theme of the possibility of damnation should also not be suppressed, for it adds the element of fear and trembling that should inspire us to take our earthly decisions with utmost seriousness. But Martensen concludes this discussion by quoting at length Acts 3, Revelation 21, and I Corinthians 15, all of which proclaim the restoration of all things.⁶⁰ In the final analysis, the note of joy should be dominant. The Christian life should be rooted in a celebratory anticipation of the restoration of all things, rather than in a mournful fear of perdition. Although Martensen does not resolve theoretic reason's antimony, and does not explicitly espouse a doctrine of universal salvation, it is clear that the comic spirit of Christianity points to such a hope.

IV. *Conclusion*

Confidence in the ultimate reconciliation of God and humanity is the foundation of Martensen's cosmic optimism and the source of his pervasive mood of joyful celebration. That mood of hilarity undergirds his valorization of comedy, particularly comedy's dimension of humor. The central message of Christianity is that reconciliation has been accomplished in the God-man, and that reconciliation will spread throughout the cosmos until all things are brought to fulfillment. This conviction informs his enthusiasm for Hegel's dialectical logic, which enables him to view the history of the cosmos as the movement from undifferentiated unity, through differentiation, to unity-in-difference. Because of this, Martensen can propose that Christianity's humoristic world-view is supported by the world-view of the speculation of the Hegelian right-wing. This dialectic is rooted in the inner life of God, and is externalized in the drama of creation and reconciliation. The God who exists as a tri-unity is not only capable of loving, but is the power of reconciling love itself. That divine love is externalized as the created order, whose *telos* is to be reunited with its divine source. The Incarnation is the seed of the reconciliation of all things that will blossom in the *eschaton*, when nature and spirit, God and humanity, will be perfectly

⁵⁹ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 493-494 / *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 483.

⁶⁰ Martensen, *Den christelige Dogmatik*, pp. 493-494 / *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 483-484.

harmonized. For Martensen, all doctrines point to the climax of the cosmic drama which is the ultimate triumph of God's reconciling love.

This Christocentric ontology demands comedy for its proper articulation. Comedy, like speculation, recognizes that the joyful end of history was implicit in its beginning, and therefore comedy can compassionately accept all the folly that has occurred *en route* to that happy ending. Martensen's identification of comedy as the highest literary form has both a theological foundation and a theological motivation. The spirit of comedy that informs his entire theological system is rooted a pervasive and persistent apocalyptic optimism.

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