

Chapter 1



Some Basic Connections

Comedy, tragedy, and religion have been intertwined from the beginning. In ancient Greece, tragedy and comedy emerged out of religious rituals—fertility cults in honor of Dionysus, a god who dies and is reborn each year. As these rituals moved into the cities and became civic drama, tragedies and comedies were performed together; in Athens, tragedies were presented in the morning and comedies in the afternoon. The great dramatists wrote both tragedies and comedies.

Some satyr plays, an early form of comedy, burlesqued traditionally serious characters, even characters from the tragedies with which the satyr plays were performed, as in Sophocles' *Ichneutai*. With a change from the tragic to the comic mask, the tragic hero became comic.

Much literary criticism in the last few centuries has belittled comedy in comparison with tragedy. Tragedy is "serious" drama, comedy "light" drama. When comedy occurs within tragedy, such as the drunken porter scene in *Macbeth*, it is usually labeled "comic relief." But the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and other dramatists took their comedy more seriously than that. They realized that comedy is not "time out" from the world; rather it provides another perspective on the world, a perspective no less true than the tragic perspective. As Conrad Hyers has suggested, comedy expresses a "stubborn refusal to give tragedy and fate the final say."¹

For the Greeks, as for Shakespeare, the world presented in comedy was the same world presented in tragedy, and no subject was off-limits to comedy, not even the gods. The first fully developed comedy we have, Aristophanes' *The Acharnians*, has the demigod Amphitheus, the same sort of heroic figure found in tragedy, on a mission from the gods to arrange a peace between Athens and Sparta. But he has a problem: he's short of travel money and has to borrow from humans. In Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, the demigod Dionysus, on a journey to Hades, has to pay for his passage like anybody else, and must even help row the boat across the infernal lake, and that makes his backside sore. When scared at Pluto's gate, he soils himself. Later he is horsewhipped to test his claim of divinity. (Real gods don't cry.)

Not only do tragedy and comedy look at the same world, but they both tend to focus on its problematic side. Here again they connect with religion, which also focuses on the problematic side of human experience. Something can be problematic conceptually, or practically, or both. That is, we can have trouble, either fitting something into our general picture of the world, or knowing how to act in some situation.

Most problems involve evils of some kind, such as ignorance, failure, suffering, and vice. A major function of any religion is to help people understand and deal with evil, which they do through explanations, advice, and commands. Buddhism got its start from the problem of suffering. With its doctrine of redemption, Christianity offered a response to the problem of sin.

The experience of evil, or of any problem, is of a disparity between the way things are and the way we think they should be. Reinhold Niebuhr used the term "incongruity" for this disparity. "Things 'happen' to us. We make our plans for a career, and sickness frustrates us. We plan our life, and war reduces all plans to chaos."² Now, Niebuhr was discussing incongruities that elicit religious faith, but sickness, frustration, irrationality, war, and other basic incongruities are found in tragedy and comedy as well as in religion. All three are ways of facing "the awful truth," to use the title of a film comedy from the 1930s.

It is because all three are concerned with the disparity between the way things are and the way they should be, that irony is important in all of them. Indeed, the same irony can be religious, tragic, or comic. Consider the ancient conceit that the best fate is not to be born. Job asks God "Why did you let me be born? Why couldn't I have stayed in the deep waters of the womb?" It would have been better, Job says, if he had been carried from the womb to the grave, as if he had never existed (10:18–19). The line from *Oedipus Rex* is: "Not to be born is the best fate. But, if someone is born, then the next best thing is that he return whence he came as quickly as he can." With slight changes in the wording, and some appropriate facial expressions, these lines could also fit into a comedy.

The ultimate incongruity, death, is central in tragedy, comedy, and religion. In commenting on the Zen story of the master Wan Nienyi Zenji, who, just before dying, climbed into the coffin and pulled the lid closed, R. H. Blyth comments that "Death is the great subject for laughter as it is for tears."³ Suicide is common in tragedies, but is also found in the silent comedies of Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin, as well as in more recent film comedies like *The End*.

While religions, tragedy, and comedy all focus on the incongruities in life, tragedy and comedy have different responses to incongruity, and these are important in their visions of life. There are many ways to respond when things do not happen as they should—puzzlement, wonder, resentment, rage, despair, amusement. Tragedy embodies certain emotions and attitudes toward incongruities, like anger and rebellion, while comedy embodies the opposite response of not getting overly concerned. As Walter Kerr says, "the characteristic comic ending to a bit or to a play is a shrug. This is the way things are: bad, and not so bad."⁴ As we will see, comedy presents incongruities as something we can live with, indeed, something in which we can take a certain delight.

Such differences in attitude can be profound. Tragedy generally treats war, for example, as an occasion to show valor and dignity in suffering, while comedy from its earliest days has treated war as folly.

Now a religion may embody a tragic response to incongruities, a comic response, neither, or both. More generally, it may embody elements of the tragic vision or the comic vision of life. Once we have clarified the tragic and comic visions, we will be in a position to look for them in various religious traditions.