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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2006

Is the Christian Story Tragic or Comic?

I just watched Woody Allen's [Melinda and Melinda](#). If you haven't seen it, I can share the basic premise without spoiling it at all. Two playwrights debate over dinner whether life is basically tragic or comic. In order to make their case, each one narrates the story of the same character Melinda via their respective dramatic lens.

Woody Allen's film experiment invites us into this thought experiment: Is life ultimately tragic or comic? More specifically, is the Christian narration of existence tragic or comic?

At the center of the Christian story there hangs a man who we call God dying on a cross. This moment of abandonment is utterly tragic. It serves to embrace the tragic elements of life. Christians ought not to approach suffering glibly. We worship a God who takes on our suffering.

But the tragic story of the cross is revealed as a triumph by the Easter story. The resurrection of Christ is the comic twist in the story. Moreover, Easter reveals that the Cross of Christ was not a failure after all, but achieved our salvation. So there is a "happy ending" to the Christian story.

The question for Christians is whether this comic aspect undermines any genuine tragedy in the story. Does the "happy ending" that gives us hope eliminate a real

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“happy ending” that gives us hope eliminate a real embrace of the tragic? Practically speaking, are Christians able to embrace the suffering in this world, call it what it is, not try to gloss over it, yet all without losing hope? Can we despair and hope at the same time?

Putting the question back into dramatic categories, we might ask whether there can be a hybrid of tragedy and comedy. Of course, there are many instances of tragedies than begin comically (Romeo & Juliet being the most famous of these). But can a story that ends comically ever truly embrace the tragic?

It seems to me that the story of Jesus may be such a hybrid. Easter does not undermine the pain of the cross, but embraces it. The risen Christ remains the crucified Christ, as the scars in his hands and side attest. Thus the Christian outlook includes both a tragic and comic vision. We really can take others’ pain seriously without leaving them in despair. And we can offer others real hope without dismissing their pain and calling evil good.

Any thoughts?

How can we keep these aspects of the Christian story together?

Are there any clues or habits to help us?

How does this play out in our relationships with those who suffer?

posted by JohnLDrury @ [6:59 PM](#)

[8 comments](#)

8 Comments:

At [3:23 PM, January 12, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

wow... a lot to think about.

I think many Catholics would say that protestants severely lack the capacity to appreciate the suffering aspect.

I don't have any answers, but I do feel that the tragic vs.

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"comic" has been a struggle for me in my own faith. Another way of putting it is the struggle between "God is Love and God is Wrath and Justice," etc. The Fear-Of-The-Lord is tough concept being raised in the spiled world I have been raised in. And I hate that.

At [10:59 AM, January 13, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Ah, yes... beautiful thoughts here. Good to get us thinking.

My 2 cents:

The best literature and age-old myths have this sense of the tragic underlying even the most hopeful stories and happy endings. The narratives ooze "reality" and as such they include, even in the victorious hero, a sense of all that was lost, all that was traded, all that was suffered, by the end. To get there.

Our "True Myth" (to borrow the way Tolkien & Dyson talked of it when leading Lewis to Christ in this very kind of discussion) as you suggest has this kind of tone.

There is no Easter without Good Friday. But there is little meaning to Good Friday without Easter. In this way I have come to believe that all pure comedy is an unrealistic dream, just as all pure tragedy is defeatist inauthenticity. A mixture, just as you say, is the Ultimate Reality.

Thanks for bringing this great idea up. I need to see the Allen film!

At [12:14 AM, January 15, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

The confusion is in labeling it "versus".

You actually said it near the end of your post. It is *both/and*, not the *either/or* the world supposes.

It seems like a paradox to put both tragic and comic, sorrow and joy, death and victory, in the same box. But

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everything belongs in God and so paradox can be a point of entry deeper into God's mysteries.

At [4:54 PM, January 15, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

The "good friday is here" but hold on because "easter sunday is coming" idea intrigues me. As I studied and read up for a paper I recently wrote about theodicy in the inter testament, it was so obvious to me how many times these authors used this very motif (although, obviously not in terms of Christ's suffering and resurrection). The idea that suffering itself can be bearable and almost comic in itself because "joy is coming and God will eventually triumph" is all over the intertestament (and in Job in my opinion). Ok, I'm way off topic, but I'm using your blog to flush out some thoughts. I'm stoping now...

At [9:24 AM, January 18, 2006](#), [millinerd](#) said...

I've been thinking about this post for a while, and while I agree with you that the Christian story has tragic/comic aspects, to call it a hybrid would by necessity mean it is being judged by other (namely Greek dramatic) standards.

I would instead suggest that Woody Allen should be the one on the hook! His are the dim reflections, whose meditations can, like all theology, only grasp aspects of the true universal drama while never completely grasping the whole.

This is why merely human dramatist have to lean toward comedy or tragedy, whereas God's universal drama inexplicably fulfills them both. Just as merely human judges must lean towards kindness *or* severity, but "behold the kindness *and* severity of our God" (Rom. 11:22).

Mark W.'s comment seemed to be getting at this as well.

At [11:21 AM, January 18, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Mark W. and Millinerd,



You have rung a true note by reminding us that the things of God should not be controlled by perceived categories.

I completely agree with this assertion. Of course God can not be boxed in by our categories. Furthermore, my post was precisely an attempt to overcome such dichotomies. But apparently I did this in a way that you did not care for. Why?

The difference between what I am doing and what the two of you desire comes down to a matter of procedure. Whereas you would prefer that I work from an assumption of God's embrace of paradox, I choose to work with the paradox to display its resolution in God.

How might we choose between these two procedures? Although it could come down to a matter of preference, the proof is in the pudding. In my mode of argumentation, I am led to offer concrete arguments for the resolution of paradox in God. The tiny example I gave of tragic-comic hybrid was the persistent wounds of the risen Christ. Whereas when one argues deductively from an assumption, he or she can so easily speak in generalities. You two made abstract arguments that were true but lacked specificity and therefore rhetorical force.

Furthermore, note that my procedure uses "paradox" in the technical sense of an "apparent contradiction," hence one that can be resolved discursively. You use "paradox" in a more willy-nilly way that simply means the embrace of contradiction. Surely you would not want to apply this principle in every case!

Which brings me to my third and final critique: a general principle of a paradoxical God could be used improperly. Although you do not go this far, one could deduce from your principle that not only suffering and hope but also good and evil are resolved in God. Surely you do not want to go there. But what is stopping you? Probably some kind of specific argument about how God resolves paradoxes,

which is exactly what I am seeking in my post.

So I agree with your conclusions about paradox, but there are two ways to get there: argument and assertion. As for me and my house, we will choose argument.

At [2:08 PM, January 18, 2006](#), [millinerd](#) said...

Perhaps I mis-wrote. I wasn't as much trying to critique your post as much as display the results of the thinking spurred in me *by* your post. Sorry it came out the wrong way.

But seeing that now "it's on"...

Why use argument? Regarding the dangers of the good/evil inference: As for me and my house, we will choose [prooftexting](#).

Seriously though, how can I give concrete arguments and assertions when I am, as I was, appealing to the ineffable, apophatic nature of God and his mysterious ways? In other words, one can't critique oranges for the fact that they're not able to be grown on orchards in Washington State. Your approach *can* avail itself of argument and assertion because its dealing with the more immediate; whereas my approach was an appeal to those aspects of the grand story of the cosmos which, though revealed in Christ, are still of necessarily unfathomable depth.

Both approaches I think are necessary, and I wouldn't want to pick one or the other - and both require different methods. Wouldn't you agree?

At [6:03 PM, January 19, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

I'll be honest, John. I am not sure how to reply here.

I cannot critique your reply. It is valid and I agree with it based on its scope. My original comment was not so much an attempt to critique your original analysis, which is also

valid, but an attempt to diffuse the tension created by trying to label the story as either tragic or comic. This kind of decomposition creates a "false" paradox that traps many people who cannot move beyond it.

I think maybe you miss understood me in my poor attempt at poetic license. You wrote, "...Whereas you would prefer that I work from an assumption of God's embrace of paradox, I choose to work with the paradox to display its resolution in God."

You do, and you did it well. But I tried to say that there is no paradox; there is nothing to resolve. God does not embrace paradox because there are no paradoxes in God, no paradoxes in the story.

The "false" paradox arises from our limited point of view, as you said, as an "apparent contradiction".

Using the language of other writers, Jesus "transcends" this apparent paradox as illustrated by your beautiful example and recognizes--makes us become aware of--the tragedy and comedy of the story are not separable. The sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

To paraphrase Henri Nouwen, the cup of sorrow and the cup of joy are poured into the cup of our life. To be fully human, we must drink it all down to the last drop.

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