

The Wørd Made Fresh: A Theological Exploration of Stephen Colbert

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Comedian Stephen Colbert is one of the most prominent and influential Catholics in America today. His late-night show on Comedy Central, *The Colbert Report* (pronounced “Colbear Repoor”), is a highly popular spinoff of *The Daily Show*, a “fake news” program hosted by Jon Stewart. On *The Report*, Colbert assumes a character best described as a caricature of several right wing television pundits, most notably fellow Catholic Bill O’Reilly. This character is confusingly (and perhaps tellingly) *also* called Stephen Colbert. Like his character, the out-of-character Colbert unflinchingly self-identifies as Catholic. It will likely become clear through the course of the following investigation that any attempt to divine if Colbert is “really” Catholic is not only impossible, but unnecessary.¹ What *can* be argued is whether or not Colbert belongs to a recognizably Catholic culture, as defined by a shared system or storehouse of distinctive symbols and language. Similarly, I will refrain from referring to the “real Stephen Colbert,” because if there is such a person at all, I certainly do not have access to him. I will argue that the Stephen-the-character and the “out-of-character” Stephen are not, as some have proposed, mere opposites, but are mutually implicating and suggest a Stephen Colbert whose religious belonging and orientation toward the world are, in a deep sense, Catholic. This deep sense of Catholicism and Colbert’s method of approaching the world of politics are closely related, and I believe that relationship provides a fruitful model for engaging in the theological task.

Why Stephen Colbert? An Apology for Seeming Triviality

At first, Stephen Colbert may seem a laughably unlikely topic for a scholarly essay. Surely there are more important topics to be examined? Of course, what is intellectually important is dependent upon one’s audience and what one values as a significant contributor to academic “culture.” Ivory-tower traditionalists may scoff

¹ It is doubly impossible, first of all because what makes one a “real” Catholic is and will likely to continue to be hotly contested, and secondly because any claim to know the true inner orientation of another person, especially a public figure only known from a distance, is epistemological nonsense. It suggests a static selfhood which can be perfectly communicated to others — on both counts, a sort of selfhood human beings have yet to possess.

at the proliferation of “...and Philosophy” books² and exegeses of immensely popular literary phenomena such as the *Harry Potter* heptology and the *Twilight* series, but the accessibility and clarity of the “*through pop culture to academic culture*” approach seems likely to play a significant role in the preservation of the philosophical-theological task in the twenty-first century. If the following investigation proceeds with a similar sort of clarity and accessibility, thereby bringing both a popular audience and an academic audience into closer communication with one another and with the contested category of the “Catholic,” it will have been a success.

Stephen Colbert is a particularly fitting subject for such a project because *The Report* is already prominent and accessible, but also because Colbert is a clearly self-identified Catholic. He is not only a very public Catholic, but his comfort and facility with distinctively Catholic language and symbols on *The Report* suggests that his Catholic identity is strong and well-examined, informed by thoughtful philosophical and theological inquiry as well as remarkably good catechesis.³

The prevailing opinion is that Stephen's “true” thoughts on the issues he discusses are likely to be the “polar opposite” of those his on-screen character expresses. I contend, however, that to speak of polar opposites is to miss entirely the point of Colbert's project. As a product and member of a Catholic culture, Colbert gives the lie to this oversimplification, this supposition that to satirize is to reject and that to express elements of an identity is to claim wholesale the identity itself. Rather, Colbert's satire stems from a deep self-identification with a particular, “intellectual” and “very devout” Catholic culture which presents a vision of a world better than the one at present, a “kingdom not of this world.”⁴

2 Popular graphic novels (e.g., *Batman* or *Watchmen*), video games (*World of Warcraft*), television shows (*House: MD*, *Seinfeld*, *South Park*, or *Battlestar Galactica*), movies (*Star Wars*, the *Matrix Trilogy*, or *The Wizard of Oz*), musical artists (Jimmy Buffett, U2, or Pink Floyd), sports teams (the Red Sox), or gadgets (Facebook and the iPod) are favorite subjects for this type of book. The familiar popular subject is used to concretely illustrate philosophical positions and thought experiments to the general population (In Rahnerian terms, this sort of move is called “thematizing the unthematic”). One of the bestselling examples of this genre, *Stephen Colbert and Philosophy: I Am Philosophy and So Can You!* (Aaron Allen Schiller, ed. Open Court, 2009) is a particularly appropriate example in this case.

3 In other words, education in practices and their shared meanings which arises more from within the life of the Church than from within the academy.

4 David Cote, “Joyce Words.” *Time Out New York*, no. 506 (June 9-15, 2005).

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060820014908/>

<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/DetailsAr.dofile=hotseat/506/506.hotseat.m>

The out-of-character Colbert, the youngest of eleven children⁵, is quite open (and not always for comedic effect) about his Catholicism. It appears to be something more than nominal:

David Cote: You created the *Daily Show* religious-satire segment, “This Week in God.” How do you square your Catholicism with comedy?

Stephen Colbert: I love my Church, and I'm a Catholic who was raised by intellectuals, who were very devout. I was raised to believe that you could question the Church and still be a Catholic. What is worthy of satire is the misuse of religion for destructive or political gains. That's totally different from the Word, the blood, the body and the Christ. His kingdom is not of this earth.⁶

Colbert's Eucharistic and eschatological language, as well as his juxtapositions of loving with questioning and intellect with devotion, confound the usual polarized categories of American political discourse while also gesturing toward the Presence of God now *and* the Kingdom to come. These fruitful tensions between so-called opposites are the bread and butter of vibrant, dynamic Catholicism, and offer a fresh alternative to the stagnant polemic most prevalent in current public discourse, even in political comedy. Colbert's satire critiques not religion, but the *misuse of religion for destructive or political gains* — even the “right” (or, as it were, left) political gains. If one were to subsume Colbert under a single identity, it seems that the run-of-the-mill liberal (even liberal Christian) suggested by the “polar opposite” hypothesis of the “real Stephen Colbert” would not be the most appropriate one. Even if we allow for multiple and intertwined identities, the stubborn fact of Colbert's Catholicism makes the “polar opposite” hypothesis untenable — and suggests that there is a way to be Catholic that is a rich and multifaceted source of identity, a field in which more static categories, such as those promoted by our political environment, can be stretched and shaped to allow an actual human person to live in them.

The out-of-character Colbert is also unambiguously involved in the life of

5 Ibid.; I mention Colbert's ten-sibling family quite purposefully here: many people, upon reading “eleven children,” will have immediately associated such a large family with Catholicism. This association is not so much a product of a rational deduction, but the result of repeated conditioning to the coincidence of “Catholic” and “large family.” This sort of experience of evocative — rather than exclusive — association with Catholicism is the type of cultural identification with which this paper is concerned.

6 Cote, “Joyce Words.”

the institutional Church. He serves as a catechist,⁷ admitting that the Sunday school classroom is a place where he can momentarily put aside the difficulty he encounters in presenting himself as both a comedian and a faithful Catholic: Colbert bolsters his Catholic karma by teaching at a local Sunday school. “In what I do there's not a lot of people who go to Catholic church,” he says. The children he addresses at Sunday school are too young to recognise [*sic*] the television star in front of them, which he is delighted about. “So I get to actually talk to someone who will take me seriously when I talk about religion — albeit I have to find somebody who's seven to take me seriously.”⁸

For the out-of-character Colbert, religion is a serious matter, although his comedic treatment of it is rarely taken as evidence of its importance — in fact, the opposite seems to be the case. His recognizability actually impedes his attempts to talk about religion, because his admirers tend to preemptively decide what it is that he wants to communicate.⁹ It is a “delight” and a relief for Colbert when he is taken seriously, since his usual medium is often interpreted as flippant and dismissive. It might not be a bad idea to take the childlike, imaginative, receptive, and yet rational faith of the seven-year-old as a starting point, for the moment taking seriously what Colbert has to say about religion and his Catholic faith, trusting his investment in it even when his presentation is anything but serious.

Beyond Colbert's out-of-character and on-screen identity as a proud Catholic¹⁰, *The Colbert Report* itself is saturated with religion stories. In the

7 Colbert also discusses the role of the Sunday school teacher while interviewing Protestant author Anne Lamott; Anne Lamott, interviewed by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, April 29, 2008.

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/167059/april-29-2008/anne-lamott>.

8 Stephen Daly, “Stephen Colbert: the second most powerful idiot in America.” *Telegraph Online* (18 May 2008). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3673509/Stephen-Colbert-the-second-most-powerful-idiot-in-America.html>.

9 For example, researchers Baumgartner and Morris imply that the effects on Colbert's largely liberal, young audience of “greater affinity to the Republican Party” (630) and “a significant increase in the tendency to agree that politics and government seem complicated” (633) must amount to a failure of understanding on the part of Colbert's audience because they mirror the statistical effects of *The O'Reilly Factor* instead of those of *The Daily Show*. It is my contention that such a move toward the “center” and a concurrent “complication” of the political landscape reflects instead the *success* of Colbert's project. It would have been particularly interesting if the specific issues Baumgartner and Morris traced had included religiously-tinged issues such as abortion or gay marriage, but even as it stands, the scholars' analysis of their findings provides a formal and potent example of the “polar opposite” hypothesis at work; Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, “One 'Nation' Under Stephen? The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (December 2008), 622-643.

10 A complete analysis of the ways in which Colbert acts and speaks “Catholicly” on *The*

official online video clip archive, 300 clips are tagged “religion” — more clips than “elections” (242), “economy” (217), “money” (235), “health” (249), “movies” (164), “media” (247), “sports” (224), “wars” (289), and “America” (228). More clips are tagged “religion” than “Congress” (170) and “history” (107) combined. Excluding tags referring to recurring elements of the show (like “The Wørd” [372], “intro” [576], and “interview” [902]), only “Iraq” (362), “Barack Obama” (434), and “books” (467) are tagged more often than “religion.”¹¹ The show has its own “chaplain,” Jesuit Fr. James Martin. Martin, fittingly enough, also serves as Culture editor of the Catholic weekly magazine *America*.¹² It should also come as no surprise that one of Colbert’s usual segments on *The Daily Show* included a “God Machine” — a gimmick which gathered multiple religion stories together for commentary from Colbert, serving much the same purpose (though with a very different tone) as *The Report*’s recurring “Yahweh or No Way” segment.¹³ Colbert’s rise to prominence has not gone unnoticed. The more “respectable” honors *The Report* has received include an Emmy, a Grammy, and the Peabody journalism award.¹⁴ Colbert’s neologisms have attracted a lot of attention, as well. Most famously the term “truthiness” — which means “truth that comes from the guts and not books” and was introduced on *The Report*’s inaugural broadcast — was chosen by the “wordinista” community as the American Dialect Society’s Word of the Year in 2005 and Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year in 2006.¹⁵

Some have noted Stephen’s remarkable web-savviness¹⁶, which is perhaps a better indicator of his influence than his reception by the media establishment.¹⁷

Report outstrips the course of this paper, but the segments and interviews I have chosen to explore offer a glimpse into the sort of verbal and behavioral resonances I mean to point out.

11 “All Tags.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/alltags>. (numbers current as of December 4, 2009).

12 “Tags: James Martin.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/James+Martin>; “James Martin, S.J.: Culture editor, *America*, 1998 – .”

<http://www.americamagazine.org/content/staff.cfm?id=8>.

13 “Tags: Yahweh or No Way.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Yahweh+or+No+Way>.

14 Stranger ones include the naming of an ice cream flavor, several animals, and at least one youth sports team in his honor. “Tags: Emmy Awards.”

<http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Emmy-Awards>; “Tags: Grammy Awards.”

<http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Grammy+Awards>; “Tags: Peabody Award.”

<http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Peabody+Award>.

15 Sue Khodarahmi, “Words of the Year,” *Communication World* (March-April 2007), 11.

16 Colbert was named “Webby Person of the Year” in 2008, in “recognition for his pioneering role in utilizing the Internet as a significant tool for interaction with fans of *The Colbert Report*...embod[ying] the true participatory spirit of the Web”; Don J. Waisanen, “A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s Comic Rhetorical Criticism,” *Southern Communication Journal*, no. 74:2 (April-June 2009), 120.

17 Colbert’s act at the 2006 White House Correspondents’ Dinner received top download status

Another indicator of his influence is the “Colbert bump,” a fairly well-documented phenomenon in which, following an appearance on *The Report*, sales of a guest’s book or album skyrocket.¹⁸ A similar effect can be noted in the cases of the neologism “Wikiality”¹⁹ and of “Operation Humble Kanye.” In “Operation Humble Kanye,” Colbert asked that his viewers purchase his own album *A Colbert Christmas: The Greatest Gift of All*, so that it would overtake the album of notoriously arrogant hip-hop star Kanye West²⁰ in sales on iTunes, thereby “humbling Kanye.” The only way to “stop Kanye’s arrogance is with my arrogance,” Colbert said. His directions were incredibly specific and targeted, urging viewers to digitally purchase the album “Wednesday [at] 5 pm Eastern,” to “propel it to the number one spot and, possibly, crash the national power grid.”²¹ He repeated the challenge the next night (although the album had already crept up one place in the sales rankings overnight).²² On the episode following that fateful Wednesday, Colbert reported that overnight, the Christmas special album (now #2) had in fact surpassed West’s *808s and Heartbreak* (now #4) on the iTunes chart — despite West’s dismissive reaction to the campaign on Twitter (as Colbert reports it, West asked, “Who the f*** is Stephen Colbert?”).²³ The responsiveness of the “Colbert Nation,” Stephen’s loyal viewership, in these and other cases

on iTunes and 2.7 million (presumably) non-journalist viewers on YouTube in its first 48 hours, viewers to whom it seemed a “remarkable event where a sharp political satirist punctured the elite bubble that normally insulates the White House [and the media] from direct [*sic*] criticism.” The media, at whom Colbert took rather bold aim during the act, generally agreed the act was “inappropriate” and “not funny”; Steve Randall, “That’s Not Funny,” *Extra! Update: The Newsletter of FAIR — The Media Watch Group* (June 2006), 1; Waisanen 120.

18 “Tags: Colbert Bump.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Colbert+Bump>

19 “The Wørd: Wikiality.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 129, first broadcast 31 July 2006 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/72347/july-31-2006/the-word---wikiality>; “Tags: wikiality.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/wikiality>.

20 West is infamous for his on-air assertion following Hurricane Katrina that then-president George W. Bush “does not care about black people,” and Colbert mentions in the initial segment of Operation Humble Kanye that West had recently crowned himself “the voice of this generation of this decade”; “Operation Humble Kanye.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 483, first broadcast 1 December 2008 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/211966/december-01-2008/operation-humble-kanye>.

21 Ibid.

22 “Operation Humble Kanye — Buy Stephen’s Album.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 484, first broadcast 2 December 2008 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/211988/december-02-2008/operation-humble-kanye---buy-stephen-s-album>.

23 “Operation Humble Kanye — Buy Stephen’s Album.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 486, first broadcast 4 December 2008 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/212032/december-04-2008/operation-humble-kanye---stephen-beats-kanye>.

indicates that a substantial group is actively engaged with the program.²⁴ This engagement is not unironic²⁵, but nevertheless suggests an easily mobilized audience.

Colbert and the Satirical Both-And

It is crucial to understand Colbert's particular satirical method both in light of the satirical tradition proper and the stream of Catholic thought in which he stands. The two most prominent examples of Catholics in the satirical tradition are two contemporaries, known to one another, (Saint) Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus. More in his *Utopia* and Erasmus in his *In Praise of Folly* wrote in a satirical style which sometimes took aim at the Church, but was written ultimately in service of the Church which both men prized, one as a monk and the other as a martyr. *In Praise of Folly* takes the decadence of the Renaissance Church as its main subject, illustrating the possibility of using satire as a sort of dissent without complete dismissal. *Utopia* is less explicitly *about* the Church, but it illustrates the other main advantage of satirical techniques: almost nothing in *Utopia* can or should be taken at face value, and so More has greater freedom of expression than he might if he chose to write in a more direct style.²⁶ This freedom refers not only to freedom to dissent, but freedom to explore supposedly opposite possibilities simultaneously. For example, More describes at length and in painstaking detail a place that is “ideal,” but which he also names “no place” — whether “no place yet” or “no place ever” is unclear, and fruitfully so. This ambiguity of orientation toward and treatment of one's subject might be called “the satirical both-and,” echoing a familiar but still powerful trope in Catholic thought — that the truth of a matter can never really be expressed in an either-or statement, but only (perhaps) in a both-and statement.

Colbert takes advantage of the warrant More and Erasmus represent, while at the same time doing something refreshingly new. His character is not entirely consistent, but this inconsistency is fruitful and illustrative. For example, Colbert routinely refers to fellow cable pundit Bill O'Reilly as his cuddly “Papa Bear,”²⁷ but bears — those “murderous eating machines”²⁸ — are also a regular feature on

24 “Tags: Colbert Nation.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Colbert+Nation>.

25 After all, its movements have been humorous in intent and directed toward websites and media sales, not toward solving world hunger or human trafficking.

26 Thomas More. *Utopia*. Trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 143.

27 “Tags: Bill O’Reilly + Papa Bear.”

<http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/Bill+O'Reilly%7C-Papa+Bear>.

28 “Threatdown: Antibacterial Soap.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 6, first broadcast 25

his “Threatdown” segment, often as the top threat.²⁹ Colbert's attitude toward O'Reilly is necessarily and purposefully ambiguous, even if Colbert-the-character seems unaware of the implied contrast.

In a more self-reflexive mode, Colbert's doom-heralding “Four Horsemen of the A-Pop-Calypse” include “TV, movies, music, and books”³⁰ — television, Colbert's own medium, and three others which describe the vast majority of the subject matter discussed and promoted by guests on the show. In the same segment, Colbert decries Sinéad O'Connor's latest album on principle, though it is entitled *Theology*, because of the musician's most infamous act — ripping up a photograph of Pope John Paul II.³¹ The irony is that Colbert is himself a bit iconoclastic when it comes to the Pope — the Holy Father is not off limits, although Colbert will admit that his infallibility is “very hard to argue with.”³² For example, he once referred to the Pope as “God's usual date.”³³ He has talked of the possibility of a “Spider Pope,”³⁴ laughed off the Vatican's commitment to going carbon-neutral because “pope-announcing smoke” can't contribute that much to global warming,³⁵ and on more than one occasion commented snarkily on Pope Benedict XVI's haggard appearance and colorful attire.³⁶

October 2005 by Comedy Central.

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/24372/october-25-2005/threatdown---anti-bacterial-soap>.

29 “Tags: Threatdown + bears.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/ThreatDown-%7C-bears>.

30 “Four Horsemen of the A-Pop-Calypse.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 281, first broadcast 27 June 2007 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/183108/june-27-2007/four-horsemen-of-the-a-pop-calypse---shaq>

31 Ibid.

32 “Pope Goes Green.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 122, first broadcast 18 July 2007 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/90113/july-18-2007/pope-goes-green>.

33 “Yahweh or No Way: Father Cutié — Miss California.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 557, first broadcast 12 May 2009 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/227664/may-14-2009/yahweh-or-no-way---father-cutie---miss-california>.

34 “Spider Pope.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 614, first broadcast 29 September 2009 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/250601/september-29-2009/spider-pope>.

35 “Pope Goes Green”; he also suggests that reducing Catholic celebration of reproduction might be a better route to reducing the Vatican's carbon footprint, since the “last time [he] checked, babies are made of carbon.”

36 “Father James Martin.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 284, first broadcast 21 April 2008 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/166723/april-21-2008/father-james-martin>.

While interviewing Yusuf, the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens, Colbert says, “I’m calling you a coward and telling you I love you at the same time.”³⁷ Here again the coexistence of loving and questioning is startling, but Stephen's meaning is perfectly clear: “I love you, and *because I love you* I wish you weren’t such a coward.”³⁸ To his beloved Church, to those in political and social power, Colbert says, “I love you, I value you, I respect you, but I also respect the truth: *and so I want you to be better.*” He is “here to educate,”³⁹ to constructively criticize, not to simply ridicule with no greater purpose. He knows and loves the value of what already is, but he does not settle for its imperfection because he is also awaiting the eschatological not-yet. He hopes for the better and best which the Catholic faith professes God has promised to us, and recognizes that the works which now flow from faith in the coming of that “kingdom not of this world” play an important role in its eventual advent.

Stephen interviewed poet and chair of African American studies at Yale Elizabeth Alexander after she had read a poem of her own at the Obama inauguration.⁴⁰ Their conversation, in large part due to the leading pressure of Colbert’s back-handed statements, illuminates a fundamental tenet of what has been called the “Catholic imagination”: something may be *fictional*, but that doesn’t mean that it isn’t *true*. Colbert starts by asking what seems to him, paradoxically, a burning question with an obvious answer:

Stephen Colbert: “Poems aren’t true, are they? They’re made up, right, they’re made up?”

Elizabeth Alexander: “It’s not true in the way that the newspaper is true—”

SC: “Well, the newspaper is never true. Have you read the *New York Times*?”

EA: “— well, [the way the newspaper is] *meant* to be true. It’s not true in the sense of the strictly factual, but a poem should be true in some way: emotionally true, true to the language that it has. So that’s why, for example, [‘The Love Song of] J. Alfred Prufrock’ might speak to you, because *there’s something in the poem that resonates, that feels true to you*, and that’s how people connect with poems...the point is that *that language is ‘off’ enough*,

37 Yusuf, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 14 May 2009. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/227669/may-14-2009/yusuf>.

38 The use of the word “coward” here is hyperbolic, of course, and not meant to *actually* imply that Yusuf's conversion to Islam and subsequent withdrawal from stardom was in fact cowardly or wrong.

39 Yusuf, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 14 May 2009.

40 “Biography & CV.” <http://www.elizabethalexander.net/biography.html>.

decentered enough from the way that you hear language every day that it makes you stop and think about what that could mean.”

SC: “Let’s talk about meaning for a second. Metaphors: What’s the difference between a metaphor and a lie?” [This gets hearty laughter from the guest and audience, perhaps because it’s actually a rather serious question.] “Ok, because ‘I am the sun, you are the moon’ — that’s a lie. You’re not the moon. I’m not the sun, ok? *What’s the difference between a metaphor and a lie?*”

EA: “Well, that was both a metaphor and a lie, so the two are not necessarily exclusive. A metaphor is a way of using language where you make a comparison to let people understand something as it relates to something else, and that’s how you use language to increase meaning.”

SC: “Well, *why not just say what you mean*, instead of dressing things up in all this flowery language? Like you know, the great romantic poets, you know, ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’ Why not just say, ‘You are hot. Let’s do it. Let’s get it on. I got a mountain in my pants, and that is not a metaphor. That is not a lie.’”⁴¹

Stephen, of course, misses the point — the “mountain” in his pants *is* a metaphor, and therefore a lie, but it may still be *true*. Like a metaphor, there is something in Colbert’s method that *resonates*, that *feels true* even when the literal meaning is silly and patently false. His strange and exaggerated presentation of reality is “*off*” *enough, decentered enough from the way that reality is presented every day that it makes us stop and think about what he could mean*, what could be missing from the usual treatment of the subject at hand. And that is why he chooses not to *just say what he means*, not to passionately or rationally argue for his position in a direct way. Colbert’s indirect, dehabituating method of satire and related techniques prompts exactly the type of reflection and openness he hopes to create in his audience, the now-rare type of active receptivity to the truth which precedes any possibility of rational argument. A metaphor’s indirectness, in Alexander’s language, “increases meaning” — it increases the possibilities of what may be recognized or learned in a linguistic encounter. Colbert’s satirical indirectness, although involving the adoption of a literally false façade, increases his possibilities for communicating truth. It decenters and disarms, throwing one off

41 Elizabeth Alexander, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, January 21, 2009; <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/216596/january-21-2009/elizabeth-alexander>; transcript by author, emphasis added; see also Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the indirect (especially parables) and the poetic in his *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 217-235.

balance, and at that very moment one's "freed hands" may grab hold of a more secure anchor than the one to which they had been clutching before.

Colbert's Case for Faith

Not only does the concept of "true fiction" help legitimate Colbert's satirical project, it also suggests that "truthiness" may be a more valid form of knowing than previously suspected. If, after all, Alexander's justification of literally false poetry and metaphor is that it *feels true* and *resonates*, truthiness would not be an unfair way to describe the sort of knowledge that one experiences while reading or hearing good poetry.

If metaphor and truthiness are related in this way, it is appropriate to ask, *What's the difference between truthiness and a lie?* Matthew F. Pierlott, a contributor to the popular *Colbert Report* addition to the "...and Philosophy" genre, asserts that there is indeed an important difference. There are four basic orientations to truth, in Pierlott's estimation: the "factual" truth-seeker, the "truthy" truth-seeker, the liar, and the bull****er. The factual truth-seeker is what one usually imagines as an honest, rational thinker, whose conclusions are not thereby necessarily true but whose method is generally accepted as the "most reliable" method of truthseeking. The "truthy" truth-seeker has a similar desire for the truth, but prefers the sort of truth which relies on "an implicit logic...that the person simply has difficulty making explicit" — in other words, a conviction that comes from the gut or heart (Pascal, for example, sounds at times like a "truthy" truthseeker, but so does Colbert's favorite example, former President George W. Bush).⁴² The liar, although false on the surface, also has an implicit respect for the truth.⁴³ The bull****er alone disregards truth completely — his or her purpose is entirely selfish and independent of any reality outside the needs of the bull****er him- or herself.⁴⁴ It is the existence of the bull****er, the loose cannon of the truthseeking world, that for Pierlott provides a rationale for an appropriate application of truthy truthseeking. Because the bull****er, the deceiver, and the incompetent truthseeker can be distinguished only by the speaker's inaccessible intention, the "reliable" process of rational argumentation is compromised.

Politicians speak "at cross-purposes" and so the "facts," the premises one might use in a rational argument, are suspect. Moreover, "there's far too much information from far too many sources for the individual citizens to stay on top of

42 Matthew Pierlott, "Truth, Truthiness, and Bullshit for the American Voter," in *Colbert and Philosophy: I Am Philosophy and So Can You*, edited by Aaron Allen Schiller (Chicago: Open Court, 2009), 81.

43 Ibid., 86.

44 Ibid., 87.

it all.”⁴⁵ Pierlott's conclusion is that our only resource and the method we all ultimately use in making political decisions *is* truthiness, that quality by which we try to discern the truthworthiness and intention of the strangers we vote to elect.⁴⁶ This affirmation of truthiness as a valid, practical resource when making decisions based on the mind of another person and on amounts of information too vast for one to fully analyze is important to keep in mind when imagining how the question of faith might be answered by a son of “intellectual” *and* “very devout” Catholic parents.

Colbert has interviewed popular biologist and evangelist of the “New Atheism” Richard Dawkins twice, once in 2006 when Dawkins was promoting his *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin 2006) and once in September of 2009. This second interview shows Dawkins, to his great credit, as quite capable of playing by Colbert's unusual rules. It also leads to an affirmation of a *something*, difficult to describe, which transcends a rigidly rationalistic grasp of the world. The transcript below is lengthy, but quite illuminating:

Stephen Colbert: “Now, you have a new book, called *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*. What evidence for evolution?”

Richard Dawkins: “Read the book and you'll find out.”

SC: “I don't read books. You know, I read the world, I look around the world and I see complexity. Things are too complex for them to just have happened by accident.”⁴⁷

RD: “They didn't happen by accident. As I explained to you last time — “

SC: [laughing] “I didn't listen to you last time. See, you don't know how this works. Okay. What do you mean? Of course they happened by accident.”

RD: “You get complexity by non-accident, natural selection, Darwin's theory of natural selection. It's the opposite —”

SC: “But how did this selection come about? How did these mutations come about, sir?!”

RD: “Now, *they're* accidents.”

SC: “They're accidents! — ”

RD: “But selection is not accident.”

SC: “Absolutely it is.”

45 Ibid., 89.

46 Ibid., 89-90.

⁴⁷ I cannot help noting here that the notion of “reading the world” is a thoroughly Christian one, rooted in a claim that creation is fundamentally good and that it reveals something true about reality and about God. For just two examples, see Bonaventure's notion of the “book of creation” and Thomas Aquinas' cosmological “proofs” of God's existence.

RD: “No, no, no...selection — ”

SC: “What do you mean, it's not an accident that a giraffe has to have a longer neck to get to the leaves up there?”

RD: “That's not an accident —”

SC: “God did it! You admit that there's a plan here!”

RD: “Now look, listen: Those that were best at getting to the tops of the trees were the ones that had the most children. They passed on the genes for getting to the tops of the trees. It's a series of sieves going through the generations increasing the lengths, little by little.”

SC: “But what the sieves *are* is an accident?”

RD: “No, that's survival.”

SC: “But you're saying survival is an accident.”

RD: “No, it's not.”

SC: “There's no purpose to life. The stars blindly run in your scenario.”

RD: “There is no purpose to life, but it's not an accident which giraffe —”

SC: “So there's no reason for us to be here? There's no *reason* —”

RD: “You make your own reasons.”

SC: “*You* can make reasons, but God can't.”

RD: “Well —”

SC: “You're better than God. You can make up reasons but God can't. Your just said that. Your words, sir.” [*sic*]

RD: “If He existed.”

SC: “God does exist. God is now, always has been, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.” [scattered cheers from the audience — and does this formulation sound familiar? Catholic, even?]

RD: “You asked me for the evidence for evolution. Where's the evidence for God?”

SC: “Where's the...uhh...Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.” [loud laughter and applause] “Ok. Explain that away. ‘That just *naturally* happened, that my peanut butter got in my chocolate.’ No. That can't happen. Someone had to *design* those peanut butter cups.”

RD: “Correct.”

SC: “Correct. Ok. But, but, wait, wait, wait...so *design* exists in the universe.”

RD: “Design exists where there are humans.”

SC: “Ok, and, humans exist, and design, that capability is within us. Right?”

RD: “Yes.”

SC: “So we can't just make something out of nothing, because ‘nothing comes from nothing.’ And therefore design existed before our use of

design—”

RD: “And where did design come from then?”

SC: “*God!* Are you deaf? It came from God. *He knew you in your mother's womb.*” [Colbert's scriptural reference here comes easily, indicating his familiarity and comfort with it.]

RD: “In the beginning was simplicity, simplicity's easy to understand, and we can explain, science can explain, I can explain in there [in the book] how you get from simplicity to complexity. Once you've got complexity, then you've got design. You've got people, who can design anything you like, much better than —”

SC: “See, you're just using big words to confuse me.” [laughter]

RD: “Not for the first time.”

SC: “Let's me tell you something. I think you're trying to sucker people. I'll tell you why, because this is called *The Greatest Show On Earth: P.T. Barnum* said that. Know what he also said? ‘There's a sucker born every minute.’”

RD: “He did. You're absolutely right.”

SC: “Why, why didn't you call your book that?” [laughter]

RD: “Well, I tell you, I didn't get that book from P.T. Barnum, that title, I got it indirectly from a tee-shirt someone sent me from America. It said, ‘Evolution: The Greatest Show On Earth. The Only Game In Town,’ and that's what I *really* wanted to call my book: ‘The Only Game In Town.’ The publisher wouldn't let me. Because I think, and I've argued elsewhere, that anywhere in the universe that there's life, it'll turn out to be Darwinian life. It's the only game in the *universe*, not just earth. [pause] Floored you?”

SC: “Floored me? Oh no, I wasn't listening. [laughter] But...but if there is no God, if we are not intelligently designed, *why is there beauty?*”

RD: “Well for one thing, because we have brains that perceive beauty because we've evolved our brains to see beauty. So natural selection has favored the ability to see beauty for certain reasons, notably for example in the opposite sex. Darwin himself said this, that we've got —”

SC: “So there's an evolutionary advantage to see beauty and to be beautiful.”

RD: “Yes.”

SC: “Okay, okay, if that's true, and we've had a million years of doing this, why are there still so many ugly people?”

RD: “That's a very good point!”

SC: “Thank you so much. When you've got an answer to that, please come

back!”⁴⁸

What is wonderful about the whole exchange is how the atheist and the Catholic are able to have a conversation not unlike the sort of conversation one might have with a friend about evolution and intelligent design. There is much at stake in *what* is being talked about, but the *manner* in which they are proceeding makes it possible for each man to concede when the other has made a valid point.

While Colbert does not explore here the possibility of the compatibility of a Creator with evolution beyond of the terms of “intelligent design,” he comes close to that now-standard Catholic response by pointing the conversation toward pleasure and beauty. The first piece of “evidence” Colbert offers for the existence of God is funny, but not therefore a bad starting point: Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Without allegorizing too much, it is possible to say that the coincidence of peanut butter, chocolate, human beings who decided to put them together, and human taste buds which can enjoy the combination is quite serendipitous — but the argument for God from gustatory pleasure is one Dawkins could easily place in the context of bodily need and therefore rationalize in a merely evolutionary universe. However, when Colbert asks for a reason for beauty, Dawkins is unable to come up with a satisfactory answer, sounding instead mildly tautological. That we have developed brains to recognize beauty and that one instance of why the beautiful is desirable is that it shows us who might be a good mate only takes us so far. It is possible, although Dawkins has neither the time nor inclination at the end of the interview to argue it, that human beauty reflects fertility and virility and so the humanly beautiful *is* the good mate, pure and simple. But even that does not explain why trees are beautiful, or the sky, or mountains. I do not want to mate with any of these things, and the evolutionary purpose of my being so distracted by them is at best tangential and at worst detrimental to my search for food and reproduction. Dawkins' explanation does not account for why we find in music or art or technology, “designedly” human creations, something akin to the “undesigned” beauty of nature. Most of all, Dawkins does nothing to tell us what that striking thing beauty actually *is*. The question of beauty is an instance in which the appeal of “truthiness” actually does get us a bit further than merely rational arguments, because the beautiful always resists quantification — it ceases to be beautiful once it is merely symmetrical, or harmonious, or nutritious. In fact, the relationship of beauty to imperfection, to asymmetry, and to dissonance makes it a

48 Richard Dawkins, interviewed by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central September 30, 2009, <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/250617/september-30-2009/richard-dawkins>; transcript by author.

very apt concept with which to push back against the reduction of all things to science. Dawkins' "greatest show," precisely *because* it is a show — something pleasurable, wondrous, beautiful, and serendipitous — gives the lie to its own self-explanation. It escapes our grasp and in so doing suggests that there may be other things in the universe which also exceed our ability to grasp them intellectually.

Colbert and Catholic Culture

To this point, it seems there is a solid case for Colbert's support of a broadly religious approach to life. But what makes Colbert distinctively *Catholic*? In other words, is it fair to say that Colbert belongs to something like a Catholic culture? I will turn here to Clifford Geertz's influential anthropological description of religion as a "cultural system,"⁴⁹ as briefly applied by historian of American Catholicism Mark S. Massa. Massa supposes that he can make a case for Catholic and Senator Joseph McCarthy's use of Catholic cultural idioms in his public discourse. What is useful for our current purpose is just how Massa proposes to make a case for McCarthy's use of a Geertzian Catholic cultural system in his rise to prominence and effort against the so-called Communist infiltration. Massa writes:

[T]o argue for a Catholic "cast" to McCarthy's crusade has little (or nothing) to do with formal Catholic theology, official teaching by theologians and bishops, or public ecclesiastical pronouncements on social and political questions. It rather has to do with considering the different kinds of dispositions, motivations, and self-perceptions that informed the cultural reception and expression of Catholicism among many Catholics.⁵⁰

To replace "McCarthy" with "Colbert" in this passage, it is important to note the oft-cited "collapse of the Catholic subculture" and to thereby revise the sort of reception and expression which characterizes younger Catholics of today (Colbert himself is in his mid-forties, part of "Generation X," while many of his viewers belong to his generation or to the younger "Millennials"; both groups largely or completely missed the mid-twentieth century centralization of American Catholic life as well as the most immediate ramifications of the Second Vatican Council). Colbert obviously does make statements on "social and political questions" on his

49 Clifford Geertz, "Religion is a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [reprint of 1973 original]), 87-125.

50 Mark S. Massa, "Catholicism as a Cultural System: Joe McCarthy, Clifford Geertz, and the 'Conspiracy So Immense,'" in *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 64.

show, but it is less these than the shared Catholic system of language, behavior, and symbols which marks him as a member of a certain Catholic culture.

Contemporary theologian Kathryn Tanner would have us speak of a theological “style,” reflected in practices, rather than Geertz's more static (and some say passe) “system of signifiers.”⁵¹ Indeed, in part because of the collapse of the American Catholic subculture, any coherent and complete notion of a symbolic system must give way to a more impressionistic and evocative understanding of what might denote Catholic culture. In the Colbert's case, however, the two conceptions amount to the same thing — onscreen words, postures, and actions which evoke the experience of a certain “Catholic culture,” a thing difficult to define but unmistakable to those conversant with or immersed in it. What is at stake in this instance is a “ring” or “resonance” of Catholicity (not catholicity although the two are not strictly distinct). To use a medieval term, one “contuits” Colbert's Catholicism, seeing it alongside the subject matter at hand, as it were peripherally, rather than taking it in directly and communicably as one's main object.

For example, at least twice in the context of *The Report*, Colbert has recited portions of the Nicene-Constantineopolitan Creed on air. This creed is shared by most Christian denominations, but because Catholics recite it en masse at each Sunday liturgy it sounds with a particularly strong resonance in a “Catholic ear.” There is something in the rhythm of Colbert's recitation which is familiar, which is unlike the way a single person would recite something. In fact, it seems as if Colbert is being carried along on the tide of the Creed's rhythm as happens when reciting it along with a crowd, and he must complete a “rhythmic phrase” rather than merely a meaningful phrase before he can halt the onward thrust of his recitation.⁵² The meaning of Colbert's reference to the creed is not exclusively Catholic, but it adds a dimension, a “cast,” to what has been communicated. It is more meaningful, in this sense, to those who share Colbert's system of Catholic language, liturgical behavior, and speech patterns, than it is to the general public.

51 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 144-155; see also David Morgan's exploration of “felt-life” in “Reconsidering Civil Religion: The Social Body of Belief,” *The Immanent Frame*, 15 January 2010, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/01/15/the-social-body-of-belief/>.

52 “The Wørd: Symbol-Minded.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 622, first broadcast 13 October 2009 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/252639/october-13-2009/the-word-symbol-minded>; Richard Dawkins, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, September 30, 2009. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/250617/september-30-2009/richard-dawkins>.

Colbert also spent Ash Wednesday of 2006 sporting a cross of ashes on his forehead through the entire episode,⁵³ referring to it only early in the broadcast. He says: “it’s Ash Wednesday. Unless this is a repeat, in which case I’m just filthy.” He goes on to say that those of his viewers who are “smacking [their] foreheads because [they] forgot” to attend an Ash Wednesday service can just rub their foreheads against his. He moves close to the camera and, after a moment, asks if everyone has finished. This is funny precisely because any Catholic who has participated in this particular Ash Wednesday ritual knows how easy it is to forget about the smear of ashes on one’s forehead and to transfer errant ashes to one’s hands and clothes, distorting the original cross into an unrecognizable blob of dirt in the process. Many non-Catholics have some sense that Catholics walk around with dirty foreheads on Ash Wednesday⁵⁴, but there is a certain closeness of address to the viewers whose own foreheads mirrored his that evening. The simple intimacy suggested by Stephen’s offer to rub his forehead on the viewer’s own reminds one both of an interactive moment in a children’s show and of the actual flesh-to-flesh intimacy of the ritual itself. He goes so far as to say that if someone has forgotten, he can perform a makeshift version of the ritual right through the television; he’s “been deputized,” he says, which is not actually too bad of a description for the universal call to spread the Good News of the Gospel, the sending forth into the world that one receives in the course of any Catholic liturgy. The difference is that most of us do not have the medium of late night cable at our disposal when dispatched to perform our apostolic duty. At the same time, the dirtiness of ashes and the childlike silliness of transferring them through a television screen makes the very distressing and challenging shared experience of the start of Lent into something a little funny, a discomfiting sign made accessible to the initiated and to the clean-foreheaded alike.

Latin phrases and scripture references, oftentimes quoted verses, appear often enough and disappear quickly enough in Colbert’s speech that tracking their prevalence would be a daunting task indeed. Instead, another interview may shed some light on Colbert’s understanding of the scriptural tradition of the Church. In my estimation, it is a fine complement to the sacramental aesthetic evidenced by

53 “Intro: March 1, 2006.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 58, first broadcast 1 March 2006 by Comedy Central.

Central.<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/181622/march-01-2006/intro---3-1-06>.

54 The ritual of having ashes smeared on one’s forehead is of course not *exclusively* Catholic, but in America it is a *distinctively* Catholic practice, so that its primary association is with Catholicism and not with any other traditions which may also participate in the practice or a similar one.

his wearing of penitential ashes, his recourse to an argument from beauty, and his evocations of the Nicene Creed with its verbal resonance to the Sunday liturgy most familiar to the Catholics in his audience.

Bart Ehrman is a biblical scholar and author of several works of popular theology, including *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (HarperOne 2005). The basic premise of the book is to expose the gradual development and imperfect transmission of what would become the canon of the Christian Bible as evidence against any sort of belief in the words of the Bible as the words of God. For Ehrman, the discrepancies in various manuscripts and the inconsistencies in the biblical texts themselves are strong arguments against trusting as authentic any of the “words of Jesus” as transmitted in the Bible. His agnosticism featured as one of the major topics of discussion in Ehrman's first on-screen meeting with Colbert, and, unfortunately, it sounds as if Ehrman's decision to pursue biblical scholarship resulted directly in the loss of a faith he once claimed as his own.

What is clear, however, is that Ehrman is struggling against an essentially fundamentalist interpretation of what it means to say that the Bible is divine revelation. Colbert takes on this fundamentalist tone toward the start of the interview. He says, “Let me lay my cards on the table here: I believe that the Bible is inerrant, without flaw, and directly from the mouth of God. Let's have a reasonable discussion.” The implication is that while Colbert-the-character often appears as a Catholic with commitments which resemble a fundamentalist evangelical (Republican) Christian, Colbert is aware that an agnostic and a fundamentalist, as such, will never agree to terms leading to a “reasonable discussion” of scripture.⁵⁵ (In fact, in Catholic terms, viewing the Bible as *inerrant, without flaw, and from the mouth of God* is not actually an impediment to a reasonable discussion — at issue is the “directness” of its transmission, and this question's answer which nuances what one means by the first three.)

In 2009, Ehrman returned to *The Report* to promote *Jesus Interrupted*, a book in a similar vein to that of *Misquoting Jesus*. The interview is important in several respects: first of all, in it Colbert develops an approach to scripture which beautifully — if somewhat prosaically — expresses the both-and orientation of Catholic thought on the matter; and secondly, this is one of the best examples of the *wrong* way to be interviewed by Stephen Colbert. Ehrman, perhaps having not

55 Bart Ehrman, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, June 20, 2006. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/70912/june-20-2006/bart-ehрман>; Colbert later reveals his familiarity with mainstream historical-critical biblical theology, belying any impression that he is uncritical reader of scripture: “Let's take the Gospel of Mark. It's often thought that's the first one written...About 60, 70 AD?”

thoroughly enjoyed his experience in the previous interview, comes in on the defensive and is determined to get his point across this time, come hell or high water. Instead of relaxing and giving in to the waves of Colbert's comedic agility, Ehrman tenses and fights and *refuses to laugh at himself*. One might think Colbert unfair for interrupting Ehrman so often, but this is his usual approach to interviewing, not some special attack on Ehrman, and without fail, the interruption is followed by laughter from the audience — which, after all, is the goal of a comedic show, however deep its subject matter or erudite its guests. The facial expressions throughout the interview are so nuanced as to be impossible to describe with any brevity, but even a lightly annotated transcript provides some sense of how most of the interview turns into such a trainwreck for Ehrman:

Bart Ehrman: “Early Jews didn't understand that the Son of God was a divine being, but was a human being. For example in the Old Testa — ”

Stephen Colbert: “Oh, you know the early Jews better than the early Jews. That's what you're saying. Wait a second, wait a second, what am I hearing? You're saying we've got a misinterpretation of Jesus and the early Jews are to blame? I can't believe you're blaming this on the Jews!”

[audience laughter]

BE: “Right.”

SC: “That is so anti-Semitic.”

Ehrman ignores this and plows on, restarting his earlier point about the Hebraic understanding of the term “son of God.” Colbert, as might be expected, again interrupts.

SC: “What's the son of a duck? It's a duck.” [audience laughter]

BE: “Right.” [Ehrman stops responding and both he and Colbert simply nod at each other for a moment.]

SC: “If it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, *and it can raise the dead* like a duck, it's a duck.”

Ehrman doggedly returns a third time to his Old Testament “son of God” argument. He gives Solomon and Moses as examples, but Colbert counters him by saying that Moses didn't raise the dead. Ehrman rightly responds by saying that Jesus wasn't the first in the tradition to do miracles but Colbert points out that they didn't also call themselves “son of God.” “Two points make a line, that's all I'm saying,” he quips. Ehrman finally completes his argument, pointing out that the divinity of Jesus isn't found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Colbert helpfully explains, “That's why John's last. The first three were rough drafts, then you get to John and he gets it right. [*sic*]” Ehrman again answers, “Right,” which by this point has become a

code word for, "I'm not really sure how to redirect the conversation." He finally tries to give in to Colbert's playful and ridiculous arguments, conceding: "In John, Jesus is clearly divine. He says in *John* 15, 'I am de vine, you are de branches.'" The reception of his abrupt, corny joke is outstandingly cold, mostly groans or near-boos with a few scattered laughs. Colbert takes up the tone of his audience, solemnly stating:

SC: "God is not a fan of puns, sir." [The tension breaks.]

BE: "But..." [He is clearly thinking hard about what to say next.]

SC: "That is one of the seven deadly sins."

BE: [a little sheepishly] "But, I-I-I think he does like your show, though." [Is Ehrman finally starting to "get it"?:]

SC: "Ok, good. I think so, too, because I'm willing to defend Him right now. Okay. You say that, uh, you have a problem with [consulting his notes] conflicting versions of Jesus' crucifixion."

BE: "Yes."

SC: "Ok, first of all, selfish that you should talk about this the day before Good Friday, but I'll give you a shake right here. All of the gospels do mention that he's crucified, right?"

BE: "That's right."

SC: "Aren't you kind of burying the lede, then? Aren't you nitpicking by saying he said this thing in one, and that thing in the other. Banner headline is: 'God Dies.'"

Ehrman reiterates (fairly enough) the non-divinity of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He proceeds to describe the agonized Jesus of Mark, quoting Psalm 22 on the cross, and Luke's very different faith-filled Jesus, crying out "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." He says that people have combined the gospels into one big gospel which is unlike either Mark's or Luke's gospel. Colbert, having given him ample leave to explain this (Ehrman, after all, has made quite a valid if less than revolutionary observation), responds (pantomiming the story amidst steady audience laughter):

Let me tell you a little parable, ok? Four different blind men are stumbling along through the jungle and they fall into a pit where an elephant has already fallen, ok? They're like, "What is this thing in here with us, so much greater than we are?!" And they start touching it, and one person thinks it's a wall, and one thinks it's a tree, and one thinks it's a snake, and another one thinks it's spears. Isn't it just possible that you're missing the point... [He

pauses, searching for the right words.] ...and that Jesus is an elephant? [loud laughter] An elephant so big that each of these four men could only see part of him? [Applause and cheering, the rare hallmark of the audience's genuine agreement with Stephen.]

Ehrman simply nods, while Colbert closes the interview by saying, “I tell you what, why don't we both die and let God settle it?” and thanking his guest.⁵⁶ What Colbert has expressed — the primacy of the Gospels' univocity regarding Jesus Christ as the Crucified One, and the symphonic beauty of multiple perspectives — lands him firmly in the company of myriad eminent Catholic thinkers. What Ehrman has revealed — that to be unbendingly firm and defensive of one's position to the point of rejecting an opportunity to playfully recognize the limits of human grasp of the truth is to be brittle and ultimately to break — is a lesson applicable not only to Colbert's guests, but to anyone who seeks to grasp the most ungraspable of truths, God.

The Word Made Fresh: Toward a Colbertian Theological Method

The above investigation has offered a presentation of Stephen Colbert as a Catholic and of the legitimacy of his indirect, sometimes literally false techniques for a person of the Catholic faith, a “squaring” of his “Catholicism to comedy.”⁵⁷ The final move from this point must be a constructive one, building on this apologetic-evidentiary foundation an application of its findings to the theological task. It is well and good to provide evidence of his Catholicism and to support its compatibility with comedy, but this is not explicitly important for theology as such unless there is some *theological* insight to be gained from the attention we have paid to Stephen Colbert.

Early on, I suggested that taking on the trusting, un-starstruck perspective of Colbert's young Sunday school students might not be a bad idea. To take that paradigm a step further, and to again offend the sensibilities of those wedded to a highly professional, mature, serious sort of theology (if indeed they have followed me this far), I would like to make another, perhaps silly suggestion: that theology might benefit from what may be called a Colbertian theological method.

A Colbertian theological method would have more in common with a game of peek-a-boo than with a debate or even a serious, thoughtful conversation (the above analysis of Bart Ehrman's struggle against Colbert's silliness is a potent

56 Bart Ehrman, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, April 9, 2009; transcript by author. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/224128/april-09-2009/bart-ehrman>.

57 Cote, “Joyce Words.”

example of the difference between the two modes). A child can look around a corner and encounter a stranger, with whom they seemingly have nothing in common, and within moments — after a few cycles of withdrawing behind and emerging in front of the wall — both child and stranger can be completely immersed in effervescent laughter. Theorists have already approached the innocent, relatively free-form model of play as a possible paradigm for the theological task.⁵⁸ But by placing Colbert's satire — with its concealed but nonetheless real concern for its subject matter — into the context of a game, the practices of play are more easily parsed into the primarily linguistic modes of theological discourse, without completely relinquishing their performative aspect.

The joke and the game, two elements of play equally suited to the life of a young child and to the goings-on on *The Report*, both function on an “economy of language,” a short-cut not unlike the shortcut of metaphor Colbert discussed with Elizabeth Alexander. A joke is about juxtapositions and omissions; a game, like peek-a-boo, is about shared rules and implied reasons for those rules. Jokes are *funny* because they place words and sometimes actions into strange relationships, which sound weird or form a pun, or because they leave something out which one expects to be included. Colbert is funny for these same reasons. He uses satire, which omits some expected things while overemphasizing others.⁵⁹ He uses techniques of contrast⁶⁰, which juxtapose words and statements so that the ensuing dissonance creates a moment of clarity. *The Report* is one big joke (which, like a metaphor, is often more or less a lie), in the sense that each moment is carefully designed to be funny — that is, pleasurable *and* destabilizing — and thereby to

58 George Aichele, Jr., *Theology as Comedy: Critical and Theoretical Implications* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 99-144, offers a helpful overview and gestures toward a shift from “theology as play” to a “comic” theology; Waisanen (120) says that Colbert also “link[s] playfulness to the 'public sphere.'”

59 He both “deliver[s] according to our performance expectations and changes[s our] expectations”; Sandra L. Borden, “The Role of Journalist and the Performance of Journalism: Ethical Lessons from 'Fake' News (Seriously),” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, no. 22:4 (2007), 310.

60 Don J. Waisanen describes the rhetorical techniques Colbert uses as “parodic polyglossia” (the use of multiple “characters” or ways of speaking), “satirical specificity” (the use of concrete, specific examples to make a broader point), and “contextual clash” (the use of juxtaposition, especially placing the familiar in an unfamiliar context); his appropriation of Kenneth Burke's “comic frame,” P. Berger's notion of the comic's creation of an alternate world, and his thoughts on the “normal person in an abnormal situation/abnormal person in a normal situation” inform and undergird much of what follows below; “A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism,” *Southern Communication Journal*, no. 72:2 (April-June 2009), 114-140.

create a rhetorical situation where new meanings or discoveries of meaning are possible.

A game is fun because, first of all, there is a shared sense of what is “going on” when one is playing; everyone has seen (or been) the child who stomps off in frustration when their playmate “keeps changing the rules.” It's not that the rules to most children's games are particularly rigid, just that one cannot just completely disregard established patterns and expect anyone else to be able to keep up. The rules can change if they somehow remain *rules* in that change, somehow continuous with the concerns of those involved in the game. When the rules change abruptly and without consensus, the game is at best no longer the same game and at worst no longer a game at all.

A game is fun also because it evokes some shared goal or implication of why anyone would want to engage in it. When I play peek-a-boo with a little girl in a café, whom I have never met before, there is something implied in our interaction — we both think disappearing and reappearing suddenly is funny, for some reason, and we both like to laugh. That recognition of sharing something with a stranger is pleasurable itself, and is one aspect of our remarkable comfort in continuing to play with one another in a culture where eye contact with strangers is taboo.⁶¹ From the moment she initiates the encounter by peeking around the corner and disappearing again, and I reciprocate by paying attention and pulling faces at her, we are bound by an implied understanding of what it is we are about to do. I may laugh more because she is an adorable child and her laughter is so unlike “adult” laughter, she more because she is just discovering that the permanence of objects doesn't depend on her seeing them, but we are both in it for the same reason: the sheer joy of *laughing*, an activity which rarely occurs in isolation. Laughter, however, is not an unambiguously positive outcome.

The laughter that happens on *The Report* is in many ways “adult laughter.” My peek-a-boo partner is not old enough to understand puns, or even knock-knock jokes, much less political satire and more complex allusive or contrastive humor.

61 I am thinking here of the “intimizing” pleasure a Catholic experiences when he or she recognizes a shared experience with Colbert, such as his cross of smeared ashes at the start of Lent or the rhythm of his recitative allusions to the Nicene Creed. There is something in this shared experience that is itself funny — that I should share something with a tiny child, or with someone on television, is both surprising and pleasurable. I am a part of a community larger than the one I usually consider, part of many communities I often do not think about. In Geertzian terms, Colbert and I are part of a certain Catholic culture, and the little girl and I share in what might be called a “peek-a-boo” culture, however trivial that may sound. It feels good to belong to a community, and it feels even better to belong to a community of which I have just been reminded.

Yet I would venture to say that the distinction should not so much be between “child” and “adult” laughter, or “clean” or “dirty” jokes — some of the funniest puns, after all, are “corny,” simple, and clean, and some of the dirtiest jokes (in the broad sense) can be found in original language biblical texts. A more fruitful distinction might be to distinguish “innocent” laughter from “malicious” laughter, or perhaps “open” from “closed” laughter. Innocent, open laughter is a response to the pleasurable surprise that comes from being shown something in a new light or from a new angle. It feels and sounds brighter and fresher, more like laughing at a peek-a-boo game than at someone falling down. Malicious, closed laughter is the sort of laughter that comes from confirmation of one's existing perspective, from the reaffirmation of the boundaries between one's community of right and the other, wrong community. It is smug, funny *at the expense of* an “outsider” or “outsiders,” more like egging a house than playing a game.⁶²

When Colbert-the-character talks about his “It-Getters,”⁶³ he is definitely referring to an “in-crowd” which agrees with his (ostensible) positions. But the fact that this in-crowd is named in a context of satire highlights the usual context of in-crowds in one pole or another of public discourse. The real “It-Getters” are those who realize that the “it” they're “getting” is not some static platform, but the experience of being jostled outside one's usual frame of reference by the invasion of innocent, open laughter.

If the “game” is theology, and the goal of the game is innocent, open laughter — the experience of being surprised into new possibilities for meaning — then a “joke” is an instance of theology. An instance of theology should juxtapose familiar concepts in a new way, just as words are juxtaposed in a new way in a pun or in Colbert's “The Wørd” segment. Or it should omit something taken for granted, either to expose its superfluity or to reemphasize its necessity. A “joke” is never presented dogmatically, that is, it is never presented as the truth itself, as a proposition. Instead, a “joke” or a theological instance must be presented as an adventure, an invitation to experience a moment of fresh meaning the joker-

62 Colbert's colleague Jon Stewart, unfortunately, often produces the latter sort of laughter, because his techniques rely less on indirect evocation and more on direct ridicule of the hypocrisy and of public figures. While such direct techniques are both appropriate and effective, and Stewart's value is not to be discounted in the least, his techniques rely heavily on the polarization of political culture and on closed laughter, rendering them inappropriate to the theological task. It may be funny, important, and cathartic to point out what Stewart points out, but it is hardly a fruitful starting point for discourse outside the paradigm of polarization. (It is impossible to definitively say that the fact that Colbert is a Catholic and Stewart is not has some causal bearing on their respective approaches to comedy, but such a connection certainly seems possible).

63“Tags: it-getters.” <http://www.colbertnation.com/video/tag/it-getters>.

theologian wants to share. The “joker” discovers or constructs a new resonance between words or concepts, and wants to share it because it is “funny” — because the end result is a pleasurable new insight, a new possibility for meaning.⁶⁴ The audience may or may not accept the invitation. The joke may or may not work; it may not be “funny” enough in the end to evoke innocent, open “laughter.” The audience may accept the joke in the wrong spirit, although this is much less likely if the “joker” is open and innocent in her invitation to the shared experience. But the point is that the theological task is no longer invested in producing a closed — sometimes maliciously closed — conclusion in its audience, but instead in sharing an instance of “the Word made *fresh*,” the familiar made surprising. The success or failure of a particular theological task is thus less easily measured, because its effect will be more subtle than verbal agreement — more subtle, but probably more lasting, because more fundamental.

The “joker” is also a professional “comedian,” who will try again tomorrow evening with a slightly different joke, with a different audience, learning by trial-and-error what is funny. This comedian is not dismayed because her act is not always received with thunderous laughter and applause, because funniness — freshness — is contextual and always changing. Jokes are not life itself, *nor are theological instances faith itself*. Theology is certainly *not* God Godself. God loses nothing in a failed attempt to share with others an insight which springs from a genuinely funny “inside joke” in our own playing with God. The joke is no less funny for being inapplicable to the perspective of another or of many others, only incomplete as all jokes — as all instances of theology — must be. What is key is that you do not know how to tell a joke well until you have tried, and cannot try to tell one with any chance of success unless you have already experienced a surprising influx of the “funny” for yourself.

The study of God is surely something that must be undertaken with a certain level of seriousness and reverence, but the sort of God Christian theologians study requires of us something more than academic rigor. This God is both immanent and

64 Approached by “entertaining multiple realities,” Waisanen 121; also (again) Alexander and Ricoeur on the poetic. When Colbert was promoting his Christmas album in the run-up to “Operation Humble Kanye,” he suggested a reason for watching reruns of his Christmas special by saying, “You know, there’s something new in every viewing.” The reference is tongue-in-cheek, of course, but it should be clear by this point that this does not mean that Colbert does not mean that there is no truth in such a statement. Every viewing, in a Colbertian theological framework, *should* offer the opportunity for “something new.” “Operation Humble Kanye.” *The Colbert Report*. Episode no. 483, first broadcast 1 December 2008 by Comedy Central. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/211966/december-01-2008/operation-humble-kanye>.

transcendent, bright light and consuming darkness — in Christ both human and God. It is not blasphemous to say that in this way God plays a sort of game of peek-a-boo with humanity, revealing and concealing Godself in turns and in simultaneity. Like myself and the little girl (I will not presume to know which of us is more Godlike and which is more like humanity), God and humans may have very different reasons for playing their part in the “game” of theology. The “peeking” effect is likely more a feature of human perception than some inconsistency of God in Godself, but it is nonetheless an apt description of what it is like to engage in the theological task. There will always be something unpredictable, something unaccounted for, something not circumscribed by the rules, something excessive: this is the payoff which is a-linguistic and ineffable, which the theologian can merely evoke or provoke, the theological equivalent of innocent laughter.

The task is no longer to concretize the broad and shifting rules of the game⁶⁵, but to join in it, offering new possibilities for fun which one can only provide from one's own experience of playing — to evoke an opportunity to be pleasurably overtaken by a newness one could not have grasped from one's usual perspective. This is a newness given by the Spirit Who sees from all perspectives at once the continual unfolding of the ever-living Word, a Word ever spoken from the mouth of the first and best comedian, the always surprising Father of innocent joy.

65 The general outlines have been rather well-documented by other theologians, and moreover are uniquely implied and inflected in each particular theological context.