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Not Alone: "Ironic Faith," The Comic Worldview, and Process Theology in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

Abstract

Steven Benko points out that far from being anti-religious, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* posits a type of belief he calls "ironic faith," though he believes that the version evoked by this film falls short of calling for social transformation. If, however, we consider the resonance between process theology's "becoming-over-being" and the open-ended "humorous outlook" as articulated by philosopher of comedy John Morreall, we can interpret *Life of Brian* as suggesting the possibility of social transformation through its concluding evocation of a shared humanity that surmounts isolation, hierarchy, and socially constructed barriers by promoting what sociologist Robert Putnam calls "bridging social capital." Understanding *Life of Brian* as an evocation of ironic faith-in-process rather than as a fixed point of theological conclusion allows us to consider the later Eric Idle stage production *Spamalot* as a potential realization of themes pointed to implicitly in *Life of Brian*, lending additional complexity to Benko's reading.

Keywords

Monty Python, *Life of Brian*, *Spamalot*, humor, comedy, process theology, community, social capital, social transformation, ironic faith, bridging capital

Author Notes

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Members of the Monty Python troupe have always insisted that their 1979 *Life of Brian*-- the comic film treatment of a hapless mortal who happens to be born in the manger next to Jesus' and who is consequently mistaken all his life for the Messiah—is not blasphemous because, rather than mocking any deity, it satirizes mortal failings. As John Cleese stated when interviewed by David Morgan for *Monty Python Speaks*: “What we are doing is quite clearly making fun of the way people follow religion but not of religion itself, and the whole purpose of having that lovely scene at the start when the Three Wise Men go into the wrong stable is to say Brian is not the Christ.”¹ Many reviewers and critics have agreed with Cleese that the film *Brian* is not anti-religious *per se*; as Bill Gibrone pointed out in his 2004 review for *Pop Matters*, “The only time Christ Himself is depicted in the film is during the Sermon on the Mount, and then it’s the audience who is the butt of the joke, as they misunderstand and misapply His poetic words. The movie treats the Son of God as an unfathomable good, while those who would follow Him are depicted as merely human by nature and design.”² Steven A. Benko takes this claim a step further by positing that *Life of Brian* is actually compatible with a particular kind of religious faith—“an ironic faith that, having recognized the limits that come with being human, are an occasion to define the meaning of one’s life within the parameters of the human.”³ Drawing upon Simon Critchley’s concept of “ironic faith” as elucidated in his book *On Humour*, Benko points out that *Life of Brian* uses “not just irony, but sarcasm, parody, satire, and other comedic devices” to present a comically existentialist worldview in which “individuals can assert the meaning of their own existence over and against the efforts of others who would seek to determine the meaning of life or what it means to be human for them.”⁴

Benko's reading offers a powerful counterpoint to the controversy surrounding the film's release, when religious leaders around the world condemned it as blasphemous. The film had generated controversy even before production began: EMI, the original producer, pulled out after becoming aware of its subject matter, leading ex-Beatle George Harrison to form his own company, Handmade Films, in order to finance the film.⁵ That controversy was not quelled with the film's release; as George Perry reported in his review for *Criterion*:

In the United States it was condemned by Catholic groups, who wanted attendance deemed a sin. A pressure group, Citizens Against Blasphemy, tried to prosecute. In Bible Belt states, local pressures caused its run to be terminated when outright bans failed. . . . In the United Kingdom, an organization called the Festival of Light successfully lobbied many towns and counties to ban it, or reclassify with an X-rating. . . . John Cleese, attacked on British television, argued that the film was really about closed minds not being prepared to question faith, rather than an attack on faith itself. As if to illustrate his point, one municipality eagerly imposed a screening ban even though there were no movie theaters within its limits.⁶

Given such a reception, it is notable that Benko (among others) discerns a version of faith, however ironic, within the film. Yet when measured against the “socially redemptive” vision articulated by Critchley—“redemptive in the sense that the perception of incongruity or dissonance between what is and what could be is an ethical call to establish a more just world”⁷—*Life of Brian*, Benko argues, finally falls short of sounding an “ethical call,” envisioning a transformation that takes place only “at the individual, not societal, level . . . it does not go so far as calling for individuals and communities to make the world a better place.”⁸

If the ending of *Life of Brian* is taken purely at face value and interpreted within the diegetic world of the film, Benko's observation appears to be on point. Nowhere in the film do we see an explicit call for social justice, and the proposed solution to the human existential dilemma—that we must “always look on the bright side of life”—can even be interpreted as flippant, suggesting that we should embrace absurdity to the point of giving up on any attempts to resolve social injustices. Though Benko's observation is apt as far as it goes, I argue that it *is* possible to detect a subtle call for social transformation if we interpret the film extra-diegetically, as a call for conceptualizing more inclusively whom we consider as belonging within the “human community.” Social activists throughout the centuries have acknowledged that ideas need to be brought into existence before they can be made manifest; thus, providing an artistic vision of a shared humanity is a crucial first step toward the kind of ethically based societal change that Critchley articulates.

Crucial to Benko's claim is his point that Critchley—along with Edwin Good, whom he also cites—posits “an ethical vision of what the world has been called to be. It has been articulated and can be finalized.”⁹ This paradigm of “finalization” allows Benko to argue convincingly that *Life of Brian* offers an “absurdist vision . . . an insight with no discernible and definable content . . . an approach with no destination.”¹⁰ As philosopher of comedy John Morreall points out, however, the deeply comic worldview is one that emphasizes mental flexibility over a fixed worldview, open-endedness over resolution, and becoming over being: “Having a sense of humor . . . involves a flexibility and openness to experience which a fundamentally serious person lacks.”¹¹ For Morreall, then, flexibility and process are hallmarks of a humorous worldview that appreciates and embraces incongruity and mortal imperfections rather than seeking fixed answers and rigid ideologies: “Once we give up the idea that everything is related practically to us, too, we are no longer bound to seeing things in just one way. . . . This mental flexibility brings an openness

to experience.”¹² This viewpoint, which Morreall terms “deeply comic,” resonates with process theology, as formulated by Charles Hartshorne (in dialogue with philosopher Alfred North Whitehead) and further developed by others. In process theology, becoming is valued over being and open-endedness over resolution, with God conceptualized as a being “fully involved in and affected by temporal processes.”¹³ Noting the resonance between the deeply comic worldview and process theology allows us to reconceptualize open-endedness, ambiguity and absurdity not as dead-ends or “failures” to realize a goal such as social transformation, but instead as steps in a slowly unfolding arc towards a more socially just world—the kind of “ironic faith” posited by Critchley and Good. While Benko is correct that this vision is not fully—or indeed even partially—realized at the film’s conclusion, nevertheless the conceptual groundwork for such a process-based theology has been laid. Furthermore, I would argue, to recognize our shared humanity across socially constructed boundaries and against hierarchies is itself an act of change in a world so marked by structural inequities.

In *Life of Brian*, a more socially progressive version of “ironic faith” is implicit rather than explicit. Yet if we consider the film—and particularly its conclusion—as a point along a process-theology-based continuum rather than as a finalized vision, it becomes possible to interpret the film in light of the Monty Python troupe’s later work. Building on the groundwork first established by *Life of Brian*, Eric Idle’s 2004 play *Spamalot* stages one possibility for reshaping the ironic vision of *Life of Brian* into a more explicit call for social justice. A case for reading *Spamalot* as a conceptual “offshoot” of *Life of Brian* can be made thanks to its reprise of “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” (even though playwright Eric Idle’s “loving... rip-off”, *Spamalot*, draws primarily on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*).

My claim here is multifaceted: First I draw upon Morreall's concept of the humorous outlook as "affirm[ing] the incongruities in things, right down to the fundamental incongruity . . . 'between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness.'"¹⁴ Though Morreall posits that traditional religious belief is grounded in the opposing "serious outlook," the humorous outlook need not be essentially at odds with religious faith, since if we apply Aristotle's concept of "comedy" as one in which the protagonist ends up better off by the end of the drama, religious narratives actually follow a comic trajectory (a point illustrated by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*). Affirmation of incongruity in both *Life of Brian* and *Spamalot* provides us a "measure of objectivity in looking at ourselves"¹⁵ that reminds us we are not alone, prompts us to move beyond self-interest, and evokes the possibility of realizing a shared humanity that dismantles social hierarchies. This ideological shift is necessary if social change is to be realized, leading me to invoke Morreall's theory of comic open-endedness and its relationship to process theology in order to explore how we might read *Spamalot* as a later "stage" in the long and slow process of evolving toward a more socially engaged "ironic faith." Finally, I briefly discuss Robert Putnam's concept of "bridging social capital," arguing that a society richer in this type of social capital has the potential to "generate broader identities and reciprocity."¹⁶ The very absence of "bridging social capital" in the film's conclusion illustrates the urgent need for it. Extra-diagetically, then, we can interpret *Life of Brian* as a call for the building of "bridging social capital" that motivates people to make connections across perceived boundaries of difference.¹⁷ If we conceptualize *Life of Brian's* absurdist conclusion as both open-ended and as revealing of the shared human condition of mortality, it becomes possible to interpret the film as an implicit call for social transformation that starts by the building of "bridging social capital." Understood in this manner, the film's

conclusion can be conceptualized as a call for community—something more potentially profound in its implications than only, as Benko posits, a call to laugh with others who “get the joke.”

The Deeply Comic Outlook: Embracing Incongruity, Rejecting Solipsism, and Acknowledging Open-Endedness

In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall characterizes the “humorous” or “deeply comic” outlook as an appreciation of incongruity, along with an ability to depersonalize or distance oneself in order to gain perspective: “The person who has a humorous attitude toward life . . . has the capacity for distancing himself from the practical aspects of most situations, and simply enjoying the many incongruities he experiences.”¹⁸ Drawing upon Stephen Leacock, Morreall asserts: “The ultimate humor arises . . . from ‘the incongruous contrast between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness.’”¹⁹ The humorous outlook, then, requires us to “pull back” from situations in which we find ourselves and consider our place in the greater scheme of things—stepping outside our own subjectivities, as it were, in order to view ourselves from an alternative position. In the process, individualistic angst may be somewhat alleviated and attachment to ego diminished, since the humorous outlook requires us to recognize our own relative smallness and to realize that life’s many imperfections are shared human experiences (rather than instances of being “singled out” for suffering by a cosmos that is personally picking on us).

This is just what occurs in *Life of Brian*’s final scene, when the camera initially pans from its initial close-up of Brian’s unjust crucifixion to reveal a hillside full of crosses, then pans even wider to display ever-more-numerous crosses as the individuals mounted on them fade into an ever-expanding crowd of the unjustly crucified. In the scenes immediately leading up to this one,

humorous effect has derived largely from the incongruity generated by our thwarted anticipation of comic resolution, when everyone we expect to rescue the hapless Brian (our expectations shaped by the cinematic conventions of the standard comic plot) fails to assist him. The People's Front of Judea, for instance, satirizes bureaucratic paralysis when they visit Brian only to assert, "We are not in fact the rescue committee" and, instead of taking action, read their resolution: "Your death will stand as a landmark in the continuing struggle to liberate the parentland from the hands of the Roman imperialist aggressors."²⁰ Their rival political faction, the Judean People's Front, sends their "crack suicide squad," yet they, rather than attempting any suicidal rescue mission, simply proceed to kill themselves. Brian's love interest Judith then appears, only to express gratitude for Brian's "martyrdom" while assuring him, "I'll never forget you, Brian." Finally, Brian's mother evokes in the most self-martyring of tones, "If that's how you treat your old mother, in the autumn years of her life, all I can say is, 'Go ahead! Be crucified! See if I care!'"²¹

Meanwhile, Brian's fellow crucifixion victims have been bickering (even as they are being executed) over perceived divisions of class, religion and ethnicity ("A Samaritan? This is supposed to be a Jewish section").²² In a tragicomic inversion of a famous scene from *Spartacus*—in which everyone in the crowd falsely claims to be Spartacus, thus sacrificing their lives for the sake of solidarity—the crucifixion victims falsely claim the identity of Brian (who has been "released" by Pilate) in an every-man-for-himself bid at self-preservation. Despite the laughter generated through incongruity as well as the intertextual mocking of cinematic conventions, it now becomes apparent that *Life of Brian's* plot trajectory will be classically tragic rather than comic. As if all this were not absurd enough, the film ends by poking fun at the artificial cheeriness of musicals when one of Brian's fellow crucifixion victims begins singing the now legendary "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

Here, *Life of Brian* inverts its tragic narrative arc by implying the possibility of hope beyond the inevitable reality that *all* our lives must end—many of them, like Brian’s, unjustly. As the camera pans out to reveal Brian as only one among many victims, Brian and the others join in the absurd singing, whistling and toe-tapping. The gradual fading of individual victims into a mass of victims evokes Morreall’s observation that the humorous outlook necessitates critical distance. Meanwhile, the wide-angle slow pan suggests that Brian’s fate, however unjust, is not isolated, and that death is, for all of us, the ultimate end—the aspect of human existence that we all, regardless of social locations, identities and perceived divisions, inescapably share.

Furthermore, the introduction of song and dance at this plot point obliterates the previous class, ethnic, and religious bickering that occurred prior to the singing. To look on “the bright side,” then—if we consider this ending in its full context—means something much different from glibly superficial cheeriness. In the deeper sense, this scene points toward a hard-fought optimism that necessitates, first, looking squarely at the harsh reality that all human lives proceed along a tragic trajectory; and second, choosing to “laugh and smile and dance and sing” despite our recognition of that grim reality. As Benko puts it, “While some may see the joke as an effort to deny the possibility of finding anything positive about life, those who practice an ironic faith would be able to see the truth in the claim that though death takes everyone, it is still possible to make life meaningful by focusing on the small joys that are available to humans.”²³ I would add that in this scene, the singing and dancing are communal activities, suggesting an approach to meaning-making that stretches beyond individualism.

Life of Brian’s conclusion suggests that the individual shares his or her fate with all other human beings. The scene from which this song arises suggests the obliteration of class, ethnic and other divisions that have previously divided the crucifixion victims, suggesting not only that we

are not “alone” (as King Arthur claims, albeit falsely and ironically, in *Spamalot*), but that the labels and hierarchies we often perceive as crucial are in fact laughably ridiculous. As Benko states, “Laughing together, [we] perceive the incongruities that give rise to ironic faith. In laughing, one realizes what is truly important and how laughable and finite so many other concerns are . . . The difficulties presented by the world and other people in defining the meaning of one’s life are lessened by the recognition that one is not laughing alone.”²⁴ This awareness of our shared tragic end renders a certain poignancy to the lyrics of “Bright Side”: “Life is quite absurd, and death’s the final word.” Despite its classically tragic trajectory, then, the worldview invoked by *Life of Brian* is provisionally comic in that despite the failure of the individual to transcend death on the physical plane, laughter and song—and, it is implied, hope—can still survive.

Thematic links can be further drawn between the film’s conclusion and the parallel original text that it parodies: the gospel story itself. The idea that *Life of Brian* is an “extraordinary tribute to Jesus”²⁵ rather than a work of blasphemy was recently expressed by theologian Reverend Professor Richard Burridge, in an interview with *The Telegraph*’s religious affairs editor John Bingham:

“I think it is an extraordinary tribute to the life and work and teaching of Jesus – that they couldn’t actually blaspheme or make a joke out of it. What they did was take ordinary British people and transpose them into an historical setting and did a great satire on closed minds and people who follow blindly. Then you have them splitting into factions . . . it is a wonderful satire on the way that Jesus’s own teaching has been used to persecute others. They were satirising closed minds, they were satirising fundamentalism and persecution of others and at the same time saying the one person who rises above all this was Jesus.”²⁶

The target of satire here, as Burrige points out in his interview with Bingham, is not Jesus himself but human beings—all of whom the film portrays as deeply flawed and clearly mortal.

Here it becomes further helpful to elucidate some key principles of process theology, a school of thought based on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and, according to Ewert Cousins, “characterized by its emphasis on becoming and relation” and thus standing “in contrast to those philosophies that give primacy to being and absoluteness.”²⁷ Cousins summarizes this complex theological approach as offering “a world view that reflects the dynamic quality of contemporary experience” as an alternative to “the static cosmology of the past”²⁸ W. Norman Pittenger explains further:

Process-theologians are sure that modern man is right in seeing himself as part of a changing, moving, living, active world, in which we have to do not with inert substances but with dynamic processes, not so much with *things* as with *events*. Hence their conception of divine Reality . . . is not that of an unmoved mover or changeless essence, but rather of a living, active, constantly creative, infinitely related, ceaselessly operative Reality; the universe at its core is movement, dynamism, activity, and not sheer and unrelated abstraction. . . . [and] this carries with it a conviction that the only reasonable explanation of the living cosmos is in fact ‘the living God’.²⁹

Process theology conceptualizes what some might call “God,” or divine reality, not as a fixed state of being but as manifestations of an ongoing, still-developing, open-ended process of becoming—a concept that resonates with Morreall’s “deeply comic worldview” given its embrace of “open-endedness.” If we consider the principles of process theology alongside Critchley’s concept of an “ironic” faith, it becomes possible to interpret *Life of Brian*’s satire of “closed minds . . . fundamentalism and persecution of others . . .” not as ironic faith alone, but also as a manifestation

of what Pittenger calls “our past-come-alive-in-the-now of our living tradition,” part of a “dynamic of the past as it exists in and creates present communal existence and prepares for our future.”³⁰

A further thematic resonance between *Life of Brian* and the original source text occurs when we examine their plot trajectories. In Aristotle’s sense, the gospel story itself follows a comic trajectory in that death is followed by resurrection. Morreall argues that traditional Christianity is a prime example of the humorous outlook’s oppositional “serious outlook” which posits “something supremely and absolutely important—the infinite God and our relationship to him,” contrasting the humorous outlook in which we become aware that “nothing is important in an absolute way.”³¹ Here, however, Morreall is clearly relying on a more conventional, “static” interpretation of Christianity rather than on contemporary process theology as articulated above. If we use Aristotle’s definition of “comic,” both *Life of Brian*’s final scene and the gospel story can be seen as invoking a deeply “comic” hope for survival beyond death, even as they both emphasize the inevitability of mortality. As Benko states, “The fact that everyone dies proves the futility of trying to do or to be more than human.”³² Considered in light of process theology and Morreall’s theory of humor as intellectually flexible and open-ended, neither death nor the film’s conclusion represent a “finalization,” opening up a space for conceptualizing *Life of Brian*’s conclusion as potentially transformative.

Though Benko does note *Life of Brian*’s evocation of the human need for community, he claims that this “community of people who laugh together is not an ethical community but is, instead, a community of ironists.”³³ While this seems apparent on the surface, I would suggest that as the film concludes, all necessary elements for social transformation in Critchley’s sense are in place: a vision of a world less hierarchical, less characterized by socially constructed boundaries, and less rife with individualistic isolation—along with a clear dissatisfaction at the enormous gap

between the ideal and the real evoked by the crucifixion scene. Shared humanity is emblemized by awareness of our shared mortality; for all the academic discussion of difference in identity politics and all the criticism of the “universal,” the universality of death remains a bodily reality not easily theorized away. (This is, however, not to say there is “sameness” of the death experience across racial, class or other boundaries.)

***Spamalot* as Evocation of Process Theology**

While the suggestion of social transformation remains at best implicit in *Life of Brian*'s conclusion, recognizing the resonance between comic theory and process theology can allow us to consider *Spamalot* as a partial realization of the potential social transformation to which *Life of Brian* alludes. On its surface, *Spamalot* would appear to be little more than a crowd-pleasing retrospective comic pastiche geared toward the “insider community” of Python fans. Following its absurdist (and apropos-of-nothing) opening “fish-schlapping scene,” the “plot” (such as it is) of *Spamalot* begins—a scrambled retelling of an already plotless *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, with *Life of Brian*'s anthemic “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” pasted in for no apparent reason and in a much different context (in this version, Patsy sings the song to a dejected King Arthur when he becomes lost in a “dark and very expensive forest” while searching for a shrubbery to appease the Knights of Ni). From the beginning it becomes apparent that *Spamalot* is going to become a different story than *Holy Grail*, incorporating new elements such as intertextual mockery of numerous smash-hit Broadway musicals. Moreover, *Spamalot* invokes a worldview that is more explicitly self-aware of the need for community-building across social boundaries than either *Holy Grail* or *Life of Brian*. What emerges in *Spamalot* is a paradigm that is not only more optimistic

(in *Spamalot*, the Grail is actually found), but that also carries more explicit ramifications for potential social change through evocation of a community built across identity differences. As a cinematic follow-up to *Life of Brian*, *Spamalot* can be interpreted as one potential stage in an ongoing movement toward an ever-evolving “ironic faith” grounded in shared humanity. Such a reading of the play points back toward *Life of Brian* as a springboard toward an evolving theology of process rather than as a finalized vision.

To illustrate, in one of *Spamalot*'s earliest deviations from *Holy Grail*, the complaint of the Marxist peasant Dennis that “strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for government” is answered by the appearance of an actual “Lady of the Lake.” Having promised King Arthur that he will join him on his quest if Arthur can prove that the Lady is real, Dennis joins the Knights of the Round Table, re-christened as Sir Galahad, and sings an amusing duet with the Lady, “The Song That Goes Like This” (an obvious parody of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera*). While Dennis’s recruitment could be interpreted as his co-optation by the establishment, it could also be interpreted as a dismantling of the peasantry/monarchy binary (which, of course, Dennis has always refused to accept anyway). The incorporation of Dennis into the quest empowers the working class/peasantry to participate in the human activity of “find[ing] your Grail”—that is to say, searching for a meaning to one’s life—rather than suggesting that the quest is available only to the elite.

The power dynamics of class are further addressed when—unlike in the *Grail* film—the coconut-banging “human horse” Patsy is given a voice and allowed to express the frustration he feels regarding his invisibility to the monarch he serves. In an amusing mock soliloquy, King Arthur sings “I’m All Alone,” oblivious to the fact that even as he sings, he is in Patsy’s constant company—or that he has been joined onstage by a chorus of companions who are, ironically,

echoing Arthur's stubborn insistence on his alone-ness. Arthur glances at Patsy, briefly leading the audience to expect Arthur to recognize his servant's presence, before shaking his head and reiterating, "I'm all alone!" At this point Patsy interjects: "It seems quite clear to me/Because I'm working class/That I'm just the horse's ass"³⁴—precisely the role he has been playing as the "patsy" (literally) who feeds Arthur's delusions of horsemanship by "taking two coconuts and banging them together."³⁵

The performance of "I'm All Alone" can be interpreted on two levels—the psychological and the political. If interpreted psychologically, Arthur's inability to recognize Patsy's presence can be seen as a manifestation of clinical depression, brought on at least in part by his distorted sense of isolation. Community and belonging, in this reading, could be seen as essential to mental health and emotional well-being. If interpreted politically, Patsy's invisibility to Arthur stems from the class division between them; Arthur views Patsy as little more than the "animal" that he is playing. Both ways of reading this scene are simultaneously valid: if isolation is damaging to people psychologically, it is *also* damaging both politically and socially. Moreover, there is an interplay between the two poles, as a significant portion of King Arthur's isolation stems from his failure to recognize the humanity of those who are already around him—namely, working-class people and women.

Spamalot is rife with examples of bonding across social divisions, as well as dismantling of hierarchies and evocation of an inclusive community. Just prior to Arthur's mock soliloquy, for example, we have learned that Lancelot is gay. In a re-vision of the "botched wedding" scene in *Holy Grail*, Lancelot not only "rescues" the lonely Hubert (unwillingly betrothed by paternal arrangement to a woman with "huge tracts of land"), but takes Hubert as a partner after revealing his own sexual orientation. In the next scene we learn that Patsy is half-Jewish, adding a dimension

of ethnic diversity to the continually revising storyline. Soon after this, the Lady of the Lake re-emerges, reminding both players and audience that she “has been there all along” and is in fact the source of King Arthur’s power. (That female presence and power have been essential to the plot throughout has, of course, been ignored up to this point by the male characters—a situation bemoaned by the Lady of the Lake in “Diva’s Lament.”)

Given all this, it becomes apparent that the “ironic laughter” in *Spamalot* emerges not in isolation but in the context of a community that has begun to transcend social barriers and deconstruct hierarchies. As *Spamalot* progresses, an imaginary world emerges in which there are no Others. To underscore this point, the play does not conclude chaotically as the *Holy Grail* film does; in *Spamalot*, the Grail—that is to say, meaning—is real. Furthermore, meaning, it turns out, is located in the audience—abolishing both the “fourth wall,” and by implication, the concept of the Other as well.

A surface reading of *Spamalot* might suggest that The Grail/meaning has turned out to be purely performative. Indeed, performativity has been one of the play’s recurring themes (as King Arthur is told at the end, “You’ve been in a Broadway musical all along!”)³⁶ Benko points out the crucial role of performativity in *Life of Brian*: “Laughing, dancing, smiling, and singing are done for the benefit of the audience.”³⁷ As stated in the lyrics to “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life”: “You’ll see it’s all a show/Keep ‘em laughing as you go/Just remember that the last laugh is on you . . . You must always face the curtain with a bow.”³⁸ Yet the breaking of the fourth wall—when the audience member sitting in the “Grail seat” is brought onstage, followed by an audience sing-along of “Bright Side”—deconstructs the performer/audience binary, implying that creative expression is a quintessentially human need, not necessarily limited to a professional or elite class. The production’s early number, “Find Your Grail,” establishes a worldview that is

existentialist but not nihilistic; when the Grail is finally found, it is located in the interstices between performers and audience, after an episodic romp that has deconstructed one binary after another. Here the vision of an inclusive human community that crosses socially constructed dividing lines becomes more fully realized than in *Life of Brian*, moving beyond the endlessly self-reflexive circularity of the *Holy Grail* film to suggest the possibility of hope. While Benko is correct that this possibility is not fully realized in *Life of Brian*'s conclusion, the film's vision of a gross social injustice (crucifixion) visited upon people of various class, ethnic and gender identifications can be interpreted as a first step toward an evolving process theology, moving toward a more fully realized "ironic faith" closer to the socially engaged version posited by Critchley and Good.

The deeply comic outlook resulting from the humorous worldview, as expressed by Morreall, does not minimize suffering, tragedy, oppression, or other human failings. Nor does it make light of serious issues such as religious faith or death. Properly understood, the deeply comic outlook acknowledges both mortality and human suffering, as well as the unfortunate reality that so much of that suffering is humanly caused. At the root of a variety of social injustices lies a hierarchical social system that does more than merely delineate Self and Other; social hierarchies not only "rank" human beings according to socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and so forth, but ascribe varying degrees of *humanity* to those at various social locations. Perhaps ironically (given that many people mis-understand "humorous" to mean "frivolous"), the deeply comic outlook has the potential to disrupt that sense of separation, hierarchy and dehumanization—precisely because it requires us to pull back and achieve sufficient critical distance to see what cannot be seen from the "inside." For those with relative power and privilege, such a move may open them up to recognizing the humanity of others; for those who are

marginalized, this act of “pulling back” may allow them to move beyond the self-blame promoted by individualism, to recognize more clearly the *structures* that have constricted their options. Such awareness may make those in socially marginal positions less likely to internalize discourses of oppression.

“Bridging Social Capital” and Inclusive Human Community

In order to demonstrate further how *Life of Brian* can be conceptualized as promoting an “ironic faith” that might develop toward social transformation, it is helpful to draw upon Robert Putnam’s concept of “social capital,” particularly the distinction he makes between “bonding social capital” and “bridging social capital.” Bonding social capital develops within a bounded group and “is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity.”³⁹ While it may “provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of the community,”⁴⁰ the downside to bonding social capital lies in the tendency of bonded groups to become exclusionary. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, develops *across* groups and as such is “better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. . . . Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.”⁴¹ Citing Thomas Greene, Putnam draws the analogy that “bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. Bonding social capital, by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism.”⁴² Both forms of social capital are necessary, says Putnam, and must work together in order for human beings to receive “crucial social and psychological support” while minimizing the problems created by “out-group antagonism.”⁴³ In order to move beyond the bolstering of the “narrow self,” bridging social capital is vital to establishing communities across various social barriers.

Considering the two different types of social capital, it becomes apparent that the building of bridging capital is not merely a “first step” toward social transformation but *constitutes* an act of social transformation in itself. Where “bridging social capital” is in rich supply, according to Putnam, goodwill arises not only among already like-minded folks but across dividing lines as well (paralleling Jesus’ observation in the Sermon on the Mount that there is little virtue in merely loving one’s own friends and family, since “even a scoundrel does that much”). As Putnam states:

Social capital turns out to have forceful, even quantifiable effects on many different aspects of our lives. What is at stake is not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride. ... [There is] hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken, that our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.⁴⁴

Nor, Putnam continues, does it make sense to conceptualize social capital in a purely individualistic way:

If individual clout and companionship were all there were to social capital, we'd expect foresighted, self-interested individuals to invest the right amount of time and energy in creating or acquiring it. However, social capital also can have “externalities” that affect the wider community, so that not all the costs and benefits of social connections accrue to the person making the contact.⁴⁵

At the same time, Putnam warns:

Sometimes “social capital,” like its conceptual cousin “community,” sounds warm and cuddly. . . . but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive. It was social capital, for example, that enabled Timothy McVeigh to bomb

the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building . . . Similarly, urban gangs, NIMBY ("not in my backyard") movements, and power elites often exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspective . . . Social capital, in short, can be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital. . . . Therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital — mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness — can be maximized and the negative manifestations — sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption — minimized.⁴⁶

On Putnam's last point, the messages embedded in *Life of Brian* become particularly resonant. Sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption are three phenomena satirized by the film, along with the negatives identified by Putnam: lack of support, non-cooperation, distrust, and institutional ineffectiveness. By satirizing the tragic (though comically rendered) end result of such human failings, the film makes a case for their opposite, begging the question of what might be different in a society where the "positive consequences of bridging social capital" are realized. While *Life of Brian's* concluding scene might be absurd, then, the issues it evokes are far from trivial.

That the productions of the Monty Python troupe happen to be funny (to the point of irreverent) does not mean we should not also take them seriously. To recognize the incongruity inherent in the deeply comic outlook necessitates a deep understanding of the gap between the ideal and the real, as Benko points out. That gap becomes especially glaring during *Life of Brian's* concluding scene—an ending which, if presented in a non-comedic film, would have been harrowing, given its deliberate intertextual inversion of the selflessness invoked by *Spartacus*. The fact that *Life of Brian* remains a comedy (despite its tragic trajectory in Aristotle's sense), however, suggests the possibility for bonding socially across class and ethnic lines—something that, thanks

to the film's invocation of dramatic irony, the audience can recognize even though the characters within the film do not.

Drawing upon Aristotle, Morreall states, "In comedies, enemies often become friends; while in tragedy, which is based on negative emotions, they never do."⁴⁷ The Monty Python troupe's clear insistence on *Life of Brian* as *comic* suggests a vision in which "bridging social capital" between those at different social locations might be encouraged. Furthermore, the open-endedness of comedy as described by Morreall suggests that, rather than being "formless" and without destination as Benko concludes, *Life of Brian*'s conclusion can indeed be read as pointing toward the possibility of generating social transformation. If we interpret *Life of Brian* not as the end point of a theological vision but—in the spirit of "becoming" over "being"—as one stage in the never-ending evolution of a process-based theology, we can read the film's evocation of an "ironic faith" as pointing toward the possibility of a world less structured by hierarchy, Othering, and differentially distributed opportunities. The film can be read as suggesting that, although our collective destination of a kinder and more inclusive world might remain distant, our journey toward such a world has indeed begun.

¹ Morgan, David. *Monty Python Speaks* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 226.

² Gibron, Bill, "Monty Python's *Life of Brian*." *Pop Matters* (29 April 2004), 3.
<http://www.popmatters.com/review/monty-pythons-life-of-brian-2004/>

³ Benko, Steven. "Ironic Faith in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*." *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 16:1 (2012), 3.
<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss1/6/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Perry, George. "Monty Python's *Life of Brian*." *Criterion*, November 15, 1999.
<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/68-monty-python-s-life-of-brian> . 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Benko, op. cit., 18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹ Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously* (New York: SUNY Press, 1983), 123.

¹² Ibid., 128.

¹³ Viney, Donald, "Process Theism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/process-theism/>>

¹⁴ Morreall, op. cit., 128.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 11.

¹⁷ Here I am not arguing for "bridging social capital" as a simple extension of the Monty Python fan base (in Putnam's formulation, fan bases are by their nature examples of "bonding" rather than "bridging" capital). I am instead suggesting that the film suggests the *need* for bridging social capital in the world outside of the cinematic frame, by portraying (though comically) the ultimately tragic outcome that results from its lack.

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

¹⁹ Ibid., 124.

²⁰ *Life of Brian*. http://www.intriguing.com/mp/_scripts/briafilm.php. Script.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Benko, op. cit., 16.

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ Bingham, John. "Monty Python's *Life of Brian* 'extraordinary tribute to Jesus,' says theologian decorated by Pope Francis." *The Telegraph*, 31 Dec. 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10543149/Monty-Pythons-Life-of-Brian-extraordinary-tribute-to-Jesus-says-theologian-decorated-by-Pope-Francis.html>. 1.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ Cousins, Ewert, "The Development of Process Philosophy." In *Process Theology: Basic Writings by the Key Thinkers of a Major Modern Movement*, Ewert Cousins, ed. (New York: Newman Press, 1971), 47.

²⁸ Cousins, Ewert. "Introduction: Process Models in Culture, Philosophy, and Theology." In Cousins, 19.

²⁹ Pittenger, W. Norman. "Process Thought: A Contemporary Trend in Theology." In Cousins, *Process Theology: Basic Writings by the Key Thinkers of a Major Modern Movement*, 25-26.

³⁰ Ibid., 30.

³¹ Morreall, op. cit., 125.

³² Benko, op. cit., 15.

³³ Benko, op. cit., 17.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Benko, 17.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Putnam, Robert, op cit., 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² Ibid., 12.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Morreall, "Comic Vices and Comic Virtues." *Humor*, Vol. 23:1 (2010), 1-26, 20.

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