

# Holy Laughter or Strong Delusion?

By Warren B. Smith

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I watched the video *again*. It was entitled *Signs and Wonders Camp Meeting 1994*. Pastors of huge charismatic churches were stumbling around the church stage “drunk” with “holy” laughter. Wanting to testify to the fact that “holy” laughter had transformed their ministries and their lives, many of them were unable to speak when called on to do so. But their “drunken” condition *became* their testimony. Their halting speech was seen as “proof” of the “power of the spirit” that had come over them. The congregation roared in approval as pastor after pastor laughed uncontrollably and then fell to the floor. Standing alongside the “drunken” pastors was evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne, the self described “Holy Ghost bartender” who was serving up this “new wine” of “holy” laughter. Many Christians today believe that Howard-Browne is God’s appointed channel for imparting joy and revival to the end-times church. Other Christians see Howard-Browne as a false prophet who is inflicting great damage to the body of Christ.

Early last spring the Spiritual Counterfeits Project received a fax from someone expressing concern about a new phenomenon called “holy” laughter. He said that a San Francisco Bay Area Vineyard Church was experiencing what was being described as “revival” and that the manifestation of “holy” laughter was being cited as one of the signs of this “revival.” Church members and visitors were reportedly breaking into fits of spontaneous and uncontrollable laughter during their nightly services.

Later when I talked with several members of the San Francisco Vineyard congregation I was told how hundreds of people were getting “hit” with “revival”—how some people were getting so “soaked in the spirit” they would lose consciousness for up to several hours after falling to the ground with “holy” laughter. The Vineyard members described “holy” laughter unqualifiedly as “awesome” and *definitely* “the work of the Lord.”

I learned that their Vineyard pastors had recently flown to a Vineyard church in Toronto where God had reportedly “touched down” and where “revival” had “broken out.” The San Francisco pastors participating in the Toronto “revival” had then “brought it back” to San Francisco. It seemed that one of the characteristics of “holy” laughter is that it can be easily transferred from one person to another through the laying on of hands. Thus the Toronto “revival” had now “spread” to San Francisco. Nightly meetings were now being held at the San Francisco Vineyard to accommodate the streams of people wanting to get “touched” by this “move of God.”

**But what does the Bible say about laughter?**

Within weeks of my visit to Vineyard I happened to catch a program on “holy” laughter on a local Christian TV station. The panel of guests were enthusiastically discussing “holy” laughter and endorsing it unquestioningly as a latter days “outpouring” of God’s Holy Spirit. Comparing “holy” laughter to the “work” of the Spirit at Pentecost, they were convinced that “holy”

laughter was *completely* authentic. They equated “holy” laughter with the biblical notion of joy. As far as they were concerned “holy” laughter was the “joy of the Lord.” Scriptural references to joy were cited; testimonies were given; songs were sung; and by the end of the program I felt like I had just watched a one hour info-mercial on “holy” laughter.

Then, several weeks later, there was a program about “holy” laughter on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. While preacher Rodney Howard-Browne was giving what appeared to be a serious message, people in the audience were laughing wildly for no apparent reason. But Howard-Browne seemed oblivious to the disruption and kept on preaching. Then when the laughter was at its height he began incorporating all that was happening into his sermon. He said that the “holy” laughter they were experiencing was a last days expression of God’s “Holy Spirit.” He too compared the “Spirit” that was manifesting to the Spirit at Pentecost. He reminded his audience how those gathered in the upper room had been viewed by others as being “drunk” on alcohol when in fact they were “drunk” in the Spirit.

Howard-Browne’s audience continued to laugh hilariously as he spoke of a present day “revival” and how “holy” laughter was ushering in this “revival.” At the end of the service Howard-Browne shuffled around the huge assembly hall, now breaking into long fits of laughter himself.

As he walked around, talking and laughing and speaking in tongues, he began to lay hands on people. After he said “be filled” and repeated the phrase “from the top of your head to the tips of your toes” people fell to the ground in hysterical laughter. As the program ended, the evangelist continued to weave his way amongst the fallen bodies, many of them still convulsed in laughter.

Also during this time I was sent a copy of a flyer saying that Charles and Frances Hunter, the authors of a new book entitled *Holy Laughter*, were coming to Portland, Maine. The flyer said, “God is filling the church with holy laughter! Come and receive a baptism of joy! YOU will never be the same! Don’t miss this unforgettable move of the Holy Spirit!” Another book on “holy” laughter entitled *Fresh Anointing: Another Great Awakening*, was also brought to my attention at this time. In it, author Mona Johnian describes the “holy” laughter “revival” that erupted in her Boston church after she and her husband attended a meeting led by Rodney Howard-Browne.

In the midst of this same two-month period there was yet *another* program on “holy” laughter. I was watching a locally televised church service and the guest preacher was Richard Roberts, the president of Oral Roberts University and son of Oral Roberts. His *whole* sermon was on “holy” laughter and how it had changed his life and ministry. He described how “revival” had come to Oral Roberts University. Roberts explained how he had canceled classes for two days so that his *four thousand students* could personally experience the “joy of the Lord” and receive the “gift” of “holy” laughter. I was not surprised to learn that the “revival” Roberts was describing had come through the person of Rodney Howard-Browne.

And then to round out my summer crash course on the subject of “holy” laughter, the August issue of *Charisma* magazine had Rodney Howard-Browne on its cover. He was clearly the man of the hour. The cover story on this by now wildly popular “Holy Ghost bartender” was entitled “Praise the Lord and Pass the New Wine.” The article was yet one more endorsement of Howard-Browne and “holy” laughter. And what I was starting to realize was that *all* of the “holy” laughter I had recently encountered—the TV programs, the books, the various “anointings” and “revivals” could all be traced back to him: Toronto Vineyard, San Francisco Vineyard, the Hunters, Mona Johnian, Richard Roberts, and all the rest. The *Charisma* article

described Rodney Howard-Browne as the “spiritual conduit” for “holy” laughter. But I wanted to know how Rodney Howard-Browne got *his* “anointing?”

The *Charisma* article stated that in South Africa, in the summer of 1979, Howard-Browne “spent hours praying for a deeper experience with God.” In the midst of his prayers he is quoted as having told God,

“EITHER YOU COME DOWN HERE AND TOUCH ME, OR I WILL COME UP THERE AND TOUCH YOU.”

*Charisma* said that suddenly in the midst of that prayer Howard-Browne’s “whole body felt like it was on fire. He began to laugh uncontrollably. Then he wept and began to speak in tongues.” In Howard-Browne’s book *The Touch of God*, *Charisma* quotes him as saying, “I was plugged into heaven’s electric supply, and since then my desire has been to go and plug other people in.”

And certainly one of the most outstanding characteristics of Howard-Browne’s “anointing” and the whole “laughing revival” is that it is so immediately transferable from person to person. Those “anointed” by Howard-Browne can now “anoint” others. And that is what’s happening. The “Spirit” that visited Howard-Browne has exponentially multiplied as it has been passed on from person to person around the world. A video advertised in that same August issue of *Charisma* documents the spread of Howard-Browne’s “holy” laughter. It is entitled *The Laugh that was Heard ’round the World*.

The “holy” laughter “revival” started by Howard-Browne is spreading like wildfire around the world. A recent conference sponsored by Toronto Vineyard drew 2300 pastors from countries as far away as Cambodia. They had all come to observe the “laughing revival” that was now being called “The Toronto Blessing.” Even skeptical pastors were getting “hit” with the “Spirit” and then taking that “Spirit” back to their churches and towns.

Howard-Browne’s “laughing revival” has now officially moved into the Christian mainstream with a recent endorsement from Pat Robertson on his popular 700 Club. On October 27, 1994 Robertson said this about holy laughter:

“...what this says to me is revival is taking place in the world in a mass wave...and we look to the coming of the Lord. I think this is a very encouraging sign in the middle of all this trouble and all these wars and all this confusion. God is saying I’m on the throne and I’m going to touch multiplied millions. It’s wonderful. I applaud it.”

But what does the Bible say about laughter? Last summer, after watching Rodney Howard-Browne on TBN, I consulted my concordance to see if there was any biblical precedent for “holy” laughter. Surprisingly, I found only 40 references to laughter in the Bible; 34 of them were in the Old Testament, while only 6 were in the New Testament. Of those 40 references 22 of them referred to scornful laughter, as in Nehemiah 2:19 when Nehemiah said, “they laughed us to scorn.” Of the 18 remaining references to laughter, seven of them referred exclusively to Abraham and Sarah’s initial disbelief and ultimate astonishment that God would

give them a child in their old age. Barely into my study on laughter I was already down to my last 11 references.

In Job 8:21 Bildad, one of Job's *false* comforters, wrongly advised Job that if he were in right standing with God he would be prosperous and full of laughter. The Psalmist in Psalm 126:2 recorded that when the captivity of Zion was over, "then was our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with singing." Proverbs 29:9 says, "if a wise man contendeth with a foolish man, whether he rage or laugh, there is no rest."

With only 8 remaining references I had seen nothing in the Bible up to this point that suggested anything even resembling "holy" laughter.

In Ecclesiastes 2:2 Solomon says, "I said of laughter, it is mad." Ecclesiastes 3:4 says, there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance." Ecclesiastes 7:3-4 says, "sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Ecclesiastes 7:6 says, "for as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of a fool: this also is vanity." Ecclesiastes 10:19 says that "a feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry."

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Interestingly the Bible's last three references to laughter—the only three references to authentic laughter in the New Testament—warn *against* laughter. These three references actually seemed to underline Solomon's contention in Ecclesiastes that "sorrow is better than laughter" and that now is a time *to weep* and *not* to laugh. In Luke 6:21 Jesus says, "blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh." In Luke 6:25 Jesus says, "woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep." James 4:9 tells us *not* to laugh but to "be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness."

I had searched the scriptures to find any biblical precedent for "holy" laughter and there was none. To my amazement, I had discovered that there were surprisingly few references in the Bible to any kind of laughter. Did this mean that God doesn't have a sense of humor or that people in the Bible never laughed? No. It just meant that laughter apparently was not something that God chose to emphasize very much. And certainly Jesus' last words on laughter—"woe unto you who laugh now!"—were not ones that would seem to give any encouragement to a "laughing revival."

The Lord says, "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). Here are some of my concerns about "holy" laughter and "the laughing revival."

**(1) There is no biblical precedent for "holy" laughter.** Laughter is rarely mentioned in the Bible. Yet, when it is, the Bible seems to make more of a case for holy sorrow than for "holy" laughter. Scripture supports Solomon's contention that "sorrow is better than laughter." It does not support the present "laughing revival."

**(2) Substituting the word joy for laughter is a non sequitur. It is inaccurate and misleading.** There is no scriptural authority for equating biblical references to joy with the

involuntary manifestations of “holy” laughter. Just because there are insufficient Bible texts to make the case for “holy” laughter, it does not follow that you can simply redefine the word laughter by substituting the word joy.

**(3) “Holy” laughter advocates rarely, if ever, discuss the need to “test the spirits.”** The Bible warns us that not every supernatural manifestation is necessarily from God. 1 John 4:1 says, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” Charles and Francis Hunter write in their book *Holy Laughter*, “Once you begin to walk in the supernatural you really have to be ready for anything and everything and never question the way God does it!” (p.65)

**(4) “Holy” laughter advocates rarely, if ever, talk about the Spirit’s express warning that in the latter times some people will be supernaturally seduced by deceptive evil spirits into following *them* and not the one true God.**

1 Timothy 4: warns, “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”

**(5) “Holy” laughter advocates rarely, if ever, talk about the Bible’s warnings of false prophets who come in the name of Jesus but bring with them “another spirit.”** 2 Corinthians 11:4 says, “For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.”

**(6) Many laughter advocates condescendingly discourage and even openly intimidate sincere Christians who question the “laughing revival.”** According to the August *Charisma* article, Rodney Howard-Browne “disparages” people who “try to apply theological tests” to what he does. The Hunters’ book *Holy Laughter* refers to skeptics as God’s “frozen chosen.” Mona Johnian writes, “skeptics, hesitators and procrastinators do not get anointed.” She warns “that any person or church that wavered could be eliminated.”

**(7) Rodney Howard-Browne’s prayer to God just prior to his “anointing” (“either you come down here and touch me or I’ll come up there and touch you”) was unscriptural.** Howard-Browne’s prayer was the essence “my will be done.” It was *not* “thy will be done,” as taught by Jesus in scripture. Why should we automatically assume that it was God who answered his prayer?

**(8) “Holy” laughter advocates, in talking about “signs and wonders,” rarely, if ever, mention the Bible’s many warnings about *deceptive* signs and wonders.** In Matthew 16:4 Jesus warns, “a wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.” In Matthew 24:24 Jesus says, “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” In 2 Thess. 2:9 the apostle Paul warns of the coming Antichrist, “even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders.”

**(9) “Holy” laughter advocates seem to lay hands on almost *everybody*. The Bible specifically warns against this.** The eighth chapter of Acts describes how the disciples would *not* lay hands on Simon, a baptized believer, even though he desperately wanted the gift of the Holy Ghost, because his heart was “not right in the sight of God.” 1 Timothy 5:22 warns us to “lay hands suddenly on no man.” Yet “holy” laughter is passed on from person to person without so much as a second thought.

**(10) “Holy laughter advocates blatantly disregard the biblical admonition that things be**

**done decently and in order.** 1 Corinthians 14:40 says, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” Mona Johnian in her book *Fresh Anointing* says, “decently and in order! We must do things decently and in order. The Bible itself commands it, cry those who are frightened by that which is beyond traditional order” (p. 35). She advises her readers to “break with tradition” (p.45).

**(11) The chaos and confusion that usually characterizes the “laughing revival: contradicts the Bible’s description of the Person of God.** 1 Corinthians 14:33 states, “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.”

**(12) Laughter advocates rarely if ever, discuss the well documented demonic deceptions that have manifested in past revivals.** To combat the deception that arose during the Welsh revival at the turn of this century authors Jessie Penn-Lewis and Evan Roberts wrote *War on the Saints: a disclosure of the deceptive strategies used by evil spirits against God’s people.* Both were very involved with the revival and were extremely concerned about the demonic manifestations that began to dominate their meetings. The forward to *War on the Saints* warns of “the grave dangers that beset the path of uninformed enthusiasm.”

**(13) A number of Christians have experienced the equivalent of “holy” laughter when they were in the New Age.** Indian Guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was affectionately known by his followers as the “divine drunkard” because he was reputed to have drunk so deeply from the well of the “Divine.” As a former follower of Rajneesh I met hundreds of Sannyasins who had flown to India “to drink” from “Bhagwan’s wine.” When followers were physically touched by Rajneesh, or even if they were merely in his presence, they would often experience feelings of great exhilaration and joy. Disciples of Swami Baba Muktananda would often manifest uncontrollable laughter after receiving Shaktipat (physical contact) from the guru.

**(14) The “laughing revival” could one day merge with what the New Age calls the coming day of “Planetary Pentecost.”** Barbara Marx Hubbard, (revered New Age leader and a 1984 Democratic nominee for the Vice Presidency of the United States), writes in her book, *Teachings from the Inner Christ*, how the human race will soon experience a day of “Planetary Pentecost.” Hubbard, claiming to be in contact with “Christ,” writes: “the Planetary Smile is another name for the Planetary Pentecost. When enough of us share a common thought of our oneness with God, Spirit will be poured out on all flesh paying attention” (p.79). In her book *The Revelation*, Hubbard says “Christ,” in describing the planetary smile, said:

*“an uncontrollable joy will ripple through the thinking layer of the earth. The co-creative systems, which are lying psychologically dormant in humanity will be activated. From within, all sensitive persons will feel the joy of the force, flooding their systems with love and attraction...as this joy flashes through the nervous systems of the most sensitive peoples on earth, it will create a psycho magnetic field of empathy, which will align the next wave of people in synchrony, everywhere on Earth. This massive, sudden empathic alignment will cause a shift in the consciousness of Earth” (p. 234-235).*

Writing in *Happy Birth Day Planet Earth*, Hubbard repeats what she heard from “Christ.” He said,

*“as the planetary smile ripples through the nervous systems of earth, and the instant of co-operation begins, and empathy floods the feelings of the whole body of Earth, separation is overcome, and I appear to all of you at once (p. 10-11).*

The controversy over “holy” laughter is already splitting congregations and causing deep divisions in the body of Christ. And while many people have already taken sides, there are many more who are still trying to figure out just what is going on. Is this really a move of God, or is this the kind of deception the Bible warns about in Matthew 24, 1 Timothy 4:1, and in the second chapter of Thessalonians?

Unity is indeed the heartfelt desire of every sincere Christian (Psalm 133:1). But the Bible warns of massive deception that will come at the end and in Christ’s name. Before the Church—in the name of unity—free falls into a worldwide “laughing revival,” we had better be sure what it is we are uniting with.

In reflecting on “holy” laughter during these very troubled times, I recalled a music special I had seen on television a number of years ago. In the midst of an otherwise polite Hollywood type crowd, a male vocalist sang straight faced and sober into the teeth of their celebration. His words were electric and piercing, and they seemed to hang in the air. He sang, “you’re laughing now, but you should be praying. You’re in the midnight hour of your life.”

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## **Sidebar:**

### **Some Examples of Holy Laughter in Other Religions**

**1) Kundalini Energy** is typically described as a powerful energy source lying dormant in the form of a coiled serpent at the base of the human spine. When freed it reputedly has the capacity to effect great physical and spiritual healings. Christina and Stanislov Grof, New Age authors of the book *The Stormy Search for the Self*, describe how the awakening of Kundalini energy can be triggered by an advanced spiritual teacher or guru. And how the awakening can bring up memories of past psychological and physical traumas. The Grofs state that:

*“individuals involved in this process might find it difficult to control their behavior; during powerful rushes of Kundalini energy, they often emit various involuntary sounds, and their bodies move in strange and unexpected patterns. Among the most common manifestations . . . are unmotivated and unnatural laughter or crying, talking in tongues . . . and imitating a variety of animal sounds and movements” (p. 78-79).*

The Grofs state that:

*“careful study of the manifestations of Kundalini awakening confirm that this process, although sometimes very intense and shattering, is essentially healing.”*

**Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh**, the former Oregon guru tells one of his followers in his book, *Dance Your Way To God*,

*“just be joyful . . . God is not serious . . . this world cannot fit with a theological god . . . so let this be your constant reminder – that you have to dance your way to God, to laugh your way to God” (p. 229).*

Often referred to as being “drunk on the divine,” Rajneesh encouraged his followers to come and “drink” from him. Bhagwan’s spiritual “wine” was often passed along with a single touch to the head. Many of his Sannyasins would fall to the floor in ecstasy after their encounters with Rajneesh.

**Ramakrishna**, an Indian saint, “daily went into ‘samahdi,’ a trance in which one involuntarily falls down unconscious and enters a rapturous state of super-conscious bliss (ananda), complete with beautiful visions and often involving astral projection. These states could last anywhere from a few minutes to several days and were often accompanied by uncontrollable laughter or weeping. He could send others into this state with a single touch to the head or chest” (unpublished article by John Rice on file at SCP).

**Swami Baba Muktanada** would transfer what was called “guru’s grace” to his followers through Shaktipat (physical touch). This “grace” triggered the gradual awakening of the Kundalini which in turn produced various physical and emotional manifestations. Manifestations included uncontrollable laughing, roaring, barking, hissing, crying, shaking, etc. Some devotees became mute or unconscious. Many felt themselves being infused with feelings of great joy and peace and love. At other times the “fire” of Kundalini was so overpowering they would find themselves involuntarily hyperventilating to cool themselves down (Per former Muktananda follower Joy Smith).

**2) African Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari.** The Grofs, in their book *The Stormy Search For The Self*, also cite an interesting parallel between the Kundalini awakening and the trance dance of the African Kung bushmen. During rituals the bushmen “enter a profound altered state of consciousness associated with the release of powerful emotions such as anger, anxiety, and fear. They are often unable to maintain an upright position and are overcome by violent shaking. Following these dramatic experiences, they typically enter a state of ecstatic rapture. According to the bushmen tradition, the dance releases from the base of the spine a cosmic healing force called *ntum* or ‘medicine.’ This is then passed by direct physical contact from one person to another.”

**3) Qigong** (ancient Chinese practice) Yan Xin, a Chinese Qigong master known to most of the over one billion people in China, gave a talk in San Francisco in 1991. Seventeen hundred devotees, most of them Chinese, showed up at the Masonic auditorium to listen to Yan. The

*San Francisco Chronicle* on 5/16/91 reported that “minutes into his talk, several began experiencing what Yan Xin calls spontaneous movements.” The *Chronicle* reporter said that “before long, the scene resembled a Pentecostal prayer meeting with many people waving their arms and making unintelligible sounds.” Yan told his audience, “Those who are sensitive might start having some strong physical sensations – or start laughing or crying. Don’t worry. This is quite normal.” The article said that “since 1985, when a Qigong revival started sweeping China, 50 to 60 million Chinese have gone to see Yan.”

**4) Subud.** According to *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* by J. Gordon Melton, the central element of the Subud faith is the practice of “latihan.” Latihan is the way one surrenders to the power of God. It is a group process. The Encyclopedia says, “the latihan proper is a time of moving the consciousness beyond mind and desire and allowing the power to enter and do its work. . . . often accompanying the spontaneous period are various body movements and vocal manifestations – cries, moans, laughter and singing. These occur in the voluntary surrender of the self to the power. During this time, people report sensations of love and freedom and often, healings. All reach a higher level of consciousness.”

[This sidebar was written with the assistance of Danny Aguirre].

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Booklet tract examining the Holy Laughter Movement. Is this a true work of the Holy Spirit or something else? Product details. Format: Kindle Edition. A book for every Christian, whether their church supports the 'holy laughter' phenomenon or not. It raises the questions that we have been advised to raise, in scripture, so we can decide for ourselves to accept or to avoid and warn about this 'revival'. I am glad to have found the 'move of God' explored with this clarity. There is, sadly, a lot of confusion in the church about it. 2 Thessalonians 2:11-13 - For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false - Behold, the man who would not make God his refuge, But trusted in the abundance of his riches And was strong in his evil desire. Job 12:16. Verse Concepts. God Is Strong Deception Strength Of God. Deceiving God Wisdom. With Him are strength and sound wisdom, The misled and the misleader belong to Him. 1 Timothy 4:1. Question: "What is holy laughter?". Answer: The term "holy laughter" was coined to describe a phenomenon during which a person laughs uncontrollably, presumably as a result of being filled with the Holy Spirit's joy. It is characterized by peals of uncontrollable laughter, sometimes accompanied by swooning or falling down to the floor. Firsthand accounts from those who have had this experience vary somewhat, but all seem to believe it to be a sign of a "blessing" or "anointing" of the Holy Spirit. The experience of holy laughter is, by nature, a subjecti