God, the one and true God of Jews and Christians, could easily have become the God of laughter. For the New Israel which is the Church he remains the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. And Isaac means ‘laughter’. Or so the rabbis and the Fathers of the Church said.

That name was imposed on Isaac by God during the establishment of the Covenant, one of the key moments in religious history. Pronounced ‘Isha-ak’, it was thought to carry its etymology with it, as clearly as, by the shores of Gitche Gurnee, the ‘haha’ of Minnehaha meant Laughing Water.

When God chose the name Isaac and imposed it on a child yet to be conceived, he also changed two existing names. Up till then Abram was the name of the man who was to be Isaac’s father; God changed it to Abraham. The constituent parts of the new name declare that Abraham will become the father of a multitude of nations. To believe such a promise required a great act of faith on Abraham’s part: he was a childless old man of ninety-nine. The same was asked of Sarai his wife. God changed her name as well: Sarai became Sarah. Her new name means ‘princess’, a fitting name for the wife who was to enable Abraham’s seed to fructify so richly. Divinely imposed names carried deep religious significance in biblical times.

They still did in the Renaissance. The Scriptures were then rediscovered, with their force renewed, in Hebrew and in Greek. To their teachings and assumptions about laughter and proper names were added those of Plato, newly available in Greek and in Latin. Especially
important for Christian ideas about laughter is Plato’s dialogue the *Philebus*. Centrally important for the half-hidden deeper meanings to be discovered in proper names is his dialogue the *Cratylus*. Plato gave his sanction to the doctrine that any noun, but especially personal names and divine names, is — when properly imposed — full of prophetic meaning. Such doctrines confirmed the practices of the Old Testament.

But although Isaac means ‘laughter’, the kind of laughter implied is by no means certain. There are three explanations for the imposing of such a laughter-filled name upon Isaac. All three accounts are in Genesis, and they overlap. On two occasions the laughter aroused by God’s promise and its fulfilment is normally taken as a sign of joy and happiness. The third is very different. On that occasion the laughter is sceptical and scoffing. As such it merited an awesome rebuke in the name of God.

Happy laughter dominates only part of the time: Abraham realized that he would be a hundred years old by the time that Isaac was born — if God’s promise was to be believed. And it was to be believed. His laughter was full of happy wonder: Sarah was already ninety! Indeed, both Abraham and Sarah had every reason to be happy, provided they fully trusted in the explicit promises of God. The aged, shrivelled Sarah was to become ‘a mother of nations’, ‘kings and peoples shall be of her’.

On being told of this future wondrous conception and birth, Abraham fell on his face; and he laughed. By falling on his face, he acknowledged the almighty power of God; his laughter was normally taken to be not mocking or sceptical but joyful and trusting:

‘Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old! and shall Sarah that is ninety years old, give birth!’

God, acknowledging that good laughter, said:

‘Sarah thy wife shall bear a son; and thou shalt call his name *Isha’ak*.’

The same happy laughter is heard on Sarah’s lips once Isaac is born:

'God hath made me to laugh; everyone that heareth shall laugh with me.' And she said, 'Who would have said unto Abraham that Sarah would give children suck, for I have borne him a son in his old age?'  

That happy laughter of Abraham and Sarah was certainly enough to explain Isaac's laughter-filled name. But embedded between the two joyful accounts is another. Three more-or-less independent tales, told to provide an explanation of the name of Isaac, have been merged together into one. In this other case the promise that Sarah would conceive came indeed from God, but Sarah lacked faith. She did not believe the divine promise; she did not trust in God.

In this account God's promise was delivered by one of three men. They were in fact angels, messengers from God. Sarah, lurking inside the tent, overheard what was promised to Abraham. The sexual implications moved her to scoff: she and her husband were 'old and stricken with age'; it had 'ceased to be with her after the manner of women'. Was she going to lie with her husband again - and fruitfully?

And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I am waxed old, shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also?' And the Lord said unto Abraham, 'Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I who am old of a surety bear a child?” Is anything too hard for the Lord?' [ ... ]

And Sarah denied, saying, 'I laughed not.' For she was afraid. And he said, 'Nay, but thou didst laugh.'

Because of that awesome rebuke, Isaac's name recalled for many not Sarah's happy laughter but her faithless scoffing. Exceptionally, St Jerome even read that scoffing back into the laughter of Abraham. 3 Especially perhaps when in none-too-serious a mood, writers on laughter sometimes gave prominence to the happy trusting laughter of Sarah; serious theologians - who were frequently distrustful of

3. On Genesis, 18:9-15, St Jerome, despite his vast authority, was not widely followed in this. The points are dealt with in, for example, John Eck's treatise, De Praedestinatione, Augsburg, 1514, sig. R4vo f. If Abraham's laughter had been sceptical like Sarah's, God would have reprimanded him too. Abraham's laughter was that of astonishment and exultation; 'not doubting but full of wonder, he said, So you really think a child will be born to a centenarian!'
women – fixed rather on the disbelieving laughter for which Sarah had been divinely condemned.

Amongst those who directly contributed to an emphasis on Sarah’s sceptical laughter was St Luke. He relates in chapter two of his Gospel how the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was to conceive and bear a son. Mary did not laugh outright, but she replied in a sceptical form of words which was for Erasmus typical of Old Testament Jewry. What she replied was, ‘How can this be?’ She had not yet lain with any man. 4

But then Mary was told by Gabriel that her cousin Elisabeth had conceived in her old age, and was further reminded – with an echo of God’s assurance to Abraham – that ‘with God nothing is ever impossible’. Nothing, that is, ‘is too hard for the Lord’. Mary thereupon believed; she placed her trust unreservedly in God’s promise and sang Magnificat.

Mary, who did not laugh in circumstances akin to those in which Sarah did, became the supreme example of true faith, in ready contrast to the sceptically laughing Sarah.

Sarah’s good happy laughter could, like Abraham’s, be used to justify an explosion of joy. Yet, because of the rebuke in the third account, she could also be cited as proof that certain kinds of laughter aroused God’s deep displeasure.

When reading the Renaissance authors who spread their religious ideas by laughter rather than by thumbscrew and stake, we find that they do not limit themselves to the few places in Scripture where laughter is presented as desirable and good. Both theology and their own sense of fun lead them to find laughter from one end of the Bible to the other. But as moralists they were guided by the kind of laughter which they found mentioned with approval there. Some of that laughter is explicit; in other cases it was uncovered by skilful exegesis.

4. In the Latin of the Vulgate, Quomodo . . . ? (‘How can this be?’). For Erasmus, that and the many episodes where Quomodo . . . ? is found in the Old Testament reveal a centuries-old tradition of incredulity, in which, at that moment, Mary shared with so many of her own people. He gathers quite an impressive list of cases where Quomodo appears. (See LB, 5, 379D, ff.)
INTRODUCTION

God gave divine sanction to such laughter, but perhaps to no other. Many in positions of power and authority never accepted laughter as a vehicle for Christian joy, Christian preaching, or the propagation of Christian truth. Faced with an Erasmus or a Rabelais they sought to censor, to suppress, to burn book or author. Some never understood what such laughter implied. Some even amongst the censors understood, and laughed despite themselves; others understood, and snarled.