



# **Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life**

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“*Between Heaven and Mirth* will make any reader smile. . . . Father Martin reminds us that happiness is the good God’s own goal for us.” —Timothy M. Dolan, Archbishop of New York  
From *The Colbert Report*’s “official chaplain” James Martin, SJ, author of the *New York Times* bestselling *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, comes a revolutionary look at how joy, humor, and laughter can change our lives and save our spirits. A Jesuit priest with a busy media ministry, Martin understands the intersections between spirituality and daily life. In *Between Heaven and Mirth*, he uses scriptural passages, the lives of the saints, the spiritual teachings of other traditions, and his own personal reflections to show us why joy is the inevitable result of faith, because a healthy spirituality and a healthy sense of humor go hand-in-hand with God's great plan for humankind.

## Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life Details

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# **From Reader Review Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life for online ebook**

## **Korri says**

Jesuit priest James Martin argues that if joy, humor and laughter seem antithetical to spirituality and a relationship with God, you're doing it wrong.

Joy, humor and laughter serve many purposes. They create a sense of community and of gratitude. Our humor and laughter are celebrations of our humanity, itself a gift from God. Learning to laugh at ourselves keeps us from becoming too proud and taking ourselves too seriously. Martin points to scholarly and religious studies about the role of humor in the Torah and the Bible (Sarah named her son Isaac, 'he laughs', because of her joy; Jonah farcial behavior and petulance raise questions about listening to God's voice; and the itinerant preacher Jesus spoke to crowds in parables that are full of exaggeration and hyperbole to make his point with humor).

There are many repetitious and overlapping points (Martin lays the blame for that on St. Ignatius) and of all religious beliefs Christianity and Judaism get the most analysis, but Martin's book is a welcome reminder of the joy of life and faith.

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## **Jennifer says**

If Stephen Colbert says that James Martin is ok, then James Martin is ok! :)

Seriously, tho - a book about finding and keeping joy in your heart, whether you are a Catholic or not - something I know I needed to hear (read) and something that I think more of us need to consider. Joy is different than happiness and is something that we can have with us at all times - which Martin shows by personal stories and accumulated wisdom. I was glad to see how kindness figures into joy as I think kindness is so important and so overlooked. The story that stuck with me the most is the one of white paint - all of the good things in our life can be considered a can of white paint, but all we can see is the one drop of red paint, the bad or unhappy things, in the midst of all that white - andd soon everything looks red. I suppose that sounds overly simple but I think it says a lot. A very good book for anyone wishing for more joy and happiness in their life. Very recommended! (the book itself is well-written and humourous, with a few laugh out loud parts, especially in the footnotes!)

\*"What ifs" that cause us to worry about the future are usually a dead end in the spiritual life. So are "if onlys", when they prompt us to fret about the past.\*

\*Joy, humor and laughter should be part of everyone's spiritual life. They are gifts from God and help us enjoy creation. "A good laugh is a sign of love," said Karl Rahner. "It may be said to give us a glimpse of, or a first lesson in, the love that God bears for every one of us.\*"

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## Stephanie says

This is a very uplifting book on the importance of finding the joy in Catholicism (and faith in general). Fr. Martin is a Jesuit priest who spent time researching the Bible and talking with scholars about the way humor and faith come together. If you have ever seen Fr. Martin on The Colbert Report you know he has a great sense of humor and handles the complexity of Catholicism with grace and wit.

I thought the book was interesting and filled with humor and insight. Catholics generally have the whole "we love a good party" thing down (beer at KoC events! at the Church!), but there is certainly something to be said about the seriousness of faith. Fr. Martin does a good job pointing out that faith doesn't have to be serious all of the time. We can laugh and make fun of ourselves and be joyful without fear of judgment from God.

The book gets a little long winded and dry in some parts, but overall it is a good read. Fr. Martin has a conversational writing style which makes the book feel laid back even though there are a lot of Biblical and scholarly references throughout it. It isn't preachy or condescending. Clearly Fr. Martin went to great lengths to make it easy for any Christian to understand. While there are more references to Catholicism than any other religious denomination (obviously) he talks regularly about conversations with pastors and church leaders from religions across the globe.

It was a refreshing read, and I'm glad I read it before we get into the Advent season. I recommend it for anyone who wants to read a lighthearted but thorough book on faith.

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## Edward says

Martin, a Jesuit author best known for his *THE JESUIT GUIDE TO (ALMOST) EVERYTHING*, emphasizes in this later book that he wants to counterbalance an too-often overly serious approach to religion, especially Christianity. This austerity stems from two reasons, the first being the idea that God is a judge who will deal harshly with our sins, and the second an emphasis upon the suffering Christ, rather than the triumphal Christ. The topic of his book, Martin writes in his introduction is the place of lightheartedness in religion. He's not advocating that religion should be all lightheartedness; sorrow and sadness also have their place, but that there should be a balance between the two. Too often, the emphasis is on sorrow – for example, how often does one see religious artwork where the individuals depicted are smiling happily instead of looking serious, or worse, staring gloomily?

Lightheartedness is made up of joy, humor, and laughter. Joy is a form of delight, of appreciating the moments that make life worth living, and there are many, even for people who suffer hardships in life. Humor is a matter of self-deprecation, of not taking oneself too seriously, but not going to the excess of morbid inferiority either. It often takes the form of jokes, at one's own expense, never cruelty, though, as in the form of name-calling and mockery. At its best, it builds community and togetherness, healthy relationships by pointing toward a "future of joy and hope." Laughter is a spontaneous upwelling of good feeling. The three are overlapping and sometimes not easily distinguishable.

The book is not principally a theoretical one, but one that proposes ideas buttressed by Martin's experiences, along with that of friends, many of whom are of different faiths, and other authors. His rationale is that stories from experience communicate truth in ways that more serious explanations cannot. An interesting

example is the life of Christ which he claims is full of humor, some of it dependent upon cultural norms that we no longer “get” and some of it downplayed in translations. One saying struck me as possibly funny, “don’t hide your lamp under a basket . . .” Think about it – why would anyone ever do that, unless they were incredibly stupid? That might strike a listener as absurd advice, but the point is that he would apply it to himself and his own actions. An act of self-deprecation.

The heart of Martin’s message is found in one line from Paul’s Letter to the Thessalonians.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. . .” What’s important about this is the difference, is that there is a “religious” dimension to the advice. A secularist can also find happiness in life, but Paul seems to be attempting to give a dimension to life that goes beyond the self. Heaven is ordinarily depicted as an attribute of the afterlife, a pretty literal conception, but it seems to me that heaven could just as well be a symbol that is really about life on earth as a “taste” of joy, humor, and laughter. It reminds us that this reality is always there as a possibility, balancing itself against “hell”, the dark side of life, full of hardship, suffering, and sorrow.

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### **Rvincent324 says**

Between Heaven and Mirth is a book about the role of joy, humor and laughter in our spiritual life. It is not actually a humorous book, although it has its moments in some of the examples the author provides. Fr. Martin, a Jesuit priest and frequent commentator in the media on all things spiritual, particularly Catholic, clearly feels that in general our spiritual lives, and our churches, don't embrace the role of humor enough. There's probably something to that thesis. I particularly agree with his position on joy. You could hardly argue that Christians shouldn't be joyful. If we had only one emotion as Christians one could argue that emotion should be joy.

As an example of joy in a well known Catholic I would hold up Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York. Just watching him for a few minutes makes you want to get to know him better and understand the source of his joyful countenance. If we could all live with that sort of observable joy in our hearts I suspect our churches would be full of our acquaintances trying to figure out "what's going on".

I recommend Between Heaven and Mirth as a good summer read. Not too heavy but not a waste of time either. A book that makes you smile, makes you think a bit about yourself, and makes you think about how we can better evangelize through our behavior. It reminds me of the quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi- Preach always, use words if necessary.

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### **Julie Davis says**

I can't tell you how many times I've had people ask me, "How can you be a Happy Catholic?" They then go on to cite the problems currently in the Church, how hard life is in general, and so on and so forth.

My answer is that happy does not mean cheerful. I'm not talking about a Pollyanna-ish insistence on always

seeing the glass half full. I'm talking about a deep, underlying joy that comes from the peace of mind in knowing Jesus really has overcome the world, really is real, really does love me personally. Except in times of deep trouble or sorrow, when no one in their right mind would be able to say that they are happy, I have happiness as a foundation of my days. I must add that even in those times of trouble there is a peace lurking in the background reminding me that "all manner of things shall be well."

I suppose that I am asked that because even the best of us tend to think that faith and religion aren't real unless they are sober, serious, and definitely *not* amusing, humorous, or joyful. This never made sense to me because I have had too many times when God makes his point to me using a "virtual" nudge in the ribs and a chuckle. There is that stunning moment when I realize what I've gotten very wrong and then that hilarious moment when I realize just how *ridiculously* wrong I am ... and somehow, you know, I wind up howling with laughter and things just never seem too bad after that.

James Martin has written a book all about that very thing. He writes compellingly that holy people are joyful people, providing numerous examples of the people, their joy, and their levity ... up to and including Jesus. The main premise is that joy, humor, and laughter help us live more spiritual lives, relate to others better, and connect with God more easily.

Martin's examination of scripture and Jesus' humor will be especially valuable to those who hesitate to think that humor and playfulness have a place in faith. His case studies in scriptural joy look at a psalm, the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, and 1 Thessalonians. It gives us a fresh look at the familiar passages and perspective on the way the hearers would have understood it when the scripture was new.

I also really appreciated the chapter where Martin addressed the problem of living joyfully when life is difficult. He discusses the fact that joy doesn't mean one is happy all the time, how to find joy during times of pain, what to do if you are not a funny person, and what to do when working or living in a joyless environment. This section is almost a primer on how to look at our lives with both gravity and lightheartedness. It is one that more people than Christians would benefit from.

Naturally in a book of this sort, anecdotes and jokes are larded throughout the text. They always are illustrations of the point that Martin is making and yet, in themselves, contribute to helping look at things just a touch less seriously or from a different point of view. My favorites were the ones that came from real life, as those are the sort that are most genuinely funny. Those are often the sort that help us in painful times, as Martin points out.

Then she recounted the story of two friends whose mutual friend had died. "They missed her terribly," said [Margaret] Silf. "They planted what they thought were daffodil bulbs on her grave and grieved all winter. In the spring they returned to the grave to pay their respects and discovered a wonderful crop of ... onions! They laughed until they cried--and they are convinced their friend was right in there laughing with them.

There were a few places where Martin was going so fast that he skimmed on providing all the information we needed for the book to be as solid as it could. The primary place I noticed this, and the one that kept bothering me, was his lack of distinction when he compared Zachariah's doubt at the promise of a son after many years of childlessness (who would become John the Baptist) and Mary's reasonable, straight-forward question about how she could become pregnant if she'd never "known" a man. Zachariah, the experienced priest who should have known better than to doubt, is struck mute by the angel. The simple question of the young girl, Mary, is answered. Martin's joke in the footnote that Gabriel is gentler with women was amusing but completely inaccurate and that made me a bit wary of other such confident assertions about Scripture when they came up.

Happily, there are not many instances of those problematic points. Those aside, this book is informative, engaging, and makes a solid argument for the case that joy and humor are integral parts of being human and the spiritual life. Certainly this book is much needed to help lighten the mood of those who believe that only serious attitudes will gain us the kingdom of Heaven. It most definitely is appreciated by those of us who occasionally must defend our faith because of our joy.

Highly recommended.

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## **7jane says**

Joy, humor, and laughter - do those feelings belong to the religion? Often the religious are presented as having more neutral or more negative feelings, but yes! Yes, these feelings belong to the religion, any religion really (the author mentions Jewish and Islamic positivity within).

It's in the Bible texts, among other feelings - in the Psalms, in the story of Abraham, when Mary visits Elizabeth, in the earliest of St Paul's letters. It is good humor, not the type that puts others down, sometimes unintentionally. There are examples of jokes (long and short) here, and good quotes. I may not have the same sort of humor as the author, and sometimes my confidence still needs some working - the reason why this is more 3.5 stars than 4 for me.

(JHL now will become my short form for the three positive feelings of the book...)

Some subjects in this book: on seriousness and why joy is so misunderstood and underrated; how one can get more of JHL in one's life; how religious people have used it (incl. saints); why it seems lacking in NT (the humor of Jesus' time: we don't 'get it' the same way, how writers needed to emphasise more Jesus' role as a 'wisdom teacher' to the Greeks, and how his suffering had to be explained instead of showing the positives); 11 ½ reasons for JHL; need for humor in the community of believers + need for humor in one's spiritual life; questions about challenges of being joyful and what to do; and of how to put the JHL into one's prayers.

This is a good book for cultivating these three feelings in one's life, and perhaps seeing some Bible parts in a more funny, positive light. I may not be a person to show much great-laughter, but I do like to smile, and this is inspiring me to accept JHL more in my life.

Joy brings us closer to God, the source of joy - and there's still the joy of Heaven to come.

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## **Anna says**

With peaceful insight that is hard to find in a goal-oriented life, *Between Heaven and Mirth* is like a self-help book that does not teach you how to get ahead but rather shows how you already are ahead. Everything, Fr. Martin says, is worth an inner joy. His message has left me feeling relieved, breathing easier, as I stop "should-ing all over myself" (one of his many jokes). At the same time, he gives a balanced approach to happiness, addressing the truth and power of sorrow; he guides the reader to embrace sorrow when appropriate without letting it dim an everlasting, inner joy. At times his advice can be challenging to follow, but he is very helpful by going slowly and repeating his main thoughts often. It is a light read, drawing from many dimensions of life for support (the Bible, personal anecdotes, scientific facts about biological and cognitive processes) in a way that is easy to understand. Through his patient and encouraging method of

presentation, his wisdom eased into my way of life almost instantly, has left me pondering joy long after finishing his book, and will continue to guide me for a joyful lifetime to come.

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### **K.D. Absolutely says**

I like books that move me or change my existing perspective on things. After all, if not for entertainment, why read? That's the reason why I *really* liked this book by James Martin, a Jesuit priest. In my mind, I can now picture laughing Jesus, Mary and other biblical characters and even saints. Prior to this book, I could hardly imagine them smiling because that's just the way they are normally depicted on pictures, photos or statues: serious, glum-looking definitely not smiling.

*I used to see paintings like this before but I used to think that they are preposterous. James Martin changed my mind. There are indeed many passages in the Bible that are supposed to be funny. But when we were taught about them when we were kids, we were made to believe that they were to be taken seriously. For example, how could a mustard seed turn into a big shady tree that can serve as a home for birds?*

James Martin was quick to add, however, that being happy is synonymous with being happy does not necessarily mean being always cheerful. You are still not expected to always be smiling when you are inside the church or a religious event. Or call attention to yourself by trying to be funny. When your joy is from your inside, it will radiate to your face, it will give it a holy glow. Look at really religious people like St. Pope John Paul II or Mother Theresa. Even if they were old, wrinkled or gray or no hair, they still look fresh and young.

Also, as part of its conclusion, this book says that being joyful and happy on earth while being good children of God, can be a practice for our life after death. He pictures heaven as a place where people are always happy, smiling, joking and joyfully praying all the time. So, if you are sad and grumpy on earth, you will have a hard time adjusting yourself to the situation in heaven.

That's why you should start laughing and smiling more now. Why not smile while reading or while writing your a review here on Goodreads? Or even while reading this review of mine? I am, right here, right now. :)

Thank you to my friend, Jesus Mary Hao for lending me this life-changing book.

You're the man, brother!

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### **Skylar Burris says**

Written by a Jesuit priest, *Between Heaven and Mirth* makes the case that mirth and all its companions—joy, fun, humor, laughter, joking—are an essential part of the spiritual life. Within his own tradition, he gives examples from Scripture, the lives of the saints, and the lives of popes, but he also draws on arguments and stories from people of other traditions, including Protestantism, Buddhism, Sufism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. I often found his examples of humor from Scripture to be a stretch. I felt he repeatedly classified as “funny” that which is merely ironic, hyperbolic, or bizarre, but I certainly don’t disagree with his central premise, and it is good for an author to remind readers that the Christian life is meant to be a life of joy. *Between Heaven and Mirth* was a fairly easy read and frequently entertaining (and yes, as one should expect,



humorous) in its anecdotes. It's not heavy or scholarly. There is much more quotation than original material, and it's rather like reading a compendium of religious (primarily Christian) jokes, with some commentary and spiritual advice and exercises thrown in.

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### **Erin Brenner says**

What a wonderful book to read during Lent! It made me think a lot about how to approach faith and how I like a positive approach better *and that's OK*. Reading it with a group helped underscore some of the most important points.

I'm now looking for another Martin book to read during Easter.

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### **Corey Wozniak says**

I sped-read this to prepare for a sermon I'm writing on joy and humor in the gospel--especially joy/humor in the context of the Mormon exodus West.

Thank the LORD for men like Father James Martin. We need more Holy Fools like him in the world.

*Can you allow yourself to think that the wonderful or funny or unexpected things that surprise you are signs of God being playful with you?*

*Think about this in a slightly different way. Can you imagine God not simply loving you, but, as the British theologian James Alison often asks his readers to imagine, liking you? We've heard the phrase "God loves you" so often that it becomes a platitude—like the wallpaper that we cease to notice one it's plastered in our room. We think, "Well, of course God loves me. That's just what God does." But thinking about God liking us is quite different. That word has a different energy around it—surprising, lighthearted, personal.*

*Here's another question: How do you show that you like a friend? Maybe you tell your friend outright. Or maybe you do something generous for him or her. But you also may be playful with your friend. So can you let the funny things that happen to you not just as signs of God's love, but God's like?*

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### **Brian says**

I had seen the Rev. Martin on several episodes of "The Colbert Report" and a few years back, I saw him promoting this book and was intrigued. Several priests in my life have had an incredible sense of humor--some did not. But I don't think it is any big secret that the religious leaders in our lives that we have a love and connection with are those with great senses of humor.

The Rev. Martin seeks to tell us that faith and a strong spiritual life should not be such a serious and dour thing. Sure there are dark moments when one feels a closeness to God, but there are those moments of joy when you are also with God. In fact it is joy and humor and mirth that should be at the heart of a strong spiritual life. Do not be afraid to laugh. As long as the humor and laughter is not at the expense of someone

else or an attempt to humiliate.

While the Rev. Martin plays pretty close to what he knows--that is the Catholic faith, and particular the Jesuit order that he is a part of--he does have many examples of humor found in the writings of Martin Luther, as well as within the Torah, and Islam. You most definitely will find yourself wanting to memorize many of the side-jokes he peppers within it.

I gave this book to my wife as a Christmas present, because she is no doubt one of the happiest and joyful people I know. She is also one of the most faith-filled persons I have ever met. There is no doubt in my mind that this is not a coincidence. This book helped me to see many of the reasons why.

Not for everyone, I know. I would recommend it for people looking for something light-hearted read, but also those that like to read about religions and faith. Can be very enlightening while your chuckling through it.

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### **Stephen says**

Enjoyable, with some good insight into the role of humor and laughter in the spiritual life.

My only criticisms are that Fr. Martin set up the book as applicable to all faith traditions, and while he does touch on other faiths (primarily Judaism, with a bit of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam thrown in) the book really approaches the topic from a Christian perspective, and specifically Roman Catholicism (though there are number of examples from various Protestant traditions). Now, I'm fine with the RC perspective, and its perhaps not surprising given that the author is a Jesuit, but it meant that sometimes some of the examples felt forced, or put there simply to broaden the potential sales. I think his argument could have been a lot tighter (and the book shorter) if he just stuck to the Christian/Catholic perspective.

My second, and more serious, criticism is related: how the book drags in the middle! The first couple of chapters are very good, as are the last couple. However, beginning with his chapter on 11 1/2 things to remember the book slows waaaay down. It was a slog to get through these middle chapters, and by the time things picked up again much of the fun had gone out of reading the book--even though, as I say, the last few chapters were quite good.

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### **Jason says**

Ultimately, this is very a readable book penned by what seems to be a very affable guy. It does, however, leave some elements to be desired when considering its subtitle. Although he manages to not offend (and at small intervals give praise to) other religions, this Jesuit simply does not have the credentials to claim this book's approach is about all spiritual life versus a Christian one. Even his attempts at placing 'joy, humor, & laughter' at 'the heart' of Catholicism are dubious at best, especially when considering scripture.

The position that modern worshippers cannot see the humor, because they simply don't get the jokes (i.e. they were written for people, literally, 2000 years ago) is a rather shaky attempt at contradicting all the smiting, women are lesser beings, and kill you kid because "I told you so" bits. An attempt to define any type of comedy could pose this argument in its defense. However, a quarter of the world is not basing its moral

codes, political positions, and gender equality issues on the dick and fart jokes made by an English baby and his talking dog on 'Family Guy'.

This issue notwithstanding, there are some very refreshing and salient points made by Martin, with these being some of my favorites:

-Humility can lead to happiness. "Simply because you go to Mass every Sunday, donate a tenth of your salary to the church, are an elder in your congregation, or always attend the Shabbat (Sabbath) services at your synagogue does not mean that you are, ipso facto, holier than everyone else." (pg. 91-92)

-Not all efforts need to accomplish something. "...it [is] okay for [you] to be a "human being" from time to time instead of just a "human doing"." (pg. 117)

-MY version is not necessarily THE version. "Humbling humor also reminds us that no one religious group has all the answers...God is bigger than any religion and can upend our human and limited expectations." (pg. 161-162)

There is some sage advice offered by Martin that would be best applied to seek happiness for the sake of happiness and not to have the "poverty of spirit" to realize you are of lesser worth than God. If I am to be so bold as to suggest an editorial thought, changing the word 'Are' to the words 'Should Be' (i.e. Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Should Be at the Heart of the Spiritual Life) would be a more apt representation of the thoughts within. But, nevertheless, what do I know? I'm about to watch a talking dog tell a double entendre poop joke to a baby.

Bless you.

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