Humour and Religion

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Introduction
Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck

At the beginning of the third millennium, once again, religion became an extremely important topic in societal debates. Unfortunately, the disintegrating aspects of religion are emphasized. Mockery with religious symbols and highly sensitive reactions to ironic laughter are newspaper headlines. Happily enough, there are also more constructive aspects to the relation between humour and religion. In many cases, humour is seen as a pathway to spiritual wisdom.

From an internal perspective, religions always contain (implicit) references to the finitude and relativity of the human condition. In that sense, humour and spirituality fit well together. Humour which is not spiritual is of no significance to religion. What is the meaning of humour in different religions? Did it evolve historically? How does it function? How is humour related to the realization of spiritual goals?

From an external perspective, academics study the way humour interacts with the laughter that resounds in society at large. How does a religion respond to sarcasm and irony? Are there limits to mockery and making fun of believers? Does humour have a pacifying effect when societal tensions run high or does it rather intensify the sensitivities and is humour consequently a dangerous toy to play with?

Although the importance of humour both in and for religions is recognized, it has rather rarely been studied in a scholarly context. The aim of this publication is to highlight the importance and functioning of humour in different world religions. It results from an international congress, organized by University Centre Saint Ignatius Antwerp (short UCSIA): Deus Ridens. The Redemptive Power of Humour in Religion (20–21 April 2009).

Hans Geybels opens this book with a *status quaestionis*. Most attention is paid to the Christian tradition, but in many other religious traditions humour plays a more important role than people are inclined to suppose. However, in each tradition, humour plays a different role. In some cases, it
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is even ritualized. Then, religion can be redemptive. But most religions are also victims of irony and sarcasm. Reactions can sometimes be cruel. The tragic examples of Islam violence as a consequence of the so-called Muhammed-cartoon affair illustrate this well. Thus, Geybels points out the limits of humour in or about religion as well. There is no humour without ethics and each religious tradition defines its own ethical margins.

In his philosophical approach, Johan Taels tries to offer a ‘definition’ of humour: The term humour may denote either a comical expression or a specific attitude or mode of life. In the latter case, it refers to what Simon Critchley has termed ‘an exemplary practice’, a ‘universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives’. By dislocating the familiar and by summoning unexpected contexts and horizons, humour makes people assume a contemplative attitude towards the world. At the same time, this theoretical attitude unfolds in an eminently practical manner. Humour alienates people from their living environment in order that they could subsequently approach it with a greater sense of freedom and responsibility. Therefore, humour may be regarded as an art of life, closely related to that of practical wisdom. Taels explores in detail this notion of humour as an art of life, in the context of three propositions. First, humour refers to an essential structure of human existence, more specifically to the fact that man is a tragi-comic being. Second, humour may tie in with either an ethics of duties or ethics of virtues. From a Christian perspective, the latter is the more likely of the two possibilities. Finally, humour is timeless, yet it is, par excellence, a modern and contemporary art of life.

In an overview of the history of Hinduism, Koenraad Elst finds humour very prominently present. The bookish approach encounters plenty of it in the mythological lore of the Vedas and Puranas, and in the fable collections. Their composers were uninhibited in highlighting the human side of both gods and men, including quite a bit of bawdy explicitness. In secular literature, various sectarian and caste groups came in for satire (some of it revived in Bollywood movies), most of all, the priestly Brahmin caste to which most writers themselves belonged. Finally, humour is very prominently present in the discourses of yogis, and even counts as a touchstone for discerning accomplished yogis from time-servers and wannabes: a true yogi is cheerful and communicates that mood to his audience, directly through his charisma as well as verbally through witty similes.

Elaine Gerbert explores how laughter appears to have played a central role in early Japanese fertility rites and in ancient rituals for greeting the emperor, who was thought to be a deity in human form. Behind these
rituals, and their present manifestations in extant laughing festivals, is the belief that laughter can serve as a medium through which the divine and the human can come together. There are reportedly seven laughing festivals still held in Japan today. While most of these are performed by villagers in agricultural communities in western Japan, the elaborate Ohoho ritual or Laughing Rite is conducted by priests on the grounds of one of Japan’s largest and most prestigious Shinto shrines, the Atsuta Shrine in Nagoya. This chapter will discuss the function of laughter in this ritual and trace a connection between the myth underlying this ritual and the laughter that figures centrally in Japan’s early cosmogonic myth. In revealing the sexual subtext of the ritual, it will explore the connections between sexuality, fertility and laughter in Shinto.

Throughout its eventful history, the Greco-Roman World experienced significant variations in religious beliefs and practices. The objective of the chapter by Paul Schulten is to analyse whether, and to what extent, instances of religious change were reflected in humour: how did the content and substance of jokes change? Were there, for instance, differences between the humour of the Olympian gods and the mocking of new oriental cults? Were there jokes on the monotheistic beliefs of the Christians? Were there early inside Christian jokes? He starts with the assumption that what was singled out for ridicule reflected serious religious concerns, whether the purpose was to strengthen or, on the contrary, undermine the established hierarchy of human and divine powers. In order to shed some light on ancient humour on religions, it will also be useful to look into its reception in the Italian Renaissance of the Quattro- and Cinquecento, especially in the works of Bracciolini, Pontano and Castiglione.

Vicky Manteli’s chapter addresses the topic of intralingual and interlingual transference of Aristophanes’ religious language and religious humour through the discussion of religious intertextual extracts from Aristophanes’ first extant comedy Acharnians (425 BC). Six target texts by three different Greek translators who have transferred the source text from 1980 to 2005 are discussed, in comparison with three acclaimed English translations produced during the same period. The corpus consists of source text intertextual references and particularly religious jokes parodying gods and prayers. Her intention is to discuss how Aristophanes’ religious jokes in Acharnians are transferred in Modern Greek and English target texts. Furthermore, the implication to be explored is that, in contrast to English versions, in Modern Greek stage versions of Acharnians, religious register is mostly reconstructed through parodic or non-parodic allusions to the ecclesiastical Greek orthodox register and liturgy.
For Ludo Abicht, typical ‘Jewish humour’ is the kind of humour developed in the Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities of Eastern Europe somewhere between the end of the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. Thus, it is no wonder that both the structure and the spirit of the Jewish Witz can be traced back to the Hassidic Tales that were created in the same environment. Jewish humour is first and foremost a survival tool in a hostile or at least alien, ‘goyish’ world. Jews made fun of Christianity and kept a safe distance from the secular authorities, but at the same time relativized a formalistic observance of the hundreds of religious laws (mitzvoth), criticized the beloved but all-too-powerful yiddishe mammas and their respected, but not always, equally brilliant rebbes. Thus, Jewish humour exudes a sense of freedom that can easily be shared by the rest of humanity.

Ingvild Sælid Gilhus asks herself why did ancient Gods laugh? Her chapter treats the meaning and functions of humour in myths and rituals from the ancient world (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome). Different types of laughter are discussed, for instance, regenerative and derisive laughter. The inherent explosiveness of laughter and its purposeful exploitation are commented upon, as well as the connection between symbolism of laughter and bodily symbols.

Przemysław Marciniak demonstrates how humour functioned and was perceived in a deeply Byzantine religious society. He analyses the attitudes towards laughter recorded in the saint’s lives as well as in various texts written by churchmen to show how laughter was used either to convey religious messages or to discredit what was perceived as a departure from the commonly accepted norm.

Jolanta Rzegocka discusses in the tenth chapter the function of laughter in early modern biblical plays. She examines selected medieval and early modern vernacular Biblical plays from England, France and Poland in order to trace down the elements that incite laughter, and to examine their function within performance context. The plays selected for discussion belong to the Easter cycle of plays or are Paschal mystery plays – thus, the main focus is the risus Paschalis (Easter laughter), its function, strategies and effect on the audience. The play she chooses to analyse in detail involves a scene in which Jesus seeks a messenger to bring the good news to the Virgin after the resurrection. Adam, Abel and other biblical figures apply for the job, but are deemed unfit. Jesus sends an angel instead. Laughs are incited by the self-deception which marks these figures regarding their moral qualities. The scene oscillates between comic and serious, between moral lesson and entertainment and between doctrinal lesson and comic relief.
The role and function of humour in Islam – subject of chapter 11 – has attracted considerable attention in recent years. Particularly, the public outrage created by the Danish caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in the Islamic world has led to intensive debates focussing on questions of a general nature. Against the backdrop of the European notion, positing itself against the experience of the Enlightenment and a relatively strict secularism, the strong emotional reaction of the Islamic world against the ridiculing of its religious core values was understood as infringing the secular core value of freedom of expression. In extension, the Islamic world was even experienced as lacking a general sense of humour. Balanced academic discussions would debate the extent to which a humorous approach to the conditio humana is permissible in Islam and whether or not Islam is capable of ridiculing its own core values. Above all, the obvious dichotomy between strict interpretations of humour in Islam on the one side and the abundance of humorous expression in the learned and popular cultures of the Islamic world on the other demand a thorough assessment.

Ulrich Marzolph discusses the role of humour in Islam from two angles. The religious interpretation of Islam relies primarily on the practical rules expressed by two pivotal institutions, first the Koran that Muslims perceive as the word of God, and second the normative behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad as expressed in the sunna. Consequently, the attitude of these two institutions towards humour may justly be supposed to form the basis of any more detailed assessment. While both the Koran and the sunna are not devoid of certain traits of humour, theological debates in the early centuries of Islam have continued to question its general permissiveness. The positions pronounced in this respect range between a strict rejection, particularly from the part of the Islamic mystics that experienced a strong and intimate relation to the Creator, and a somewhat milder attitude that would regard humour as an admissible means of alleviating the human condition by putting to practice an Islamic version of the ancient dictum of prodesse et delectare. Contrasting with the theological debates, we find, however, an abundance of humorous expression in all of the Islamic cultures, covering both historical periods as well as contemporary modernity. It is important to keep in mind the fact that Islam is by no means a monolithic religion. Rather to the contrary, the living reality of the various cultures the world of Islam has developed over the centuries bespeak a highly diversified and, moreover, a surprisingly liberal attitude towards humour expressing itself in a large variety of practical notions.

Walter Van Herck tries to find in the twelfth chapter a philosophical explanation for the vulnerability connected to humour. The phenomenon
of mockery makes clear that tolerance is not enough in today’s society. People don’t want to be just tolerated, but they want to be respected for who they are. They want to see their religious values respected even in humour. Humour is part and parcel to the game of recognition. In applying the views of Charles Taylor on the role of recognition in contemporary culture, Van Herck elaborates further on the ways in which humour is related to values and human vulnerability.

François Boespflug explains how laughter is transitory, but its images give laughter repetition, obtrusiveness and durability. The spectacle of laughter in its durable form has not always been tolerated in societies and still isn’t tolerated without reservation, most certainly not when the most sacred figures of a dominant religion are chosen as targets. Boespflug discusses a number of mocking images taken from the history of European Christianity. As such, he attempts a social history of humour and ridicule applied to the Christian God. This history cannot be taken to be paradigmatic for other religions, but it is instructive and it suggests that one cannot mock the Gods of others without precaution.

Jessica Milner Davis examines the tradition of the Fool and his/her permitted licence in different cultures. Its origins lie in religious ritual (e.g. Zuni Indians’ Koyemci fools, Roman Saturnalia, Japanese warai rituals and other festivals of inversion). With mass participation in the rite, the licence for ‘topsy-turvy-dom’ and mockery flows outwards from the Fool or designated holder and abuse can easily follow if social control is not strictly enforced. In the Western medieval Church, such disorders earned proscription for the Feast of Fools, with its unruly processions of the Ass, ritual braying, censing with black puddings and old shoe leather etc. Suppression of these popular rituals encouraged the rise of professional enactments of Folly, on stage as well as at Court and in the marketplace. As drama was reborn after the death of the Roman Imperium and its public theatres, secular Fools flourished. Fairground ‘clowns’ differed from their more literate brothers at Court, but both were professional specialists, fooling for their livelihoods, and in England at least, Court Fools moved between private sponsorship and commercial theatre. The theatre thus offered its own licence for the secular act(-ing) of Fools, from which European comedy gradually evolved a myriad specialist varieties of comedian/ienne – in farce, mime, burlesque, stand-up, circus, music-hall, comedy and satire in film and television etc. Twenty-first century Western democracies now seem to be evolving new forms of licence for playing the Fool in public. Professional hoaxes are programmed into conventional business meetings
for the purpose of exposing fraudulent pretentiousness and encouraging independent thinking. ‘Clown doctors’ are welcome fixtures in hospitals and age-care centres, helping to relieve tension and pain. Mimes and guerilla artists (such as Belgian ‘George le Gloupiere’) are commonplace events on the streets, and even po-faced science celebrates its annual IgNobel Awards. In the media, news bulletins are often eclipsed by satirical commentaries on their content and such secondary sources increasingly inform the opinions of Generations X and Y. Unlike the professional comedian, these new skilled Fools are not mere entertainers. They hark back to the older tradition in which the Fool deliberately turns the world upside-down and where playing the Fool was (or could be) a way to expose the truth and to combine Wisdom with Folly. Among others, Erasmus argued that Foolishness could be sacred, a path to spiritual insight; and indeed such a spiritual model had flourished in the early Church (e.g. St Symeon of Emesa and St Procopius of Russia). The public Pranksters/Fools of today display a similar drive to expose hypocrisy and pretentiousness, sometimes with missionary, reforming zeal. But they are not normally concerned with development of their own spirituality. Some other contemporary parallels for using Fooling as a route to spiritual enlightenment will nevertheless be explored in this chapter.

Villy Tsakona’s chapter discusses the semiotic mechanisms and the social function of religious cartoons in Greece. Greek religious cartoons are part of the public discussion of issues relating not only to the Greek Orthodox Church, but also to Greek politics. At the same time, religious cartoons are not considered offensive, blasphemous or inappropriate by the Greek readership: no public protest has been expressed against them, at least during the past few decades. The data examined here come from Greek newspapers and published collections. The analysis shows that Greek religious cartoons are based on the differences between modern times and Biblical times or, more often, criticize clerics, politicians and sometimes citizens for inappropriate behaviour. By using religious intertextual links, which are easily recognized by the majority of the Greek readership, cartoonists participate in the ongoing public discussion about political, religious or other issues, without, however, pushing the limits of their criticism beyond what is socially permitted. In particular, cartoonists do not contest Orthodoxy as a system of beliefs, practices and moral values.

It seems that, at least in the Greek case examined here, the relation between humour, religion and politics is not a conflictual one, but rather a symbiotic one, not only reflecting the strong interconnection between the
Greek Orthodox Church and the Greek state, but also resulting from the implicit norms established in this particular community and regulating the content and targets of humour.

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Part 1

Religious Laughter
Chapter 1

The Redemptive Power of Humour in Religion

Hans Geybels

Humour

Nothing is as difficult to formulate as the definition of a concept. Humour suffers the same fate as so many other concepts: (almost) everybody knows what it means, but nobody can come up with an exhaustive definition. Even etymology does not provide much clarification: the Latin humor means moisture. Now, of course, good comedy is often juicy, but that does not really advance our research. Humour is multi-faceted as well: formal (irony, satire, sarcasm, cynicism and such) or topical (puns, one-liners, caricature, stand-up comedy and so on). It only gets more complicated when we consider that some people feel that sarcasm and cynicism are not expressions of humour at all, just as some caricatures are not considered funny by all. Humour is not just anything that is funny or hilarious. One can laugh at someone who is being funny, but one can laugh at someone to ridicule them as well. Is it enough to define humour as that which elicits laughter? What about Schadenfreude? Humour is most certainly connected to laughter, but not just any kind of laughter. Also consider that although there is laughter in every culture, it can be motivated in many different ways. The phenomenon is specific to a certain time and place. Are these methodological difficulties responsible for the lack of scientific literature on this subject, or was humour considered too commonplace to attract academic attention?

Many forms of humour emerge in real-life situations with a sudden or unexpected twist that can be intentional or unintentional. The secret of Jewish humour, on the other hand, lies in self-deprecation. It seems a skill that is defined by context alone. A specific reaction can be humorous in one context and ironic or even sarcastic in another. But where do the boundaries lie? Even the art world struggles with that. In 1959, the authorities
confiscated the statue of a crucified woman (Bild einer gekreuzigten Frau unserer Zeit) by the activist Swiss painter Kurt Fahrner. He was subsequently convicted of disrupting the freedom of religion. Rolf Hochhuth’s theatrical piece Der Stellvertreter (1963) – highlighting what he considered to be the questionable role of Pope Pius XII regarding the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War – elicited a silent march of protest by young Christians.

Times have changed. In 2006, many religious organisations objected to Madonna re-enacting a crucifixion on stage during her world tour, but there were no criminal legal consequences to her act. Some Cardinals in the Vatican fulminated in 2006 about the abuse of the cross by pop stars and other idols, but the reaction from the general public was lukewarm at best. Religion has become an acceptable subject for comedy in all its forms.

The use of religious symbols in comedy (and mockery) is as old as time. Mockery of Christendom is also as old as Christendom itself, for example, the so-called Alexamenos graffito, which probably dates from the beginning of the third century. By a vast majority of scholars, the inscription is accepted to be a mocking depiction of a worshiping Christian. The image depicts a human-like figure attached to a cross and possessing the head of a donkey. To the left of the image is a young man, apparently intended to represent Alexamenos, raising one hand, possibly suggesting worship. Beneath the cross there is a caption written in crude Greek, which could be read ‘Alexamenos, worships (his) God’.

Are there any limits to this custom? In 2005, the West responded with outrage to the violence following the publication of Mohammed caricatures. But a similar outrage about the lack of understanding from the West was precisely what drove some Muslim organisations to that violence in the first place. There is a broad consensus in Christian circles that the sacred should never become the object of mockery, but such reverence is difficult to enforce. In the current climate, Christians can ask for respect at best.

The realization that not all laughter is humorous is an important one in the light of the hubbub caused by the Mohammed caricatures. Even if some sort of grading system were introduced for caricatures – from one, totally innocent to ten offensive, must be banned – it would not be universally applicable. A non-Muslim cracking a joke about Mohammed would be easily considered as causing offense by the Muslim community. Even scientists like gelotologists (who study laughter) do not seem able to clarify the definition of humour any more than that it is a cultural-historical
phenomenon defined by its context; and that is true of nearly all human traits.

The context dependence of humour leads to a lot of friction in a society that is growing increasingly pluralistic. That is made painfully apparent by the Mohammed caricatures affair. Many Western commentators held up the absolute right to freedom of expression of opinions, while Islamic representatives defended the sacredness of the prophet. Are there then no limits to what can be humorous? Should one be mindful of what one writes, but forget all the constraints of common decency when communicating the same message in the format of a cartoon or work of art? In Europe, few countries have a journalistic code regarding comedy. In Switzerland, the Schweizer Presserrat / Conseil suisse de la presse published guidelines in 1996: Medienethischen Grenzen satirischer Medienbeiträge. ‘Religious symbols may be used in satire as long as they are not denigrated or become the object of ridicule. Restraint should also be exercised regarding the convictions behind those religious symbols, or physical shortcomings or death.’

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Most people, if asked which concept they would associate with religion – humour or violence – would doubtless reply violence. That should come as no surprise given the countless reports of Islamic terrorism the average viewer is subjected to in the media every week. But even if those events did not appear so heavily in the news, most people would still relate religion to violence. Christianity, specifically, tends to be immediately associated with the crusades, the inquisition, witch hunts, religious wars and so on. Another reason is probably that both believers and non-believers tend to equate religion with seriousness, profundity, reverence . . . God prefers to be approached in a reverential, dignified manner, not familiar at all. Religion is not an object of ridicule, nor is it ever a laughing matter. Who could name any commonly available literature about humour in Christianity?

This marks a stark contrast with tradition and folklore both past and present. In ancient China, thunder was called ‘the laughter of the heavens’. Greek mythology presents us with the enigmatic character Baubo. An Eleusinian legend tells the tale of how she bared her lower body during an obscene belly dance, making the goddess Demeter laugh and for a moment forget her sorrow for her daughter Persephone, who was abducted to the underworld. There is so much laughter in Olympus and Walhalla!
Even today, most religions have a form of humour, but it is very seldom exploited.

Christendom

Is Christianity the exception? The novel *The Name of the Rose* by Italian linguist and novelist Umberto Eco seems to confirm that. Millions of copies of the bestseller were sold worldwide, but it was the film that popularized its contents to a wide audience. The theological discussions in the book and the film centre on the question whether it is permissible to laugh in a monastery. The old Benedictine monk Jorge of Burgos believes it is devilish. The devil uses laughter to distract monks from their contemplation of God. The Franciscan William of Baskerville, on the other hand, is of the opinion that laughter is allowed. His basis for this is a lost book by Aristotle: laughter is an essential characteristic of humans. If Christ became truly human, He must have laughed.

But Jorge of Burgos is right: ‘Jesus never laughed.’ He quotes Chrysostom, whom theologians considered an authority on the subject for centuries, based on that phrase. There is not a single mention to be found in the Bible of Jesus laughing. This interpretation influenced Christian monastic culture for centuries. Even the quite moderate rule of Benedict of Nursia states that laughter is unseemly. There is no problem with a small smile, but a very strong objection to laughing out loud and certainly to a thunderous belly laugh. Those forms of laughter must be punished. This will remain the state of affairs for centuries: only a modest smile is allowed. Even the Franciscans do not change this rule, even though it is often claimed they did. This mendicant order does endorse joy, but there is a distinct difference between joy and laughter.8

The situation remains unchanged for centuries. What reason is there to laugh after the Fall of man? There are two main reasons for opposing laughter: it distracts the devout from their contemplation of God and there is no good reason to laugh. There are many more reasons to weep. Bewailing the sinfulness and the decline of the world is propagated as a work of true piety. Not just the Benedictines but even the Franciscans and all other orders and congregations generally regard laughter as sinful while mournful tears are cultivated as true devotion. A true saint is a sad and melancholic figure.

To the Source: the Bible.

Were the religious orders correct in their views about laughter? At first glance, it would seem they were. There is very little laughter in the Bible.
At first glance! Was not a very important part of the Bible the work of Jews and are Jews not widely known for their sense of humour? Could it really be true then that there is no humour at all in the Old Testament? Perhaps the faithful are taking the Scriptures a bit too seriously. Many Catholics – unfortunately – only know the Bible through the liturgy, which by all accounts is hardly the time or the place for hilarity. Of course, there is very rarely any hilarity in the Book, but there is lots of humour, often quite subtle. The ‘oldest’ chuckle is Abraham’s. When God announces to the one 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sara that they will conceive a son, he falls to the ground and laughs (Gen. 17,17). When Sara gives birth to Isaac (whose name means: he who laughs) she says: ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me’ (Gen. 21,6). Many such examples of laughter can be found, for example, the many comical situations in the life of Isaac. His life story – and that of others – shows how men in that patriarchal culture were often played for fools by women: Rebecca, Abigail (1 Sam. 25), Bathseba (1 Kings 1), Jezebel (1 Kings 21) and Esther (Est. 3–4,7).

Ecclesiastes strikes a balance: ‘There is a time for everything . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance’ (Eccl 3, 1.4). ‘I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live’ (Eccl. 3,12). Joyful laughter is rarely mentioned in the Bible, and most often than not it is only in otherwise very serious passages, but Eccl. 10,19 is an exception in describing joyful laughter: ‘A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.’

So it is in the Old Testament, and so it is even more in the New. That may seem incredible, but that is mostly because we tend to receive the Word of God only in its serious liturgical context. Jesus’ subtle humour – his irony – will generally escape the attention of the average believer. Take the very serious tale of the adulterous woman in the gospel of John. That story (John 8, 1–11) is widely known, but is its irony recognized? First comes the irony of the author of the gospel: after driving up the suspense, Jesus gives his answer and asks that whoever is without sin should cast the first stone, whereupon his audience make their retreat . . . the oldest ones first. The oldest – are not they the ones who have had more than a taste of such things? This is then followed by another prime example of Jesus’ irony. He does not comfort the woman. He hardly gives her time to gather her wits about her. He asks: ‘Woman, where are they?’ What could she answer to that? Laconically He adds: ‘Has no one condemned you?’
There are other arguments available to support the premise that Jesus liked a bit of humour. He is regularly invited to dinner parties. If He was a killjoy, He would probably not have been receiving quite so many invitations. He must also have enjoyed His fair share of good wine, because onlookers described Him as a friend of tax collectors, a drinker, a sinner and more of the same. In any case, were we to reject the idea of Jesus laughing, we would be rejecting his Jewish roots. Does not laughter have its place at the banquet during the end time of the Messianic fulfilment? Finally, it is unthinkable that Jesus would not have laughed during his childhood at his parents Joseph and Maria (Ott 2003, 32). Surely, his first laugh!

Admittedly there is no direct evidence in the Scripture for the above arguments. Theologians from ancient and medieval times were right: nowhere is it written that Jesus ever laughed. But it is also not written that he never did. Some passages do seem to imply a laughing Jesus: ‘I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete’ (John 15,11 and also 16,24 and 17,13). John puts great joyfulness into the words of Jesus.

Humour is a key concept in the actions of Jesus. It is his way to put the restrictive culture He grew up in, in perspective. It is the ideal method of delivering his message without moralising. Many of his parables illustrate this. The New Testament is filled with this kind of humour that is intended to respectfully communicate many claims and truths. God’s smile shines through in the Acts of the Apostles as well. Hilarity ensues in Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas are taken for the pagan gods Hermes and Zeus. Overwhelmed by the elated crowd, they must try to prove they are not gods at all.

Clearly, humour is not foreign to Christendom. Only consider the first Christian congregations. They were feared by the ‘atheist’ Greek and Roman philosophers because of their joyfulness. They truly are the bearers of a joyful message and of a ‘bonheur d’être’ (Guillebaud 2007, 183). According to Werner Lauer, humour was even invented by Christians. Christianity desanctified the world. As soon as the world is no longer seen as sacred and taboo, there is room to laugh at the world. He also argues that both Christianity and humour are in the world but not of the world. Finally, he claims that real humour is Christian because of its ethical component. Real humour is ethical as opposed to mockery and cynicism (see Lauer 1974). One does not have to agree with Lauer’s views, but they still reveal an important fact about the prominent role humour has to play in Christendom.
And Now?

Has this source of joyfulness run dry? Christians believe in a joyful message, but where has the joy gone? The philosopher Nietzsche hardly did any harm to Christian beliefs with his quip ‘God is dead’, but seemed to be spot on when wittily remarking: ‘Don’t the Christians look redeemed again today!’ That comment can also serve to express one of the most important criticisms of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. That film does not for one moment expose God’s smile in the mystery of Easter. The whole movie is nothing more than a sequence of humiliations, brutal violence and physical suffering. But Gibson’s film is not exceptional. Current day liturgy seems to focus most of all on the cross as well. The average homily does little to lighten one’s mood. And that while we supposedly preach good news!

Yet there have been some changes over time. Christians are no longer necessarily humourless. Most Christian magazines feature cartoons and jokes. Weekly or monthly columns are reserved for humorous purposes. Church websites often feature humorous pages. There is an element of folklore in the sermons on the eve of Lent – mostly delivered in the local dialect – and the carnival masses. Perhaps even the ancient ‘risus paschalis’ (Easter laughter) is ready to be rediscovered? In the Middle Ages, the night before Easter gave rise to very special sermons in which the devil – who came to collect his due (Jesus) – was ridiculed and the joyfulness surrounding the resurrection became the focus (see Kuschel 1998, 127–134). The solemnity and sadness of Lent are replaced by the joy of Easter.

To date, very little contemplation of humour in Christendom has been done. (Possibly a good thing!) Nonetheless, in day-to-day pastoral care, humour is essential. How else do pastoral carers survive and put into perspective the suffering they face every day? How else would they be capable of truly sharing in the joys of others? Humour helps to put things in perspective and to blow off steam. Even in the gospel, humour has its place, but it must be applied correctly and that is not an easy task. Laughter can be a means to evangelize. Humour is an integral dish on the table of God’s creation and so it should be on the Christian menu. Time to rediscover the ‘diaconie de l’humour’! ‘Always be joyful,’ Paul repeats in his letters.

What About the other Religions?

So far we have examined the role of humour in Christendom, but this book also discusses other religions, beginning with Judaism. Jewish humour is
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almost proverbial, but is it really that straightforward? Is there really such a thing as Jewish humour? First of all, it must be remarked that there is not one single Jewish form of humour. There are many forms of Judaism and all those communities have different attitudes towards humour, and even within one community – be they orthodox-traditional or liberal – there will be those who appreciate humour and those who do not. So it is best not to assume there is one single kind of Jewish humour.

Humour is an old tradition in Judaism. We pointed out earlier how the Old Testament contains many passages involving irony. But there is even more humour – in the form of authentically funny texts – in the Talmud. Jews are happy to laugh at almost anything if there is reason to, even in some synagogues. That tends to depend on the Rabbi. Let us not forget the feast of Purim, when laughing is practically obligatory. Tradition has it that this feast dates back to the times of the book of Esther, a very special book that does not mention the name of God even once. The reason for this was that the book roll was sent to all the provinces of Persia, and it was feared God’s name would be profaned if those texts were to fall into the wrong hands. The feast is held in remembrance of the liberation of the heavily persecuted and suffering Jews from Persia in the fifth century before Christ. Happiness, laughter and abundant eating are the main elements of the celebration at which children dress up and get into all sorts of mischief.

There is no denying that a particular type of humour stands out within the Jewish communities: gallows humour, often accompanied by self-deprecation. This is a form of humour typical for minority communities who often have to struggle to survive or who – in the worst cases – are actively persecuted. The Jewish people have known persecution for centuries. A Jewish joke often has a punch line highlighting a negative stereotypical Jewish characteristic, but not always. Many jokes also highlight Jewish determination and resourcefulness, which is also typical of minority groups. Precisely because of their minority status, Jews are often the butt of ‘humour’ by others. The Jew jokes from the German Reich are the most painful historical examples of this, and that tradition is still continued today in the Arab world.

While Jewish is often equated with humorous, the opposite is most certainly true of Muslims. One might begin to wonder if Islamic culture even has a word for comedy. The affair surrounding the Mohammed cartoons has strengthened the image of a humourless Islam even more. While it is easy to find literature about Jewish humour, it is practically impossible to track down anything published about Islamic humour. Similar to the Bible, the Koran does not contain any passages mentioning God laughing.
Again, similar to Christian tradition, the Koran does contain rather more sceptical passages regarding laughter. ‘Let them laugh a little, and cry a lot. This is the requital for the sins they have earned’ (9, 82). ‘Are you laughing, instead of crying?’ (53, 60). The Hadith on the contrary, does contain some passages that suggest Mohammed laughed.

Admittedly, it is difficult to discover Islamic humour, but it certainly does exist. Just as in the Jewish tradition, there are many different attitudes towards humour in the Muslim community, ranging from condemnation to acceptance. Turkey can be very different from, for example, Pakistan in that respect, and Sunnis are not the same as Sufis. Many Islamic media show jokes and cartoons. Palestine saw a whole range of Arafat jokes, but also many Jew jokes because of their minority status in Israel (S. Kanaana & P. Heumann 2001). In some Western countries, there are even Islamic stand-up comedians who do not shy away from religious themes. In 2005, a large gathering of Islamic scientists at the University of Berlin held a discussion about humour in the Arab world throughout history and in the present day.¹⁴

A common form of mockery is the caricature. The Islamic community in North Africa and the Middle East revels in anti-Jewish and anti-American caricatures. The Mohammed cartoons established the cartoon as a weapon even more strongly in those countries. Those caricatures contain myriad ‘caricatures’: Jews with a hateful face and a crooked nose, a beard and a hat, conspiring with Americans and responsible for everything from the great ecological and economical disasters to the bird flu epidemic. Their mockery knows no bounds in this. But Muslim humour does respect taboos about Allah, Mohammed and the Koran.

We can only hypothesize that Jesus and Mohammed must have laughed. The same goes for Buddha. There is no biography of the Buddha, and all that is known about him was idealized and later committed to writing. We can assume that the Buddha had a sense of humour, as we assume the other religious founders did. The teachings of the Buddha were a reaction to the Brahmans, and humour and even mockery are often used as a tool against them. The Brahmans are like the blind leading the blind. They do not see the sun or the moon, but they can show the way to them. The image of the laughing Buddha – an incarnation of the Buddha who lived in tenth century China under the name Butai – is immensely popular in practically the entire Buddhist world. He is a symbol of riches, happiness and heavenly blessings.

Just as there are many variants of Christianity and Islam, Buddhism is also split into numerous groups, some of which display more of a sense of humour than others. Theravada Buddhism certainly holds humour in high
regard, and that is true a fortiori of Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is known for his subtle sense of humour and his infectious laugh. Zen Buddhism centres on koans. Many of these koans – short paradoxical dialogues between a master and a student – display an irony similar to that in the gospels. Zen Buddhism uses humour as a true learning tool.

Notes

3 The 12 caricatures were published on September 30, 2005 in the Danish newspaper *jylland Posten*. It was motivated by the fact that children’s’ books author Kare Bluitgen could not find an illustrator for his children’s book about the life of Mohammed. The editor in chief of the newspaper, Flemming Rose, who discovered that information, decided to hold a competition for Mohammed caricatures.
7 Examples taken from *Humor und Religion*, 9–10.
9 See www.ursulahomann.de/.DasChristentum UndDer Humor/kapo10.html (accessed 31 March 2010)
12 For this section, we were largely inspired by C. P. Baumann, *Humor und Religion. Worüber man lacht – oder besser nicht*, Stuttgart: Verlag Kreuz, 2008.
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Berlin: Arani Verlag, 1971; W. Novak and M. Waldoks (eds), Das grosse Buch des jüdischen Humors, Königstein/Taunus: Athenäum, 1982. There is of course no such thing as the quintessential Jewish joke, which is made abundantly clear that much criticism of the collections of Jewish humour mentioned here, came from the Jewish community itself.

14 See www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-469/_nr-731/_pI/i.html (accessed 31 March 2010).

Bibliography


Chapter 2

Humour as Practical Wisdom

Johan Taels

Lucian of Samosata was a Greek sophist and satirist who was known around the second century BC as one who produced ruthless mockery of the Greek gods, those in power, writers and philosophers. In Charon, one of his dialogues, he tells a curious tale. In Greek mythology, Charon was the ferryman who transported the dead over the river Styx to the underworld. Lucian says that one day, the Gods gave Charon the day off. Charon decides to go to the upper world, ‘to see what life is like; what men do with it, and what are these blessings of which they all lament the loss when they come down to us’ (Lucian of Samosata 1905, 167). He gets into a conversation with Hermes, who, at his insistence, takes him on a short tour and leads him to a high mountaintop so that he would ‘have a general view of what is going on’ (ibid., 169). However, Charon’s inquisitiveness is not satisfied. He tells Hermes that the cities and hills do not interest him much: ‘it is men that I am after’ (ibid., 171). To clarify his special interest, he recounts an anecdote that always makes him laugh: a man invites a friend for supper on the following day. ‘I’ll be there,’ says the friend. However, no sooner has he spoken these words than a loose roof tile drops onto his head, killing him instantly. ‘Ha, ha, thought I, that promise will never be kept,’ Charon adds phlegmatically, ‘so I think I shall go down again; I want to see and hear’ (ibid., 172).

When we are looking for some clarification on the concept of humour, we can find two interesting perspectives in Lucian of Samosata’s tale. The first is the most self-apparent: we understand ‘humour’ to be the same as ‘the comic’. Both concepts are thus more or less synonyms. In the fragment just cited, Charon and Hermes – just as all other Greek gods and demigods – see for themselves the humorous or comic image by means of observing human behaviour and events from Olympus or some other mountaintop. It is precisely this panoramic view that gives them the distance they need in
order to be able to laugh at the dumb luck of a roof tile landing on someone’s head. But there is another concept of humour to be found in this fragment, or at any rate, the seed of one. Charon does not want to stay on the mountaintop. He wants to experience the situations that he now views as comic from within, and to get to know up close the passions and sufferings of those involved. In other words, he is conscious of the fact that for humans the comic is no independent concept, but that it always presupposes the flipside – the tragic – as well. Here, we find the impetus for the second concept of humour: humour as an attitude or way of living in which man understands the art to cope with the ambiguity of existence, with an ongoing entanglement of the comic and the tragic.

In the following contribution, I will attempt to elucidate these two central meanings of humour. In the first section, I will discuss several central aspects of humour in the broad sense, namely as the synonym of ‘the comic’. This concept then relates to all forms of expression (verbal, auditory, visual, mimicry, understanding etc.) that in one way or another appeal to our desire to laugh. It thus also relates to irony as much as sarcasm, to mild humour as much as black comedy and to cynicism, crude jokes, subtle jokes, caricatures, nonsense and so forth. In the second point, I will go deeper into a narrower concept of humour. Humour is, in this case, an indication of a way of living that is closely related with practical wisdom, and that makes up a part of the spiritual praxis in life.

Humour as ‘the Comic’

‘The comic’ has a curious status in our society. In the previous decades, it has penetrated into the core of our lifestyle, where it regularly takes on pandemic forms. Yet, in the history of our culture, and, in particular, in the history of western philosophy, all in all the concept has received little attention. Apparently, the voice of the ancient Greek philosophy still comes through: the comic cannot be taken seriously, the elusive character of it is a threat to reason.

This, of course, does not mean that philosophers have not thought about the nature of the comic. Over the course of history, they have developed three main theories, of which the last two are relatively recent: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. I will briefly relate the meaning and relevance of these.

The ancient Greeks and Romans knew only one explanation for laughter: the Superiority Theory. The name of this theory speaks for itself: the
stimulus of the comic exists in our enjoyment of being superior over the other. The true object of laughter is the flaw of the other, his self-ignorance (Plato), his inferiority (Aristotle). In fact, every joke is nothing but a polite insult. Cicero (first century BC) puts it this way: laughter arises ‘from the castigation of deformity and disgrace in a not disgraceful way’.¹ He expresses here also the moralistic aspect of the Superiority Theory: whoever laughs, puts the flawed behaviour on show, punishes this behaviour and confirms in doing so the (alleged or desired) societal or cosmic order.

Cicero provides a subtle example. In order to understand his anecdote it is important to know that Roman poets and senators belonged to the same class, and that it was unthinkable that they would ever make each other out to be liars publically.

The great Metellus (who was a senator) went to see the old Ennius, the great poet, in his remote house on the Aventine. His house servant swore that he was not at home – but Metellus, who knew him well, left fully convinced that the servant had lied to him. A few days later Ennius came to the house of Metellus and asked for the master of the house, but Metellus screamed that he was not home. This naturally upset Ennius, but Metellus calmed him down: “I recently believed your maid’s word (Roman servants were known as notorious liars), so why don’t you now believe me?”²

Until late in the modern times, the Superiority Theory held a monopoly in the explanation of laughter. This is not to say that the Greeks and Romans, people from the Middle Ages and modern citizens, did not also laugh for completely different reasons. Yet, for all of the expressions of the comic, only this explanation was viewed as legitimate. An explanation which Thomas Hobbes (seventeenth century) at the beginning of modern times, rendered even darker.³ Hobbes was convinced of the fundamental egotistical characteristic of human nature and saw the passion for laughter as direct expression of this. Laughing, according to him, is a praxis for men who are forced to boost their self-image by observing the imperfections of other men. However one-sided his theory may be, it does give a plausible explanation for the strong attraction of the lower regions of humour, such as ethnic, racist and scabrous jokes.

The most well-known and subtle variation of the Superiority Theory is quite recent: that of Henri Bergson in *Le rire* (1900). Bergson – inspired here mainly by the rise of film – was fascinated by the comic qualities of the automaton, the marionette, the puppet, the robot etc. For him, the cause of laughter lay in the impression that something mechanical is ‘encrusted
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on the living’. Humour thus has an important social function here: the goal of which is the societal correction of each behaviour that is more artificial than flexible.

The Superiority Theory provides an explanation for some forms of humour, but remains blind for others. It sees the comic preferably as an instrument, operated from within the existing societal, moral or cosmic order with the intent to correct deviant behaviour; not, or at least rarely, as an outlet for this same order. However, already in antiquity and the Middle Ages, there are countless examples of this latter form of humour to be found: consider the ancient comedies which were performed in order to allow the spectators of the tragedies to catch their breath; or of the function of carnival prior to the 40 days of Lent or of the ‘bugiale’ (a liar’s room in the Vatican [though pre-eminently a place where the demand for truth echoes loudly] in which everyone was allowed to think up what he wanted and all rumours were admitted). It took, however, until the relief theory of Herbert Spencer (nineteenth century) and Sigmund Freud to find an appropriate explanation for these expressions of the comic.

The basic idea of the relief theory is simple: our bodies build up nervous energy, and laughter, the function of which can be compared to a hydraulic pump, frees us up from this. More precisely, in laughter, energy is released and the release creates enjoyment, because it spares the energy that normally would be used to keep psychic activities in check. The relief theory brings the comic into relation with the subconscious: comic expressions express and reveal the control of our psychic efforts, for example, our suppression of aggressive or sexual feelings and fantasies. But the significance of this goes further. The desire for the release can indeed also be ignited through confrontation with the demands of the outside world: the existing order, the law, government, the hierarchy, that harshness of life itself. Precisely, in order to be able to hold out in relation to the unrelenting societal, moral or cosmic obligations and laws, the escape route of laughter is at times indispensable.

The Superiority Theory and Relief Theory are, as already said, complementary: the former sees laughter as a (re)confirmation of the dominant order, the latter sees laughter as an outlet for that. Still, there are countless comic expressions that are not explained by either of these two theories. Why, for example, does the following word play incite laughter? ‘Conversation between an English and German psychoanalyst: “According to Freud, what comes between fear and sex? Answer: Fünf”’ (Cohen 1999, 17). Moreover, what about various other forms of absurd humour, nonsense or about laughter caused by sudden contrasts, unexpected happenings etc.?
As the most broad of the three theories of laughter, only the Incongruity Theory provides us insight into this aspect. The most proper object of humour, according to this theory, is the absurdity of contradiction. The enjoyment of laughter exists in the experience of the collision, the disagreement of an expression, an event or experience with our preconceptions and expectations. This explains, for example, why we are inclined to laugh when we see a drunkard keeping his balance, but the sober man falls; or when we are confronted with a difference in language play; or through an unintentional mistake in words. Although there are already traces to be found in the ancient Greeks for this theory, it is brought to full by a few great thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (including Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer). Their ideas can be condensed in the following expression by Lessing: ‘Where is it written that in comedy we should only laugh at moral errors (. . .)? Every incongruity, every contrast between imperfection and reality is funny’ (Lessing 1959, 450).

With this overview, we have glimpsed at an initial view of humour as a synonym for ‘the comic’. This is a concept that is certainly found in all religious and spiritual traditions, but that naturally also continuously has been and is used against these traditions. In the second section of this contribution, I will turn my attention to a rather more specific concept of humour that has been treated less often, but from which I contend that it belongs to the core of most religious and spiritual traditions, namely humour as an art of life.

Humour as an Art of Life

I understand the art of life aspect of humour as the art to take upon ourselves the comic and tragic meaning of all our existential relationships – that is our relationship to ourselves, to our fellow man, to the cosmos, to God – in contemplation and wisdom, but also in greater freedom and responsibility.

I will outline this concept with three propositions: (1) humour refers to an essential structure of human existence, more specifically to the fact that man is a tragic-comic being; (2) the art of life of humour can be seen as a specific complement of the classic virtue of practical wisdom; and (3) humour as a life art is timeless, but is most appropriately suited to the living conditions of the post-modern citizen.

Man, a tragic-comic animal

Can animals laugh or cry? Based on the behaviour of some dogs and apes (bearing the teeth, opening the jaw wide) one can be tempted to answer
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this question affirmatively. Fact remains, however, that this ability of man extends beyond that of an animal. This was shown in a very convincing way by the German philosopher-biologist Helmut Plessner. During the first half of the twentieth century, Plessner was particularly preoccupied with this special position of man in nature.

The most important distinction between man and most other animals, according to Plessner, exists in the position they take with respect to the environment (see Plessner 1981, 177–245). Most animals take a ‘centralist position’ in the world. This means that they control their interaction and position with their environment from the centre of their bodies and the nervous system. Now, the great difference between these types of animals and man is that man is also always aware of himself as being the centre. Humans are reflexive, conscious of their own consciousness activities to such an extent that he never comes together with this centre, that he can always step behind or outside of himself, that is to say, man is ex-centric.

Humans are, in other words, simultaneously centric and ex-centric, natural and artificial. This paradoxical relationship with himself is a structural characteristic par excellence and is to be found in all capacities that are most his own, and through which he differentiates himself from the other animals, such as the ability to astonish himself, or to be fearful (and not just be afraid like animals), or to laugh and cry. Often it involves behavioural forms that imply a double level: a natural and a cultural, a psychosomatic and a spiritual.

Not only does man laugh and cry, he laughs and cries over his own existence. He is in this capacity ex-centric, conscious of his inability to be united with himself to such an extent that he can experience his existence as tragic or comic. Let’s examine this typically human ability in more detail.

The comic and the tragic are pre-eminently hermeneutic concepts. That is to say: comic and tragic experiences don’t just refer to various categories of facts and events, but to the way in which man interprets and experiences these facts, and to the way in which he relates himself as existential. The origin of the comic and tragic experiences is the same: the rift between the actual and ideal, between what is and what could be, and the inability to close this rift by means of his own power. The difference between both experiences is placed in the way in which man becomes conscious of this rift. When he becomes conscious of this in a painless way, we talk about a comic experience; when he becomes conscious in a painful way, we speak of a tragic experience. Let me illustrate with a newspaper report, such as one that can be found on a daily basis:

In the Ochotsk sea in the Russian far east, a cow fell from the sky and landed on a Japanese fishing boat, causing it to sink. After Russian
soldiers had stolen a herd of cows, apparently not uncommon in Siberia, they wanted to transport the cows in a transport airplane. The soldiers forgot, however, to tie up the cows inside the airplane. During the flight, the cows began to move about in the hold of the plane, causing it to become unstable. The crew had to push the animals out of the loading door. Chance would have it that one of the animals landed precisely on a Japanese fishing boat. The boat immediately sank after the strike. The fishermen were unharmed, but were arrested immediately after being saved because their story was not believed.4

Obviously there are two perspectives from which one can recount the story: a comic perspective and a tragic one. The editor of this article totally opted for the perspective of the comic distance. But it is clear that the fisherman experienced this same situation in a much different, tragic manner. Schematically presented:

From a comic perspective: the reflective dominates and keeps the passion in check, so that the pain diminishes; the emphasis is on chance (randomness); the reflection goes beyond good or evil, and makes abstraction of concrete aspects for situations and persons.

From a tragic perspective: passion dominates; the reflective is in service of the passion, which increases the pain; the emphasis is on fate, on the question of guilt/innocence, and of concrete situations and persons.

In sum then: man is an ex-centric and a paradoxical being. He can not only laugh and cry, but also laugh and cry at himself, and thus is able to experience his own existence as comic and tragic. This ability positions him, however, before a particularly heavy ethical and spiritual task: how to do justice to the tragic and comic dimensions of his existence, without losing his life to one of the two dimensions? Every person is always confronted with two large threats in his life: either to go under in the tragic perspective, or to take flight in the comic. In the first case, he is burdened by the crushing power of what is given (the societal events, bodily limitations, loss of a loved one . . .), that it seems as if nothing is possible any longer, as if all is irrevocably fixed, and freedom and responsibility are merely illusions. In the second case, he undermines the meaning of what is given to such an extent that what initially looked important, is reduced to being something inane, so that everything is more or less possible, but nothing really matters. When the comic perspective becomes dominant in this manner, we automatically slip into cynicism. Every passion, each engagement is seen up front as laughable; every meaning is reduced to the nothingness of the laugh, without connecting back to the concrete situation or the personal responsibility.
Characteristic to an attitude of humour is that humour, different from other comic or tragic forms of expression, is aimed at fully to do justice to both experiences of existence. Humour is the art of life by which, in the changing existential situations, the unity and balance between the comic and the tragic are discovered and preserved. For this reason, according to S. Kierkegaard, humour must then also be viewed as the most personal expression of the seriousness of existence.

Practical wisdom

Humour has a hermeneutic purpose. This purpose exists of allowing one to read one’s own life and to interpret it in the light of the ambiguity, equivocally and inconsistency that is an inextricable part of it. This interpretive function is first and foremost, epistemic: the humorist, like the scientist in his laboratory, wishes to reveal the world (as well the individual’s world as our shared world) as it is, sharply and accurately. However, the humorist has more tools at his disposal than the scientist: he can make use of an array of instruments that are inherent in comic ingenuity, such as the plasticity and flexibility of the comic imagination, which finds expression in sudden changes of perspective, diametric reversal, unexpected twists etc. A good example in this respect is to be found in the Apophthegmata Patrum or Sayings of the Father, a collection of sayings and stories by the desert fathers dating from the third or fourth century:

Two elders had lived together for many years without ever quarrelling. One day, the one said to the other: “Come on, let’s have at least one quarrel like other people do.” The other man said: “But I don’t know how to start a quarrel.” Then the first man said: “I will take this brick and place it between us, and then I’ll say: it is mine. And you’ll say: No it is mine. And that’s how it starts.” So they place the brick between them and the one says: “It is mine.” And the other replied: “No, it is mine.” And then the first spoke again: “Well, if it is yours, then take it and go your way.” And so they were not able to have a quarrel (Wagenaar 1981, 18).

The playfulness of this thought experiment stands in sharp contrast with the moral rigidity, the moralism that we often self-evidently connect to a spiritual way of life. This playfulness, however, originates from a very unique nature. It is no mere flight into the ludicrous or into that which distracts, but comes from a moral power, which allows to distinguish between apparent seriousness and true earnestness. From this it chooses that which is truly
important (the peaceful community) and it gives up the rest (the intellectual curiosity for the thought experiment) without any apparent trouble.

However, the most characteristic feature of humour is that the sobering and objectifying humorous perspective does not lead to despair or fatalism, but that it has a therapeutic and liberating effect. Peter L. Berger gives the following example:

In the old days, somewhere in Eastern Europe, a traveller arrived in a shtetl in the middle of winter. There, outside the synagogue, an old man sat on a bench, shivering in the cold.
“What are you doing here?” asked the traveller.
“I’m waiting for the coming of the Messiah.”
“That is indeed a very important job,” said the traveller. “I suppose that the community pays you a good salary?”
“No, not at all,” said the old man. “They don’t pay me anything. They just let me sit on this bench. Once in a while someone comes out and gives me a little food.”
“That must be very hard for you,” said the traveller. “But even if they don’t pay you anything, surely they must honour you for undertaking this important task?”
“No, not at all,” said the old man. “They all think that I’m crazy.”
“I don’t understand this,” said the traveller. “They don’t pay you. They don’t respect you. You sit here in the cold, shivering, hungry. What kind of job is this?”
The old man replied: “It’s steady work.” (Berger 1997, xvii)

It is clear that the speech of the old man is not merely epistemic. His acute awareness of the severity of the situation is connected with a moral strength, which enables him to take on the situation. In other words, his insight has become flesh and blood, it is at the same time practical wisdom, and is as such bound to the virtuous-ethical or spiritual conduct: courage, temperance, honesty, integrity . . . Generally speaking, the hermeneutic purpose of humour always requires a double movement: humour creates distance and is reflective, but it is at once forward looking, focused on concrete practice. In a single movement, the humorist detaches himself from a number of preconceptions or supposedly self-evident representations and confronts this insight with concrete practice, which he does not leave behind, but rather takes on with renewed vigour.

There is yet another important similarity between humour as an art of life and the virtue of practical wisdom: self-knowledge plays a crucial role in
both. In humour, one never solely laughs at the others, but also always with oneself. He who laughs is at once the object of laughter. But also the way in which in humour self-knowledge is filled in, leans much closer to the virtue ethics (and thus to the practical wisdom) than to deontic ethics. Take, for example, the self-knowledge in Kantian ethics. Kantian ethics is typically one of intellectual detachment and askesis. It is an ethics whereby man uses all of his power to escape from the constraint of natural motives, and to become detached from all that is particular and exceptional about the own point of view. In negative terms, the ethical assignment consists in not to coincide with what I am as an immediate, natural being. Expressed positively, it implies a striving to attain the greatest possible mastery of one self. Ideally, this ethics leads to a complete self-reduplication: as a moral-rational being, the subject is in complete control of his immediate impulses and needs, so that his choices and motives are entirely transparent to himself.

The self-knowledge that is characteristic of humour is of an entirely different nature. Obviously, the humorist strives to order his emotional and passionate life as well as possible. However, he does not imagine that he is able to eliminate for good the ambiguity that is typical of our existence. In this sense, the self-knowledge involved in humour is much more concrete than that of Kant’s deontic ethics. In this context, Roberts speaks of the relationship between humour and humility; not a sombre or dejected humility, but a ‘blithe humility (. . .), a kind of self-transparency, or openness to “seeing” painful truths about oneself’ (Roberts 1988, 142). It is precisely this recognition that opens up a space where a new state of integrity becomes possible.

Let’s summarize: humour shows a realism without illusions, yet is still hopeful. Humour makes it possible to deal with moral failure without succumbing to it, and in a way that is unthinkable with deontic ethics. This is because the humorist accepts that man does not merely have his destiny in his own hands, but that he borrows his dignity to something that, or someone who transcends him.

Humour as modern and contemporary art of life

Since the end of the 19th century, many thinkers and writers (among which Nietzsche and Heidegger) have acknowledged that we live in a tragic time. I would say, however, that – at least in our culture – the opposite is true: our time is a time in which the comic perspective dominates the tragic. One of the most important reasons for this is the continually increasing reflexivity, which the ubiquity of the panoptical comic view strongly promotes.
As is well known, the modernization process is typically characterized by reflexivity. With the aid of the newly emerged natural sciences and a renewed and sharper Cartesian self-awareness, the modern subject detaches itself from the pre-modern conception of the world. It no longer regards itself to be incorporated self-evidently into the predestined natural and cosmic order, and instead wishes, through its newly acquired knowledge and its labour, to control this order and to shape society on the basis of its own rules and insights.

This reflexivity of modern society does not mean that it will not accept boundaries. Quite the contrary, in fact: the modern socialization system is characterized precisely by strict boundaries and unassailable authorities. Only, these are no longer determined naturally but societally (see Van Poecke 2000, 127–77). However, they are less forceful: it is only on the basis of his position within this strictly delineated and hierarchically ordered societal framework that the modern citizen assumes an identity.

It speaks for itself that the emancipation of contemporary society – irrespective of whether we call it post-industrial, late-modern or post-modern – from the preconceptions of this strictly disciplined modernity requires an even more extreme form of reflexivity. Quite interesting in this respect is the perspective of sociologist Ulrich Beck, who, precisely because of its outspokenly reflexive nature, calls our era one of ‘reflexive modernization’ and describes our society as a ‘risk society’. It entails, among other things, that the citizen is unable to fall back on the old, supposedly unassailable certainties. In trying to come to grips with his existential fears and uncertainties, he is no longer able to call on the social and moral classifications, institutions and authorities which used to be self-evident to his parents and ancestors. As an individual, he is compelled to assume full responsibility for the conditions of his own life. He must, as it were, act as the risk manager of his own existence: he must try to anticipate, prevent and mitigate all risks that are inherent in modernity, and that are simply a consequence of scientific, technical and economic progress. Obviously, such a risk management exercise requires a constant lucidity and reflexivity. A reflexivity by which he, in the words of Beck, ‘is elevated to the apparent throne of a world-shaper’ (Beck 1992, 137). With this, the reflexive, postmodern citizen does approximate to Schiller’s contemplative ideal of full detachment through the comic. In Schiller’s terms, this is an ideal which consists in

liberating himself from the influence of violent passions, and taking a calm and lucid survey of all that surrounds him, and also of his own being, and of seeing everywhere occurrence rather than fate or hazard, and
ultimately rather smiling at the absurdities than shedding tears or feeling anger at the sight of the wickedness of man (von Schiller 1838, 209).

Has there ever been a society with a better eye for the comic than our own? A society where stand up comedians, humorists and cartoonists enjoy the kind of prestige that, just a few decades ago, was reserved for serious, preferably melancholic writers and dramatists? Or where the panoptical comic view has penetrated into every corner of our homes through the rapid succession of perspectives and the sheer endless reduplication of sound and audio excerpts in the mass media? Or where citizens are assumed to be able to adopt a meta-perspective on their own convictions and modes of life, while at once understanding these convictions and modes to be changeable and qualified? In sum, a society that is characterised to such an extent by an ever-greater reflexivity, that its citizens would appear all to be living on Mount Olympus together? Will the citizens of the reflexive modernity and the risk society, ever be inclined – like Charon – to abandon their panoptical perspective?

Obviously such questions are rhetorical: the above analysis of reflexive modernity concerns general historical and socio-cultural trends, while nothing fundamentally has changed in relation to the existential condition of man as a tragic-comic being. No culture, however developed and reflexive, should be assumed capable of eliminating the tragic dimension of existence.

But it is clear that the self-evident nature of the pre-modern time is further removed than ever before, and that the modern and post-modern reflexivity cannot be pushed back. Here is the great importance of the art of life of humour. Through its hermeneutic character and its specific form of self-distance and self-understanding, humour is particularly well suited to the flexible and reflexive lifestyle of the post-modern citizen. It is consequently one of the few arts of living, which, in a hyper-reflexive society as ours, can offer resistance against the ubiquitous lure of Mount Olympus. As an art of living, it opens up, moreover, a path towards the great spiritual and religious traditions, in which man can learn that as a tragic-comic being, he can only become himself in a journey to ‘something’ or ‘Someone’ that transcends him.

Notes

Quotations from non-English texts are translated by V. Paumen.

Humour and Religion


Bibliography

In the history of Hinduism, we find humour prominently in many places. The bookish approach encounters plenty of it in the mythological lore of the Vedas, Puranas and fable collections. Their composers were uninhibited in highlighting the human side of both gods and men, including some bawdy explicitness. In secular literature, various sectarian and caste groups come in for satire, especially the Brahmin caste to which most writers themselves belonged. Finally, humour characterizes the discourse of yogis and counts as a touchstone for their level of accomplishment.

Making Fun of the Vedic Gods

In Hindu history, humour is not an underground counter-current against a dour orthodoxy but has full citizen’s rights. We first encounter it in mythology, where mild humour and satire are often employed, starting with the Rig-Veda. As a collection of hymns addressed by the ‘seers’ to the gods, it is predominantly solemn in tone, but not always.

Some of the speculative hymns of the Rig-Veda, like those on creation (10:40, 10:129), a topic of heavy interpretative efforts by medieval Indian and modern Western scholars, may have been intended as more light-hearted than we tend to presume. The Vedic poets think up a number of creation stories involving gods using various productive crafts, as well as the goddess Adiță, ‘infinity’, who is caught in the act by the seers while delivering (‘crouched with legs spread’, RV 10:72, transl. Doniger 2009, 127) the earth and the quarters of space. Already by having many Creators rather than just one, they avoid prostrating too deeply before Him but remain masters of the cosmological game. They express an early scepticism against all belief systems about the origin of the universe:
Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The gods are later than this world’s production. Who knows then whence it first came into being? He, the first of creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not. (RV 10:129:6–7, transl. Griffith 1889, 633–634)

Are these poets really painting philosophical panoramas or just enjoying their word-play? *Pace* Hindu reformists and other uptight modern apologists who try to impose a prohibitive seriousness on scripture in order to make it more respectable, the seers who composed the Vedic hymns were uninhibited in highlighting the human side of the gods they worship. In between solemn cosmological myths, they offer jocular variations on the gods’ characters. This seems typical of polytheistic religions, witness the hilarious stories about the Greek gods. In particular, there is quite a bit of bawdy explicitness which Christian commentators and modern Hindus deem inappropriate in a sacred text. Victorian translator Ralph H. Griffith concealed it by rendering the afflicted verses in Latin rather than English, and Hindu modernists try to explain it away in contrived symbolical interpretations.

Gods contract marriages in heaven, but also set the trend of adultery. Thus, the Moon marries the Sun’s daughter (RV 10:85, a splendid bridal hymn) but later runs off with the wife of the god *Brhaspati* and then restores her to him (RV 10:109), apparently in metaphorical reference to the fast-moving moon’s successive uniting with one star after another. The goddess Saranyu (Greek Selene, the moon now feminine) leaves her husband, the Sun, for no particular reason, then gives birth to their twin sons (the lunar nodes?) and abandons them too (10:17:2). As with the moon god’s moving from consort to consort, this imagery may have been thought up as a metaphor for an innocent astronomical phenomenon, but then takes on a transgressive life of its own in a living tradition of declamation.

In at least one case, important religious developments in the Vedic-Brahmanical religion can be followed from one funny anecdote to another. The thunder-god Indra, like his counterparts Zeus and Thor, is the protagonist in profound cosmological myths such as his slaying the dragon; but also in stories of illicit love. One of his kinder performances is when he is sought out by the repudiated wife Apâlâ, makes love to her and thereby purifies her of her misfortunes, bestowing fertility on ‘this the part below my waist’ (RV 8:80, transl. Griffith 1889, 454; see Doniger 2009, 125). He is a great consumer of psychedelic brews, which his priests pour into the sacrificial
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Stories of Indra’s affairs, like those of Zeus, read like experimental variations by later poets exploiting the god’s well-established character to entertaining effect. But in the end, the fun turned into destructive mockery: a revolution in religious history from Vedic to classical Hinduism, symbolized by the enthronement of the semi-historical figure of Krishna as deity, sees Indra drowned in humiliating comedy.

In the Itihāsa-Purāṇa literature (‘History’ and ‘Antiquities’, first centuries BC and AD), core part history and larger part myth, Indra is reduced to a pin-pricked old glory. Thus, in one story in the Ramāyāna, he seduces priest Gautama’s wife Ahalyā but is magically castrated by the vengeful husband, only to be restored to his manhood with the help of a pair of pig’s testicles. In another version, he is cursed to have a hundred vaginas, suddenly appearing all over his body. As magical curses cannot be revoked, Brahma whom he asks for help, settles for the second-best solution, viz. filling each vagina opening with an eye. Here, the ancient imagery of a god as hundred-eyed (referring to his omniscience or, more physically, to the stars) is given a new satirical twist. At any rate, Indra lost the authority to be worshipped and disappeared from the pantheon, though the now-popular gods Shiva and Ganesha are heirs to his symbolism.

Making Fun of the Puranic Gods

Loss of authority due to mockery, as in Indra’s case, is the exception, not the rule. Generally, mockery and worship go together. Often Hindu myths are given grave interpretations by modern Hindu moralists and by Western scholars, but when you see them declaimed or enacted before an audience of ordinary Hindus, you find they don’t mind acknowledging the lighter side and taking a laugh at the same gods whom on other occasions they sincerely venerate.

Thus, Vishnu once saved Shiva from his enemies by taking the shape of a seductive woman, Mohini (‘enchantress’), who distracted and then eliminated the enemies (Mahābhārata 1:15–17); but next the relieved Shiva loses his proverbial self-control upon seeing ‘her’, so they have intercourse, and
in a later elaboration on the story, Mohini bears a child called Ayyappan (Sekar 1992, 15). The Hindu public grins at the risqué twist in the story, yet many do go on pilgrimage to Sabarimalai where Ayyappan is worshipped.

The elephant-headed ‘laughing god’ Ganesha is already funny by his iconography, as a pot-bellied sweet-tooth riding a rat. Yet he is a very important god, invoked at the start of all worldly enterprises and religious rituals. He makes us carefree by removing obstacles, the way an elephant uproots trees to create a path through the forest. Here too, a clear distinction can be made between real myths and ad hoc variations with little more purpose than entertainment. The Puranic story introduces Ganesha’s elephant head as a replacement for the human head chopped off when he as a dutiful son had denied all visitors access to his mother Pârvati during her bath, including his irascible father. But an elephant-god clearly has deep prehistoric roots in natural symbolism preceding the cute but contrived head replacement story. That the unassailable animal with its charming gait and brainy forehead knobs should become the laughing god, is logical: he can afford to laugh at what to others are menacing dangers.

The two Epics, the actual focus of living Hinduism (as contrasted with the Vedas, to which lip-service is paid), have their share of humour; especially the most tragic one. The Ramayana, about the liberation of the abducted Sîtâ by her husband Râma, is comparatively serene and disinclined to laughter in spite of its happy ending (at least in the original version; in an extra chapter added later, the happy gains made are lost again, culminating in Sîtâ’s suicide). By contrast, hilarious episodes dot the Mahabharata, the lengthy epic about a feud between princely cousins for the throne, in spite of its predominantly tragic ending, with victory turning sour for all members of the nominally victorious Pândava party.

There may be a link between the tragic Hindu view of history, with successively more sombre eras (the Mahabharata war marking the fall from the second-worst to the worst and most lawless of the four eras), and the punctuation of this story of decline with humorous episodes. Pure comedy is found, for example, in the scenes set inside the magical palace created by the demon Maya for the Pandavas. Their Kaurava cousin/enemies are invited to the palace, and when they enter a room with what looks like a plain floor, they suddenly find themselves stepping and falling into a pool of water. Getting up, they move into another room, which looks like a pool of water, and they walk gingerly with their clothes hitched up, to everyone’s amusement, when it is actually a plain floor. (There is a similar story in the Targum Esther, second century AD, and therefrom also in Qur’ân 27:42, about the Queen of Sheba lifting up her dress when walking on the glass floor in
King Salomon’s palace. The Targum was edited only slightly later than the Mahabharata, and both contain far older oral traditions, so we refrain from speculating on the direction of borrowing, if any.)

Many other incidents follow, but to viewers of the film versions, it will not always be clear which ones are actually in the text and how many are modern embellishments; that’s what you get with a truly living tradition. Indeed, a lot in the *Itihāsa-Purāṇa* literature reads like it was made for cinematic adaptation. Polytheism and idolatry appeal to the human appetite for colour, variety, visual stimulation and entertainment.

A popular theme elaborated by later poets is the private life of the Mahabharata hero Krishna, starting with his first heroic feats when still a baby, then his amours as a youth and later on his husbandly problems in resolving the mutual jealousies of his wives. Thus, he once gives Rukmini a parijata flower, and when Satyabhāmā throws tantrums, he presents her with a whole parijata tree (which he has wrested from Indra in heaven, part of his dethroning Indra). But all the flowers from this tree then fall into Rukmini’s garden, or how jealousy is never rewarded . . . .

The cowherd-prince is the beloved of all milkmaids, even married ones. Once he sees them bathing, grabs the clothes they have left ashore and installs himself in a tree with an excellent view of the girls, who now have no choice but to appear naked before him. Modern Hindu moralists, like the reformist Ârya Samaj movement and Mahatma Gandhi, are annoyed at such scenes and their popularity. But seasoned Hindu preachers give this prank a spiritual twist: the girls are the souls of all sentient beings, their infatuation with Krishna is the souls’ longing for God, their nakedness before him is God’s knowledge of our intimate thoughts, the infidelity of the cowherds’ wives for Krishna’s sake is the soul’s renunciation from their worldly involvements.

At this point, we note an instance of pedantic Brahmin humour. Much of that class is untranslatable:

Classical Sanskrit literature can abound in puns. Such paronomasia, or wordplay, is raised to a high art; rarely is it a *cliché*. Multiple meanings merge into a single word or phrase. Most common are pairs of meanings, but as many as ten separate meanings are attested. (Deszö 2005, 12)

Some of it involves grammatical references, jocular by their out-of-place use. The grammarian Pāṇini, *ca.* 500 BC, laid down a meta-rule that when two rules are in conflict, one should follow the second one, typically the more specific one. In the stories about Krishna’s affair with Râdhâ, this
cowherd’s wife is not sure whether to give in to her passion for him. She asks for advice and is told to apply Panini’s rule: ‘follow the second one’, her newest love.

Episodes of humour abound when the Pandavas are living in disguise in the court of king Virâta, where they are obliged to stay in hiding from the Kauravas for a year. Masquerades and cross-dressing are endless sources of comedy. Krishna and Râdhâ once cross-dress as each other, signifying that they actually become one another: the ultimate consummation of their love. Or as the Bonzo Dog Band ca. 1970 would sing: ‘Kama kama kama sutra with me! / In position thirty-one / it was terrific fun. / In position seventy-two / you were me, and I was you.’

Fables

Humour is a central motif in a literature which Westerners might classify as secular, but which to Hindus is dharmika, a term often translated as ‘religious’, but more precisely referring to the proper way of dealing with any entity in the universe, gods and supernatural beings as well as fellowmen, animals and the elements. Morality and savoir-vivre are the subject matter of the famous fable collections, such as the Pañcatantra, the Jâtaka tales and the Hitopadesha. Animal characters are used to illustrate human foibles and sometimes their remedies, e.g. to teach statecraft to princes too dull for conventional schooling. Some of these fables are already depicted on Harappan vases, third millennium bc (Lal 2002, 114 ff.).

It is helpful to keep the comical or ironical intention in these stories in mind so as to avoid inappropriately serious interpretations. Thus, in contemporary India, countless political and religious orators pompously claim as the core of India’s heritage the motto: Vasudhaiva kutumbakam, ‘The whole world is one family.’ They make it sound as if this is the Hindu equivalent of the Islamic motto: Allahu Akbar. Apart from the utter banality of this one-liner, which could be claimed by any religion that sees all creatures as children of the Creator, it is also an unfortunate choice as authoritative motto because of its original context (see Tiwari 2008). The quoting worthies rarely know the scriptures to which they pay lip-service, and wrongly assume that the phrase is from the Veda or Gita. It is actually from a fable collection, where its thrust sharply differs from its surface meaning.

In the Hitopadesha, a jackal tries to befriend a gullible deer in order ultimately to devour it, but a crow warns the deer, telling it about what happened to animals past who took strangers into confidence without
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checking their true intentions. When the crow is about to dissuade the deer from going out with the jackal, the jackal interrupts him with a sardonic appeal to the oft-cited phrase: ‘“Beware of strangers”, such is the talk of narrow-minded people. To magnanimous people, the whole world is one family.’ The deer then rejects the crow’s warnings and later on gets attacked by the jackal, only to be saved by the crow’s intervention (Narayana 2006, 30 ff.). Sarcastic lesson: he who believes that ‘the world is one family’, is a fool bound to get into trouble; he who disbelieves it, is wise; and he who propagates it, is a knave whom you should avoid like the plague.

Satire

Another large corpus of religion-related humour is the satirical treatment of priests and ascetics in Hindu theatre, poetry and, more recently, novels. Theatre and dance are characterized by a spectrum of rasa-s, ‘flavours’ or ‘moods’, such as the heroic, the serene or the sensual mood, and the hāṣya or comic mood (authoritatively discussed in Visuvalingam 1983). Sanskrit drama has an inevitable ‘jester’ (vidûshaka) or comedian, generally a Brahmin but with the opposite characteristics of the ideal Brahmin: gluttonous (like Ganesha) rather than self-controlled, and speaking vernacular rather than Sanskrit. This tradition has persisted through the ages down to the present. Every folk-drama tradition (Yakshagana of Karnataka and Andhra, Kathakali of Kerala, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Bhavai of Gujarat etc.) has a mandatory jester or jesters; and jokes are cracked at the expense of almost every god, king and sage. Mythological films and commercial dramas also keep up this tradition. So strong is this compulsion that, like the inevitable song-and-dance sequences, at least one comedian figures in almost every Bollywood movie, not excepting horror films.

Even Moghul rule was countered by the invention of ‘Akbar and Bîrbal’ stories, with Muslim emperor Akbar’s Hindu minister Birbal being cast in the role of the witty court jester. Some of the Birbal stories are interchangeable with those of Nasruddin Effendi (or Hodja), the Turkic jester, and given the Moghuls’ part-Turkic origin, this must be a confluence of two comedic traditions.

From Rig-Vedic times onwards, with the romantic dialogues of various couples, e.g. between the seer Agastya and his wife Lopamudra (RV 1:179, in which she successfully implores him to come down from the heights of philosophy and beget progeny), dialogues of divine pairs have been a major source of comedy. Till today, in the Chitrapur abbey at Shirali, Karnataka,
during the annual car procession, a regular ritual is performed by a couple famous for such dialogues, entertaining giggling devotees, where the woman representing goddess Parvati refuses to open the door for her husband, representing Shiva, who has come home late at night after, or so she accuses him, a tryst with another woman. Her accusations, though never explicit, consist of persistent veiled hints, to which he pleads innocence, all in typically rustic Konkani dialogues laced with humour, until at long last he convinces her and is allowed in, to the sound of conches and drums.

Kîrtan, the popular form of musical religious discourse, also has the kîrtan-kâra continuously interjecting both musical interludes as well as satire and comedy throughout the programme, which continues for hours into the night in village temples. This includes references to gods, kings, demons, sages and the heroes, villains and comedians of the Puranic tales they are relating, and also to contemporary politics, personalities, trends and events. The most popular singers are those who entertain their audience the most with their wit and jokes. This tradition is continued by popular god-men and god-women who give similar discourses at densely attended sat-sangs (religious gatherings) and on Aastha and other religious TV channels.

Humour in secular Hindu literature (authoritatively presented in Siegel 1987) forms the upper end of a continuum with popular jokes of the ‘ethnic joke’ type at the expense of Sikhs, Brahmins, Bania merchants and renunciates. In theatre, the renunciate, particularly the Buddhist, became a standard character embodying prudery and hypocrisy (e.g. Bhatta Jayanta: Āgama-dambara, ‘Much Ado about Religion’, ca. 900 AD; see Deszö 2005). He may be shown as cheating on his ascetic vows and fornicating with women, then to declaim a pious sermon about the evil of jealousy to appease the layman whose wife he has consummated. His traditional self-labelling as ‘indifferent’ to pleasure and pain will be given a twist, viz. as being indifferent to the concerns of others. Playwright Shûdraka in his Padmaprâbhrtaka shows a monk as getting a girl pregnant and then washing his hands off his paternal responsibilities by invoking his renunciation of all worldly concerns, solemnly citing the chastity precepts of his monastic Order (Siegel 1987, 211). This is more or less what the Buddha himself did: abandoning wife and child to withdraw from the world into his spiritual quest. But not to let his satire harden into plump condemnation, the playwright lets the narrator ambiguously observe that Buddhism must be great since it remains pure in spite of its countless debauched representatives, just as water in the holy river remains pure regardless of the corpses and debris floating in it.

This type of satire can be directed at others and at one’s own community. Both in literature and in real life, there is plenty of self-relativizing through
jokes about the idiosyncratic traits of one’s own group. At the vulgar level, jokes about sects or castes often merely impute stupidity, just like Pollack or Belgian jokes. But the better-quality jokes bring out the specific characteristics of the group, just as a Scot is mocked for other traits than a Jew. Thus, a Brahmin may be shown making a fool of himself by being too wily; a Sikh by being too energetic.

An example of the latter:

A Sikh claims that Hanumân [the monkey who helped Rama in freeing Sita by defeating her abductor Râvana and setting his capital on fire] was a Sikh. Others reply: “How can that be? Sikhism is centuries younger than the Ramayana!” “Well,” says the Sikh, “here we have someone who does not know the abducted lady and has no quarrel with her abductor. Yet he sets his own tail on fire and burns up not just the enemy’s palace, but a whole city. Who else would do such a thing except a Sikh?!”

It is bad form to react to jokes about your own community in a sour or angry manner. The right way is illustrated in this testimony, related to me by a Hindu friend:

Some non-resident Indian friends visited Delhi. They hired a cab for the day, the driver being an old Sardâr [= Sikh]. On the way, they began cracking Sardar jokes, just to tease the old man. But to their surprise, he remained unperturbed. At the end of the sight-seeing, they paid the cab hire-charges. The Sardar returned the change but gave both of them one rupee extra and said: ‘Son, since morning you have been telling Sardar jokes, and let me tell you, some of them were in bad taste. Still, I don’t mind because you are young blood and are yet to see the world. But I have one request. Give this rupee to the first Sardar beggar that you come across in this or any other city.’ My friend told me: ‘That one rupee coin is still with me. I couldn’t find a single Sardar begging anywhere. A Sardar will do any job with utmost dedication and pride, but he will never beg’ (personal communication with Chocka Lingam 2009).

Brahmin Jokes

Brahmins are the ideological backbone of Hindu society. Their stereotypical defects, pedantry and conceit, are a rich source of satire. They go through a demanding training in ritualism and scriptural knowledge, are very honoured, but are often insecure in their livelihood, being in principle
dependent on royal or civil patronage. When in the Mahabharata, princess Draupadi suffers an insult, has her honour restored and is asked if she wants any additional compensation, she proudly spurns the offer, pleading that she is a Kshatriya (warrior aristocrat), not some begging Brahmin. Till today, Brahmin priests in pilgrimage sites are notorious for pestering pilgrims for alms. Simple living and high thinking is their ideal, but when the bills have to be paid, they must get an income somehow.

Consequently, a good Brahmin joke often combines elements like erudition and religiosity with scheming for an entry into other people’s generosity. Here is an example of an elaborate joke on a Brahmin ascetic, taken from Simhâsan Battîsî, the story cycle of Raja Bhoja, an eleventh-century warrior and philosopher-king. The reader has to be aware that Kailâsha is the Himalayan mountain dedicated to Shiva, whose wife is Pârvatî, ‘she of the hills’; that Shiva and Parvati are united, one half each, in Ardhanarîshvara, ‘half-woman lord’; that Shiva is called Hara, and that he and Vishnu, who is the conqueror of the Dânava demons and is called Hari, are united, one half each, in the synthesis-god Hari-hara; that Shiva carries the moon on his head and a snake around his neck while the river Ganga springs from his hair; that Shiva is the god of wandering ascetics whose only income is what lands in their begging-bowl; that Shiva is also called Ishvara, ‘the lord’, and that his quintessential quality of aishvarya, ‘lordliness’, in effect means ‘opulence’. So, here goes:

Once Bhoja saw a poor elderly Brahmin passing by. Bhoja asked: ‘Wherefrom, oh Brahmana?’ – ‘Returning from a pilgrimage to Kailasha.’ Bhoja inquired: ‘Hope Shiva’s feet are alright?’ – ‘What you ask! Shiva has died.’ Intrigued, Bhoja insisted on an explanation, so the Brahmin recited a verse: ‘His one half had already been seized by the enemy of the Dânava demons. Now the other half is taken by the daughter of the hills. This way the worlds have become devoid of him. His Ganga has gone to merge with the seas, his moon to space, and his snake to the deepest hell. The remainder of his inheritance were his omniscience and opulence, which you have taken, and his begging, which has come to me.’ So, this long-winded exercise in iconography turns out to be a beggar’s appeal to royal generosity.

Today, this type of satire is being permanently enriched in popular media. Let’s consider a few contemporary Brahmin jokes doing the rounds on the internet. Sometimes, the target is the Brahmin’s air of authority, of always being believed at his word:

A neighbour came to Pandit [scholar] Vajpeyi, asking to borrow his cow. “It is out on loan,” the Pandit replied. Just then, the cow snorted loudly inside the stable. “But I can hear it snort, over there,” said the neighbour.
“Whom do you believe,” asked Vajpeyi, “me or a cow?” (A similar story is told about Nasruddin Effendi: Gigliesi and Friend 1982, 87)

A universal joke adapted to the Brahmin stereotype, here in debate with a Rajput, presupposes that the reader knows of the Rajput caste’s belief in their descent from the Shaka or Scythian invaders, who were sun-worshippers (the sun-god Sûrya is depicted with boots on, like a Scythian horseman). So:

The Rajput extols the supremacy of the sun and hence the need for sun-worship. The Brahmin replies: “The sun is not as powerful as you think, it has less power than the moon.” Astonished, the Rajput asks, “How can that be?” so the Brahmin answers, “the moon shines at night, when it is needed. The sun only shines during the day, when it is light anyway!”

Brahmins who are not that gifted yet have to perform the role, become nerds, applying the lessons learned without understanding them. Thus:

Mishra heard that his best friend’s mother had died. When he asked his father how best to offer his condolences, the old man told him to say: “What a loss! She has been a mother to all of us.” And so he did. Some time later, another friend was grieving because his wife had died. Having learned his little lesson well, Mishra let him know: “What a loss! She has been a wife to all of us.”

In spite of their reputation for being the most religious people on earth, Hindus have a healthy scepticism of religion, and some Brahmin jokes deride those people whose immersion in religion makes them strangers to the realities of this world. For example:

Pandit Vajpeyi gets on a bus and asks the conductor, “How long is the trip from Kolkata to Varanasi?” “About 8 hours,” says the conductor. “Okay,” says Vajpeyi, “then how long from Varanasi to Kolkata?” The conductor gets irritated: “It’ll still be about 8 hours, man. Why do you expect a difference?” “Well,” says Vajpeyi, “only 18 days after Dassehra [a religious festival in October] comes Diwali [one in November], but it’s a very long time from Diwali to Dassehra!”

Brahmin jokes acquired a downright nasty edge in the twentieth century, when anti-Brahminism became an important political movement, with striking similarities to anti-Semitism. It left traces in the satirical twists in
Bollywood movies, though these escape the notice of non-Indian viewers. Whereas a Padre or Mullah will be shown as a dignified character, a Brahmin priest is usually ‘an ignorant pot-bellied buffoon, cowardly and mean, lustful and greedy’, or so Hindu observers complain (Tilak 2008, 195).

Yet, just as Jews tell the best Jewish jokes, the best Brahmin satire has been produced by Brahmins themselves, starting with the priests’ self-mockery in the Vedas. Thus, the Chandogya Upanishad (1:12) describes a sacrifice by dogs, ritually compelling the gods to shower them with food, as a satire on the tall claims made by Brahmins for the effectiveness of their rituals. Later, anti-religious philosophers would use this satire as a serious argument against rituals: if you can feed the gods in heaven by burning some food-stuff in the sacrificial fire, why not likewise burn foodstuff right here with the effect of providing food to your brother travelling in the desert (Vrhaspati cited in Chattopadhyaya 2006, 352)?

One of the oldest Vedic hymns (RV 7:103) likens chanting Brahmins to lowing cows, bleating goats and most of all to croaking frogs. On the first day of the rainy season, around summer solstice, after months of deadening heat, the Brahmins celebrate Indra, the god of the monsoon-breaking thunder. At that time, ‘the music of the frogs comes forth in concert’, for the amphibians too rejoice at the arrival of the rains. Why try to deny that Brahmins’ chanting sounds like frogs’ croaking? The comparison frequently recurs in literature down the centuries. But it is benevolent irony, not denunciatory satire, for the hymn asserts that, funny as they may sound, these Brahmins with their chanting ensure good divine vibrations and hence prosperity to society: ‘The frogs give us cows in hundreds and lengthen our lives’.

Some Vedic chanting does indeed consist of non-human language, viz. as an imitation of bird song (Staal 2008, 205–213). In this connection, there is reason to suspect a similarly subhuman explanation for the famous Vedic syllable Aum. A deeply philosophical hymn of the Rig-Veda (1:164) repeatedly discusses ‘the syllable’ all while invoking the image of cows and calves lowing at each other. In later writings, from at least the Mândûkya Upanishad onwards, Aum is given profound explanations, e.g. that it represents the three forms of targeted consciousness (waking, deep sleep, dreaming, as distinct from self-directed consciousness in meditation); or that it is the humming sound which yogis hear in deep meditation; or a vibration massage for the endocrine glands inside the head. But it may well originate as a plain human vocalization of the sacred cow’s natural sound: mooh. By ancient Hindu standards, this irreverent idea does not detract from the syllable’s spiritual significance: the one does not exclude the other.
Political Significance of Hindu Satire

In order to see who has the power in a society, one should find out of whom one cannot make fun unpunished. The record shows that all through Indian history, making fun of the Kshatriya aristocracy and the Brahmin priesthood was a perfectly everyday matter with no threat of punishment attached. That doesn’t mean anything was allowed nor that there were no religious taboos, e.g. killing a cow entailed the gravest punishment. But the realm of the word, at any rate, was entirely free. The Buddha famously gave discourses or entered debates in which he mocked existing religious practices such as animal sacrifice; yet he never incurred even the mildest form of persecution for this. (The two failed attempts on his life stemmed from intrigues among his own disciples, not from ideological criticism.) At 80, he died peacefully from accidental food poisoning.

For many centuries, debates between the sects or schools within Hindu society had testified to Hinduism’s capacious openness to difference and dissent, even when expressed in sharp or irreverent language. This also explains why in the colonial period, when the British introduced modern politics and its concomitant culture of public debate, India could quickly develop a vivid native tradition of political satire, including the modern medium of the cartoon, as a cornerstone of an emerging democratic polity (see Hasan 2007).

Against this background, it is a pity that in recent years, Hindu activists have started making calls for banning offensive books and films. After successful Muslim and Christian campaigns to get books like *The Satanic Verses* and *The Da Vinci Code* banned in India, censorship which Hindus had at first tried to resist (as in Goel 1998), the communal competition for attention and ‘respect’ that seems to characterize multicultural societies has led some Hindus to conclude that they too should respond to mockery with repression. Hence, the recent campaign for banning the admittedly hateful paintings of Hindu gods by Muslim painter M. F. Husain (see Elst 2007, 206–215). During the commotion about the Danish Mohammed cartoons, the Hindu nationalist Bhâratîya Janatâ Party voted in support of a resolution in the Andhra Legislative Assembly against the cartoons, thus establishing its unlikely Muslim-friendly credentials and preparing the ground for future bans on anti-Hindu publications.

This flies in the face of the solid age-old Hindu tradition of tolerance of criticism and satire. Hinduism is indeed under siege, as Hindu nationalists are wont to say, but the enemy is not always where you would expect him.
Yogic Humour

A final instance of Hindu humour is the kind you encounter in the discourses of yogis. This is a far more ‘serious’ type than satire and consolation humour, far more robust, for it is the very heart of the humorous disposition.

Before coming to the point, let us first discard the cases of false yogic accomplishment. Hindus know that many unemployed young men don the ochre robe and set themselves up as ascetics entitled to live off working people’s charity. So naturally, commoners and literary authors have thought up an array of satire about false ascetics, peddlers of deception or dupes of self-deception.

Thus, it is related that when a queen once went out to offer a flower garland to a renunciate sitting with eyes closed under a tree, she did not know the true story of his immersion in deep concentration. She did not recognize him as her former sweeper, who used to clean toilets in the palace. Or if she did, she was impressed that such a low-born person could rise to such spiritual heights. What had actually happened, was this. While on duty in the palace lavatory, he had caught a glimpse of the queen’s buttocks. He was so impressed that when walking home, he thought of nothing except this magnificent marvel of nature. He just kept on going over this vision of beauty with his mind’s eye and couldn’t pay attention to the world around him anymore. So he sat down under a tree to concentrate on nothing else than the unforgettable sight of the queen’s buttocks. Hunger and thirst, heat and cold, the noises around him, the people who kneeled before him to get his divine blessings, none of it reached his attention anymore. Even when the queen approached him, he couldn’t see her face, for his mind was totally immersed in the blissful vision of her other side (recounted in Callewaert 1991, 149–150).

Another hurdle is people’s attraction to dead-end spiritual paths. Thus, ca. 1980 I heard Swami Hariharananda Giri reject the Hare Krishna teaching that one can attain liberation by endlessly chanting ‘Hare Krishna’. He explained: ‘It is like being hungry and expecting to get nurtured by chanting ‘Bread, bread!’ Instead of turning inwards for meditation, they go around shouting ‘Hare’ . . . harre horre horri horrible!’

Now for the real thing. A talk by a yogi on spiritual matters, discussing both the benefits we should aspire to and all the hurdles that life or we ourselves put into our way, is typically very entertaining. Some outsiders are merely annoyed by that invincible smile on the faces of popular contemporary yogis like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar or Baba Ramdev, but to their followers,
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that smile is a mark of authenticity. A humorous disposition is a touchstone for discerning an accomplished yogi from time-servers and wannabes: a true yogi is cheerful and communicates that mood to his audience. He can do so simply by his positive charisma, but in the context of a discourse, he will give the mood some flesh through ironies and light-hearted yet sharp observations on the human condition.

Here is a classic story used by gurus to demonstrate the superiority of practice over theory. A Pandit is crossing the river in a ferryboat, immersed in deep thought. Suddenly he addresses the ferryman: ‘Hey boatman, have you studied grammar?’ The illiterate boatman sheepishly signals no. Taking pity on him, the Pandit comments: ‘Then a quarter of your life has been wasted.’ After remaining pensive for a while, he asks the ferryman: ‘Have you studied philosophy?’ ‘No,’ the ferryman confesses. The Pandit, now stern, flares up: ‘Then half your life has been wasted!’ Soon after, it is the ferryman’s turn to inquire: ‘Hey Pandit-ji, have you studied swimming?’ ‘No.’ ‘Then all your life is wasted! The boat has been damaged and we’re sinking!’

But the real humour of yogis is not in witticisms. When you write down a yogi’s improvised discourse, you may wonder just what was so funny that everybody laughed. The secret is mostly in the lightness of the telling.

The yogic type of humour is likewise found in Buddhism, which is paradoxical given that the Buddha started from the deeply pessimistic premise that ‘all is suffering’. Buddhists and Hindu yogis alike practise detachment and equanimity, a vantage point from which a humorous look at the affairs of the world naturally follows. The Dalai Lama is always cheerful in spite of his dramatic situation as the exiled leader of a nation threatened with extinction. What he says is usually rather predictable, but his discourses are a joy to attend simply because of his good humour.

A leading psychologist imagines how Kāma Sūtra author Vatsyāyana must have thought about his friend, the monk Brahmagupta:

In spite of a life devoted to meditation, prayer and books, Brahmagupta was like many other monks I have come to know and admire who are perpetually cheerful, who laugh easily and loudly, the laughter not springing from a sense of humour but from an evolved spirit of mischief and playfulness. Sometimes, watching the frequent and obvious merriment of these monks, I have wondered whether the Buddha’s message is really about the world being full of pain and sorrow; or perhaps, the Enlightened One has left a secret message for his monks, a cosmic joke which
never palls with any number of re-tellings, which makes them laugh so much. (Kakar 1998, 160)

Though Hinduism has developed a crypto-Buddhist streak denouncing the world and preaching escape from the cycle of incarnation in this vale of tears, the original Hindu outlook, shared by the mass of Hindus uneducated in philosophy, is actually quite enthusiastic about life, celebrating the natural time cycles in the festival calendar along with weddings and other rites of passage. This is not just the stereotypically Pagan worldliness, the lust for life, fame, gain, women and offspring that clearly underlies the ‘do ut des’ Vedic sacrificial cult. It has a profound philosophical dimension.

In the *Taittirîya Upanishad* (2:4–9), joy is described as the fundamental experience of being, in apparent diametrical contrast with the basic dogma of Buddhism. The inner quest as conceived in the Upanishads and Patañjali’s *Yoga Sûtra* is not construed as stemming from a desire to break free from the chain of reincarnation, but merely as an endeavour to free consciousness from its self-oblivion and absorption in external objects. Then the Self rests in the Self, and this is good enough: unlike in Buddhism, the enstasis of consciousness in itself does not have to be a step towards stopping the wheel of Karma.

But the conceptual difference between the Hindu and Buddhist paths of meditation makes little difference to the actual experience of the fruits of meditation. These follow from practice, not from the explanations constructed around it. That is why practising yogis in both traditions will evince a similar joyful outlook. There’s no such creature as a depressed yogi.

**Concluding Explanation**

Recently, Christian thinkers have started floating the unlikely claim that Christian doctrine has made possible the emergence of humour. Indeed, it is asserted (as by Trio 2009, citing German theologian-psychologist Werner Lauer), that ‘the transcendental God concept’ of Christianity created the mental space in which humour can flourish, viz. by desacralizing the world, by breaking with the Pagan view of the world as sacred.

The desacralization or disenchantment of the world is nowadays used to buttress several claims on behalf of Christianity or monotheism, e.g. that the invention of ‘the individual’, of democracy and human rights, and even of science, are all somehow the fruits of monotheism. This desacralization is said to have made the world fit for scientific investigation by objectifying
the world, even though a number of sciences are known to have been started well before the birth of Christianity and well outside the impact of any monotheistic religion. Indeed, when we look more closely, we find that ancient scientists not merely felt unthreatened by the world’s sacredness in treating it as an object for research, they actually favoured the study of precisely those domains of reality that were the most sacred to them.

Thus, the Vedic seers worshipped language as a goddess (Vâk, Bhâratî), ‘yet’ they invented grammar. The Pythagoreans saw numbers as divine, ‘yet’ they developed number theory. Plato considered geometrical shapes as partaking of the divine, and his academy held geometry up as the key to all knowledge. The Babylonian priests worshipped the stars and planets in temples dedicated to Marduk (Jupiter) or Ishtar (Venus), ‘yet’ they were the great pioneers of astronomy. By contrast, the first monotheists, the pre-Christian Israelites, were totally absent from the creation of sciences focused on the various domains of the disenchanted world. They too made their mark, though, but it was in studying the one part of their world that was still effectively ‘enchanted’, viz. their national history as revelation of God’s will, laid down in their scripture, a marvel of ideologized historiography.

So, the claim made on behalf of monotheistic desacralization as the key to free scientific enquiry is simply false. Likewise, the parallel claim that a transcendental God concept is what made humour possible, must also be rejected. Obviously, it is hard to sustain in the face of the observed near-universality of humour, among Greek comedic playwrights and ordinary Pagans of every nation. The Hindu experience also pleads against it.

Here is the world-sacralizing polytheistic idolatrous religion par excellence, and it has a tradition of humour as rich and variegated as its pantheon. Its gods are not radically distant or transcendental, they are close to man. Conceptually distinct from them, there is also an impersonal principle of the Absolute, the Brahman, but it is nirguna, ‘without qualities’. It has no personality, no iconography, hence is not worshipped in temples nor made the object of jokes, for Sanskrit comedy focuses its eye for laughter on its protagonists’ personality traits. The gods, by contrast, by having personalities, have a lot in common with man, so they are fit as objects of worship in theatrical temple rituals, and for the same reason they are fair game for humorists. There is plenty of frustration and suffering in Hindu society, and social taboos that are no laughing matter, but man’s relation to the gods is a realm of freedom where laughter is at home.

In Hindu religious sensibility, man is at the centre of the pantheon. The more gods there are, the less man feels small next to them and the less reason he has to fight for them, hence the tradition of tolerance regarding
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laughter and criticism. In the Mahabharata, Krishna sums up his teachings thus: ‘I tell you this, the secret of the Brahman: there is nothing higher than man’ (Shânti parva 299.20). At a refined level of understanding, the gods are seen as only projections of the mind, so man’s own consciousness becomes the focus of religious attention in the different yoga traditions. Experience teaches that from the yogi’s establishment in the Self, serenity flows naturally, with some humour in its wake.¹

Notes

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Bibliography


In an article on the uses of laughter in Greek culture, S. Halliwell suggests that the rich trove of descriptive terms available for describing and assessing laughter in ancient Greece can be arrayed along a continuum characterized by playful laughter at one pole and consequential laughter at the other (Halliwell 1991, 280–81). Playful laughter is essentially laughter ‘as a mechanism for release or relaxation’, laughter that is ‘exempt from the sphere of practical effects and repercussions’ (ibid. 1991, 283). Consequential laughter aims at a definite result, and in the classical Greek context, that result is intended to control human behaviour by ‘causing embarrassment or shame, signally hostility, damaging a reputation, contributing to the defeat of an opponent, delivering public chastisement’ (ibid. 1991, 283). In other words, ‘arousing feelings which may not be shared by all concerned, and which typically involve some degree of antagonism’ (ibid. 1991, 283).

Not surprisingly, in addition to playful laughter to release tension, consequential uses of laughter to control behaviour can be widely observed in a tightly structured society such as Japan’s. There, where the maintenance of face is particularly important, the threat of being the object of laughter is an especially potent means of controlling behaviour, and children are cautioned from an early age to conform to socially accepted standards lest they be laughed at (warawareru). Perhaps because of the culturally conditioned fear of being singled out and laughed at, satire directed against others is exercised with caution in Japanese society and is not often found in arenas of public life such as television shows. But traditional Japanese culture also offers numerous examples of instrumental uses of laughter that depart from the antagonistic, corrective laughter of classical Greece.

One of the best known instances of the positive consequential effects of laughter appears in section 16 of Book I of the Kojiki (Chronicle of Ancient Events, 712 AD), where the Sun Goddess Amaterasu shuts herself up in a
Laughing Priests in the Atsuta Shrine Festival

cave to sulk after her brother the Storm God Susanoo has destroyed her rice fields and defiled her celestial palace by flinging a piebald colt flayed backward through the roof of the weaving room. Alarmed at the eternal night that descends upon the heavenly plain, the eight hundred gods gather outside the cave and attempt to lure the Sun Goddess out. They are unsuccessful until the goddess of fertility, Ame no Uzume no Mikoto, begins dancing on an upturned tub, stamping her feet resoundingly, ‘pulling out the nipples of her breasts’, and pushing down her skirt to expose her private parts, causing the eight hundred myriad deities to roar with laughter (Chamberlain 1981, 64). Her curiosity awakened, Amaterasu opens the door of her cave and the Heavenly Strong of Hand Male Deity takes her hand and pulls her out and sunlight returns to the land. Ame no Uzume no Mikoto’s ribald dance which leads to the opening of the cave is often said to be the first performance of kagura (literally, ‘god music’), the ritualistic dances performed for the deities in Shinto shrines to augur in and open up the new year.

The ancient Japanese sensed a magical power in laughter, which they believed had the power to shake and release the spirit of the kami. Vestiges of this belief are found in extant kami rites in which elements of buffoonery, comic words and gestures, and parodic masks and wigs have traditionally been employed to move the kami soul (Higuchi 1982, 114–115). In many of these rites, particularly ones related to the agricultural cycle, laughter in combination with sex has been valued. Sexual words and gestures have been added to the power of laughter, together with drums, bells and songs to rouse the spirit of the kami of the rice paddies and fields and ensure the harvest of the five grains and the birthing of many progeny.  

Ancient agricultural societies had many opportunities to observe the connections between the opening of seeds, buds and wombs, and the ensuing germination, birth and growth of plant and animal life, and the idea of a connection between the forceful expulsion of breath in laughter and opening up and fertility is captured in the languages and myths of a number of pre-modern civilizations. In Japan, the connection between laughter and fertility is underlined in the etymological root of the Japanese verb ‘to laugh’, warau, which according to Higuchi Kiyohito, is found in the associated verb ‘to crack open’, wareru. Significantly, the Japanese verb ‘laugh’ was once written with the Chinese character for ‘mouth’ affixed to the side of the Chinese character to write the verb ‘to blossom’ or ‘to bloom’ (saku).

In her study of sexuality and laughter in the history of religion, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus points out an episode in an Egyptian myth that is remarkably similar to the Japanese myth. Mocked by the god Baba, the sun god Re walks out on the council of gods, lies down and sulks in his chambers.
The subsequent freezing of life is lifted when Hathor, goddess of sexuality and birth, stands naked before him and makes him laugh. Laughter provoked by the flaunting of female sexuality is also a fructifying force in Greek myth, in which the goddess Demeter, mourning the loss of her daughter, veils herself, sits down and refuses to eat or drink. Demeter is roused from her inertia by the obscene jokes of the servant girl Iambe, ‘the incarnation of the ritual jokes of an indecent character’ (Gilhus 1997, 19, 34). The close connection between laughter and sexuality is found in ancient Hebrew tradition as well, in which only one vowel sound distinguished the Hebrew root word for laughter from the word for sexual intercourse (Sanders 1995, 40). In modern times, this nexus of laughter, sexuality and fecundity was famously explored by Mikhail Bakhtin in his oft-quoted study of medieval carnival: *Rabelais and His World*.

**Japanese Laughing Festivals**

The pattern of Ame no Uzume no Mikoto’s dance and the ensuing laughter of the gods that leads to the opening of the cave and the assurance of fertility and the continuation of life are replicated in modern Japan in several Shinto rituals. At the Niu Shrine festival in Kawanabe Town, Wakayama Prefecture, dances and laughter are orchestrated to cheer up the despondent deity, the goddess Niutsu Hime no Mikoto, who overslept on the day that the 8,000,000 gods of Japan gathered for their annual convention in Izumo, and, in her pique at missing the party, hid herself. The Niu Shrine laughing festival centres upon the efforts of villagers who gather and make a racket with laughter and shouts of ‘Laugh! Laugh!’ to rouse the deity from her depression. The festival takes place in October, the ‘godless month’ when the deities are all said to leave their homes for Izumo on the Japan Sea Coast. In a kind of laughter therapy for the kami, twelve male members of the shrine parish (One for each month of the year and a thirteenth member for intercalary years) are selected to lead processions to the Niu Shrine. Participants dressed in wildly bright, assorted colours and with faces painted white like clowns carry aloft offerings of fruits and vegetables on skewers as they walk, laughing (their laughter is almost a shout) to the accompaniment of bell ringers and dancers. Celebrants hold aloft signs inscribed with the character for ‘laugh’. Onlookers join in with shouts and laughter, and the festival lasts from morning to night (Nomura 1993, 40–44).

The Omata Village in the Hōfu City suburb in Yamaguchi prefecture is the site of a laughing ritual dating back to the twelfth century. It is held on
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a Sunday in early December every year by the descendants of the founders of Omata Village. Goh Abe distinguishes between three types of laughter used in this festival: (1) those that give thanks for and celebrate the year’s harvest; (2) those that pray for the next year’s good harvest; and (3) those that laugh away misfortunes accumulated during the year (Abe 2006, 46).

In his writings about this festival, Higuchi Kiyohito emphasizes not the intentionality of the laughers but the effect of the laughter upon the kami, who are attracted and entertained by the sound of laughter (Higuchi 1982, 100). The act of imitating something that another person is doing is sometimes inherently funny and can provoke laughter, and in this ritual, which is presided over by a Shinto priest and begins with a drum roll, selected celebrants holding sacred sakaki branches against their chests face one another, eyeing each other and breathing in unison as they laugh three times together. An elder monitors their laughter by striking the bottom of a metal basin once if the laughter is insufficient, and many times in succession if their laughter is deemed successful, whereupon the others gathered around cheer, applaud and laugh. The event is lubricated with generous rounds of sake and food. Participants who may feel embarrassed at the beginning of the ritual report that the laughing produces within them a feeling of solidarity with each other, with their ancestors and with the kami (which is likely the clan deity which at one time was regarded as being the same as the clan ancestor) (Nomura 1993, 39).

Although the avowed purpose of the festival laughter is to give thanks for the harvest and to petition the kami for a good coming year, the immediate, emotional benefit appears to be the feeling of solidarity with the communal body of the village and the strengthening of their faith in the kami that the experience of laughing together creates. Celebrants say that their ‘heads become empty’ and that the laughter seems to fill every part of their bodies (Nomura 1993, 39). They cease to exist as separate entities functioning on a rational level. Losing critical consciousness, they feel that they have become people of old, united with the kami. In addition to promoting a feeling of oneness with humans and god, the laughter also serves a purgative function (in keeping with its power to unblock, loosen and open up the body) and the ritual banishes the ills of the old year.

Laughter at the Atsuta Shrine

In Japan, laughter is not only incorporated into local village folk festivals to ensure fertility and promote communal solidarity, but is a part of an annual rite at an important high-ranking national shrine where it implicitly asserts
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the integrity of Japanese identity. In contrast to the village folk festivals, held by local lay persons, the Ohoho matsuri, or Laughing Festival of the Atsuta Shrine in Nagoya in Aichi prefecture in central Japan, is conducted solely by shrine priests (kannushi). It is a significant festival not only because of the high status of the shrine, which is patronized by members of the imperial family, but because of the way in which the story at the root of the festival is connected to the myth of the Sun Goddess and the Storm God. Founded in the fifth century, the Atsuta Shrine is a replica of the Inner Shrine (Naiku) of the imperial Ise Shrine where Amaterasu is enshrined. It is said to house the sacred sword, one of the three sacred regalia of the imperial line. The story of the sword is central to the Ohoho matsuri, according to the legend passed down in the Legends of the Shrine’s Origins (Owari Atsuta Daijingu Engi).

The origin of the sword is to be found in the story of Susanoo, who is banished to Izumo on the Japan Sea coast after desecrating Amaterasu’s palace. In the myth, Susanoo redeems himself by slaying a dragon that is about to devour the daughter of a pair of terrestrial deities. In stabbing the dragon’s tail, he discovers therein a sword, perceives it to be of divine origin and sends it up to heaven to his sister Amaterasu. Later, when Amaterasu’s grandson (and founder of the imperial line) descends to earth, he carries the heavenly sword, along with the two other sacred regalia, the jewel and the mirror (the latter of which is later installed at the Ise Shrine). In Shinto belief, inanimate objects as well as animate beings can be the shintai or seats of living gods. This sword bears the majestic name Ame no Kusanagi no On-Tsurugi, the Heavenly Grass-Cutting Sword, and is the main deity enshrined at the Atsuta Shrine (whose characters mean, literally, ‘Burning Field Shrine’).

The myth of Susanoo’s exile to Izumo, located across from the Korean peninsula, hints at early relations between the Koreans and the Japanese. The myth, for instance, contains references to the way in which the hairs in Susanoo’s beard become forests on the Korean coast. The complex, often fraught relations between the inhabitants of the archipelago and the dwellers of the peninsula are highlighted even more directly and pointedly in the legend that underlies the Ohoho matsuri. In that legend, the motif of sibling rivalry between the Sun Goddess and the Storm God gives way to a broader, more generalized anxiety about the competitive role of continental players in Japanese political affairs. According to this legend, in 669 AD during the reign of Emperor Tenchi, the Korean Buddhist monk Dōkyō crept into the building of the Atsuta Shrine where the imperial sword was kept and abducted it with the intention of taking it to the kingdom of Silla.
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(known as Shiragi in Japanese) on the Korean coast. But the wily sword gave him the slip during the night and miraculously returned to the shrine. The next time Dōkyō tried to steal the sword, he managed to board a ship. But while he was at sea, a storm arose and he lost his bearing and drifted back to Japan, whereupon the sword declared itself in a tirade:

I am the sacred regalia sword of Atsuta. I was kidnapped by the bewitching monk who tried to take me to Silla. He wrapped me in seven robes but I slipped out and returned to the shrine. Later, the monk wrapped me in nine robes and I was unable to escape.

Hearing the sword speak, the people searched for it. Dōkyō tried to throw it away to avoid arrest, but the sword would not leave his side. Dōkyō finally gave himself up, and the sword was taken to the imperial court in Kyoto. Seventy years passed. When the retired Emperor Temmu (reigned 673–686 AD) fell ill, a divination was held and it was revealed that this illness was the result of a curse called down by the sword Kusanagi no tsurugi. The Emperor immediately issued an order that the troublesome, avenging sword be returned to the Atsuta Shrine. The joy of the Atsuta Shrine priests upon recovering the sword gave birth to a festival of thanksgiving, which now takes place in the morning of the fifth of May, and to another festival which takes place the night before in the evening of the fourth. This evening ritual is the Ohoho matsuri, known by the shrine priests as the Eyōdo shinji (the Eyōdo rite), an idiosyncratic reading of the Chinese characters with which the name is written. The same characters, which are the ones for ‘drunken laughing man rite’, can also be read as Suishōjin shinji and can indicate either the elation produced by laughter or the laughter produced by drinking. The avowed purpose of the laughing festival is to attract the attention of the kami, and, through laughter, to shake the kami spirit (tama) and lure the kami down to earth so that it may be present at the rituals held on the fifth to commemorate the return of the sword.

The story of Dōkyō and the sword Kusanagi no tsurugi stands in counterpoint to and in some ways mirrors the motifs of the well-known national myth of Amaterasu and Susanoo. Its themes of violation, flight and recovery repeat the more famous narrative’s themes of transgression, exile and redemption. Whereas the feminine principle is dominant in the earlier myth through the performance of Ame no Uzume no Mikoto and the status of the Sun Goddess, it is literally concealed from view in the Ohoho matsuri, where the masculine principle, manifested in the phallic symbolism of the sword, dominates the narrative of the festival.
According to extant documents, the Ohoho matsuri dates back at least to 1680, but the rite undoubtedly existed before then in a more elaborate form. Many of its folk aspects would have changed over time and would have been greatly simplified during the Meiji period (1868–1912), when Shinto was reorganized, rationalized and brought under bureaucratic control during the State Shinto movement (Nomura 1993, 36–37). In its present form, the rite begins at twilight, ‘a transitional moment when structures are the most fluid, when the light appears so changeable that ordinary objects can no longer be easily discerned (. . .) when normal definitions begin to fall away’ (Sanders 1995, 155). In the dark, the broad, dense green canopy of the venerable shrine trees in the middle of Nagoya City takes on the appearance of a giant, black floating island (Nomura 1988, 40). Performed by seventeen priests, the ritual is deliberately organized in a way to create an air of mysteriousness (shimpisa). After undergoing ritualistic purification in the Purification Hall, the priests assemble in an outdoor courtyard faintly illuminated by lanterns. As night begins to fall, they file by lantern light to a nearby outdoor purification site where they line up for a second purification ceremony performed by a priest who scatters water over them with small branches. They file next to the first of four small shrines located within the large Atsuta Shrine complex, where the first of four laughing rituals will take place. The electric lights that normally illuminate the pathways of the grounds are extinguished and lanterns swaying by their sides guide them as they walk to the Yōgōnoma Shrine, where it is believed that the kami will make its descent. They assemble before this small wooden shrine and begin the rite to summon the kami. Lanterns are extinguished, plunging the priests in complete darkness, a darkness that is as an extension of the world of the gods.

The rite consists of receiving mysterious masks in cloth bags from a flute player, who draws the masks from a wooden chest. The exact number of masks is kept secret, in keeping with the atmosphere of mystery. Proceeding in two lines, the priests advance two by two to his side, crouch down to receive a bagged mask (or not), which they place in their hanging kimono sleeves. It is forbidden to look upon the masks, and the priests are only allowed to touch them through the cloth bags in which they are carried. When the last two priests advance to the front of the shrine and squat down, the other priests advance and make a half circle around them. The priest on the right taps the mask he carries three times and utters ‘o ho’ in a subdued voice. The priest on the left taps his mask and laughs in the same
quiet way. The first priest taps his mask as before and laughs again. Then the two priests tap their masks in unison and laugh quietly. The flutist blows five or six high-pitched notes. Then, all the priests laugh loudly three times: ‘o ho ho.’ The priests then file to the next shrine, the Kaguraden, and then to the third shrine, Hakkengū. In the dark, those who are carrying masks in their sleeves cannot be distinguished from those who are not. The visual confusion is increased by the fact that some of the priests who do not carry masks in their sleeves deliberately swing their sleeves as though they do.

The mask, which no one ever sees, is referred to as a god mask (kami men) and is said to be that of Otafuku, the mask of a lusty woman with a low, narrow forehead, red lips and full round cheeks that is often displayed aloft at festivals. The Otafuku mask is faintly erotic, in a coarse, humorous way, and the suggestion of the erotic is enhanced by the fact that it is to be fondled through cloth but not seen by the priests. The soft, rounded syllables of the ‘o ho ho’ laugh, uttered quietly after the mask is tapped, suggests a bewitching woman’s laugh, and contributes to the suggestion of playful eroticism. The element of sexual play was evidently more pronounced in pre-modern times, when, according to shrine records, a man dressed as a woman and wearing a woman’s mask, appeared at the rite (Nomura 1993, 38).

The Saisetsu Gate, where the last laughing ritual takes place, is also called the ‘gate that does not open’. According to legend, it was through this gate, located on the eastern side of the shrine grounds, that Dōkyō passed carrying the stolen sword. Since then it has been regarded as a gate of misfortune and never opened. At this site, the celebrants return the masks to the flutist, who places them back in the wooden chest, where they will be shut up until the following year.

The next morning, dozens of priests and hundreds of laymen dressed in ancient court costumes gather to celebrate the return of the sword. The sun-lit spring leaves of the many ancient trees in the large park-like grounds of the shrine stand out in brilliant sharp relief in contrast to the shadowy presences of the preceding night’s ritual, and the life of the festival is accentuated by the bright array of colours of the period costumes. The spirit of the sword is carried in a mikoshi or palanquin, accompanied by a long procession from the main building to the West Gate, which faces Kyoto, site of the ancient capital. There a lengthy, formal ritual combines thanks for the sword’s return with a divination and wishes for the emperor’s health.

It is believed that the laughter in the Ohoho matsuri which today is restrained was far livelier and rowdier in the past. The festival, and the laughter, have come to be highly stylized and aestheticized, and today, the
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laughter is more a symbolization of laughter than laughter itself (Nomura 1993, 37). But together with the setting in which it takes place and the aura of high ritual and deep import with which it is conducted, it awakens a sense of the mysterious power that the ancient Japanese once associated with laughter. Its magical ambience is heightened by the fact that the rite is conducted on an early spring night when the magnificent trees and plant life of the park-like shrine grounds are burgeoning with new life. Awareness of air and sound – the medium in which laughter lives – is heightened by the fact that one’s visual perceptions are minimized in the dark, so that while it is difficult to see what the priests are doing, it is easy to be caught up in the sensations of sound and touch that surround the celebrants. As the priests file from one shrine to another, one’s ears are filled with the sounds of dozens of wooden clogs churning up the loose gravel of the paths and the soft swishing sounds produced by legs moving in loose silk hakama trousers. The visual sense that makes possible the discernment of differences and facilitates intellectual assessment is minimized, while the haptic and auditory senses that enable one to ‘feel’ oneself surrounded by the invisible Other, as well as with the physically present but visually indistinguishable others, are maximized. As Barry Sanders points out,

air and sound, both of which live and die in the world of evanescence, so ephemeral and fleeting, symbolize not only the temporary nature of life but the fact that the miracle of life, our breath, comes from the invisible world. (Sanders 1995, 42)

In the Ohoho matsuri, it is in darkness that the laughter that shakes the spirit (tama) of the kami and forms a bridge between humans and kami is performed. Darkness, rather than illumination, is the medium of the kami. In darkness, humans access the invisible, supernatural forces of the world.

The laughter of the gods that watched Uzume perform her bawdy dance before the cave is spontaneous, noisy and erotically charged. The laughter of the priests who perform the Ohoho matsuri is subdued and carefully measured. However, in both cases, laughter marks the restoration of balance and order. Laughter in the Kojiki draws the Sun Goddess from her cave and returns sunlight, fertility and life to the earth. Laughter at the Atsuta Shrine festival celebrates the return of the heavenly sword. Stolen from its divinely decreed home by a renegade Korean monk, the sword symbolizes sacred authority and its return marks the re-establishment of political and spiritual balance and order in the land.
It is possible to imagine that behind the story of the sword’s abduction, one finds the concerns of a people anxious to assert their political identity at a formative time when Japanese, Korean and Chinese identities were less clearly defined than they later became in the modern era. As scholars have argued, the movements of ideas, artefacts and peoples from the Asian continent to the Japanese islands were so numerous and frequent in the fifth century that it was difficult to discern Japan, Korea and China as strictly separated, distinct entities. The imperial court was very anxious about the possible destabilizing effects of intercourse between its members and foreign visitors. The figure of Dōkyō, the Korean monk of the foreign religion of Buddhism, would re-emerge in a later narrative as an even more dangerous threat when stories of his nefarious influence on the government in Nara through his illicit sexual relations with the Yamato queen led the court to relocate to Kyoto in order to better protect its interests. In the Atsuta Shrine legend, anxiety about foreign influence crystallizes in a story about a Korean monk’s ability to abduct one of the sacred Japanese regalia. The recovery of the sword led to a celebration with ritualized laughter that marked not the opening of a cave but the closing of a dangerously vulnerable gate and the reinstatement of a national order.

Unlike ancient Greece, deities in pre-modern Japan were not often depicted as having the power to laugh at humans or to use them as their playthings. Rather, it was the humans, through their words and deeds and especially their laughter, who possessed the agency to summon the gods. Together with laughter, play (asobi) was essential to Shinto. Priests and parishioners worshipped kami by singing and dancing to celebrate and entertain kami (kami asobi) and play and laughter were incorporated into kami worship. Laughter, which has the power to rouse the kami and bring the kami and their blessings to the world of human beings, plays an essential role in the central myth of the Sun Goddess. Today, in the Ohoho matsuri, laughter has become highly refined and aestheticized, but the ritualistic play of synchronized gestures and movements, of swinging bags filled with kami masks (to rouse the kami spirit) lives on.

Notes

I am greatly indebted to Professor Naofusa Hirai, former Director of the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics at Kokugakuin University, for introducing me to the chief priest of Atsuta Shrine in the summer of 1998 and for arranging my meeting with the priests of the shrine in 2000, when I was invited to witness the Eyōdo ritual on the eve of May 4 and attend the festival on May 5.
An idea of the seriousness with which being laughed at may be taken in Japan and the implications for international relations can be found in Zipangu (ed.), *Japan Made in the U.S.A—Warawareru Nihonjin [The Japanese Who are Laughed At]*, New York: Zipangu, 1998.


3 Y. Shinoda, *Atsuta Jingū*, Nagoya: Atsuta Jingū-Gocho, 1988, 43. Information about the shrine, the legend of the sword and the laughing festival can be found in this volume published by the shrine.

4 This interpretation was given by the Head Priest (gūji) of Atsuta Shrine in an interview conducted in the summer of 1998. Japanese grammar does not distinguish between singular and plural and in describing the reason for the Ohoho laughing festival, the gūji did not indicate whether the deity in question was the one kami, Ame no Kusanagi no On-Tsurugi, or a host of kami.

5 It will be noted that the terms festival and ritual are used somewhat interchangeably in this article, as they are often two sides of the same coin in Shinto practice. Festival, or matsuri, is the noun form of the verb matsuru, which means to enshrine or celebrate a deity. This is done with rituals, which often entail singing. This was underlined by the priest assigned to be my guide on the evening of the Eyōdo ritual.

6 The head shrine priest whom I interviewed on May 3, the day before the Ohoho matsuri, made light of my overly serious approach to seeking definitive answers to questions raised by the maddening vagueness of the shrine documents that I had been relying upon to understand the rite. I was thus unable to obtain a definitive answer to my question concerning the number of masks involved. The priests suggested that no one sees the masks because they are kept in bags and no one knows their exact number for sure.

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Chapter 5
Humour on Religion in the
Greco-Roman World
Paul Schulten

*The secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow; there is no humour in heaven.*
(Mark Twain)

*For the gods love a good joke too.*
(Plato)

**Introduction**

In some of his verses the Roman poet Propertius (ca. 50–15 BC) makes fun of the Egyptian goddess Isis.\(^1\) He claims to be angry at Isis, because on the occasion of her festival his beloved Cynthia has to be chaste for ten days and he resents that. According to him, Isis will grow horns again, like her former self. By this he alluded mockingly to the Greek representation in mythology of Isis as Io, transformed into a cow by an amorous Zeus intent on escaping detection by his spouse Hera. More mockery directed against the goddess is to be found in his calling her bitter, in disregard of any name her worshippers might want to give her.\(^2\) A great variety of names was precisely one of the characteristics of the new Hellenistic gods who had entered the Roman world from the East during the late Republican period. Isis Myrionyma (Isis with the myriad names) was such a common expression that it became a stereotype (Versnel 1990, 50 note 32). Isis, who was called ‘unique and everything’ by her followers, was one of those new gods belonging to the group known as the henotheistic category.\(^3\) Propertius seems to be making fun of the almighty power expressed in all the names given her. At the same time he is mocking the place Isis occupied in the Greco-Roman Pantheon in the form of the Argolid princess Io forced to flee the wrath of
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Hera in bovine disguise. The strange adventures of the anthropomorphic Olympian gods are here the base of his playful remarks, seemingly different in kind – one directed against her total power, the second aimed at her appearance as the mythological Io, taking her by the horns, so to speak, as a cow and lunar symbol at the same time.

Throughout its history the Greco-Roman world experienced significant variations in religion. Animistic, polytheistic, henotheistic and monotheistic beliefs replaced each other when not existing side by side. This essay is an attempt to find answers to the following questions: in this society, did the humour on religion, its gods, or their servants change when the religion changed – more exactly, was religious humour responsive to alterations in religious beliefs and practices? Secondly, how should this humour be interpreted? Finally, how did ancient humour survive the fall of the Roman Empire in the West? For this, we can seek help from the humanists of the Renaissance whose studious imitations of the classics allow us to discern not only what was funny for the Romans but also what remained so long after their world disappeared. It should be kept in mind that the classical perception of humour – a mixture of Platonic, Aristotelian and Ciceroian thoughts on the subject – pointed to the expression of the unexpected. The abnormal elicited laughs: inversion, incongruities, marks of inferiority or ugliness, or all of the above at once.

Olympian Burlesque

Poking fun at the polytheistic world of the Greek gods is common in ancient humour. In the Latin comedies of Plautus (ca. 250–184 BC), for instance, persons of all classes often belittle the gods (Tolliver 1952, 55). Plautus’ plays are situated in Greece which might have made these expressions of contempt more palatable to Romans, but the audacity is still remarkable (See Segal 1968). In the extant literature of the later Roman era it was probably Lucian (ca. 120–200) who most satirized or rather parodied the gods (See Branham, 1989; Gilhus 1997, 48–55). That must have been one of the reasons for his enormous popularity among the humanists. Lucian probably found his inspiration in the satires of Menippus of the third century BC. A sort of Olympian burlesque, laughing at the expense of the anthropomorphic gods, can be traced at least as far back as the Old Comedy of Athens in the fifth century BC. The comedies of Aristophanes (ca. 446–386) provide numerous outstanding examples. The playwright made jokes on most of the gods with the exception maybe of Apollo and
Athena. Zeus, for instance, appears often in hilarious contexts, mostly in connection with his amorous adventures, Hera’s unleashed anger sometimes intensifying the comical effect.

The comic treatment of Zeus’ sweet tooth for women had a long tradition in Antiquity. It is already present in the Iliad, in the famous comical story of Hera’s deceitful seduction of Zeus, complete with the enumeration of some of the great god’s extramarital adventures. Aristophanes contributes additional humorous takes on Zeus’ love affairs in the argumentation of ‘Unjust Reason’ in his comedy The Clouds. About 200 years later, in Amphitruo, which casts gods in the main parts, Plautus shows Zeus tricking the famously virtuous queen Alcmene by deceitfully assuming the form of her husband Amphitryon. The scene must have been popular for it is often represented visually. See, for instance, the South-Italian phlyax vase of the fourth century BC, depicting Zeus, dressed as a comical actor and carrying a ladder, ready to climb up a lady’s window, with his helper Hermes dutifully holding a torch to provide light. The scene may come from a now lost Greek comedy that inspired Plautus to write Amphitruo. As can be expected, the play contains a joke on Zeus’ sometimes strained relations with Hera as well. Hermes/Mercury tells the Olympian chief: ‘just let the “lady up yonder” learn of your performances here and you would rather be Amphitryon than yourself.’ The jealousy of the wife, we are to understand, only enhances and gives extra flavour to the comical aspects of adultery. Lucian follows up with many playful allusions to the Olympian’s infidelities and his wife’s reactions: in his Dialogues of the Gods Zeus complains to Eros that women never fell for his looks, but that he always had to assume another form. And he peevishly says to Hera: My, what a memory you have for these little outings of mine.

A not so distant second to marital infidelity, scatological humour, very popular in comedy too, is not beneath the dignity of the Olympians either. Although Dionysus, protagonist in Aristophanes’ Frogs claims at the beginning of the play not to like this sort of jokes, he soon indulges in them, farting in the ferry to the Underworld and soiling his pants at various occasions.

Critique on ‘Low’ Humour on Religion

Other gods were not thought above this sort of fun either, although both the Greeks and the Romans certainly deemed scatological humour beneath the urbane dignity of gentlemen. In Petronius’ Satyricon (ca. 27–66) one way to expose Trimalchio as a non-gentleman is to point to his eager embrace of flatulence. Cicero (106–43), who in a letter to his friend
Pactus blames the Stoic school of philosophy for stating that noisy farts should be as free as belches, seems to agree heartily with that.\textsuperscript{22}

The above-mentioned remarks by Dionysus seem to indicate that by the fifth century BC there was already an awareness of difference between lower and more urbane humour. Buffoonery is very much criticized by Plato as well as later by Aristotle and seen as behaviour unfit for a respectable citizen.\textsuperscript{23} In this light, it is interesting to note that the two well-known instances when Homer mentions the unquenchable laughter of the gods concern forms of lower humour. In the first book of the Iliad the gods are very much amused by Hephaestus’ limping, which comes across as the moves of a buffoon; the same holds for the practical joke he plays on Ares and Aphrodite in the Odyssey.\textsuperscript{24}

Keeping in mind that Homer constituted their main reading, Plato wanted to exclude these texts from the education of promising youths. According to him it was a big mistake to expose their innocent minds to texts that misrepresented the nature of gods and heroes.\textsuperscript{25} He also seriously questioned whether his ideal society should make place for performances of tragedies and especially of comedies.\textsuperscript{26} He was obviously resigned to the impossibility of avoiding such plays entirely, but wanted to see mimicry and buffoonery left to performances by slaves or hired aliens.\textsuperscript{27} Poking fun at the gods was anathema to him and he feared the atheists’ propensity to make jokes about the practice of ritual sacrifices as vehicles of forgiveness for crimes committed. Worse, jokes could too easily help those atheists, devoid of inhibitions regarding gods, sacrifices and oaths, to make converts to their own views.\textsuperscript{28}

It is very obvious that Plato frowned upon the many jokes on gods and religion circulating in his time. Indeed, he had a lot to worry about considering that the ridicule did not stop at infidelities and bodily noises. Thievery and deception, another frequent topic for jokes, was applied to the divine world as well. The Homeric hymn to Hermes, which has the god of thieves precociously stealing the cattle of his half-brother Apollo while only a mere infant, is an early example.\textsuperscript{29} Popular humorous taunts against effeminacy or gluttony were often used in comedy and in more than one case directed against semi-god Heracles.\textsuperscript{30} Even more problematic, gods were also mocked for their greed and for their needy dependency on oracles and sacrifices, which in turn derided these rituals themselves.\textsuperscript{31}

Various Explanations

Many later classicists shared Plato’s particular dislike for irreverence towards the gods. Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609) was apparently shocked by
stories like these and so were many others later in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They found it hard to understand why their beloved and revered poets made allowances for vulgar humour and blasphemous posturing. William Gladstone (1809–1898), classical scholar and prime minister, tried to solve this problem for the Iliad and the Odyssey by arguing that Homer had lowered himself to gratify the vulgar tastes of his audience. In the beginning of the twentieth century the American classicist Joseph Hewitt found a more elevated excuse for Aristophanes: his mockery of the gods should be seen as the mark of true faith, a faith so strong that it could not and would not be tied down. Such jesting, therefore, would not imply any sort of disrespect.

In a more recent study about laughter and religion Ingvild Gilhus questions the motives of Aristophanes, especially with regard to his play *The Frogs* (Gilhus 1997, 38). No longer compelled to find excuses for the Ancients’ tastes, she disagrees with previous theories seeing in Dionysus’ performance a ploy Aristophanes used to promote either atheistic ideas or just the opposite, i.e. that his ridiculing of the gods would just show how serious they were still taken. The latter idea conceptualizes humour as a bridge between the human and the divine. Gilhus is equally sceptical of the hypothesis that religious humour made fun of the human representations of the gods, who were far beneath the transcendental divine reality. In her opinion, the answer lies in the specific character of the god of wine and wild laughter, who had it in his power to provide both release to his followers and great misery to those who failed to recognize him.

Given the variety of answers to the question of mockery of the gods within the context of Greco-Roman polytheism, it will not be easy to come up with a wholly satisfying explanation. What we know of contemporary reactions does not seem conclusive either. Xenophanes and Plato warn against it, while neo-Platonists offer allegorical explanations. What is missing, by comparison with later Christian perceptions on the subject, is any sense of anxiety about how the gods themselves might react. The anger of the Olympian gods, however, could be roused easily and apparently could result in terrible punishments. Marsyas and especially Prometheus come to mind, the last one for having outwitted Zeus in the classical setting of a dinner party. Not only was Zeus not amused, but he ordered the poor Titan bound in the Caucasus. Nonetheless, Prometheus’ horrifying ordeal failed to discourage Lucian from ridiculing the whole episode in his *Prometheus on Caucasus*.

Lucian’s treatment of the Olympian gods does not differ much from the way they appear in the Old Comedy. Remarkably, situations featuring the
gods parallel the somewhat clownish acts in comedies. Seldom do the gods contribute witticisms comparable to the clever repartees so appreciated by Cicero, Quintilian, Plutarch or Macrobius. The same is true of the collection of Greek epigrams and the only extant joke book of Antiquity, the Philogelos (Baldwin 1983). Whenever they appear in funny scenes, the gods come closer to stock characters in Greek and Roman comedy such as cunning or stupid slaves, bragging soldiers or foolish old men. Part of their funniness is the fact that they are more grandiose than human characters, but their humour is not of a higher quality. As Dio Chrysostom (ca. 40–120) remarked, audiences thought a drunken Heracles even funnier on the stage than a drunken slave. By contrast, in most available sources witticisms are uttered by well-known politicians or philosophers. If gods are involved in witty remarks, it is to heighten the comical effect by their hyperbolic persona. They serve basically as props, not as fountainheads of high humour. The same is true in the case of the gods that entered the Hellenistic world from the East. If powerful Dionysus is part of the fun at his own festival, he is mostly indulging in the same sort of buffoonery as his pure Greek colleagues in, for instance, The Frogs.

Mockery on Henotheistic Cults

The growth of henotheistic cults in the classical and Hellenistic period energized a sort of mockery different from the Olympian burlesque, one that was already employed in Greek comedy and continued in Roman literature. The satires of Juvenal (ca. 60–135) are a good illustration. Whereas the Olympians are treated in the ‘normal’ way, he has nothing but scorn for the imported gods of the East and for their worshippers. To Juvenal, the temple of Isis is one gathering of immorality. Her priests exercise a catastrophic influence on the minds of credulous women. The same low opinion of the Oriental gods comes across in Apuleius’ (ca. 123–180) Lucius or the Ass where the main character is a woman likewise devoted to the cult of a single unspecified god. Lucius derides her steadfast devotion by insinuating that it was a conduit for deception: by claiming unusual religious convictions she was able to bamboozle everybody including her husband for the purpose of dedicating herself to nothing else but a daily routine of drinking and whoring. The recurrent humourous taunts against women’s alleged sexual and alcoholic impulses now become connected to heno- or monotheistic religious practice and this constitutes a change. There is a shift from the gods as the main targets for religious ridicule to
their worshipers and their rituals. Jokes are still made at the expense of the eastern newcomer gods - for instance on their animal forms – but the most scorn is heaped on the total self-absorption of the new cults’ worshipers; that the faithful could purchase absolution of sins just by performing certain rituals invites even more ridicule (see Gilhus 1997, 53–5). Juvenal satirizes a priest of Isis, who obtains pardon for wives who break the law of purity, if bribed with a fat goose and a slice of sacrificial cake. Removal of personal responsibility was absent in the old religious practices before Plato. Criticisms against the Christian cult were in the same vein. Well-known is the taunt against the converted emperor Constantine that he had found the only religion that would give him absolution after having exterminated his whole family. This outlook calls to mind Plato’s explicit views on the subject, especially in his three-pronged critique on Epicurism; there he stated that gods existed, that they cared about us and that our prayers and sacrifices could not make them ignore our misdeeds. In a later period Lucian still makes fun of the priest Chryses, father of the girl taken by Agamemnon, who believed that Apollo was in his debt because of all the sacrifices he had performed. Apparently the presumed dynamics between ritual and personal success inspired many of the comic attacks against henotheistic practices.

Christianity

Turning our attention to the Early Christian Church we find that its monotheistic faith was a popular target for pagan fun. The soldiers of Pontius Pilatus directed their gibes against the captive Christ and afterwards many pagans denigrated and derided the Christian faith, reserving special scorn for the awe-inspiring moment of the crucifixion. The Trinity and the Christian rituals did not escape mockery either. Within the context of classical culture it was unfathomable that a truly powerful god would not strike back in anger when belittled and laughed at. One only had to recall what happened to the hapless Theban king Pentheus when he dared make fun of Dionysos. In fact, the God of the Old Testament was not to be mocked either, nor were His servants. The story of the prophet Elisha in II Kings 2:23–25 sent a clear message in this respect. The young boys that ridiculed him for his bald, sweaty head while he was climbing a dusty road were at once eaten alive by two she-bears sent by an avenging Yahweh. Even the Fathers of the Church seemed to have been a little bit taken aback by such harshness and most probably wondered if being devoured by wild beasts for
the rather innocuous crime of teasing an old man was not tantamount to what we would now call cruel and unusual punishment: the commentaries on this passage helpfully point out that the children in question had probably reached adolescence, in other words, they were beyond the excusable simplicity of childhood and thus capable of wilful sin. This kind of brutal and excessive punishment hurts our modern sensibilities; yet, a fourth century Greek or a Roman citizen who knew his Plato would have found such divine retribution perfectly intelligible and in line with the norms of divine justice.59

The Old Testament, however, seems on the whole to be more indulgent towards laughter and fun than the New (Halliwell 1991, 476–483). In Ecclesiastes 3: 1–4 for instance we encounter the well-known saying that there is a right time for everything under the heaven: a time to weep and a time to laugh.60 The New Testament dedicates very little space to the latter. In agreement with this, the early theologians showed a marked distrust of joking, laughter, and humorous pursuits in general, albeit in varying degrees. They were rather given to subduing laughter and anything that might lead to it. ‘Jesus never laughed’ became a standard motto, since John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) first pointed this out.61 Not that joking and laughing were inherently sinful activities in Chrysostom’s view; the problem was that indulging in seemingly innocent merry-making could easily lead to real sin.62 Broadly speaking, however, the Church Fathers mostly issued clear warnings against banter and laughter (Kuschel 1994, 47). They did so for a variety of reasons. For one thing, they apparently still shared the Ciceronian ideas about behaviour befitting respectable people in good standing within their social circle. Jerome (ca. 347–420), for instance, demands certain standards of decorum in a Christian’s dress, diet and laughter.63 Ambrose (339–397) thinks that one should not merely refrain from rude jokes but rather forgo all kinds of jests altogether. Following classical prescriptions, he makes an exception for those moments when conversation ought to be agreeable and pleasant.64 This sounds very much like the remarks of Cicero in De Officiis, I. 103, where the orator indicates the desirable limits of jesting. Stephen Halliwell points to another factor that could have influenced the Christian adversity to jesting. Aside from the already painful memory of the Christ being so maliciously mocked before and after the crucifixion, the constant ridicule heaped on their priests and on their fellow co-religionists wiped all smiles from Christian faces (Halliwell 2009, 475–479). There is certainly some truth in this observation, especially if one keeps in mind that quite a few Christians thought of themselves as unique – in a good way, of course – for abstaining from the long-held practice of retaliatory abuse.65
Stronger factors of explanation, however, seem to lie in the fear and abhorrence of pagan theatre. Church fathers were prepared to make some allowances for a little innocent banter among friends. But they feared that few would have the good judgment to stop at that. How many might end up lured into theatres and arenas, thus sliding further and further into sin? So great a danger for one flitting moment of mindless self-indulgence! Better not to give occasion for the all too probable plunge into darkness to occur, for ensuring a safe passage from this world to the afterworld was very serious business indeed. The rather fierce Tertullian expressed this in his own way by saying that the real laughter would come to good Christians after the Last Judgement – when they would have the leisure to contemplate at will the spectacle of their former persecutors burning in hell.66

A last and maybe not negligible stimulus for the condemning expressions of the more lighthearted side of humanity was the reality the reverend Fathers routinely faced from their pulpits. Chrysostom especially complains about people giggling and laughing in church even when kneeling in prayer. Youngsters sometimes laughed while receiving the benedictions and many of them could not stop doing so throughout the service. They behaved as if they were at bath or in the market square!67 Still, and notwithstanding their efforts, the theologians never succeeded in completely banning laughter and fun from Christian life. Maybe they had some success in the monasteries, but there must have been reasons for the strict monastic rules against laughter (Gilhus 1997, 68). Rules of conduct are never given if there is no serious fear of seeing them broken. Cicero understood that very well, as he seemed incapable of adhering to his own cautionary remarks about the use of witticisms. Not without reason his enemy Cato once derogatorily called him ‘our scurrilous consul’.

In spite of the strictures of monastic precepts, we know that scurrilous monks found their way through the Middle Ages’ labyrinth of rules and cautionary warnings. Monasteries were not made for laughter; the most one could hope for was the rather dull diversion provided by riddle-games, practically the only kind of permissible entertainment. The Church’s grip on ethics resulted in a restraining influence on the place of humour and laughter. Certainly, people of all classes indulged in a variety of humorous exchanges, but they did so while fully aware that they were not supposed to. Comic relief came from spaces less susceptible to the theologians’ apprehensions, from the coarse and inventive humour abundantly produced by the popular culture which did not spare the Church and its servants. In the Renaissance the elite was less squeamish: religion and especially priests became the butt of some inspired and some less successful jokes.68 Comic
interpretations of biblical quotations and theological concepts were as pop-
ular among the learned as among the less learned. Reviving the Ancients’
liberties with religious humour, writers like Boccaccio, Bracciolini, Pontano
and Castiglione restored the stature of wit. In some ways, they even experi-
enced more freedom than their beloved examples. The chapters on humour
and wit in Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier are mostly faithful copies of Cice-
ro’s discussion of the subject in the second book of De Oratore. The differ-
ences with his revered precursor lay mostly in Castiglione’s markedly lesser
fear for retaliation from the powerful people mentioned in the book. This
increased freedom is likewise on display in the numerous salacious jokes
about priests, monks, and religious circumstances Boccaccio earlier
included in his work, to general acclaim. The awareness of the dangers
coming from humour was much more acute in the Graeco-Roman world.
The same conclusions are to be drawn from differences in their respective
attitude towards practical joking: the classical authors disapproved, while
their Renaissance counterparts saw nothing wrong with even vulgar pranks,
resulting in many saucy jokes about all echelons of the Church, at best par-
tially restrained. For instance, a clever turn on an inscription above the
doors of the cell of friar Antonio da Rho provoked much laughter because
it indicated that every girl who entered would receive full indulgence.
Within this newly found appreciation for wit, religious humour has remained
a staple of European cultural production, despite some efforts to discredit
it coming especially from seventeenth century Calvinists. These efforts
were not crowned with success, if an early twentieth century Dean of St.
Paul’s Cathedral in London is to be believed: he said he could never see
why it should be derogatory to the Creator to suppose that He had a sense
of humour. ‘One meets with so many people who could only have been cre-
ated for a joke.’

Conclusions

For the following section I should perhaps have used the term ‘Suggestions’
instead of the ubiquitous, but more pretentious ‘Conclusions’. For one
thing, there are many more sources to be searched for answers to the ques-
tions I posed. A long-term approach by all means asks for a much more
elaborate study that will be complicated also by the fact that nothing is as
short-lived and culturally bound than jokes. These problems are aggran-
dized by the number of coexisting theories on humour. Analysis of the sig-
nificance of humorous remarks and their impact will differ with the theory:
the Superiority Theory will engage the texts differently from the Incongruity Theory to mention two of the leading theoretical approaches to humour.74 Furthermore some important points meriting attention remained outside this analysis such as the connection between magical rituals and ancient humour or more intense comparisons with medieval humour.75

Notwithstanding these objections, the contents of the jokes discussed above reveal some interesting changes throughout Antiquity. The most important seems to be the shift from the playful Olympian burlesque to the more severe vituperation of the henotheistic cults. The funny stories about Zeus and his family are like those told nowadays in family gatherings, playfully even fondly mocking powerful but somewhat distant relatives.76 These come across as familiar and not so threatening. Robin Lane Fox describes it well as a mixture of awe and intimacy (Lane Fox 1987: 109–111). The new gods are not like that: all citizens are not able to partake in their cults for the common good of the society; on the contrary, their worshippers come under suspicion for benefitting from specific individual gains.

Apparently these religious practices became the butt of somewhat fearful scorn. This type of mockery was partly transferred to the monotheistic Christians by the slowly diminishing pagan world and might even have contributed to their attempts for a general banishment of humour and laughter throughout the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance the classical interest in the positive functions of witticisms was revived within a Christian context. The higher classes allowed themselves more freedom of expression, also because educated pagan taunts did not exist any more. This brought us a lot of awe-inspiring blasphemies, that most of the clergy surely did not welcome. The greater the god, the bigger the joke. Hercules would have understood that too.

Notes

1 Propertius, Carmina, Book II. 33a.
2 Quaecumque illa fuit. But contra see verse 1 of Book II. 12. Quicumque illa fuit qui puerum pinxit amorem where the expression evidently is not meant in a humorous way. About the mockery content in this poem see J. F. Miller, ‘Propertius’ Tirade against Isis (2.33a)’, The Classical Journal, 77 (1981), 104–111.
3 On the relative popularity of the term Henotheism see Versnel (1990) 35–38.
5 Their thoughts especially in resp. the Philebus, the Poetics and the De Oratore.
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8 The subject of adultery in a comic context was always very popular with the Greeks as with the Romans and of course in later periods as well. See for instance E. Segal, *The Death of Comedy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, 190 ff.

9 Homer, *Iliad*, 14. This list of ‘only’ seven immortal and mortal women has been far outnumbered by Leporello’s list in Mozart’s opera Don Giovanni, but the comical intention is not much different.


12 A. D. Trendall, *The Red-Figured Vases of Paestum*, Rome: The British School at Rome, 1987, 71, 125. *Phlyakes* were serio-comic plays, popular in Southern Italy in the fourth century BC. Actors in it had the same name. The vase is a Paestan Bell-Krater made by Asteas ca. 350 BC. It is now in the Vatican Museum.

13 W. R. Agard (‘Greek Humor in Vase Paintings’, *The Classical Journal*, 19 [1923], 102) thought that it was a picture of Zeus visiting a prostitute. On the scenes of comedy on the phlyax vases see O. Taplin, *Comic Angels and other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Painting*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 49–50. Taplin argues that many of the so-called phlyax vases, however, pictured scenes of the Old Comedy. Representations of scenes of comedy most probably chose an episode that was critical to and identifiable characteristic of a given play. See J. R. Green, ‘Drunk Again: A Study in the Iconography of the Comic Theater’, *American Journal of Archaeology*, 89 (1985), 470. In Plautus’ play however Jupiter enters Alcmene’s house in a normal way. Sometimes the pictures are just representations of stock characters, but that is not the case here. Scenes of tragedies on vases, however, were also not always exact representations. See Taplin, *Comic Angels*, 33. On the possible original of the play see Segal, *Death*, 205.

14 Plautus, *Amphitryon*, 510. Some verses earlier Mercury also called his father a sly dodger.

15 Adultery was still the most popular theme of the mimes in Imperial Rome.

16 Lucian (On Sacrifice) calls him ‘a very Proteus for versatility’.


An anecdote about the Greek philosopher Metrocles illustrates that. After an involuntary fart he wanted to commit suicide out of shame. Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives*, VI. 94.

Petronius, *Satyricon*, 41.9, 47.2–6 and 47.7.

Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares*, 9.22.5. Discussion of this letter in A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 18–26. See also an epigram in the *Anthologia Palatina* where in a typical humorous hyperbole the foul smell of somebody’s belching cannot even be distinguished from the other, obviously normally worse, activity. *A. P.* XI. 240. This also in one of the poems of Catullus. Catullus, *Carmina*, 97, 1–2.

In his well-known treatise of humour Cicero says that the wit of the buffoon is not at all for ‘our sort of people’, but acknowledges that it raises as much laughter as any. Cicero, *De Oratore*, II. 251.


Plato, *Republic*, 377e – 388d. Before Plato there was already criticism on the portrayal of the gods in Homer and Hesiod by the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes (sixth century bc). ‘Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that are a shame and a disgrace among mortals, stealings and adulteries and deceipts of one another’ (*Fragments*, 11).

Ibid., 606c1–10.

Plato, *Laws*, 816. Plato sees an advantage in the confrontation with humour in the resulting ability to discern better the serious side of life.

Plato, *Republic*, 885; 908.


W. E. Gladstone, *Studies in Homer and the Homeric Age*, 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1858, 462–463. A not totally convincing attempt to give the laughter of the


34 Hewitt, ‘Religious Burlesque’, 182–184. A short survey of supporters of this theory and of those who thought Aristophanes was consciously or subconsciously defending the atheistic spirit of his time in T. Long, *Barbarians in Greek Comedy*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986, 42–43. Halliwell (*Greek Laughter*, 244) rightly points to the fact that the old comedy was state-sponsored and was performed in one of Athens’s religious shrines.

35 *Ibid.*, Hewitt mentions some other possibilities: Aristophanes wanted to please a thoroughly sceptical and irreligious audience – Ridicule was not felt that much by the Athenians – The Ionians were on easy terms with their gods. Hewitt, ‘Religious Burlesque’, 176–177.

36 She of course points to Euripides’ *Bacchae*. This albeit attractive solution seems however to overlook the problem of the mockery of other gods.

37 Gilhus (*Laughing Gods*, 48) complicates the issue even more by declaring the humour of Lucian different from that of Aristophanes by declaring it critical and at the expense of the divine. According to R. B. Branham (*Unruly Elocution: Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, 163) Lucian is not so much critically attacking the old gods, but just repeating the old humour on them. Also Versnel, *Inconsistencies II*, 118.

38 See note 33.

39 Dionysus here is a different case. In the *Bacchae* his mockery by king Pentheus does not remain unrevenge (Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 134–135). Halliwell, however, makes the important difference here between accepted sympotic festivity and the hostile ridicule of Pentheus.

40 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 536f. A humorous account in Lucian, *Dialogues of the gods; Hermes Hephaestus and Prometheus*. The Persian king Cambyses was struck with
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madness after he injured the sacred Apis bull and made fun of a statue of Hephaestus in Egypt. Herodotus, Historiae, III. 29 and 37.

41 We have to take here into consideration the fact that of the enormous amount of joke collections that have existed only very few survived, like for instance the Philogelos of the late-Roman empire. On the quantity of jokebooks see Schulten, ‘Ancient Humour’, 212.

42 Versnel (Inconsistencies I, 25) places the start of this immigration in the fifth century BC with Cybele and Dionysus.

43 Many examples from Greek comedies in Long, Barbarians, Chapter 2.


46 Ibid. VI. 489.

47 Ibid. VI. 526–541 and XII. 28. In VI. 511–526 he already mocks the frenzied worshippers of Bellona and the Magna Mater, two other new gods.


49 It is not sure which god(dess) was meant by Apuleius. It could be Christian, but that does not seem sure. See K. Bradley, ‘Contending with Conversion: Reflections on the Reformation of Lucius the Ass’, Phoenix, 52 (1998), 315–334.

50 Already present in Greek Comedy (Galy, ‘Critique’, 175).

51 Juvenal, Satires, VI. 533.

52 Sozomenus, New History, 2. 29. 3–4.

53 Plato, Republic, 885. See also 390e where he states that poets should not say that gods can be won by gifts.

54 Lucian, Of Sacrifice. He mockingly calls Chryses ‘that experienced and eminent theologian’.

55 Plato recognizes in the same passage that jokes could easily be made on this subject. He was probably thinking about the famous atheist Diagoras of Melos, to whom once a priest showed many votive pictures of shipwrecked persons who had survived praying to the gods. To his remark that now he would not doubt any more about the existence of the gods, Diagoras answered that there would have been far more, if those who were not saved had set up offerings too. Cicero, De natura deorum, III. 37. The same story about the cynic Diogenes in Diogenes Laërtius VI 59.


59 See Plato, Philebus, 48a–50d. The almost necessity to blaze up if someone mocks you in Aristophanes, Clouds, 992. Also Plutarch, Magna Moralia 46d. On the distinction between playful and consequential laughter see Halliwell, Greek Laughter, 279–296.
In Ecclesiastes 7:2, however, it says that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of laughter.

Chrysostom, Homily lxxxiv on St John (Resnick, ‘Ricus Monasticus’, 96–97).

Chrysostom, Concerning the Statues: Homily. xv., 11.

Jerome, First Theological Oration: Discourse against the Eunomians, v.

Ambrose, Duties of the Clergy, i.xxiii.103. I am grateful to prof. H. F. Stander from the University of Pretoria who indicated these passages to me.

Chrysostom, On Virginity, 44.

Tertullian, On the Spectacles, 30

Chrysostom, Homily xxiv on Acts and Homily xxxvi on 1 Cor.


See for instance the joke in the very popular collection of Bebel about a meeting among the Trinity discussing who is to be sent to the earth to be crucified. The Father excuses himself because of his age and the Holy Spirit on the ridiculous impression a dove would make on the cross. After the collection of facetiae of Poggio Bracciolini Bebel’s three books with more than 400 jokes were held in high esteem in the beginning of the Cinquecento. Bowen, One Hundred Renaissance Jokes, 42.


H. Lloyd-Jones (‘Zeus, Prometheus and Greek Ethics’, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 101 [2003], 70) defines the relationship of the gods to mankind as a stronger tribe with a weaker one. Galy (‘Critique’, 173) rightly points to their being much closer to their followers than the gods ‘des religions révélées’.
Bibliography

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Chapter 6

Transferring Aristophanes’ Religious Registers into Modern Greek and English: The Case of (Re)Constructing the Religious Humour of Aristophanes’ Comedy *Acharnians* in Greek and English Target-Texts

Vicky Manteli

Setting the Scene: Introduction and Corpus Presentation

This study aims at contributing to the literature of humour translation through the discussion of transference of religious registers and jokes from a classical Greek comedy into Modern Greek and English. Thus, it may be taken as a case study in the field of classical Greek comedy translation with a view of understanding not only how religious aspects are conceptualized in different cultural and linguistic contexts, but also how the humour of a fifth-century comedy written to be performed interacts with the specifications and nature of modern humour.

I intend to address the topic of religious humour transference in Aristophanes’ first extant comedy *Acharnians* (425 BC) through a close discussion of all examples of religious discourse, namely six source text (ST) extracts, found in hymns and prayers in the comedy. Each ST will be discussed vis-à-vis its target texts (TTs), in Modern Greek and in English (see Table 6.1). The criteria for selecting the TTs were as follows: in view of enabling a discussion of the nature and the specifications of modern humour, a condition was set according to which all TTs (Greek and English) should have been written since 1980s, each of them falling into a specific decade from 1980s to 2000s. This condition was deemed helpful for making comparative remarks and drawing evaluative conclusions with regard to translators’ strategies and their interpretation of the humour of Aristophanes’ comedy for the modern stage. It was also regarded helpful for assessing variation in the attitudes of different languages and cultures (Greek and English) vis-à-vis religious humour in general.
In case more than one translation version (either Greek or English) was written within the same decade, TTs were selected on the basis (that after a preliminary study of all TTs I was able to conclude) that the selected TTs seem to include a range of qualities that can be taken as typical of foregrounding a particular translation trend within the tradition of modern stage production of Aristophanic comedy.

With specific reference to the Greek TTs, an extra selection criterion was taken into consideration, namely the abolition of *katharevousa* in 1976 and the official institution of *koinî nea helleniki* (i.e. *dhimotiki*). In discussing Greek diglossic humour, Canakis provides a concise sociolinguistic overview of the phenomenon of Greek diglossia, the salient features of *katharevousa* and *dhimotiki*, their association with high and low registers, respectively, and the changing attitudes of Greek language users towards registers (Canakis 2008, 350–80). Greek TTs have been selected among twelve Modern Greek versions, which form the total corpus of stage versions used as performance texts since the comedy was first revived on the Greek stage (i.e. 1961).¹

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.1 List of translators.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Translator’s Name</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alan Sommerstein</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Henderson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Roche</td>
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<td>Chrysa Prokopaki</td>
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<td>Dionisis Savopoulos</td>
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<td>Pavlos Matesis</td>
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<td>Nikos Anastasopoulos</td>
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Source Text Background Information: Methodology

My study on religious humour and its transference is based on examples of religious discourse pertinent to hymns and prayers in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*. One might assume that a modern equivalent of classical Greek hymns and prayers, at least within Western Christian religion, are prayers to God, Jesus Christ, Mother Mary and patron saints. All examples are parodic due to the following reasons: high and low tones clash (see Example 1); the request of prayer is absurd (see Example 6); and the invocation is paradoxical (see Examples 2, 3, 4 and 5). Another point to be discussed is that ST humour is realized either as verbal (Example 1) or referential (Example 6), or both (Examples 2, 3, 4, and 5, see infra).
Depending on what can be observed in ST, I will discuss translators’ strategies by observing shifts which occur in the transference of the following features: forms of invocation, epithets qualifying gods and divinities, lexis and syntax of hymns and prayers, and organization of religious discourse (particularly opening and closing parts of prayers). On a macroscopic level, this study will try to answer the following global questions: Is ST religious humour transferred in TTs? Are there any noticeable shifts in terms of field, tenor and mode of discourse? What strategies do translators employ to make up for any loss of meaning, affect or stylistic effect?

Discussion of Source Text Religious Jokes and Their Target Texts: Evaluation of Translation Strategies

In this section, I will present and discuss all examples of religious discourse in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*. The presentation of each example is organized as follows. First, the source text (i.e. Aristophanes’ text) is presented. Then the target texts are given in two columns: on the left column, the three English TTs and on the right, the three Greek TTs. Greek TTs are followed by a close translation into English by the author for the purposes of the present study. Special attention was given so as to transfer all humorous and religious references as closely as possible. This kind of organization of ST and TT material may prove helpful for enabling a comparative view among different TTs and specifically between English and Greek TTs. Each example is preceded by a brief description (in title form) of the kind of parody and the salient features of humour of the ST extract. TTs are followed by a close ST analysis and a discussion of all six TTs with an emphasis to shifts observable and translators’ strategies employed.

**EXAMPLE 1 (lines 237–279 Ach): Parodic Hymn to Dionysus**

Verbal humour: register clash (high tenor versus low tenor)

<table>
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<th>High Tenor</th>
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<td>(LINES 237 AND 241)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>εὐφημεῖτε εὐφημεῖτε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOMMERSTEIN</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak fair! Speak fair!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROKOPAKI</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Εὐφημεῖτε.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pray silence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HENDERSON</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pray silence, silence!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MATESIS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Άλαλα τα χείλη! Πρόσχωμεν! Σοφία!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mute are the lips [of the unfaithful]! Defend the doors!! In wisdom!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROCHE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANASTASOPOULOS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lines 247–252)

ὦ Διόνυσε δέσποτα, κεχαρισμένως σου τήνδε τὴν πομπὴν ἐμὲ τέμφαντα καὶ θύσαντα μετὰ τῶν οἰκετῶν ἁγαγεῖν τυχηρῶς τὰ κατ᾽ ἀγροῖς Διονύσια στρατιάς ἀπαλλαχζέντα. τὰς σπονδὰς δὲ μοι καλῶς ξυνενεγκεῖν τὰς τριακοντοτύδες.

| SOMMERSTEIN | O Lord Dionysus, may this procession which I hold and this sacrifice be pleasing to thee, and may I and my household celebrate with all good fortune the Country Dionysia, now that I am released from soldiering; and may the thirty years’ peace prove a blessing to me. |
| PROKOPAKI | Διόνυσε δέσποτά μου Δέξου ευφρόσυνα ετούτη την πομπή καὶ τὴ δυσία ποὺ σου προσφέρει ὁ οίκος μου. Λάμπρυνε αὐτά τα κατ᾽ ἀγροῖς Διονύσια, τώρα ποὺ απὸ τὸ στρατό ἅττυ ἀπαλλαχτεῖ, καὶ βοήθησέ μοι ἄγει σε καλὸ ἡ τριαντάχρονη που ἔκλεισε εἰρήνη. Lord Dionysus [let us stand properly] Rejoice at this procession And the sacrifice offered by my household Brighten this festival of Rural Dionysia now that I am released from military service and help me so that this thirty-year-long peace I have made, proves to my advantage. |

<p>| HENDERSON | O Lord Dionysos, may my performance of this procession and this sacrifice be pleasing to you, and may I and my household with good fortune celebrate the Rural Dionysia, now that I’m released from campaigning; and may the Thirty Years’ Peace turn out well for me. |
| MATESIS | Διόνυσε δέσποτα Ἦ λιτανεία καὶ η συνημμένη εδώ δυσία, ἀπὸ μένα καὶ το σπιτικό μου εἰς’ αφιερωμένη εξαιρετικά σ’ εσένα. Καταδέξου καλοδέξου την. Ευδόκησε να σοφάσω χαμοτά τα κατ’ ἀγροῖς Διονύσια, τώρα ποὺ τέρμα τη στρατιωτική δυσία. Κι η ανακωχή που πέτυχα, δώσε να σώσει να τρανταφίσει αὐξόσπαρτη, αμήν. Lord Dionysus, The litany and the attached sacrifice, is especially dedicated to you from me and my household. Condescend and welcome my offering. Consent to my joyful celebration of the Rural Dionysia Now that my military service is over. Do your best so that the truce I’ve achieved may grow strewn with flowers for thirty years, amen. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>ROCHE</strong></th>
<th><strong>ANASTASOPOULOS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hail, Dionysus Lord, may you find this ritual and sacrifice full of grace, and may I and my family celebrate the Country Dionysia full of happiness seeing that at last I’m free from all that nasty campaign stress. So let the truce of Thirty Years of Peace be a success. . . .</td>
<td>Δέσποτα κι αφέντη Διόνυσέ μας και δέξου το ευχέλαιο μας και τη λιτανεία που πρέπει να οργάνωσε ετούτη η κομπανία. Τα αγριότικα Διονύσια βόηθα μας να γιορτάσουμε Ανέμελα και φίνα Τώρα που ξαναπεράσαμε απ’ τον πολέμο τα δεινά τη φτώχεια και την πείνα. [Bless us Lord and master Dionysus] Accept the holy oil and the litany too organized to your honour by this company Help us celebrate the rural Dionysia Carefree and fine Now that we’ve got rid of the war’s trials poverty and hunger.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Low tenor**

(Line 256) σοῦ μηδὲν ἢττους βδεῖν

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SOMMERSTEIN</strong></th>
<th><strong>SAVOPOULOS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as good as you at farting</td>
<td>( \text{GYNAIKA} ) . . . ν’ αφήνουν πορδίτσες μικρές και απανωτές ( \text{ΧΟΡΟΣ} ) σαν τις δικές σου (( \text{DICAEPOLIS’} ) WIFE) . . . And they’ll fart little and repeated farts ( \text{CHORUS} ) Like yours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>HENDERSON</strong></th>
<th><strong>MATESIS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as good as you are at farting</td>
<td>. . . με καυτέρες πορδίτσες, σαν εκείνες που κερνάς εσύ εμένα. with spicy farts like the ones you treat me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>ROCHE</strong></th>
<th><strong>ANASTASOPOULOS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as cute and pretty as you and smelling as sweet [as dawn].</td>
<td>[Adapts ST and omits the verse]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lines 263–264) Φάλης, ἵπποις Βακχίου, ξύγκωμε νυκτοπεριπλάνητε μοιχὲ παιδεραστά. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SOMMERSTEIN</strong></th>
<th><strong>SAVOPOULOS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phales, companion of Bachus, fellow-reveller, night rover, adulterer and pederast</td>
<td>Θεούλη του φαλού, μωράκι του Διόνυσου συνταξιώτης Little God of phallus, little baby Dionysus’ fellow-traveller</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Source text analysis

Lines 247–279 form a parodic hymn to Dionysus in the context of a phallic process (phallos-bearing) in which a sacrifice to god Dionysus first takes place (244–247) and the comic hero Dicaeopolis pours libations (268–269). Olson points to the typical discourse organisation after an invocation of a divinity which rests on optatival
infinitives (ἀγαγεῖν τυχηρῶς, καλῶς ξυνενεγκεῖν) to express a specific wish and a more general wish for the future respectively (Olson 2002, 144). After addressing a short prayer to the god, the comic hero Dicaepolis is ready to celebrate the Rural Dionysia and enjoy his private peace. The ST is full of images pertinent to agriculture, life after the war, peace and sexual pleasure (272–279).

Register humour is realized in the ST as a clash between language used to address a formal situation, namely religious rites (i.e. prayer and procession) and improper language used to qualify a god along with scatological humour and sexual metaphors. More specifically, high tenor refers to imperative constructions as normal injunctions preparatory to a religious rite (εὐφημεῖτε εὐφημεῖτε); invocation of a divinity (ὦ Διόνυσε δέσποτα); typical discourse organization which rests on optative infinitives to express a specific wish and a more general wish for the future respectively (ἀγαγεῖν τυχηρῶς, καλῶς ξυνενεγκεῖν); standard religious vocabulary (κεχαρισμένως σοι τήνδε τὴν πομπὴν ἐμὲ/πέμψαντα καὶ θύσαντα μετὰ τῶν οἰκετῶν). Low tenor refers to slang, improper qualifications to god Dionysus (ξύγκωμε νυκτοπεριπλάνητε μοιχὲ παιδεραστά); taboo words relevant to scatological humour and sexual activity (σοῦ μηδὲν ἥττους βδεῖν; μέσην λαβόντ άραντα καταμαγκάσισαι).

Analysis of target text extracts: All TTs transfer the religious address to Dionysus and Phales as well as the reference to the phallic procession. No compensation strategies are used here. English TTs transfer the religious tone of the initial imperative (εὐφημεῖτε εὐφημεῖτε) which opens the scene through language marked for high register and formality as well as religious overtones: SOM Speak fair! Speak fair!; HEN Pray silence, silence; ROCH Silence! HEN Pray silence, silence. ROCH Silence! Holy silence, please! Greek translators also use intertextual references from the field of religion and the ceremonies of the Christian church service: PROK Ευφημείτε (Pray silence); Στώμεν καλῶς, Διόνυσε δέσποτά μου (Lord Dionysus let us stand properly); MAT Άλαλα τα χείλη! Πρόσχωμεν!Σοφία! (Mute are the lips of the unfaithful! Defend the doors! Wisdom) ANA Δεηθώμεν! (Let us make a bene!). Consequently, all translators use anachronistic loans from the field of Christian religion and employ, albeit not systematically, a religious tenor and mode of discourse: SOM Lord Dionysus/blessing; HEN Oh Lord Dionysus; ROCH Lord, may you find . . . ; MAT Δίόνυσε δέσποτα (Lord Dionysus), λιτανεία (litany), αμήν (amen), αποσταξάμενος μπελάδες (having abjured troubles); ANA Δεηθώμεν! Άνω σχώμεν το κοντάρι! (Let us make a bene! Let us hold up the pole!), περιφορά (litany), Ευλόγησον μας Δέσποτα . . . και δέξου το ευχέλαιο μα και τη λιτανεία (Bless us Lord . . . and accept this Holy Oil and the litany too), Συμματήρι (thurible), πρόσφορο (consecrated bread),
λειτουργία (service), ευλόγησον τον δούλο σου (bless your servant), επί γῆς ειρήνη (and on earth peace). ANA also uses anachronistic adjectives pertinent to qualifying Virgin Mary but not appropriate for qualifying a phallus idol (i.e. τρισμακάριστη, πλατυτέρα, γρηγορούσα [three times blessed, cosmic, watchful]).

Greek TTs are supposedly more humorous than English TTs since they explore more humorous devices, especially register clash, use of high mode katharevousa, and puns based on alliteration and neologism. Greek humour rests heavily on register exploitation and particularly the use of old high mode katharevousa with its formal and learned lexis and structures in inappropriate, ordinary or banal situations which results in incongruity realized as incompatibility between tenor and field. However, in transferring sexual metaphors English translators use more obscene language and bawdy slang than Greek translators with the exception of MAT.

**EXAMPLE 2 (lines 404–406 Ach): Paradoxical Invocation**

Verbal and referential humour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Lines 404–406)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Εὐριπίδης, Εὐριπιδόν</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ύπάκουσον, εἴπερ πώποτ’ ἀνθρώπων τινί</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOMMERSTEIN</th>
<th>PROKOPAKI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euripides, beloved Euripides, answer my call, if ever thou didst answer any mortal.</td>
<td>Ευριπίδης, Εὐριπιδάκη! Άκου με που σε φωνάζω, αν άνθρωπο ύπακουσε ποτέ. Euripides, Euripidaki! Listen to me calling you, if you’ve ever listened to any human.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HENDERSON</th>
<th>MATESIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euripides! Dear Euripides, answer if ever you answered any mortal.</td>
<td>Ευριπίδης! Πίπι! Εισάκουσέ με να χαρείς . . . το ξέρω, χάρη δεν έχεις κάνει εσύ σε ανθρώπο. Euripides! Pipi! Lend a favourable ear to me . . . It’s OK. Never have you granted a favour to any human.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROCHE</th>
<th>ANASTASOPOULOS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euripides, dear Euripides, won’t you listen? Listen now if you’ve ever listened to anyone.</td>
<td>Ευριπίδης! Ευριπιδουλάκο! Ευριπιδούλη! Ευριπιδούλη! Ευριπιδούλη! Ευριπιδούλη! Ευριπιδούλη! Ευριπιδούλη! Υπάκουσες μα να χαίρεις ν’ ανοίξεις την πόρτα σου σε ανθρώπος, αλλά κάνε μια εξαίρεση για μένα. Euripides! Euripidouli! Euripidoulako! I know you’re not in the habit of opening your door to humans, but make an exception for me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Source text analysis:** This is a case of religious parody. Here the typical structure of prayer is used by Dicaepolis to address a mortal (the tragic poet Euripides) rather than a divinity, in one of the most notable door-knocking comic routine scenes in Aristophanes’ comedy. Dicaepolis begs Euripides to open the door and grant him the favour of his presence, something which the tragic poet notoriously avoids doing. ST humour is enhanced through the diminutive Ἔυριπίδης (my little Euripides).

**Analysis of target text extracts:** It seems that ST religious register and discourse organization are more appropriately transferred by SOM, HEN, and MAT. More specifically, SOM reproduces the high tone of the original invocation through grammatically distinctive lexis: inflected second person singular (didst) and archaic pronominal forms (thou). The qualifying adjective beloved alludes to religious discourse, too. MAT, on the other hand, transfers equivalently the imperative εἰσάκουσέ με (lend a favourable ear to me) and reconstructs the religious context through the use of an allusion to Christian prayers (i.e. Ἐισάκουσον τον δούλο/τη δούλη του Θεού [lend a favourable ear to your servant]). The other TTs lack the formality of ST tenor. Characteristically enough, ROCH opts for informal style constructions (won’t you listen? Listen now if you’ve ever listened to anyone), thus failing to reproduce the illocutionary force of the ST.

Greek TTs may be considered more humorous than the English TTs for the following reasons: a) transference of ST diminutive in funny ways (i.e. absurd inflection to a proper name [Ευριπιδάκη, Ευριπιδούλη, Ευριπιδούλακο]; b) use of children’s discourse (Πίπη); c) use of register clash, for example in MAT’s TT, in which a high register imperative εἰσάκουσέ με (lend a favourable ear to me) is used next to a low tenor fixed expression να χαρείς (I wish you joy).

**EXAMPLE 3** (line 435 Ach): *Parodic Prayer to Zeus*
Referential and verbal humour: paradoxical invocation and unexpected use of adjectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line 435</th>
<th>(Line 435)</th>
<th>ὦ Ζεῦ διόπτα καὶ κατόπτα πανταχῆ</th>
<th>SOMMERSTEIN</th>
<th>[Dicaepolis inspecting the costume before putting it on] <em>O Zeus who seest through and under all</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROKOPAKI</td>
<td>Ω Δία οὐ εἰς ο πανταχοὺ παρόν καὶ τα πάντα αἰόν</td>
<td>O Zeus, ubiquitous and gifted with the ability to see everything</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOMMERSTEIN

Ω Δία οὐ εἰς ο πανταχού παρόν καὶ τα πάντα αἰόν
O Zeus, ubiquitous and gifted with the ability to see everything
Humour and Religion

HENDERSON
(inspecting the rags) O Zeus who sees everywhere, through and under!

MATESIS
Οφθαλμέ μου πανταχώ παρών και πανταχώ τρυπών
My dear eye, ubiquitous and ubiquitously drilling

ROCHE
O Zeus, who sees over and under all things

ANASTASOPOULOS
Ω Δία παντοκράτορα
O Zeus Pantocrator

Source text analysis: Line 435 is a parodic prayer to Zeus addressed by Dicaepolis after he has put on Euripides’ tragic rags in an attempt to disguise himself, cheat the Chorus and pass as beggar to them. Verbal humour is based on an unexpected use of adjectives (διόπτα καὶ κατόπτα) incongruously qualifying the divinity.16 However, Dicaepolis’ invocation to Zeus as διόπτα (‘through-seer’) is contextually appropriate since the comic hero inspects the holes in his rag-costume. Consequently, parody can be regarded as situational.

Analysis of target text extracts: All TTs transfer the religious invocation and reference to Zeus (ὦ Ζεῦ).17 However, it is rather uncertain that English TTs are pragmatically equivalent (i.e. transfer ST illocutionary force), in other words transfer ST verbal humour. SOM’s TT reproduces the high tone of the ST through older forms of formal language (who sees through).

Greek translators manage to reconstruct anachronistically ST religious parody through parodic allusions (ΜΑΤ Οφθαλμέ μου πανταχώ παρών και πανταχώ τρυπών [My dear eye, ubiquitous and ubiquitously drilling]) and intertextual references to the Lord’s Prayer (ΠΡΟΚ Ω Δία ἐσύ o πανταχώ παρών και τα πάντα ορών [O Zeus you, ubiquitous and gifted with the ability to see everything]). Anachronistic adjectives, appropriate for qualifying the Lord but not Zeus are used by ANA, who adapts the text by translating through omission (ANA O Zeus Pantocrator).

EXAMPLE 4 (lines 566–571 Ach): Parodic Prayer to General Lamachus
Referential and verbal humour: paradoxical invocation and parody of ritual opening and closing of prayer

(Lines 566–571)
ἰὼ Λάμαχ ὦ βλέπων ἀστραπάς,
βοήθησον ὦ γοργολόφα,
φανείς·
ἰὼ Λάμαχ ὦ φίλ ὦ φιλέτα.
εἴτε τίς εστι ταξίαρχος ἢ στραγηγός ἢ
tεκομάχας ἀνήρ,
βοήθησάτω
tις ἀνύσας ἡγὼ γὰρ ἔχωμαι μέσος
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOMMERSTEIN</th>
<th>PROKOPAKI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>O Lamachus who glances lightning,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Έλα Λάμαχε, συ με τα μάτια που</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appear and come to our aid, fierce-crested one!</strong></td>
<td><strong>αυτοφάγοτον και φλόγες</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O Lamachus, our friend and fellow-tribesman!</strong></td>
<td><strong>πετούν,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Or if there is a taxarch or general or</strong></td>
<td><strong>έλα Λάμαχε, φίλε και σύντροφε,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>stormer of walls, help,</strong></td>
<td><strong>τρέχε, βοήθει!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>quickly, someone! For I am gripped round the</strong></td>
<td><strong>Κι αν υπάρχει ταξίαρχος, στρατηγός,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>waist.</strong></td>
<td><strong>τειχομάχος</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O Lamachus who glancest lightning,</strong></td>
<td><strong>να φτερει αμέσως εδώ να βοηθήσει,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appear and come to our aid, If_i erce-crested one!</strong></td>
<td><strong>δεν αντέχουμε μεις.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O Lamachus, our friend and fellow-tribesman!</strong></td>
<td><strong>You, Lamachus, come, your eyes glance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Or if there is a taxiarch or general or</strong></td>
<td><strong>lightning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>stormer of walls, help,</strong></td>
<td><strong>come, Lamachus, friend and comrade</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>speed up and help!</strong></td>
<td><strong>speed up and help!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And if there is a brigadier, a general, a</strong></td>
<td><strong>And if there is a brigadier, a general, a</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>wall-stormer</strong></td>
<td><strong>wall-stormer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>let him come here straight away</strong></td>
<td><strong>let him come here straight away</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>to help</strong></td>
<td><strong>to help</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>we can’t hold on.</strong></td>
<td><strong>we can’t hold on.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HENDERSON</th>
<th>MATESIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>O Lamachus who looks lightning,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Λάμαχε στρατηγέ, που ήναι η ματιά σου</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>appear and help us, you of the fearsome crest!</strong></td>
<td><strong>στρατηγάτη,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O Lamachus, friend and fellow tribesman!</strong></td>
<td><strong>βάλε περικεφαλαία και πιλάλα βόηθα!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Or if there is a taxarch, or general,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Λάμαχε φιλάρα και κυριακηρίατη!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Or wall-storming champion, let him come to our</strong></td>
<td><strong>Βείσονται κανείς εδώ ταξίαρχος,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aid,</strong></td>
<td><strong>πολίμαχος</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>anyone, and quickly! I’m caught in a waistlock.</strong></td>
<td><strong>ή πολιορκητής, να στέψει αμέσως;</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>You, Lamachus, come, your eyes glance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Μου ήκανε καταλαμβάνομαι!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>lightning</strong></td>
<td><strong>General Lamachus, whose glance is</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>come, Lamachus, friend and comrade</strong></td>
<td><strong>lightning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>speed up and help!</strong></td>
<td><strong>put on your helmet and rush out, help!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And if there is a brigadier, a general, a</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lamachus buddy and compatriot!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>wall-stormer</strong></td>
<td><strong>Is there any brigadier,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>let him intrude at once.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Warchief</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I’m caught in a headlock!</strong></td>
<td><strong>or besieger around?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROCHE</th>
<th>ANASTASOPOULOS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>O General Lamachus, lightning banger,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ωχ! Ωχ! Βοήθεια Λάμαχε, γενναίε στρατηλάτη!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Come to our aid in your woeing feathers:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ένδοξη Ευνοέσσα, Λάμαχε τιμημένε,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Lamachus, friend and fella</strong></td>
<td><strong>με τη ματιά τη φλόγη και το περήφανο</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clansman, or any storm trooper near,</strong></td>
<td><strong>λαιρί,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Or military man: come if you can</strong></td>
<td><strong>σοώ της Γερακιάς γα, μπαρουκιοπατνικήνε,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And rescue us. It would be nice,</strong></td>
<td><strong>απείσε γιατι χανάμας;</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And on the dot. I’m in a vise.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Κι αν σου πέσει δύσκολα, στείλε</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O General Lamachus, lightning banger,</strong></td>
<td><strong>συνταγματάρχης, ταξίαρχο, υπολοχαγό, εστώ</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Come to our aid in your woeing feathers:</strong></td>
<td><strong>κι επιλοχία να βάλει το χεράκι του, γιατί</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Lamachus, friend and fella</strong></td>
<td><strong>τα βλέπω σκούρα. Αέρα!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clansman, or any storm trooper near,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Oh! Oh! Help, Lamachus, brave and</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Or military man: come if you can</strong></td>
<td><strong>victorious army commander!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And rescue us. It would be nice,</strong></td>
<td><strong>And on the dot. I’m in a vise.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And on the dot. I’m in a vise.</strong></td>
<td><strong>And on the dot. I’m in a vise.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Glorious nationalist, celebrated Lamachus
With your glowing glance and proud
cockscomb,
son of the legendary Gerakina,
old warhorse
hasten, for we are lost!
Or if it’s tough for you, then send over a
colonel, a brigadier, a sergeant, or at
least a commander to give us a leg up,
for the outlook is bleak. Hurray!

Source text analysis: In lines 566–571 half of the Chorus prays to General Lamachus to come for their assistance while no evident danger lurks. Therefore, parody is more pertinent to the dramatic situation. However, the incongruous appeal for assistance bears the formal characteristics of a pseudo-prayer to a mortal rather than a divinity: note the ritual opening (ἰὼ Λάμαχος ὃ βλέπων ἄστραπάς) and closing (βοηθᾶτω τις ἄνυσας· ἐγὼ γὰρ ἔχωμαι μέσος).

Analysis of target text extracts: In contrast to Greek TTs, English TTs transfer both the ritual opening and closing of the ST pseudo-prayer and the imperative structure (SOM O Lamachus who glancest lightning appear and come to our aid / Or if there is a taxiarch or general or stormer of walls, help, quickly, someone!; HEN O Lamachus who looks lightning, appear and help us, you of the fearsome crest!/ Or if there is a taxiarch, or general, Or wall-storming champion, let him come to our aid, anyone, and quickly; ROCH O General Lamachus, lightning banger, Come to our aid in your waving feathers/ come if you can and rescue us). In addition, SOM transfers equivalently the lyric tone of the ST through high register language and structures (who glancest lightning/ for I am gripped round the waist). By contrast, ROCH TT flouts the relation norm between ST and TT by opting for low register choices (banger; friend and fella; on the dot).

Although ST religious parody is not recreated in Greek TTs, register humour is prevalent: low register and dialectic choices (MAT βάλε περικεφαλαία και πιλάλα βοήθα [put on helmet and rush out, help]); register clash (i.e. forms of high mode Modern Greek katharevousa mix with demotic Greek in ANA TT); allusions to culture-specific anachronistic jokes from the military field and the field of folk tradition (i.e. τῆς Γερακίνας γιε [son of the legendary Gerakina]; ἐνδοξὸς ἐθνικόφρονα, Λάμαχος τιμημένε [glorious nationalist, celebrated Lamachus]).
EXAMPLE 5 (lines 665–675 Ach): The Invocation is Paradoxical

Referential and verbal humour

(2015–1675)

Χο. δεῦρο, Μοῦσα ἐλθέ φλαγωφά πυρὸς ἔχουσα μένος ἕντονος Ἀχαρνική.
οἶνον ἐξ ἀνθράκων προῦνοι
φέψαλος ἄνήλατ’ ἔσει-
Εἰςμενος οὐφία ἑπίθι,
ἥν’ ἀν ἑπάνθρακιδες ἀσί ναρακείμεναι,
ο ὁ Θασίαν ἀνακυκώσι λιπαράμπυκα,
οι δὲ μάττωσιν, οὐ-
τω σοβαρών ἐλθέ μέλος
ἔντονον ἀγροικότερον
ὡς ἐμέ λαβοῦσα τὸν δημότην.

SOMMERSTEIN

Come hither, Muse of flame,
With the power of fire,
Ardent Muse of Acharnae!
Even as from the oaken coals
The spark flies up when roused
by a fair wind from the fan,
what time the sprats
and lying by,
while some do stir
the Thasian pickle with its gleaming circlet,
and others knead the dough:
even so come thou, with a lusty song,
a vigorous song, a country song,
to me thy fellow-demesman.

SAVOPOULOS

Μούσα καρβουναρού
Σφιγκὰ μου πυρωμένη
σπιθίτσα φουντωμένη
με αναπνοές τρελού.
Βαρδάρη που μιλάς
σαι ψάρι φαγωμένο
αχ πολλαπλασιασμένο
και σαν καρδέλι να!
Ελα την Κυριακή
με το βαρύ σου τέμπο
κι οι δυο Σοφία Βίμπι
ακούγαμε εκεί.
Ποιος μας γηροκομεί
Τη σήμερον ημέρα
ψηφία καρβουνιέρα
μούσα Δεκεμβριανής;
Πολέμησα καιρό
σε όλα τα πεδία
και με τυφλή μανία
ξέσχιζα τον εχθρό.
Τώρα με χειρωφτή
μια τσογλανοπαρά
που κάνει κριτική.
Coal-bearer Muse
burning embers
little spark blazing
through a mad man’s breath.
You, wind Vardaris, speak
like fish that has been eaten
Oh multiplied
and like a big loaf!
Come on Sunday
in heavy tempo
we both listened
to Sophia Vembo.
Who’s nursing us
at present day
roaster and cinder-machine
December Muse?
I’ve battled for a long time
on all fields
tearing up the enemy
in blind fury.
Now I’m being operated
by a bunch of critical
and judgmental bums.

HENDERSON
Come this way, refulgent Muse,
wear the force of fire,
and, Acharnian!
Even as a spark that from oaken embers
leaps aloft, excited
by a fan’s fair wind,
when the herring
are lying there ready,
and some are mixing
the Thasian sauce with its gleaming fillet,
and others are kneading the dough: so
come, bringing with you a tempestuous,
a well-tuned, a countrified song,
to me, your fellow demesman.

MATESIS
Δεύτερο Μούσα καρμπονάρα πυρωμένη, αλανιάρα ωςφαριάρα, σπίθα του πουρναρόξυλου βαρβατωμένη, από σύμμαχο αέρα, ξεσαλωμένη, κοίτα διώ στη χόδο δοξά και μαρινάτα, άλλοι ετοιμάζουν αρμή από Θάσο, αμβροσιακή, κι άλλοι πλάζουν τη μπουγάτσα, έτσι βαρυπερπάτητη, σα σερνικό δημοτικό τραγούδι, Φλογάτη και βαρβάτη, έλα και λάβε με τον πατριώτη σου εμένα.

ROCHE
Come, you Muse, tempered in flame,
Come with the energy of fire-
Acharnian fire that leaps with a beam
From oaken charcoal fanned to a blaze.
And there on the side
Lie the herrings to be fried,
And someone mixes the Thracian sauce.

ANASTASOPOULOS
Έλα κοντά μου αρχόντισσα Μούσα μου Αχαρνιώτισα, έλα με αφάνη και αφή σαν της φωτιάς τη φλόγα, σα σπίθα από κάρβουνο που το φύον να άρεμει ενός σημά του θρόσκεται.
While someone fillets the gleaming fish.
So come shouting a rustic song
Like our folklore fathers sang.
Celebrate with one
Who is a fellow Acharnian.

Source text analysis: Lines 665–675 belong to parabasis (the structural lyric unit of Aristophanic comedy in which the comic poet personally addresses the audience through the chorus). The ST extract is an ode to the Acharnian Muse, an absurd divinity probably coined by the poet, and functions as an invocation to the Muse to offer poetic inspiration to the comic hero. The parody of the lines has been discussed with specific reference to lexis, images/metaphors and sentence structure (Horn 1970, 15–16; 18). The invocation to the Acharnian Muse parodies an acknowledged locus for hymns.

Analysis of target text extracts: All translators transfer the image of the divinity invoked by the comic hero (e.g. SOM Muse of flame, Ardent Muse of Acharnae; HEN refulgent Muse, ardent, Acharnian; ROCH Muse, ΑΝΑ Μούσα Αχαρνιώτισσα [Acharnian Muse]). Seemingly it is only SOM TT which faithfully reconstructs the ST religious tone (come hither, come thou, to me thy fellow-demesman).

Most Greek TTs are culturally relocated through anachronisms and field shifts: For example, SAV qualifies the Muse as Δεκεμβριανή (December Muse), an adjective which alludes to a tense historical period in Greek post-war politics. His TT is characterized by acerbic social comments (Now I’m being operated by a bunch of bums). He also uses a reference to the female
singer Sophia Vembo renowned for her patriotic songs in second World War era. Other culture-specific allusions (i.e. the north wind Vardaris blowing severely in winter-time Thessaloniki) are also present. One may assume that there is only one allusion to religious topics and specifically Jesus’ two miracles of feeding the multitude: the feeding of the 5,000 (miracle of the five loaves and two fish) and the feeding of the 4,000 (miracle of the seven loaves and fishes). To conclude with, SAV flouts the relation norm between ST and TT (Chesterman 1997, 123–128) and creates a particularly humorous text based on paradoxical and absurdist anachronistic comments. By the same token, MAT recreates the parody of the ST by using: lexis from different fields, for example the fields of religion and cooking Δεύρο Μούσα καρμπονάρα (Front and centre, you spaghetti alla carbonara Muse); low register choices (αλανιάρα [gadabout]); and neologisms (αχαρνιάρα [acharnish]).

EXAMPLE 6 (lines 816–817 Ach): Parodic Prayer to Hermes
Referential humour: absurd character and request of prayer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOMMERSTEIN</th>
<th>PROKOPAKI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hermes, god of trading, grant that I may sell my wife at such a price, and my own mother too!</td>
<td>Hermes, patron saint of traders, may your kindness help me sell my wife on such good terms and my mother too</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HENDERSON</th>
<th>MATESIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hermes of Traders, may I sell that wife of mine on such terms, and my own mother too!</td>
<td>Hermes, Lord of the bazaar, since it looks so profitable Lend me a hand to sell my mother and my wife.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Source text analysis: This is a parody of a prayer to Hermes, god of trade, in which the Megarian (a starving citizen from Megara, a rural town near Athens blocked by the Athenians in the Peloponnesse War) begs for the god's help to trade his mother and wife. In Dicaepolis' private free market the Megarian has just managed to pass his daughters as pigs and trade them for a bunch of garlic. His appeal is absurd since it distorts the character of a typical ancient prayer and particularly the request for help (Horn 1970, 46). However, the qualifying adjective μπολαῖε is suitable for the dramatic situation.

Analysis of target text extracts: All translators transfer the invocation to the divinity but it is only PROK who recreates the religious field and tenor of the ST more coherently (προστάτη [patron saint], η χάρη σου [your kindness]). SOM and HEN also use appropriate language marked for high register/formality (i.e. grant that I may sell my wife at such a price; May I sell that wife of mine on such terms). Contrastingly, ROCH opts for low register and dialectic features (i.e. Can I sell me wife . . . what about me mother). ANA's text is comparable to ROCH's TT in that it heavily rests on low register fixed expressions (να βγάζει στο σφυρί κόρες, γυναίκα, αδελφή . . .) and taboo words (ρουφιάνα ανάγκη [brute necessity]). Another point is that ANA does not preserve either the content or the discourse organization of ST parodic prayer. Instead he translates through ST adaptation and insertion of exclamatory statements (Τι τύχη είν’ αυτή . . . Ti φάρδος . . . Α ρουφιάνα ανάγκη πώς καταντάς τον άνθρωπο [What luck is this! . . . What bloody luck! . . . Oh you brute necessity, should you reduce someone to begging for his living, shouldn’t you?]).
Conclusions

After a close analysis of translators’ strategies and shifts observable in TTs, I will now attempt to summarize concisely translators’ text-linguistic behaviour and provide some answers to the global questions with reference to religious humour transference, translation trends and classical comedy adaptation in general. My remarks are as follows:

- All translators domesticate their TTs so that ST religious (i.e. culture-specific) concepts are culturally relocated and thus probably better received by their readerships/audiences. Religion seems to be synonymous with Christianity and particularly in Greek TTs with Greek Orthodox Church.
- English translators succeed in reproducing the religious register of the ST quite closely, probably because religious English is a marked variety (i.e. old third person singulars, inflected second person singular, special titles of the deity, archaic pronoun forms). SOM is found to use more systematically language marked for high register/formality and also allusions to religious discourse. Contrastively, ROCH very often flouts the relation norm and translates into low tenor.
- Greek translators very often recycle and/or recontextualize allusions to liturgical language, prayer books etc. to transfer ST religious intertextuality. It seems that religion is a reference point with strong socio-cultural grounding in Greek culture and that religious allusions (either parodic or non-parodic) are regarded as shared socio-cultural knowledge among Greek speakers. The use of intertextual references and/or parodic allusions to the Orthodox Christian religion is closely associated with the global strategy of domestication which results in culturally relocated TTs. However, it should be noted that the most recent Greek TT (i.e. ANA’s version) included comparatively less religious references. This may reflect a potentially falling interest in and awareness of religious matters among Greek speakers.
- It is worth mentioning that even when the humour in the ST is referential (see Examples 3 and 4) rather than verbal, Greek translators usually enhance the latter by adding puns, as well as by using register clash and anachronistic jokes. This strategy of intensification is explainable as a global compensation technique. It also ties up with aspects of adaptation/acculturation of comedy as a genre, in general.
- English translators, with the exception of ROCH, reproduce the high register and formal tones in their TTs and tend to transfer faithfully the
semantic and pragmatic meaning of the ST. Consequently, they view ST religious references in close association with their historical and cultural context and the dramatic situation of the comedy. By contrast, Greek translators reconstruct, rather than transfer, ST religious humour and therefore produce new texts, particularly humorous and broadly anachronistic. My study proves that Greek translators perceive ST religious discourse and religious jokes as opportunities for text adaptation in view of an extra comic performance-oriented text.

- English translators tend to transfer the religious register of the ST (lexis, syntax, discourse organization). By contrast, Greek translators tend to relocate it, probably because their texts were translated for the stage. Another possible explanation relates with Greek translators’ education and cultural background which dictates that Aristophanes is too comic and the revival of his comedies should always make audiences burst into laughter.

- TTs written in 2000s (i.e. the most recent TTs) flout the relation norm between ST and TT since they opt for shifts in tenor, mode or field of register. Therefore, they fail to transfer the religious context of the ST. To be more specific, ROCH and ANA both tamper with the ST tenor and mode of discourse, while ANA also inserts anachronistic loans and intertextual references from other fields (e.g. Greek folk poetry and songs). Therefore, my study proves that the more recent the TT, the more distant it may be from any ST religious register or religious humour, though not from humour in general.

- The present work proves that if there is a formula as regards the translation of classical Greek comedy, this depends on the rival agendas of faithfulness to the original against raising a laugh.

Notes


2 Regarding the English target texts ‘year’ refers to the year of publication of the text; regarding the Greek target texts ‘year’ refers to the year of the comedy’s stage production in which the specific target text was used.

3 Since the aim of my study is to discuss the transference of all religious source targets from Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* in English and Greek target texts, I will also have to refer to Dionisis Savopoulos (SAV) version particularly for Example 5 and part of Example 1. Savopoulos target text is included in my discussion as it
was his translation rather than Prokopaki’s (PROK) which was used for the lyric parts of the comedy in the performance text originally produced for Piramatiki Skini Technis (Experimental Stage of Art) in Thessaloniki 1982. His free musical adaptation of *Acharnians* stood as a total translation which was presented at a club in Plaka (Athens, 1976–1977) and became tremendously popular, see A. H. G. Van Steen, *Venom in Verse. Aristophanes in Modern Greece*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 218–20. Savopoulou, an acclaimed Greek composer and musician, has been writing and performing music since mid 1960s.


5 My list partly follows Willi’s discussion of religious registers in Aristophanic prayers and hymns, which albeit sets out to explore if a partial overlap should (not) be recognized in the functions of prayers and hymns as two markers of religious discourse. According to the scope of my study and particularly the salient features of the source text as well as shifts observable in target texts, the list has been revised. See A. Willi, *The Languages of Aristophanes: Aspects of Linguistic Variation in Classical Attic Greek*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 8–50.

6 In the Orthodox Church service until the tenth century AD the priest called the doors, the doors in wisdom defend as an order to the congregation that only baptized Christians should stay in church and partake of the Mass.

7 In wisdom let us stand to listen to the Holy Gospel: Part of the priest’s call to the believers during the second part of the service to stand up and listen to the Holy Gospel.


10 Note Henderson’s use of an archaic adverb form to make an earnest request for silence.

11 The word *wisdom* alludes to the phrase In wisdom let us stand to listen to the Holy Gospel, which is part of the priest’s call to the believers during the second part of the service to stand up and listen to the Holy Gospel.


SOM, HEN and ROCH use *O Zeus*; PROK, MAT and ANA use *Ω Δία* (*O Zeus*).


Dialectic features may prove a useful tool for sociolinguistic information and this can be effectively exploited on performance level as a semiotic mechanism for characterization (in this case the representation of the Megarian father as a rustic peasant from an underdeveloped rural area).

For an extensive discussion of religious English see D. Crystal and D. Davy, *Investigating English Style*, 147–172.


**Bibliography**

**Primary sources**

**Source text**


**English target texts**


**Greek target texts**

Anastasopoulos, N., (ed.) (2002), *Aristophanes Acharnians*, [Theatre Bill Published by the Municipal and Regional Theatre of the City of Veria for the Summer Production].


**Secondary sources**


To begin with, there is no such a thing as ‘Jewish’ humour, meaning a kind of humour that has been common to all Jews all over the world and throughout history. When we talk about ‘Jewish humour’ we are referring to a particular cultural habit that started in the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenaz communities in Eastern Europe somewhere toward the end of the eighteenth century and migrated with these Eastern European Jews to Western Europe, North America and, in the twentieth century, the state of Israel. This Witz (joke), as it was called, is paradoxically the heritage of that Jewish community that was nearly destroyed in the Nazi Shoah during the Second World War; the Yiddish-speaking Jewry of the shtetls, once comprising the vast majority of the Jews in the Diaspora, has been reduced to a small remnant and the orthodox religion it represented is no longer dominant, but the specific kind of humour it has developed has obviously survived both the attempt at physical destruction and the success of the various reform movements and even the secularisation of a large percentage of the present-day Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora. Moreover, as a result of the gradual political and social emancipation, more and more Jews have participated significantly in the development of the various cultures of their ‘host countries’, especially in North America, and have been able to enrich these cultures not only with their scientific and philosophical contributions, but with a certain dose of their typical form of humour as well. That may be the reason why an ever-increasing number of non-Jewish readers and moviegoers nowadays understand, enjoy and even develop themselves a kind of humour that was originally intended for the inhabitants of rather isolated and often persecuted villages and restricted neighbourhoods in the traditionally orthodox Christian or catholic countries of Eastern Europe.
Once and in many ways still a strategy of survival, this specific brand of Jewish humour has successfully survived the onslaught of the generations and has gradually turned into another feature of ‘Judaism’ itself, next to e.g. religion, the memory of the Holocaust and Zionism. Of course, many religious and non-Zionist Jews would not agree with these somewhat specious characterizations, but this is more due to the particular problem of defining the Jewish identity than to a lack of understanding on the part of the non-Jewish observer. For who is a Jew? Some orthodox Jews will answer that only religious people can truly be called genuinely Jewish, while others will tell you that only the children of a Jewish mother and a handful of legally converted men and women may be considered to be Jews. There are many agnostic and even atheistic Jews who believe that the centuries of persecution, culminating in the Shoah, the destruction of European Jewry, constitute the true Jewish identity, or for that matter the unconditional support of the state of Israel, the final safe haven after centuries of discrimination and suffering. From a philosophical and ethical point of view, I particularly like the definition elaborated by Arthur Hertzberg in Jews: The Essence and Character of a People (1998), in which he stresses the messianic and utopian core of the Jewish identity: ‘religious Jews maintain their faith in the coming of Messiah’ (Hertzberg 1998). But secular Jews as well share the idea of the emergence of a final era of universal peace, which Hertzberg calls ‘the greatest creation of the Jewish spirit’ (ibid.). As long as this hope of a better world at the end of times persists, the Jews will continue to exist.

Arthur Hertzberg, himself a Conservative rabbi, was the son of an Orthodox rabbinic scholar from Poland. His ancestors were prominent rabbis within the Belz Hasidim, one of the most important present-day Hassidic congregations or ‘dynasties’. Hassidism, a movement of spiritual revival, started in the first half of the eighteenth century in response to three developments within Judaism that threatened the genuine tradition.

(1) Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the Jewish world had been shaken by the upheaval caused by the appearance of the self-proclaimed Messiah Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676), whose revelations sounded like an answer to the longing of many Jews awaiting the final return to the Holy Land and the end of the long and painful Exile. Tens of thousands of Jews all over Europe and the Middle East were ready to abandon everything and leave for Palestine, when the presumed Messiah gave in to the pressure of the Ottoman Sultan and converted to Islam. But this did not stop the
messianic fervour, as other pseudo-saviours pretended to be the expected Messiah and the entire Jewish world became divided between believers and non-believers. Reacting to these dangerous outbursts of Messianism, the founders of Hassidism stressed the virtue of a virtuous and holy (hassid) life over the excitement and promises of ‘sabbatianism’ and similar popular movements.

(2) Against the reliance of the rabbinic scholars on the sole study of the Thora, they rediscovered the kabbalistic traditions which according to them ought to be shared by as large a group of Jewish men as possible.

(3) Finally, the Hassidic Jews vehemently opposed the adherents of the beginning Jewish Enlightenment or Haskala, who indeed succeeded in narrowing the gap between Jewish and Christian intellectuals, but who also abandoned the strict observation of a number of rituals and practices. Since the Hassidic spiritual leaders or tsaddiqs (the Just) wanted to reach as many ordinary Jews as possible, they offered them the religious truths in their often exalted homilies (the body of sermons known as the Hassidic Thora) and especially in the so-called Hassidic tales which later on have become world famous through authors such as Martin Buber (Die Erzählungen der Chassidim, 1949) and, more recently, Elie Wiesel (Célébration hassidique, 1972; Contre la mélancholie, 1981). These collections of thousands of stories and aphorisms refer on the one hand to a number of mystical texts from the Kabbala and on the other prefigure the typical Jewish Witze. In order to fully understand these Hassidic tales we ought to dwell for a moment on the main characteristics of Jewish mysticism, and to grasp the religious origins of this brand of Jewish humour, we must study the content and form of these always pious but occasionally also funny Hassidic stories.

The Kabbala or the Truth of Not Knowing

All religious Jews study the Thora (the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible), erroneously called The Old Testament by the Christians. As they do not recognize The New Testament as a sacred text, the Jews cannot possibly consider their own Tanakh as an ‘old’ and therefore superseded document. To mark the difference with the Christian version of (almost) the same book, we ought to know that the Hebrew Bible puts the Prophets, those holy men always berating the kings and the people for not honouring the Covenant, in the second part, to be followed by the books of spiritual Wisdom. In the Christian canon, these prophets come last, so that their prophecies seem to announce the imminent
coming of the Lord (Jesus). Beside the *Thora*, religious Jews also study the *Talmud*, a collection of texts written between 200 BC and 500 BC, that constitute the foundations of most of the Jewish religious laws and traditions. The third body of texts, the *Kabbala*, refers to the writings of Jewish mystics between approximately the first century BC and the sixteenth century, with a special emphasis on the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendor, written in the thirteenth century. Until the eighteenth century, only a restricted number of visionaries and small circles of initiated disciples studied the mystical texts, and even within the popular Hassidic movement not everyone was familiar with these scriptures. For one thing, some of the books contained mysterious formulas and complicated numeral and linguistic elucidations that were supposed to release benevolent magical forces (white magic), but it was feared that, in the wrong hands, these magical forces could also be used to harm people (black magic). This intriguing secret knowledge, or rather the lack of it, gradually found its erroneous way into the eclectic practices of non-Jewish soothsayers and fortune-tellers, hand readers and quacks. Even today, many people believe that the Tarot cards are part of the Kabbala, although this game has nothing to do with it. In reality, Jewish mysticism gravitated around the mysteries of the unity of God, the hidden meaning of the *Thora*, the secret of creation, the rupture of the universe, the coming of Messiah and the redemption of the world. There are also many meditations upon the origins of evil and, more theoretically, about the border between theism and pantheism: if God is permanently everywhere, how could something different from Him be created? What is the essence of a ‘pious or sanctified life’ for the individual and, from the vantage point of the entire Jewish people, what is the connection between the historical *exile* of the Jews (galout) and the exile of the divine Shekhina (the presence of God in the world)?

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of the mystical traditions and a renowned translator of some of the core mystical texts, distinguishes five ‘schools of mysticism’ (*Scholem* 1946) that run parallel to major turning points in Jewish history:

- The Merkava or ‘throne’ mystic (from the first century BC until the tenth century, mostly developed in Palestine and the Middle East).
- Medieval German Hassidism (twelfth and thirteenth century).
- Spanish mysticism (thirteenth and fourteenth century).
- Mysticism and Messianism in Palestine (sixteenth and seventeenth century).
- Modern Hassidism (Poland and Eastern Europe, from the middle of the eighteenth century until today).
We can find traces of the earlier traditions in present-day Jewish liturgy (hymns, prayers and other references), but most specifically in the writings, sermons and stories of the Hassids, whose spirituality would not have been possible without this wealth of mystical experience handed down from generation to generation. The religious leaders (tsaddiqs) of the communities, the founders of the various Hassidic dynasties and even some particularly pious and blessed rabbis studied these kabbalistic texts with the same ardour they used to study the Thora and the Talmud with, or should we rather say that they approached Thora and Talmud ‘mystically’, that is, with love and trepidation rather than with the analytical attitude of their rabbinical opponents? This doesn’t mean that they proceeded irrationally, but they were fully aware of the limitations of even the most respected forms of scholarship:

One day, when there were many guests sitting around the table of the Rabbi of Rijin, someone asked: “But why are so many people that angry with our great master Moses ben Maimon?” – “Because in a certain text”, a Rabbi answered, “he says that Aristotle knew more about the celestial spheres than Ezechiel. How could one not be angry about such a thing?” – At that point Rabbi Israël of Rijin took the floor: “But Moses ben Maimon was right. Two men have entered a royal palace. The first stops in every room, enraptured in the contemplation of the riches and the magnificence, the luxury and the splendor of everything and all, the precious nature of those jewels which his eyes of an expert cannot let go. The second, on the contrary, goes straight from one room to the next, preoccupied with one and only idea: ‘This is the home of my king, here are his ornaments and his decorations, a few more steps and I shall contemplate the Lord, my King.’”

In other words: the mystics went for the essence, the contemplation of the knowable attributes of God, the ten sefirot as described in the Zohar: the highest Crown of God, his Wisdom, his Intelligence, his Love, his Power, his Mercy, his Permanence, his Majesty, the deepest Cause of all his creative powers and his Kingdom, the mystical archetype of the community of Israël (also called the Shekhina). These 10 ‘names of God’ taken together express, but do not reveal his hidden face. For the essence of God Himself, the En-Sof, cannot be known. That is the meaning of the mystical ‘Truth of not knowing’. A few mystics may proceed as far as the forty-ninth gate, but they can never enter the fiftieth gate, behind which the ultimate Secret is dwelling. Those who would try to enter regardless would not only face death, but total annihilation.
This contemplation, however, is only one part of the mystical endeavour, for according to Isaac Louria, a mystic from Safed in Palestine, human beings also carry the awesome responsibility to contribute to the restoration of the ‘broken vessels of creation’. This sacred duty to work for the restoration of the universe, Tikkun Olam, prevents Jewish mysticism from turning into an escapist and purely esoteric spiritual journey, way above the muddy paths of common people. The painful but realistic agnosticism of the final insight stands in sharp contrast to any and all forms of religious dogmatism and even suggests a link with some of the findings of contemporary sciences. This modesty is also the only soil in which genuine humour can grow, for dogmatists and fundamentalists are simply unable to create the distance that is the necessary condition for a successful Witz.

The Dancing Jews in Black

It proves nearly impossible to write a summary of Hassidic theory and practice, as we are dealing here with a mass movement composed of hundreds of so-called dynasties, all with their different customs and traditions. In a sense, it is even worse than in traditional Judaism, of which it is said that two Jews stranded on a desert island will immediately build three synagogues: one for the orthodox, one for the liberal and a third one neither of them will ever want to visit. This is partly due to the fact that the various Jewish congregations are almost autonomous in the way they interpret the scriptures and apply the laws and regulations, but to a certain extent it is also the natural result of the interpretative modus of the Talmud. If one text can be understood in so many divergent ways by different scholars, it is tempting to either formulate your own interpretation or at least ask a question. Thus e. g. it is written that when I find a chicken within a circle of 30 yards from the coop, I’ll have to return it to its rightful owner. When however I find it outside of that circle I may keep it. Of course a clever Talmud student will not fail to ask: what happens if the bird is found with one wing inside and the other outside the circle? This is neither a Jewish joke nor a Hassidic tale, but an example of Talmudic logic. When Jesus avoided the trap set for him by his religious opponents by telling them ‘to give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but unto God what belongs to God’, he was using the same logic.

But even if we cannot possibly agree upon a definition that befits all Hassids, they do share certain common traits that distinguish them from the other Jews. Just by watching the behavior of the founder, Rabbi
Baal-shem-Tov, and listening to his words, we can enumerate at least seven points that will characterize Hassidism until today:

(1) There is a direct way to God, for which one does not need the scholarship of the traditional rabbinical students.

(2) This direct experience has been handed to us by the Jewish mystics. In a period in which a large percentage of the Jews were, just like many of their Christian fellow citizens, stressing the primacy of reason over faith, Baal-shem-Tov said: ‘We are connected to the higher world through prayer and the law, through seriousness in the preparation and enthusiasm in the fulfillment’.

This resulted in an increasing estrangement between the Hassids of Eastern Europe and the enlightened Jewish communities of Western Europe.

(3) This enthusiasm has to be understood quite literally. The Hassids talk about ‘a movement of prayer’ rather than a ‘posture’. The most visible expressions of this enthusiasm (en-theos: God in me and I in God) are the religious dances during the Hassidic celebrations.

(4) Around the Master (later on several Masters) a core group of disciples is formed. These core groups will soon develop into the various Hassidic dynasties, in which the leadership of the group is traditionally given to the oldest son.

(5) As the Hassidic reform movement puts the observance of the individual and collective moral prescriptions above the knowledge of the great and complex theories, it becomes accessible to large groups of faithful. To the outsiders, it sometimes looked like a revival of popular devotion, with its belief in miracles, religious healings, sacred objects and pious hagiographies of the founding fathers, but it was more than that, as the Hassids in no ways tried to exclude reason and insisted on the active participation of all the (male) members of the congregation, rather than on their passive submission. Many of the Hassidic tales that will later on reappear as typical Witze make fun of religious leaders who took unfair advantage of their spiritual authority.

(6) Most of the time, the Hassids succeeded in avoiding the potential conflicts between the spiritual Masters and the faithful, but of course they could not avoid the virtual war between themselves and their orthodox critics (mitnagdim).

(7) Many critics have always suspected the Hassids of some form of pantheism, a charge that has often been leveled against most mystics in all three monotheistic religions. Isaac Louria tried to solve this problem
with his theory of the tsimtsum, the voluntary withdrawal of God into himself in order to make room for the creation of the universe. But as the gap between the Hassids and the orthodox Jews narrowed as a result of their common struggle against the Enlightenment, Hassidism seems to have gradually turned into a conservative force in present-day Judaism, a far cry from the rebellious movement it must have been in its first period.

One day the great rabbi Elimenekeh of Lisensk is disturbed in his synagogue by the visit of the furious hassid Faivel. Faivel is generally known as a pious man, but to his dismay the rabbi discovers that he now wants to sue the Lord himself. “How can you say such a thing?” the rabbi replies.

“And how can the Almighty neglect his covenant with the Jewish people in such a way? A contract is a contract, especially when it is a contract with the Lord. First he gives us all these commandments and vows to support and protect us until the end of times. Okay, that is a fair deal for both parties. And then He, the Lord, allows the emperor to issue a new law forcing us, the Jews, to build roads even on Sabbath, an obligation that we cannot possibly ignore. To me that sounds like the height of ambiguity. So I sue Him for breach of contract.”

Rabbi Elimenekeh ponders over these words and must agree that the man has a point indeed. He consults two other rabbis and they decide to set up a rabbinical court. Since they want to conduct the trial in closed chambers they ask Faivel to leave the room. Then they address the Lord: “You, who art everywhere, we cannot possibly ask You to leave the room. Still, we must insist that You do not disturb our deliberations.” And the Lord keeps quiet.

Many hours later they come outside and proclaim the verdict: Faivel was right and in this case God, for mysterious reasons, was wrong.

And, the story tells us, at the same moment the emperor changed his mind and withdrew the new law on forced labor.

A contract has to be honored, whether it has been concluded between God and men or among humans. When a man has been blessed with health and wealth, he is bound by an ethical obligation to help the less fortunate of his fellow men.

Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov had made it a habit to distribute loaves of bread to the poor, his guests. In a period of drought and scarcity of food,
he noticed that his wife had baked loaves that were half the normal size. He immediately ordered that new and even bigger loaves be baked and distributed. ‘For’, he said, ‘you have to distribute bread in relation to the extent of the hunger and not in relation to the price’.

One morning, the wife of rabbi Zeev Wolf of Zbaraj was having a quarrel with the kitchen maid, whom she accused of having broken a dish. She demanded that the girl replace the broken vessel. The girl denied the accusation and the wife decided to take the matter to the rabbinical court. While she was getting dressed for the visit to the judges she noticed that the rabbi too had put on his best clothes. ‘I don’t need your help’, she said curtly, ‘I know exactly what I am going to say’. ‘Yes, dear, I am aware of that’, the rabbi answered, ‘you know what you have to say. But she doesn’t know at all how she can defend herself. So I come with you to defend her, for who else will speak in her defense?’

Obviously a Hassid, especially a tsaddiq, cannot insist upon justice and fairness from the Lord without being just and fair towards the poor and the powerless. Hassidic tales always make the link between the Hassids’ almost intimate contact with the Almighty and their duty towards ordinary people, even in regard to presumably trivial matters. When a young and eager disciple is sent to a renowned and holt Master to complete his religious education, he is very disappointed. For instead of conveying his religious and mystical wisdom, he orders him to clean pots and pans in the kitchen. When weeks later the exasperated youth finally asks him, when they are going to discuss divine matters, the Masters answers him: ‘It has already been done. Just make sure there is not a single spot of rust left on the pans’.

Despite – or maybe on account of? – its transcendental point of view, the Hassidic tale is as down to earth as can be, dealing with the most trivial and ordinary matters that in fact preoccupy most of the people most of the time. The often strained, but never questioned, connection with God (Emmanuel) allows for a certain amount of anarchistic freedom vis-à-vis the worldly authorities: the Czar or the Emperor may be very powerful indeed, but they are nothing compared to the Lord of Hosts who, by the way, is our special Protector. Furthermore, these stories most often have a surprising twist at the end, very similar to the point that characterizes a good joke.

Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum once dreamt that he had died and that the angels had carried him to heaven, but to his great surprise he did not see a single saint in heaven. When he asked the angels about this, they corrected him: “Of course the saints are not in heaven, but heaven is in the saints!”
Or when students questioned rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, why the Lord is always hidden, the rabbi answered: “The Lord plays hide-and-seek, but nobody goes looking for Him. However, once you know that someone is hiding he is no longer completely hidden.”

In most Jewish jokes, the explicit religious references may be missing, the psychiatrists may have replaced the rabbis as the real spiritual leaders of the community, most Jews may have lost their knowledge of Yiddish and New York City can hardly be compared to a poor shtetl in the Eastern European Pale. Still, without the rich tradition of Hassidic storytelling, the emergence of the typical Witz cannot be explained.

A Well-Honed Tool for the Survival of the Smartest

A young yeshiva pupil is questioned by the teacher; ‘Two Jews just finished cleaning a chimney. One is covered with soot, but the other is clean. Which of them will wash his face?’ – ‘The dirty one, of course’. – ‘Wrong answer, son; the one who is clean sees the other one’s face and thinks he is dirty too, but the dirty one believes that he too is clean. Next question: two Jews just finished cleaning a chimney . . . ‘ – This time the boy knows the correct answer: ‘The one who is clean!’ - ‘Wrong again: why would someone who is clean go wash himself? Third chance: two Jews . . . ‘ – The little boy is desperate and starts to cry, whereupon the teacher laughs, saying ‘How can one man be clean and the other dirty after they’ve done the same work? You should have answered that there was something wrong with the question’. The audience is silent, until someone interrupts: ‘why for heaven’s sake would a Jew want to be a chimney sweep?’

The first part of this story may still belong to the Hassidic tradition, but the last remark is definitely a typical Witz. In their troubles and tribulations throughout history, Jews have learned to discern the various dangers that threatened them and identify the many enemies that hate their guts. Given their strong devotion to memory and remembrance – Jews may eventually forgive, but they’ll never forget – that knowledge is handed down from one generation to the next. David Cooper, one of my American students who has become the rabbi of a vibrant congregation in Oakland, told me that his grandfather, a kosher butcher and a religious man, used to teach him to ‘never trust a goy’. David obviously has trusted many non-Jews in his life, but he has never forgotten that advice. In order to survive and even prosper, Jews had to adopt a number of strategies and develop certain defense
mechanisms and why shouldn’t one transfer these skills to one’s children and grandchildren? One of these strategies is to take full advantage of as much education as you can get, which explains the highly visible presence of Jews in academia. Another one is to concentrate on those industries that desperately need labour power and thus will not discriminate too much against non-Christian newcomers, which is exactly what happened to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe (Yiddishland) around the turn of the twentieth century. As far as old-fashioned anti-Semitism is concerned, make sure you are the first to make fun of certain Jewish habits, so that your enemies will be at a loss. Of course, as Jews are living in a rapidly evolving environment and gaining access to the latest trends in modern science, the confrontation with the religious beliefs and traditions of the sheltered and monocultural old country has become inevitable. Jewish scholars have laboured over all of these challenges ever since the beginning of the emancipation in the eighteenth century, but there is a marked difference between learned essays and the ways ordinary people deal with them from day to day. One of the best ways is of course the ability to release the tension by exposing the weak underside of a threatening situation:

Berlin, 1934. A Jew enters the offices of a large company and asks for the personnel manager. – ‘Do you have an appointment, sir?’ – ‘No, but just tell me where his office is located’. And before the guard can stop him, the Jew has climbed the stairs and, without even knocking, has walked straight into the manager’s office. Without being asked he sits down. The manager looks up from his reading ‘Excuse me, but what . . . ?’ – ‘I’ve come here to talk about this job ad in today’s newspaper’. – ‘Wait a minute: in this ad we say that we are looking for a tall, blond Aryan with blue eyes, a straight nose, no glasses and a sportsman, right? And look at you, a typical sickly Jew with thick glasses, curly dark and a very, very Jewish nose. So why did you really come here?’ – ‘Me, oh, just to tell you that, in case you’ll need me, you don’t have to count on me. Goodbye’.

The persecuted and despised underdog turns the tables: from now on he’ll call the shots. Thus he starts reading the viscerally anti-Semitic paper Der Stürmer rather than the Jewish press, for in the Jewish papers there is only depressing news about restrictions, spoliations and deportations, whereas Julius Streicher’s Der Stürmer keeps telling him that the Jews possess all the money, control the media, run the industry and have basically taken over the world. These jokes not only make fun of the powerful and arrogant enemies of the Jews, but they succeed in preserving the human dignity and
moral superiority of their victims. In the old days, the pious Jews simply knew that there was no power on earth that could match the power of the heavenly Lord, even if He occasionally gave the impression of being asleep while His favourite people were harassed. That certitude has been preserved in the hundreds of Witze about Stalin, Hitler and other rulers who persecuted the Jews, even though the explicit reference to the Lord Almighty has been lacking.

And what about the imbalance of power between the dominant Christian churches and the small Jewish minority?

When the chief rabbi of Jerusalem visited the pope in Rome, he saw a golden telephone on His Holiness’ desk: ‘Is this a direct line to . . . you know?’ – ‘Yes it is’. – ‘Very impressive. Would you mind if I made a short call to Him?’ – ‘Of course not. Go ahead’. Five minutes later the rabbi is presented a bill for over 500 dollar. ‘A long distance call, you understand?’ smiles the pope. The chief rabbi pays the bill and leaves. A year later, it is the pope’s turn to visit the chief rabbi in Jerusalem. He immediately notices a similar golden phone on the rabbi’s desk. ‘Also a direct line to . . . ?’ – ‘The very same’. – ‘May I use it for a second?’ And the pope keeps talking and talking for more than half an hour. When he asks for the bill the chief rabbi replies: ‘A bill? Not for 25 cent. Just put a coin in the collection box’. – ‘Excuse me, 25 cent for at least half an hour?’ – ‘Well, this is a local call, you understand?’

Usually the priests and nuns in the stories are a little less intelligent than the rabbis – Jesus saves, but Moses invests – a mild case of arrogance one might call it. But when it comes to converts to Christianity, the Witz can become bitter: when your son becomes a Christian, do as the Lord and simply write ‘a new Testament’. A dying Jew asks his sons to fetch a priest, so that he may still convert: ‘But why, abba?’ his shocked sons answer. ‘Because it is so much better when a goy dies than a Jew, that’s why!’

Apart from holding up to ridicule and thus neutralizing the malevolent or at least unfair servants of church and state, the traditional enemies of the Jews, Jewish humour is best known for its often merciless self-criticism. Almost nothing and nobody is spared. There is, however, a great difference between this self-critical humour and the not so humorous standard anti-Semitic jokes (e.g. How many Jews fit in a Volkswagen? Two in front, two in the back and about 100 in the ashtray – What happens when a Jew enters a pigsty? The pig leaves because it can’t stand the smell). Jewish self-humour tackles the many restrictions of Jewish religious laws, the stupidity of some
of the rabbis, the preoccupation with money, the spoiled ‘Jewish American Princesses’, the vanity and the meddlesomeness of Jewish mothers, the clumsiness of the schlemiel and the mishaps of the shlimazzel (a schlemiel waiter carrying a bowl of soup stumbles and pours the contents all over the shlimazzel) and the annoying habit of kvetching (constantly complaining):

On a long train journey an old Jew is bothering his fellow travelers with his loud whining; ‘Oy vay! My wife Sarah is terribly ill! My son David refuses to study for the exams! And my daughter Roisele is seeing a goy!’ – ‘But Samuel’, they tell him, ‘your wife has fully recovered, your son passed the exams and your daughter has a new, nice Jewish boyfriend. Stop kvetching and let us sleep’. The old man thinks about it, keeps silent for a little while and then resumes: ‘Oy vay, my wife Sarah was terribly ill! My son David refused . . . ‘

Instead of choosing examples of each of the above-mentioned categories of self-critical humour, stories that can be found in the many excellent anthologies of Jewish jokes such as Leo Rosten’s classical *The Joys of Yiddish* or, more recently, the delightful *Born to kvetch* by Michael Wex, let me finish this section with the story of the Jewish parrot:

An orthodox Jew is walking down the street in a definitely non-Jewish neighborhood, when he hears someone talking in Yiddish. He turns back and finds an animal store, where he finds indeed a parrot that speaks Yiddish perfectly. ‘This’, the owner tells him ‘is a real Jewish parrot. It can recite psalms in Hebrew as well.’ The man buys the animal, puts a tiny kippa on its head and throws a little prayer shawl over its wings. In the synagogue the next Sabbath he bets with each of the men for twenty dollars that the bird will speak Yiddish and sing a psalm. But the parrot stubbornly refuses to open its beak. The man is furious and goes home with the bird on his shoulder. Suddenly the parrot starts laughing: ‘You schmuck, next week we’ll return to the synagogue and bet for a hundred dollars each. And then I’ll talk!’

What Am I, A Philosopher?

Besides being critical of their enemies and their own idiosyncrasies, the Jewish joke tellers can also be dialectically witty to the point of becoming philosophical indeed. When a dying rabbi is asked by his children and
grandchildren to utter a last memorable sentence, he gets impatient and
whispers: ‘Life is like a river’. Everybody nods, but finally a little child asks
him, what this means. With a last effort, the rabbi sits up and says angrily:
‘Well, then it isn’t a river!’ and dies. Or take the story of two Jews sitting in
a pub, drinking in silence, until one of them suddenly muses: ‘life is like a
cup of dark tea’. When his friend asks him: ‘what do you mean, life is like a
cup of dark tea?’, the first reacts: ‘what am I, a philosopher?’

If genuine wisdom is the art of being able to see the other side of a state-
ment or a question, that is to say of warning oneself and the others against
all forms of dogmatism, then Jewish humour must be called ‘wise’ beyond
any doubt. This takes us back to its deepest origins in Jewish mysticism, the
freedom to accept the ‘truth of not knowing’ the final answer to our most
existential questions. Make no mistake: this is most certainly not the result
of intellectual laziness or spiritual resignation, but on the contrary, the fruit
of centuries of wondering, thinking, praying and suffering, repeating the
painful experience of Job, the Preacher and so many religious and secular
Jewish thinkers over and over again. Without this tradition the often sur-
prising wisdom of the first Hassidic teachers would not have been possible,
as they attempted to translate the sum of all this historical wisdom into ordi-
nary and accessible language. Without their efforts, the Jews would not have
withstanding the onslaught of the murderous persecutions or the temptation
to comfortably disappear in the melting pot of modernity. Paradoxically,
the universal dimension of Jewish wisdom and humour is indissolubly con-
ditioned upon its specificity: without this tie to the ever-evolving tradition,
it would never have been able to critically enrich the common culture of
humanity. In addition, without the tenacity of a kind of humour that is
strong and flexible enough to maintain a permanent watch over itself, that
is to say to laugh at its own image in the mirror, it would have locked itself
up in a fossilizing ghetto of its own making and thus have lost its capacity to
hope. Without hope what are we? Certainly not philosophers.

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Chapter 8

Why Did Jesus Laugh? Laughing in Biblical-Demiurgical Texts

Ingvild Sælid Gilhus

Introduction

In ancient Coptic texts, found at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945, strange things happen: The living Jesus is glad and laughing above the cross while nails are driven into the hands and feet of his substitute. Eve laughs at the rulers of this world, because they try to rape her and do not understand that she has entered the Tree of Knowledge and thus has escaped from their clutches. The Old Testament prophets are cast as laughing stocks and Jesus mocks his disciples and laughs at them. Why do Jesus and Eve laugh? Why are the Old Testament prophets mocked? What purposes does laughter serve? In what social settings can such types of laughter have been appropriate?

The theme of this article is laughter in a group of Christian texts that have usually been called ‘Gnostic’, but are now sometimes more fittingly labelled biblical-demiurgical texts because of the position of the biblical god, Yahweh, who is made into a subordinate world creator (Williams 1996). The peculiar character of laughter in these texts raises the question of what its meaning and function in each case were. Is it a humorous laughter? Has it anything to do with spiritual wisdom? Is it aggressive? What is the historical background of the laughter motifs in the biblical-demiurgical texts?

Christianity and Biblical-Demiurgical Mythology

Laughter became part of philosophical, cultural and literary theory in antiquity and an object of criticism in Christianity which showed both a tendency to be agelastical, avoiding laughter, and antigelastical, nourishing a
principled antipathy towards laughter (Halliwell 2008, 5–6 note 15). Christian Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Jerome and John Chrysostom made laughter a subject of theology. Especially, monks and virgins should not laugh, and the most prominent of the saints were praised for never having laughed. In the canonical gospels, it is never mentioned that Jesus laughed (Gilhus 1997, 61–8).

As already seen, however, a laughing Christ appears in some of the fourth-century Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi as well as in the newly found Gospel of Judas, likewise from Egypt. Most of the myths referred to above that include laughter pertain to so-called Sethian texts, named after the special position this son of Adam and Eve has in some of these texts as a saviour/messenger from the world above and/or a model of Christ.1

Six texts will be consulted. Three texts are found in codex II from Nag Hammadi: the Secret Book of John (NHC II, 1), the Nature of the Archons (NHC II, 4) and The Treatise without Title (NHC II, 5). The Second Treatise of the Great Seth and the Apocalypse of Peter are in codex VII (NHC VII, 2 and 3), while the Gospel of Judas is from the recently published Codex Tchacos.2 There are in the main four laughter motifs in these texts:3

1. One or more mythological persons laugh at the world creator and his archons (mythological rulers of this world).
2. The docetic Jesus laughs at those who have crucified his material counterpart.
3. Eve laughs at the archons at the Tree of Life or the Tree of Knowledge.
4. Jesus laughs at the disciples and at their questions to him.

I will present the main examples of these motifs before turning to a general discussion about their origin, meaning and function and how they relate to theories about laughter.

Laughing at the World Creator

In accordance with Yahweh’s statement of being the only god, found several times in the Old Testament, in the biblical-demiurgical texts the world creator claims that he is the only god. In the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, which is a Christian revelation speech delivered by the ascended Christ to his followers, the world creator announces to his angels, ‘I am God and there is no other beside me’ (53:30–31). This statement, sometimes followed by laughter, is a topos in this type of literature. In the Second Treatise
Why Did Jesus Laugh?

of the Great Seth, Christ immediately tells how he responded to the world creator’s utterance: ‘I laughed heartily when I reflected on how conceited he was’ (53:31–34; cf. NHC II, 5, 111:25–29; NHC VII, 2, 53:27–34, 54:1–4). Sometimes, the utterance evokes laughter from the underlings of the Archons who are the rulers of the planets, other times representatives from the spiritual world laugh at him. The source of laughter is, in this case, the contrast between the spiritual world above and the world below with the world creator who claims to be the one and only ruler, when the other mythological entities (as well as the readers) know that his claim is a blatant lie.

In the Second Treatise of the Great Seth not only the world creator, but also Adam, Moses, Salomon and the prophets in the Old Testament are characterized as laughingstocks (sobe). This passage of the treatise is virtually a litany of laughingstocks:

For **Adam** was a laughingstock, since he was made in the shape of a human by the Hebdomad (probably the world creator), as if he had become stronger than I and my brothers. We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned.

**Abraham** as well as **Isaac and Jacob** was a laughingstock, since they were called fathers by the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and my brothers. We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned.

**David** was a laughingstock since his son was named the Son of Man, having been influenced by the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and my kin. We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned.

**Solomon** was a laughingstock, since he thought that he was anointed, having become arrogant through the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and my brothers. We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned.

**The twelve prophets** were laughingstocks, since they have come forth as imitations of the true prophets. They came into being as counterfeits through the Hebdomad, as if he had become stronger than I and my brothers. We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned.

**Moses**, a ‘faithful’ servant, was a laughingstock having been named ‘the Friend,’ since they perversely bore witness concerning him who never knew me. Neither he nor those before him, from **Adam to Moses and John the Baptist**, knew me nor my brothers.

For they had instructions from angels to observe dietary laws and submit to bitter slavery, since they never did know truth, nor will they
know it. For there is a great deception upon their soul, making it impossible for them ever to find a Nous of freedom nor know it since they do not know the Son of Man.

Now concerning my Father, I am he whom the world did not know, and because of this, it (the world) rose up against me and my brothers. We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned.

For the Archon was a laughingstock because he said, ‘I am God, and there is none greater than I. I alone am the Father and the Lord, and there is no other beside me. I am a jealous God, who brings the sins of the fathers upon the children for three and four generations’. As if he had become stronger than I and my brothers! We, we are innocent towards him, since we have not sinned, since we mastered his teaching. Thus he was in an empty glory. And he does not agree with our Father. So through our fellowship we overcame his teaching, since he was vain in an empty glory and does not agree with our Father. For he was a laughingstock with his judgment and false prophecy. (NHC, VII, 2, 62:27–65: 2)

In this rhetorically strong and persuasive text, the patriarchs, kings and prophets of the Old Testament are mocked because they believe in the world creator and because they are ignorant about Christ and his father. Accordingly, they do not know the truth and in the eyes of the author of the treatise appear as foolish.

The Laughter of Jesus at the Cross

A rather strange occurrence of a laughing Jesus appears in relation to a docetic interpretation of the crucifixion. Docetism implies that Jesus only seems to have a physical body and to physically die, while he in reality is incorporeal and spiritual and thus immortal. A docetic theology is witnessed in several versions in early Christianity. The two Nag Hammadi sources that combine a docetic view of the crucifixion with a laughing Christ are the Second Treatise of the Great Seth and the Apocalypse of Peter. These two texts follow each other in codex VII. In the Second Treatise of the Great Seth Jesus says:

Someone else, their father, was the one who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They were hitting me with the reed; but someone else, Simon, was the one who lifted up the cross on his shoulder. Someone else was the one on whom they put the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing on high over all the excesses of the archons and the offspring of
their error and their conceit. I was laughing (sobe) at their ignorance. (NHC VII, 2, 56:6–19)

Later in the text, Jesus mocks the archons because of their lack of knowledge about how things are and for ‘having proclaimed a doctrine of a dead man’ (NHC VII, 2, 59:23.25). The laughter in this passage (as in the passage with the laughter litany quoted above) is derisive and aimed at the archons. In this case, mistaken identities – a common motif in comedies – contribute to inspire the textual laughter. In the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, both the motif of the laughter of Jesus at the cross and the laughter at the world creator are present.

In a similar way as the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, also the Apocalypse of Peter reveals a docetic view of Jesus. In this treatise, Peter has a vision before the crucifixion about what will happen. Jesus (the Saviour) ‘explains’ the vision, while Peter is the one who speaks. It is rather complicated because the Saviour appears in the frame of the passage as well as within the texts as the spiritual saviour. The one who is crucified, however, is not Jesus:

I saw him [the Saviour] apparently being seized by them, and I said, ‘What do I see, O Lord? Is it really you whom they take? And are you holding on to me? Who is this one above the tree (of the cross), who is glad and laughing (sobe)? And is it another person whose feet and hands they are hammering?’ The Saviour said to me, ‘He whom you see above the cross, glad and laughing, is the living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his physical part (pisarkikon), which is the substitute (pishebio) for him’. (NHC VII, 3, 81,4–21).

In this passage, the laughter seems at first glance to be a happy laughter (‘glad and laughing’). Later in the same text, however, the one who is crucified in place of Jesus is described as ‘the home of demons, and the clay vessel in which they dwell, belonging to Elohim and belonging to the cross that is under the law’ (82:22–26). Then it is said: ‘Therefore he (the Saviour) laughs at their lack of perception (i.e. those that persecuted him), knowing that they were born blind’ (83:1–4). So while the initial laughter of the saviour apparently was not aimed at someone, the later occurrences of laughter in the Apocalypse of Peter are. Jesus mocks those who do not grasp the docetic perspective and thus are blind. His laughter has an aggressive and hostile quality. Guy G. Stroumsa speaks about ‘the cosmic cruelty of laughter’ (Stroumsa 2004, 271) while Fernando Rubio characterizes it as ‘d’un rire qui paraît exister aux dépens de la souffrance d’un autre’ (Rubio 2008, 335).
Eve laughs at the Archons

In some of the biblical-demiurgical texts there is a spiritual Eve, a sort of goddess, partly modelled on Eve in Genesis, but strictly separated from the earthly woman. This spiritual woman appears inside Adam as a spiritual power, but separates herself from him and gives him life. What is finally left on earth is the material Eve, a material travesty, almost a caricature of the lofty female spiritual ideal. When the archons mistake the material Eve for the spiritual Eve and think that they manage to rape her, she laughs at them and escapes.

There are two versions of this myth in the Nag Hammadi corpus, that differ slightly from each other, for instance in whether Eve goes into a tree or turns into a tree and in whether the tree is identified with the tree of knowledge or not. The two versions are found in two treatises that stand side by side in codex II:

Then the authorities came up to their Adam. When they saw his female counterpart speaking with him, they became agitated with great agitation; and they desired her. They said to each other, ‘Come, let us sow our seed in her’, and they pursued her. She laughed (sobe) at them for their foolishness and blindness; and in their clutches she turned into a tree, and left before them her shadowy reflection resembling herself; and the authorities defiled [it] foully. – And they defiled the imprint of her voice, so that by the form they had modelled in [their] (own) image, they condemned themselves. (NHC II, 4, 89:17–31)

They came to Adam. When they saw Eve talking to him, they said to one another, ‘What sort of thing is this luminous woman? She resembles that likeness which appeared to us in the light. Now come, let us seize her and cast our seed into her, so that she becomes soiled and may be unable to ascend into her light. Rather, those whom she bears will serve us. But let us not tell Adam, for he is not one of us. Instead let us bring a deep sleep over him. And suggest to him while he is sleeping that she (Eve) came from his rib, in order that his wife may obey, and he may rule over her’. Since Eve was a force she laughed (sobe) at their decision. She put mist into their eyes and secretly left her likeness with Adam. She entered the tree of knowledge and remained there. The rulers pursued her, and she revealed to them that she had gone into the tree and become a tree. Then the blind creatures fell into great fear and fled. (NHC II, 5, 116:11–33)

The interpretation of both passages presupposes a specialized knowledge – a sort of esoteric insight, because you must be an ‘insider’ to get the point.
The ‘joke’ is dependent on the incongruence that appears because there exist two levels of being, a spiritual and a material, and on the confusion that arises because the one is mistaken for the other. The motif of the two Eves could also be compared to motifs in ancient comedies, where mistaken identities were part of the fun.

The butt in both the *Nature of the Archons* and the *Origin of the World* is the Old Testament god. In these texts, he is described as a hybrid between man and animal. He is not thought of as a creator á la Plato, who was a craftsman, but is construed as a paternal begetter. The sexual pro-creational nature of this master breeder is a defining feature of the figure.

The motivation or inspiration behind the myth of the aborted rape of the spiritual Eve is probably, at least partly, God’s command to human beings ‘to be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen 1: 28) which is used to characterize this god as an arch-begetter. It is combined with the Jewish myth about Satan being the father of Cain. There is a conflict between a god who urges people to procreate and the ascetic ideals that most likely were part of the ideology of at least some of these texts and were probably shared by those who used them.

**Jesus Laughs at the Disciples**

The motif of Jesus who laughs at his disciples appears in dialogues between Jesus and the disciples in the *Secret Book of John*, the *Gospel of Judas* and in the crucifixion scene in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. If we compare the relationship between Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament with their relationship in the texts under scrutiny there are some similarities. Similar to the disciples in these fourth-century Coptic texts, the disciples in the canonical gospels do not always understand what Jesus means and may appear rather ignorant.

This point is developed further in the biblical-demiurgical texts where laughter is introduced as a rhetorical device to mark lack of understanding and spiritual blindness. In the *Secret Book of John*, John’s lack of knowledge is used by Jesus to give a new explanation of events. When John is singled out for further revelation, the purpose of Jesus is to help him. ‘Do not think it is, as Moses said,’ a laughing Jesus tells John in this text (NHC II, 1, 13:18–20). One occasion for mirth is that Jesus says that he is the one who has made people eat of the Tree of Knowledge, because it represents the knowledge of light. John thinks that the serpent made them eat and says so. Then Jesus laughs and says that the serpent, connected to the Tree of Life, taught them the evilness of desire and procreation (22:9–15). This is an
ironic laughter that reflects two levels of understanding, that of Moses and that of Jesus, which means that there is a contrast between the material and the spiritual and between the traditional interpretation of Genesis and its biblical-demiurgical interpretation that sees Yahweh as an inferior god.

In this case, laughter is connected to two different ways of understanding. One has to do with spirituality, the other with sexuality, as symbolized in, respectively, the Tree of Knowledge and Jesus, implying gnosis of salvation, and in the Tree of Life and the serpent, which represent the cycle of birth, procreation and death.

The laughter of Jesus in the Gospel of Judas (33:22 ff; 36:22 ff; 44:18 ff; 55:12 ff) is more sinister than his laughter in the Secret Book of John (cf. Rubio 2008). In this gospel, Judas is the chosen one who receives the revelation. At the same time, Jesus turns him down. In the Gospel of Judas, the disciples and Judas are given a new explanation of events that will most likely never help them, because they are not only ignorant but seen a priori to be condemned to destruction.

In 33:22 ff, Jesus laughs (sobe) when he finds the disciples gathered together and seated offering a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread. The disciples ask him why he laughs at them and Jesus answers that he does not laugh at them: ‘You are not doing this because of your own will, but because it is through this that your god [will receive] thanksgiving’ (34:8–11). The disciples speak of themselves as ‘the children of our god’ and think that Jesus is ‘the son of our god’ (34:12–13), while Jesus refers to this god as ‘your god’ (Rubio 2008, 341). The disciples apparently belong to the wrong god and will not be saved. They do not understand Jesus and become angry, infuriated and blaspheme against him, which reveals their lack of understanding.

When the disciples ask Jesus about the great generation, that is holy and superior to them, Jesus laughs at them and asks why they are thinking in their hearts about the strong and holy generation (36:17–23). The underlying message is that this generation has nothing to do with the disciples, because the disciples are not at the same level as them.

Among the disciples, Judas is the only one who dares to stand before Jesus, but he does not dare to look him in the eyes. Judas is obviously singled out for something and Jesus promises: ‘Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the kingdom’ (35:23–25), but adds, ‘not so that you will go there, but you will grieve a great deal’ (35:26–27). Jesus laughs at him when Judas tells that he has had a revelation and says: ‘You thirteenth daimon, why do you try so hard? But speak up, and I shall bear with you’ (44:20–23). Jesus corrects Judas’ interpretation of his own vision,
and stresses that he will not be saved. Judas is at best relegated to a sort of middle position between the mortal humans, inclusive of the disciples, and the immortal generation.

In 55:13–15, Judas asks why Jesus laughs at them and Jesus says that he does not laugh at the disciples, but at ‘the error of the stars, because these six stars wander about with these five combatants, and they all will be destroyed along with their creatures’ (55:15–20). This statement includes a cosmic view and implies that Jesus views events from a superior perspective. There is a contrast between the transcendent world to which he belongs and the world of the stars. Like in the other three laughter motifs, the contrast between the transcendent god and the god of this world is either made explicit or implied.

Common to these examples are the two levels of understanding. In some of the examples, a literary technique of misunderstanding that is familiar from the Gospel of John is applied. This literary device usually contains an ambiguous statement by Jesus that is misunderstood by the hearers, and then clarified, usually by Jesus. In the Gospel of Judas, this device has been developed in a more acute and exclusive direction, not least by including mocking laughter and by the message that some of the hearers will never ever understand the right interpretation of events. In the Gospel of Judas, it is further not primarily what Jesus says that is misunderstood like it is in the Gospel of John, but Jesus points out something that the disciples have done or that has happened to them, which is interpreted in a wrong direction and reveals their lack of understanding.

**Historical Roots**

What is the historical background of these myths? An obvious place to look is in the biblical tradition. The Old Testament references to a laughing god have derisive and mocking connotations. Yahweh is a god who mocks his enemies (as the old Near Eastern gods usually do) (cf. Gilhus 1997, 14 ff). In Psalm 37 in the bible, Yahweh’s laughter is contrasted with the gnashing of teeth of the wicked and in Psalm 59 with those who bark like dogs, belch and have swords in their lips. The contrasting implies that Yahweh’s laughter comes from a more frightening mouth than those referred to in the psalms (cf. Brenner 1990, 57). In these examples, derisive laughter has connotations to a symbolic context of a wide-open mouth, teeth, biting and swallowing aiming at destruction. Divine power shows its superiority at the expense of someone else in line with the superiority theory of humour.8
According to Arthur Koestler, most of the 29 references to laughter in the Old Testament are connected to mockery and scorn (Koestler 1964, 52–53).

In his recent interpretation of the Gospel of Judas, Fernando B. Rubio leans on Robert Grant, who saw Christ’s laughter in the Nag Hammadi texts as a reflection of Ps 2:4, ‘He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision’ (Grant 1959, 121–125). Rubio stresses that there is a violent dimension to Judaism and Christianity and refers in addition to Ps 2:4 to Ps 59:9, 37:12–13, Proverb 1:26–27. He sees the Gospel of Judas 55 ff as modelled on Ps 37:13 and stresses the continuity from Jewish and Christian traditions (Rubio 2008).

Rubio’s suggestions seem sound. There is most likely a continuation from the biblical tradition to the biblical-demiurgical texts. At the same time, there has been a dramatic revaluation, because the god who had the right to laugh in the biblical text, i.e. Yahweh, has now himself become the butt of laughter. Rather paradoxically, the texts that have been presented in this chapter include a rejection of a positive interpretation of major events in Genesis as well as a rejection of the Old Testament god. At the same time, they seem to continue an inverted conception of laughter of derision connected to this god, but have transferred it to his antagonists, in line with what Rubio suggested for the Gospel of Judas. While the Old Testament god laughed at those who did not realize his almighty power, in the texts we have discussed laughter is turned against this god exactly because he lacks almighty power and does not realize it.

Stroumsa has recently pointed at the possibility of another specific Old Testament model for the motif of the laughing and docetic Jesus. He wants to offer ‘a more convincing interpretation of Christ’s laughing’, but not exclusive of Grant’s suggestions (Stroumsa 2004:274). Stroumsa stresses that the church fathers considered Isaac as a typos or figura of Christ, although Isaac was not sacrificed. He proposes to see in the laughter of Christ a reference to the etymology of the name of Isaac, yzhaq, ‘he will laugh’. Like Isaac, who was not sacrificed and whose name means laughter, the docetic Christ was not sacrificed, and he laughed. Stroumsa also ventures the hypothesis that in the first century ‘some (Jewish) believers in Jesus and in his redemptory role considered him to be, as it were, Isaac redivivus’ (Stroumsa 2004, 287). In a second stage when the docetic attitude was identified with Gnosticism and antinomianism, Christ’s laughter turned sarcastic. Stroumsa uses several texts as indications of the existence of the Isaac-redivivus motif. Stroumsa’s hypothesis is interesting and there
Why Did Jesus Laugh?

could very well be a historical connection between the interpretation of Isaac and the laughing Christ neither Isaac nor the Gnostic Christ was sacrificed (cf. also Rubio 2007).

There is, however, an unsolved problem in how the different laughter motifs in the biblical-demiurgical texts hang together: Laughing at the world creator; Eve’s laughter at the archons; Jesus laughing above the cross; Jesus laughing at his disciples – what is the relationship between the four motifs, is one of them more ancient than the others? Is the vision of the two gods, the transcendent god and Yahweh, the original source of laughter in these motifs? Structurally, the motifs of the crucifixion and the attempted rape of Eve are close to being identical with each other (Gilhus 1991), a fact that made Rubio place these two motifs in the same group. Is the laughter of Christ the primary motif or is the motif of Eve laughing at her tormentors prior to the motif of the laughing Christ? Do the four motifs have separate stories of origin or are they connected to each other? At present, there is no consensus about the origin and significance of this laughter in the biblical-demiurgical texts.

My suggestion is that the motif of laughing at the world creator is the most ancient of the four laughter motifs because the other motifs seem to presuppose this motif. The docetic Jesus laughing at the cross seems, for instance, to take the motif of the devalued world creator as granted. The motif of Eve laughing at the archons has a similar structure as Jesus laughing at the cross and could be dependent on this motif. I would also suggest that the fourth motif – Jesus laughing at the disciples and their questions – in addition to presupposing the contrast of the two gods may also have some roots in the rhetorical device of misunderstanding, found, for instance, in the Gospel of John where some of the misunderstandings occur when concepts and statement are interpreted in an earthly manner, but in reality refer to divine matters. It is likely that the motif of Yahweh who is laughed at has attracted other motifs and rhetorical devices and been intertwined with them during time.

What is striking, however, is that laughter has an aggressive quality in all the four motifs in the texts under scrutiny. Common for them is the two levels of understanding, the traditional level where the ultimate signifier is Yahweh and the radical level in which he is degraded and where a new ultimate signifier, the transcendent god, is established in his place. Consequently, the four motifs represent a shared rhetorical strategy that is dependent on the establishing of a superior concept of god and of simultaneously degrading Yahweh.
Meaning, Function and Social Context

Part of the ‘fun’ of the laughter motifs in the biblical-demiurgical texts is because they present two levels of being and thus point at an incongruity between the spiritual source and its material derivate. This incongruity establishes the matrix for laughter in these texts.

One of the first modern scholars who presented an incongruity theory of humour was Arthur Koestler. According to him, there are four criteria of humour. ‘Bisociation’ implies ‘the perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M1 and M2’ (Koestler 1964, 35). There is a clash of perspectives and during the cognitive process the traditional perspective is discovered to be false, while the alternative perspective is found to be correct. The incongruity is never finally solved, and according to Koestler it is the ongoing incongruity that creates the humorous effect.

In the case of the four laughter-motifs in the biblical-demiurgical texts, the clash occurs between a material and a spiritual level of being. In these texts, it is presupposed that the implicit audience has a basic knowledge of the myths of the Hebrew Bible. The comical effect of the myths of Eve that escapes into the tree; the docetic Christ and the crucifixion; and the mockery of Yahweh were dependent on the old and the new versions of the same myths being mentally held up against each other. The incongruity between the two versions is never finally solved, not least because most people would probably stick to traditional interpretations of Yahweh, Genesis and of the crucifixion that were promoted by the representatives of the proto-Orthodox church.

A second criterion of humour is, according to Koestler, the presence of mistaken identities. The idea of two gods, two Eves and two Christs, as well as the parallel and the inversion between sexuality and asceticism are in line with this thinking (Gilhus 2008). Those who mistake the spiritual for the material or vice versa are laughed at.

A third criterion of humour is the presence of the one who is fooled. In these texts, the prototype of the fool is the Old Testament god.

A fourth criterion of humour is the suddenness of a punch line. This may be lacking in the biblical-demiurgical texts, which could mean that while these texts are in accordance with some of the criteria of humour, they are not in accordance with all of them. On the other hand, there is some empirical evidence that those jokes in which the listeners were best able to predict the punch lines were the funniest (Martin 2007, 74).

Processing the laughter myths could at first glance and in line with incongruity theories be seen as akin to solving a riddle or seeing the point of a
joke, and thus to reflect the process of acquiring insight and knowledge. However, this is far from being the whole picture (cf. also Gilhus 1997; Rubio 2008). At best, the laughter in these texts is ambivalent, encompassing both knowledge and mockery. The Coptic term that is used for ‘laughter’ is sobe. It means ‘laugh, play’, but in its transitive form and with pronouns its meanings are ‘deride, mock’. As substantive (noun) it means ‘laughter, derision’ and ‘laughingstock’, so a certain aggressiveness is connected to the term from the outset.13

Incongruity theories of humour have become very popular in recent years. The theories are strong when it comes to making laughter and humour a rational phenomenon, but weaker when it comes to explaining their emotional impetus. This means that incongruity theories of humour pertain to the techniques of jokes and of raising laughter, but they do not fully explain why a joke is funny and why people laugh, which is more of a social question. The ancient theories of humour, on the other hand, stress especially the aggressive and hostile aspects of laughter and humour. In the case of the biblical-demiurgical texts, such aspects are clearly present and important. At the same time, as the laughter motifs in the biblical-demiurgical myths represent insight, the laughter is aimed at someone who is laughed at. The prototypical butt is, as we have seen, the Old Testament God and those who belong to and worship him.

Hostile and aggressive types of humour and laughter usually involve three individuals or groups: the speaker, who communicates the message; those who listen and laugh; and those who are the butt of the joke (Martin 2007, 18). Even if textual humour is not identical with the telling of jokes and the plots in texts are not identical with jokes, there are similarities between jokes/humour and the four myth-motifs, not least the shared element of laughter in the four motif points at such similarities. It must also be stressed that topics like sex and aggression are very common in jokes and seem to contribute significantly to their enjoyment, as in the myth of Eve with its sexual and aggressive elements and in the docetic myth of the crucifixion with its aggressive component where Simon of Cyrene is tortured while Jesus laughs.

Who were the persons and groups that the aggressive laughter in these myths was aimed at, in addition to the world creator and his minions who are the mythological figures within the texts? Most likely, the hostile laughter was aimed at contemporary opponents of the communities that used these texts. In his recent discussion of Johannine misunderstanding dialogues, Paul N. Anderson stresses that these dialogues are addressed rhetorically to successive crises in the Johannine community in different stages of its development. He emphasizes that not only are the uncomprehending
individuals and groups in the narrative corrected, but also ‘the persons and
groups in the audience they represent’ (Anderson 2007, 139–140). The
same is most likely true with the laughter in the biblical-demiurgical texts.
Who these persons and groups were is not known, they may have been Jews,
but more likely they were Christians who were in support of a more tradi-
tional interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. In the case of the Second Treatise of
the Great Seth, the Apocalypse of Peter and the Gospel of Judas, Louis Painchaud
says that they belong to the group of ‘the most aggressive Christian Gnostic
writings’ (Painchaud 2008, 172). Painchaud suggests that these texts were
written against the sacrificial interpretation of Christianity and the sacrificial
theology of the proto-Orthodox Christian groups in the second century. This
seems to be a pertinent suggestion. In the case of the Origin of the World and
the Nature of the Archons, the conflict may have been between ascetics perhaps
even encratite Christians and groups that were in favour of family life.
The laughter in these texts is radical: God is laughed at; his prophets are
laughed at; there are two Eves, one of them is more like a goddess; Jesus
laughs aggressively at the crucifixion and he mocks and condemns his dis-
ciples. We know that the church fathers were duly shocked by some of the
things that they read in these and similar texts. Most likely, however, the
texts were not aimed at them, but meant for ‘in-groups’, people who had
already agreed to the basic tenets in this way of interpreting Scripture. The
purpose of these texts could rather have been to nourish held beliefs and
boost morals in own ranks as well as widening the gap between insiders and

Conclusion
One may feel that the interpretations of Jewish and Christian texts that are
done by these text-producers and readers are rather peculiar. On the other
hand, to keep Scripture alive implies to continually think with it and recre-
ate it in a contemporary situation (Hughes 2003). According to James L.
Kugel, Jewish interpreters are ‘fond of maintaining that although Scripture
may appear to be saying X, what it really means is Y, or that while Y is not
openly said by Scripture, it is somehow implied or hinted at in X’ (Kugel
1998, 15). He further stresses an extremely important point that

meaning was to be, by definition, relevant to the situation of the inter-
preter and the listeners, not some insight into historical circumstances in
which the text was originally written, but a message of immediate value
and applicability, either a timeless moral truth or a law to be observed in one particular fashion or something bearing in some other way on the present or immediate future. (Kugel 1998, 19)

In a similar way, the four laughter motifs that have been discussed in this chapter were interpretations of Scripture that were created to meet certain concerns and to fit into specific social situations. The question in the heading, why did Jesus laugh, has no simple answer. It seems at first glance that his laughter is connected to insight/knowledge and to promoting the spiritual level of existence and thus it appears as laughter of wisdom. More fundamentally, however, this laughter is aggressive and hostile. The laughter of Jesus and the other entities in the biblical-demiurgical texts seem to be built on incongruity, but to thrive on aggression. Laughter is a rhetorical device and its purpose is to divide those that are inside from those that are outside – divide those that held alternative views on Yahweh, the interpretation of the Old Testament, the crucifixion of Jesus and the value of asceticism from those that agreed with the traditional views of the proto-Orthodox church.

Notes

1 The label ‘Sethian texts’ points at a number of motives that are present in these texts, but does not necessarily imply a Sethian group. What the social context of this literature was and how it relates to specific social groups is a thorny and perhaps unsolvable question. The social context will also have changed from the second to the fifth century and from place to place. About the problem of Sethians and Sethian texts, see (Klijn 1977; Wisse 1980; Turner 1986).

2 The genre of the texts could be labelled revelation dialogue. Except for the Apocalypse of Peter, which is a Christian apocalyptic work, the texts are usually seen as Sethian treatises or as exhibiting Sethian features.


4 G. G. Stroumsa (Stroumsa 2004) pertinently points out that there exist different types of doceticism.

5 There are other references to docetism in Nag Hammadi texts, but they do not include laughter (First Apocalypse of James (NHC V, 3, 31:15–22; 30:1–4); The Concept of Our Great Power (NHC VI, 4, 41:14–42:3); The Letter of Peter to Philip (NHC VIII, 4, 139:15–22).

6 According to Irenaeus of Lyon, Basilides taught that Simon of Cyrene was crucified instead of Jesus, who assumed the form of Simon and stood by, ‘laughing at them (irrisisse eos)’ (Adv. Haer., 1.24.4).

7 In Timaeus, the demiurge is called father only two times, the second time he is called ho gennesos patér (28c og 37c).
Aristotle formulated this theory first, but was more than two thousand years later followed by, for instance, Thomas Hobbes and Henri Bergson.

Rubio (Rubio 2008, 334) says that the Gnostic laughter ‘est à la fois méthode de détachement, instrument de libération et signe de transcendance’. He compares it to the laughter of zen, but uses his comparison to reveal difference – in the end, this Gnostic laughter is not like the laughter of zen.

The common structure of the laughter of Jesus at the crucifixion and the laughter of Eve could be lined out in this way, cf. (Gilhus 1991, 61; Gilhus 1997, 73–74):

a. The Spiritual being descends into the material world.
b. The antagonists want to conquer the Spiritual Being.
c. The Spiritual Being laughs at them.
d. The Spiritual Being escapes.
e. The antagonists conquer the material substitute of the Spiritual Being.
f. Because the antagonists are blind, they think they have conquered the Spiritual Being.


Rudolf Bultmann (Bultmann 1971) pointed out this specific contrast, while Alan R. Culpepper (Culpepper 1983, 152 ff.) has stressed that there are other types of misunderstanding as well.

The Egyptian word for laughter, zbt, is also mostly used in a derisory way. W. Gugliemi (Gugliemi 1980, 907–908) says: ‘Zumeist meint zbt das auf Spott und Schadenfreude basierenden Auslachen, welches nach den Geboten der Lebenslehren zu vermeiden ist’.

During time, the evaluation of laughter has changed. Laughter is from the seventeenth century rationalized and reduced to cold humour, irony and sarcasm (see. M. Bakhtin 1968, 67; 101–144). In the last century, however, there has been a reassessment of laughter and humour, something like a new turning point in the Western history of laughter. The new message is that laughter makes human being whole and in harmony with their bodies and society. With the dominance of incongruity theories in the field of humour studies, laughter also becomes more of a cerebral phenomenon pointing to the rationality of human beings: laughter has in a way moved from the body to the brain, cf. (Gilhus 1997, 101).

Bibliography

Coptic texts


Books and articles

Byzantine attitudes towards laughter were certainly multifarious and ranged from denial to acceptance. It would be simply naive to think that what we find in religious writings of various sorts (that usually disapprove of laughter) can be accepted as a standard norm. In this text I shall discuss a few examples of the interplay between humour and religion in Byzantine culture.¹ I shall start by showing why many scholars believe that Byzantine society was by and large humourless.

The sources we have record many instances of laughter-inducing reactions. Liutprand, bishop of Cremona, described in Antapodosis the encounter with Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (949) and the emperor’s joyful reaction to an acrobatic performance.² Sometime later John Tzetzes described a meeting with his students (or other teachers perhaps?) where, after discovering that a person who had argued with him about a play of Aristophanes they were studying had in fact a copy of Oppian’s or Euripides’ text, all people in the gathering burst into inextinguishable laughter.³ Tzetzes says ἀσβέστοι ὄρτο γέλω, using the phrase from the Iliad ἀσβέστοι δ’ ἀρ’ ἐνωτό γέλω (I. 599).⁴ The Homeric quotation was probably employed to underline both the ‘power’ of laughter and learnedness of Tzetzes himself.

Niketas Choniates records various events which made people laugh. Both passages I have chosen here, to demonstrate that the Byzantines laughed, are well known. The first one tells the story of a Turk who attempted to fly from the tower through hippodrome but much to the joy and amusement of the Byzantines ‘instead of taking wings, he plummeted groundward like a solid mass pulled down by gravity. In the end, he plunged to the earth, and his life was snuffed out (. . .)’. The adventure of the unfortunate conjurer made people mock the Turks in the sultan’s retinue.
As Choniates remarks, ‘They could not even pass through the agora without being laughed at (akatagelástous)’ (Choniates 1975, 119–120) The second story concerns the well-known and very often cited humourous remark made by a mime name Chalivoures that met with the disapproval of Emperor Isaac:

Once at dinner Emperor Isaac said “Bring me salt”. Standing nearby admiring the dance of the woman made up of the emperor’s concubines and kinswomen was Chalivoures, the wittiest of the mimes, who retorted, “Let us first come to know these, O Emperor, and then command others to be brought in.” At this everyone, both men and women, burst into loud laughter (exekágchasan); the emperor’s face darkened and only when he chastened the jester’s freedom of speech his anger curbed.

One remark of methodological character should be made. Although the terms ‘humour’ and ‘laughter’ are usually used interchangeably, they are not necessarily the same thing. As it was observed: ‘(. . .) laughter itself, the physical act of laughing, is often discussed as it were the same as humour or playfulness which are among the causes of laughter but should not be equated with it.’ In many cases, however, laughter is associated with the humour which causes it and is perceived as a marker of humour. The physical aspect of laughing was addressed by Meletios the Monk (who lived some time between the seventh and ninth centuries) in his treatise De natura hominis (Cramer 1836, 44). Laughter is described as ‘agitated movement of the facial muscles or a broadening of [the same] muscles caused by the motion of internal organs’ (Kazhdan 1991, 1189). Meletios explained also the etymology of the word laughter (gelos) which for him was associated with warmth.

Laughing Reluctantly: The Byzantine Attitude towards Laughter and Humour

In the collection of answers, originally composed in the sixth century and then rearranged somewhere in the ninth century, given to various people by two monastic writers Barsanouphios and Joseph there is one concerning parrhesia and laughter. The question asked the two recluses was: Why are parrhesia and laughter inappropriate? Parrhesia, which means freedom of speech or in a bad sense impudence, was also a topic of an epigram written by the nun Kassia (ninth century):
Freedom of speech is the mother of rudeness. Parrhesia derives from para ton ison (more than is right) for it exceeds the limits of what is right and proper.\textsuperscript{8}

As Marc Lauxtermann assumes, Kassia reinterpreted one of the monastic gnomes which warned against speaking too much and supplied her own (wrong to be exact) etymology of the word \textit{parrhesia}, having in mind the word \textit{perissa}. As a result a \textit{parrhesia} is \textit{not a product, but the cause of boorish impertinence}.\textsuperscript{9} Lauuxterman is certainly right but it is worth mentioning that in the \textit{Questiones} of Barsanuphios and Joseph (earlier than Kassia’s text but gathered into the collection probably during her lifetime) we encounter the same idea written in almost the same way – for the recluses there are two categories of \textit{parrhesia}. The first one is a by-product of the lack of proper constraint (\textit{anaideia}) and this one is a mother of all evil things. The second type of \textit{parrhesia} is a result of cheerfulness (ilarotes). Neither of them do any good but the cheerfulness-born \textit{parrhesia} is slightly more acceptable. Accordingly, as we are told, there are two types of laughter which is the offspring of \textit{freedom of speech} (which must mean here rather, to use Lauxtermann’s words, boorish impertinence). One type is the shameful laughter (since it is connected with \textit{parrhesia} and the foul language) while the second one is the cheerful laughter. Not to elaborate further it is enough to say, that both types can lead people to adultery.

As it was observed in Christian conceptions of laughter it ‘[. . .] was systematically seen in connection with the lustful body, and condemned’ (Gilhus 1997, 63). However, the most important reason why The Church Fathers disapproved of laughter was because Christ himself never laughed in the Bible.\textsuperscript{10} The first ones among them to point out that Christ never ever laughed were Basil the Great and John Chrysostomos (Resnick 1987, 96–97). Anti-laughter attitude can also be found in the lives of saints who abhorred jokes and laughter as children or counted them among sins that should be avoided by a holy man.\textsuperscript{11} We have indeed many examples of an anti-laughter attitude recorded in saints’ lives,\textsuperscript{12} though it has to be remembered that laughter is perceived probably as an obstacle on the way to \textit{apatheia}. In other words, laughter, being an emotion which is difficult to control, was not welcome in the new Christian world. On the other hand, laughter and ridicule as educational tools could also be employed by the saints as the example of Athanasios of Athos shows, who cured an inappropriately behaving monk by allowing his brethren to ridicule him (the word \textit{skomma}, gibe, used in the text implies scurrillity).\textsuperscript{13} And as a letter of Ignatios the Deacon (ninth century) shows, jokes were not uncommon between the clergymen.\textsuperscript{14}
Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable stated in their introduction to Byzantine studies

while tears were habitual and honourable, smiles and laughter were rejected by the church fathers and were regarded by the Byzantines as signs of lewdness and obscenity. The gods of Antiquity laughed frequently and noisily, but Christ can only be imagined weeping. The words of the Gospel “woe unto you that laugh now! for you shall mourn and weep!”, give a clue to understanding the Byzantine attitude toward laughter.

But only three pages later the reader finds a different statement, probably much closer to what Kazhdan himself thought about the Byzantine sense of humour: ‘the Byzantines could freely indulge in laughter and crude obscenity. They liked practical jokes and earthy buffoonery at their feasts; they used sharp irony in their political arguments.’

Humour and Religion: Byzantine Style

There is of course no turning point in history of Byzantium which would mark a sudden change of the attitude towards laughter. According to Kazhdan one of the key figures, responsible for ‘re-introducing’ laughter was Bishop Arethas of Cesarea:

While Photios rejected “impudent laughter”, his immediate successor [scil. Arethas] reintroduced this emotion into the literary depiction of social behavior, and thus provided justification for the reinvention of the genre of pamphlet. (Kazhdan 2006, 82–83)

Arethas of Caesarea suggested indeed that the ability to laugh is as natural to a man as the ability to neigh to a horse, when he says that a man will not be seen neighing and a horse laughing. But to what extent this sentence signals his personal, favourable attitude towards laughter is difficult to say; for the passage is borrowed from Paedagogus of Clement of Alexandria (2.5.46.2), who wrote as follows:

We need not take away from man any of the things that are natural to him, but only set a limit and due proportion to them. It is true that man is an animal who can laugh; but it is not true that he therefore should laugh at everything. The horse is an animal that neighs, yet it does not neigh at everything. (Clement of Alexandria 1954, 134–135)
Moreover, the argument that only a man is able to laugh (while other creatures cannot) is employed very often in various treatises throughout the ancient and Byzantine periods. Therefore, this sentence may be purely conventional, after all for the Byzantines man seemed to be the only being capable of laughing. While I am sceptical as to whether it is possible to point out one single person or an exact point in time when the laughter was ‘rediscovered’, it is possible that in those periods of history of Empire when the classical tradition was studied more intensively, laughter and humour were more welcome. As Anthony Kaldellis assumes the twelfth-century statements that saw laughter in the more positive light signal ‘a massive shift in psychology’ (Kaldellis 2007, 253).

Bishop Eustathios of Thessaloniki, in his Adversus implacabilitatis accusationem, stated that while choosing between tearful (aridakrus) Heraklitos and the laughter of Demokritos, he would prefer the latter (pòs tò Dëmokritò mallon) for the ability to laugh is a peculiar nature of man (iðidôs anthrôpou tò gelastikòn). Similarly, in his epigram (as Gustav Soyter called it) Constantine Manasses did not condemn laughter but rather pointed to the fact that it is better to laugh at yourself than mock your neighbour (kreisson gelân gár heautòn e paiztein tôn plesión). Manasses’s conclusion is supported by what Christ and Saint Paul said about not judging one’s neighbour (Manasses 1875, 72 v. 838 ff.). Certainly, as Gustav Soyter already noticed, the Byzantines did not really observe such a Christian-oriented laughing policy. Manasses’s epigram is written in the vein of Menandrean-like gnōmai, and might be a message of a general character; but it would be very tempting to think that it actually originated as a sort of commentary on twelfth-century satirical texts and a sense of humour – as Garland has noted, ‘(…) a taste for abuse was an innate part of the Byzantine mentalité and a constituent of most Byzantine humour’ (Garland 2007, 184).

Choniates, commenting on the Byzantine audience reaction in the aforementioned story about a would-be flying Turk, wrote with some contempt that ‘[w]hen the emperor was informed of these things, he was in all probability amused, knowing how the rabble was fond of gossip and play (….)’ [ho basileús, diecheítò men hòs eikós, tò stómálon kai philopaigmôn tòn eph tôn triódôn eidōs] (Magoulias 1984, 68). In other words, ecumenical canons or attitudes recorded in the saint’s lives cannot be taken as equally valid for the entire population. As was recently observed,

Church leaders consistently warned against laughter for its cruelties and subverting of pious thoughts. Performances of comedy, burlesque, and slapstick were routinely condemned as a distraction from sober
comportment. Such repeated warnings, of course, indicate just how little effect they had on ordinary lives. (Rautman 2006, 289)

But this ambivalence and gap between the expectations of holy people and mundane reality should not surprise us at all. It has been long recognized that canonical laws, warnings of the Church fathers and the negative attitude recorded in the saint’s lives likewise had little effect on the existence of mimes and various sorts of performances in Byzantium.

Using Humour for Religious Purposes

Byzantine satirical texts (almost) never mocked the religion itself – that would be unthinkable. The church historian, Socrates from Constantinople (sometimes called Scholasticus, fifth BC) discusses in his work Bishop Sisinnios who was the author of the collection of theological jokes (or perhaps rather funny remarks and puns). Socrates, who apparently preferred luxury to the ascetic way of life was once asked why, being a bishop, he bathes twice a day. ‘Because there is no time to do it thrice’ replied the bishop (Maraval and Périchon 2004–2007, 6, 22) As John Haldon notices most of the jokes ‘depended for their effect upon a fairly intimate knowledge of Christological debates, the membership and characteristics of various heretical groups’ (Haldon 2002a, 61).

Obviously, the restriction about not poking fun at religion did not apply to different denominations such as Islam. In the Dogmatic Panoply of Eutychios Zigabenos (twelfth century) one may find a mocking biography of the ‘pseudo-prophet’ Muhammed (or Moameth, as Zigabenos calls him). According to him the visions of Muhammed were invented in order to tame his wife, unhappy that her husband turned out to be not only poor but also a paralytic.20 A text could, however satirize people, regardless of their position, whose behaviour was perceived as undermining Christian religious beliefs and principles.

The imperial official Christopher of Mytilene (eleventh century) wrote a satire against the monk Andrew who collected: ‘[t]en hands of the martyr Prokopios, fifteen jaws of Saint Theodora, eight legs of Saint Nestor, no fewer than four heads of Saint George and the bones of the twelve forearms of Saint Demetrios.’ Your faith, says Christopher, convinced you to believe that God’s athletes were hyd ras and it turned the martyr Nestor into an octopus.21 It is most likely that Christopher mocks a real person, whose love for relics had in fact nothing to do with real piety or religion. But it cannot be excluded
Laughing Against All the Odds

that he also directed his satire against popular beliefs (Romano 1999, 180). Monastic communities were mocked very frequently and the writers (especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries) described in detail monks preoccupied with profane rather than sacred issues. Michael Psellos lists entertainments of a monk Jacob: dances, feasts, drinking and wine (Romano 1999, 216). One of the so-called *Ptochoprodromic* poems describes a monk who became a drunkard from drinking pure water (Kislinger 2007, 150).

As Michael Angold points out, these texts should be read with caution since the authors of satires ‘have created the impression of communities motivated only by material concerns. A blanket condemnation is unfair, as the example of Patmos shows.’ Finally, as some scholars suggest humour was also used in the time of iconoclasm to ridicule iconodules (icon worshippers). Marie-France Auzépy gives as an example the life of bishop Leo of Catania. Leo’s opponent, the magician Heliodoros is in fact a prototype of an iconodule, mocked by the author of this hagiographical text (Auzépy 1992, 57–67).

The examples of mocking religious rites are very rare indeed. The first one concerns Emperor Michael III called the Drunkard (842–867) who was a devoted fan of all types of spectacles, and sometimes he partook in such activities. These abominable practices were described thoroughly in the *Scriptores post Theophanem*, and later adopted by other historians. Here is the excerpt from the Chronicle of Skylitzes:

Worst of all was the crew of catemites who followed him (Michael III) around, ready for any shameless deed. These he held in honour and respect. To make a burlesque of the sacred mysteries and to profane them he dressed these fellows up in priestly robes woven with golden thread, and in stoles. Then he obliged them to celebrate the divine and most holy mysteries in a sacrilegious, indecent manner. Their leader, a fellow named Gryllos, he called patriarch, the other eleven, metropolitans. The emperor himself played the role of one of the concelebrants, calling himself bishop of Koloneia. When they had to sing in celebrating the mysteries they performed the songs to the accompaniment of guitars. Sometimes they sang softly and melodiously, sometimes stridently, just as priests proclaim the scriptures in the sacred liturgies. They had golden vessels set with precious stones which they filled with vinegar and mustard; this they administered to the communicants in mockery of the immaculate mysteries.

Certainly, this text is not to be trusted completely. This passage and ones similar to it were written as propaganda for the Macedonian dynasty, whose
funder Basil I murdered Michael III, his adoptive father. What is important here, however, is not the exact event (which might or might not be true) but the role it played. Such descriptions were supposed to show Michael as a heretic, or at least a ‘trespasser’ of God’s laws and accordingly unworthy of being the autokrator ton Romaion.

There are works which are not primarily designed as ridiculing religious matters but which can be understood in such a way by a later reader. The twelfth-century anonymous satire Timarion is an excellent example of such a reading. This text tells the story of a certain inhabitant of Constantinople who, on his way back to the City, died and was (mistakenly) taken to the Underworld. After having spent some time there, he is judged ‘alive’ and can go back to the World of the Living. This text met with ferocious criticism of the thirteenth-century amateur theologian Constantine Akropolites. Among many other accusations Akropolites singled out ‘anti-Christian’ attacks of the anonymous author:

I cannot imagine what motivated him to attack the Christian faith. [. . .] Why this thunderstruck fool, this certifiable maniac, wanted to revive the myths of the pagans, though he was shrewd enough to assume the veneer of a Christian refuting open error [. . .] whilst all the time his intention was to string pagan nonsense in an incompatible union with the truth [. . .].

In the Timarion there are more passages that could be interpreted as humorous commentary on Christianity. When Timarion is about to leave the Underworld his deceased professor says to him: ‘Get up, Timarion, my boy, and get on your way back up to life. It’s a long time since anyone was resurrected.’

Whether this is an allusion to Christ’s Resurrection is unclear, as Barry Baldwin noticed, but the furious attack of Akropolites means that the entire text was read (or rather could be read) as anti-Christian. Akropolites’s criticism is unique, so there is no certainty if his reading is a common or exceptional reaction to the satire in question. Perhaps the fact that this text was handed down as anonymous is also telling. Perhaps its author tried to avoid accusations similar to those expressed by Akropolites.

There exists another satire, a Late Byzantine text, the Office of a Beardless Man, which is undoubtedly meant as blasphemous. The Office is a parody of various liturgical offices of the Eastern Church, filled with obscenities. The purpose of the text is very difficult to understand. Some earlier scholars tried to interpret it even as a Byzantine version of a black mass.
Conclusion

Various testimonies (gathered for instance by Lynda Garland) seem to suggest that Byzantine humour, arises mainly from making fun of someone else, from the feeling of being somehow superior.\(^{33}\) I think, however, that understanding Byzantine humour (especially in connection with religion) in a more exhaustive way requires studying its various manifestations as a whole – from laughing at those who are *worse off* to slapstick humour to refined and often subversive uses of ‘literary’ humour (see for instance Sarris 1995–1997, 15–29). I believe that in Byzantine texts one can find examples of the eleven categories of ‘spontaneous conversational humour’ as identified by psychologists Debra Long and Arthur Gresser such as *irony, satire, sarcasm, clever replies to serious statements, double entendres, puns* (cf. for instance Chalivoures’ remark), etc. (Long 1988, 35–60). I think that a crucial role in future studies will be played by research on satire and the mutual relationships between humour/laughter and satire, and by efforts to understand how satire functioned in Byzantium and what purposes they (and more generally texts with satirical overtones) were meant to serve.

This short article does not exhaust by any means the issue of the laughter and religion in Byzantine society. What, I hope, was apparent is the fact that the Byzantines poked fun at almost everything except for strictly religious matters (with few exceptions). A belief that the Byzantines followed the anti-laughter recommendations of the Church Fathers coupled with the most unfavourable opinions about Byzantine literature resulted in an opinion that the Byzantines, similarly to Christ, never laughed. Undoubtedly many of the jokes, especially having something to do with religion, require a vast theological knowledge in order to be understood. At times, the modern reader might be amused by histories that had never been intended as jokes in the first place (Haldon 2002a, 48–71). Be that as it may, the Byzantinists are responsible for creating the illusion that the Byzantines were humourless.

Notes

1 The scholarly literature on Byzantine humour is rather paltry, see for instance Garland (1990; 1999); Haldon (2002a); published also as Haldon (2002b).
2 ‘Cumque me ignorare quid mihi thaumastoteron edicerem, magno inflatus cachinno se similiter neque scire respondet.’ [‘I replied that I did not know which I thought *thaumastoteron*, more amazing; and he burst into a loud laughter and said he was in the same case, he did not know either.’] See Liutprand of

3 Tzetzes, Commentarium in Ranas (cod. Ambrosianus gr. C. 222), 897. Edited in (Koster 1975).

4 Homer (1924): ‘And unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods, / as they saw Hephaestus puffing through the palace.’

5 Choniates uses a relatively rare word ekkagchazo- (‘to burst out into loud laughter”).

6 Stewart (1994, 30). See for example the following anecdote handed down by George Pachymeres (1975, 207): ‘So, no less concerned with assuring the safety of the basileus [Michael VIII Palaeologos – P. M.] than with announcing the pleasant news [that the City was taken – P. M.], Eulogia took care to reveal it little-by-little: taking the big toe of his foot, she gently squeezed it between her fingers in order to waken him slowly, and he awoke at once; and on seeing the nun standing there, he asked what had caused her to do such a thing. It was clear from her laughter and her joyful bearing (gelotí men kai charopoí), that she had something good to say; but she did not immediately announce what was in her mind, but waited until the faculties of his mind had resumed their normal state. Cf. H. J. Cassidy (2004, 74).


8 English translation after M. Lauxtermann (2003, 267).

9 Ibid.

10 For instance Basil the Great, see Asceticon magnum sive Questiones, PG 31, 961. 30–31, and John Chrysostomos stating that Christ wept but never laughed, In Matthaeum PG 57, 69.47. On the Church Fathers’ attitude towards laughter see N. Adkin (1985). As the fifth century abbot Esaias advised when laughing the mouth must be kept shut and teeth must not be shown (ibid., 151). On the laughter in the Antiquity see the recently published work S. Halliwell (2008, 471 ff). It is worth mentioning that in some gnostic and apocryphal texts (e.g. the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and the Gospel of Judas) we can read about Jesus’s laughter, see B. D. Ehrmann (2006, 110 ff).

11 The following examples were pointed out by L. Garland (2006, 163–164): Lukas the Younger of Stiris (ninth to tenth century), Paul of Latros (tenth century), Theodor of Edessa (eighth to ninth century).

12 There is at least one example of a person who destroyed his satirical works since a Christian should weep not laugh, Kaldellis (2007, 253) the case of Nikephoros Basilakes (who burnt his satires) and gives also other examples on the attitude towards laughter. Basilakes’s satires are also mentioned in A. Garzya (1970, 616).


14 C. Mango, ed. (1997, letter no. 15): ‘O best of my brethren and friends, I am not ironic; I have never sought to use the tropes of humour or sarcasm against friendship. Had you compared my last letter to our previous jokes, you would have dismissed any notion of irony. But as I see, having forgotten those jokes and
decided that irony stands foremost in my mind, what else can you declare but to label me with that name? Patricia Karlin-Hayter (1998, 17) while commenting on this edition, made the following remark: ‘Plusieurs des lettres sont tout simplement des exercices d’humour érudit byzantin (...).’

A. Kazhdan and G. Constable (1982, 62; 64). Garland (2006, 163–164) also highlights the inappropriateness of laughter in Byzantium which was considered ‘not only vulgar but licentious and impious: just as Jesus in the Gospel tradition is never recorded indulging in laughter’. But Garland, admits that even though castigated by the saints and Church Fathers, Laughter (and humour) existed in Byzantium.

L. G. Westerink (1968) and (1972), op. 69, 86, v. 19–20. It is interesting to note that Lucian (whose works Arethas commented on) used a similar comparison in his *Vitarum auctio* (v.551–552) while saying that ‘a man is capable of laughing and an ass is not capable of laughing’, J. B. Itzkowitz, ed. (1992).

As I understand according to A. Kazhdan (2006, 82) this sentence describes what Arethas thought about laughter: ‘Moreover, laughter consistently rejected by Byzantine theologians, was, according to Arethas, as natural to man as neighing to a horse.’

‘Adversus implacabilitatis accusationem’, in T. L. F. Tafel ed. (1964, 120). Although Eustathios uses, once again, a commonly known argument, he gives us more personal opinion than Arethas. In his voluminous commentaries on the *Iliad* Eustathios made also an interesting remark about some myths being full of laughter and cheerfulness (diáchusis, which van der Valk understands as *gaudium, animi laxatio*) of the more powerful (that is gods) (see M. Van der Valk, ed. (1987, 60–61; 529). Unlike Christ, the ancient gods laughed very often. After all God was described as having no emotions and being *apathes*.

G. Soyter (1928, 147): ‘Wenn die christlichen Grundsätze, wie sie Konstantin Manasses (um. 1100 bis 1150) in diesen Epigramm über “Das Lachen” einschärft, in Byzanz stets befolgt worden wären, dann hatten die Byzantiner nur über die Vergänglichkeit alles Erdischen und über ihre eigenen Schwächen, nie aber über die Fehler oder das Mißgeschick eines Mitmenschen gelacht.’


On Michael as an actor see J. Ljubarskij (1987).


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29 Timarion, 24.
30 Timarion, 75.
33 Cf. R. A. Martin (2007, 21–22): ‘The philosophical conception of laughter as essentially a form of aggression can be traced to Aristotle, who believed that it was always a response to ugliness or deformity in another person, although he thought it would not occur if the object of laughter aroused other strong emotions as pity or anger. Following in the long tradition of Aristotle, the seventeenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw laughter as being based on a feeling of superiority, or “sudden glory”, resulting from some perception of inferiority in another person’.

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Chapter 10

Being Serious about Laughter: The Case of Early Modern Biblical Plays

Jolanta Rzegocka

This may come as a surprise, but a drama that revolves around the Biblical subject of Sin, Atonement, and the Judgement, contains a considerable amount of laughter. Medieval and early modern Biblical plays have it all: the holy laughter and the laugh from the belly, the warm and human laughter of the Apostles’ scenes and the rough and bawdy laughter of the episodes involving devils. The longstanding opinion that laughter is an offence against God and a peril to men’s souls derives from Plato and may be found in the works of John Chrysostom through Augustine to Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugo of St Victor (Kuschel 1994, 43). Interestingly, historians of the Christian denunciation of laughter as well as their opponents have formulated similar questions: ‘Are there limits to laughter?’ , ‘Is laughter beyond good and evil’, (Kuschel 1994, xx.) , ‘What kind of laughter should be condemned?’ These are the questions that pertain to the field of Biblical drama since notwithstanding numerous authoritative statements on the unseemliness of laughter in view of the general Doom, the austerity of the life of Christ and death awaiting Christians, the late medieval theatre embraced laughter and comedy. As a result, we are faced with plays whose appeal and spiritual resonance is largely based on mirth and gaiety that the plays elicited in their audiences and whose voice is tempered by humour. The questions that arise in this context are: why does late medieval religious drama rely on laughter and comedy whose variety and quantity is unparalleled by other religious literature? Why was religious laughter so respected in Christian theatre? How did it negotiate its place in the view of the asceticism of the late medieval thought and institutions? What functions did it perform and was it put to good use? An analysis of a sixteenth-century Biblical play from Poland will provide answers to these questions and will help to put this Central-European play on the map of dramatic production of early modern Europe.
A careful examination of European passion plays, penitential ceremonies and Easter plays reveals the fact that the religious life of late medieval city-dwellers was the life of contrasting emotions and practices. The Holy Week ceremonies from Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Poland centred on acts of public penitence and tied the collective memory to images of Christ’s suffering and martyrdom narrated in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Brooks 1933, Flynn, 1994, Knight 1997, Webster 1998, Newbigin 2000). The penitential ceremonies whose long tradition has survived to the present day (i.e. Seville, Almería, Madrid, Kraków) gave their participants an opportunity to share completely in Christ’s suffering, and thus to rehearse the past while living through the present moment. The redemptive power of suffering and the role of the penitential activity was unquestioned throughout the fifteenth century and well into the sixteenth century. The 1551 decree of the Council of Trent on Penitence gave a new impetus to the development of passion plays and ceremonies. While the period of penance in the Catholic church led to the outburst of dramatic representations of Christ’s agony and penitential ceremonies practiced in the religious confraternities, the feast of Easter and its culmination, the feast of the Pentecost, gave rise to the rich tradition of Biblical plays, and play cycles all across the towns of Europe (Runnalls 1998, Okoń 1991, Hindley 1999, Dąbrówka 2002). The most spectacular cycle-drama emerged in England, as the town guilds and the church authorities united their efforts in the staging of the great events that spanned the entire history of Salvation (the Fall, the Crucifixion, the Doom) (Johnston 1998, Happé 2004). The Biblical plays staged at Easter were a mixture of the comic and the serious – they aimed to convey the Paschal gaudium to their audiences by eliciting their joy in the scenes of the Resurrection and Visitation of the Tomb as well as by providing amusement and inciting a more coarse laughter in the Harrowing of Hell episodes. Easter rejoicing signified that Christ, having been laughed at on the Cross, is now laughing at death (Kuschel 82, 87). Easter laughter had a deep theological meaning since ‘by being mocked himself, Christ will grant the ridiculed and the mocked their dignity and rights’ for God’s sake’ (Kuschel 90), and therefore Christians may rejoice (joy that may express itself in laughter) in the spirit of solidarity with the despised, they laugh in the spirit of liberation and repentance.

The tradition of Paschal merriment was not limited to theatre alone, laughter broke into liturgical celebrations too – in German-speaking countries it took the form of the sermons that were preached at Easter and that provoked laughter – the so-called risus paschalis or Easter laughter (Jacobelli 1992). Karl-Josef Kuschel calls risus paschalis ‘an institution which persisted’ well until the Reformation (Kuschel 84). In the fifteenth-century
Bavaria, for example, the preachers would tell funny stories in their sermons and conclude with a moral teaching. At Basel *risus paschalis* was a custom practiced even at the Cathedral, where it was regarded ‘as a legitimate way of attracting people to church on Easter morning’ (Kuschel 86). Rich European sermon and Biblical theatre tradition shows that the austerity of the Holy Week liturgy did not still all human laughter. Although the late Middle Ages thought about laughter in terms of peril, they too acknowledged its necessity and explored its potential usefulness. Medieval preachers and play producers focused on the redemptive power of humour and their audiences too learned to acknowledge its delight.

A play that illustrates well late medieval approach to humour and laughter is a sixteenth-century vernacular Resurrection play *Historyja o chwalebnym Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim* (The History of the Glorious Resurrection of the Lord) written by a Pauline monk Mikołaj z Wilkowiecka (Nicolaus from Wilkowiecko). The play gives us a glimpse at the repertoire of the popular religious theatre in southern Poland. The humour in the play revolves around three episodes: the scene of the guards’ awakening at the empty tomb of Christ at Easter morning and the two scenes that belong to the Harrowing of Hell episode, namely: the scene in which the devils try to keep the door of Hell locked against the descending Christ and the scene of Christ sending the envoys to the Virgin.

Let us take a look at the last scene in which Jesus seeks a messenger to bring the good news to the Virgin after the Resurrection. In the episode, Jesus does not accept the services of those who volunteer: Adam, Abel, Noah, John the Baptist and the Good Thief since he knows their vices all too well. Finally he decides to send an Angel. It is worth quoting the entire scene in order to single out the elements of comedy and laughter:

ADAM
Oh, Lord Jesus, I ask you,
Let that happiness befall me today,
Let me go to your mother,
To tell her the news.
It is better that I go, wretch that I am,
Than for anyone else:
It was me who started it all;
It was my sin that caused the fall of all people,
So let me be the very first
To declare your Resurrection,
Through which you’ve set right
What I corrupted through sin.
JESUS
Don’t take it badly, dear Adam,
But you don’t suit my purpose as an envoy.
In paradise you learned
To stroll as if you were in a grove,
Amusing yourself with apples,
Lemons and figs.
On the way to see my mother
You’d want to do the same
And amuse yourself,
And you would neglect your mission.

ABEL
There’s me, you know, dear Lord,
Abel, your dear servant,
Who made you a sacrifice.
I burned the sheep and lambs
That you accepted from me,
And which you cherished greatly.
May I please you now as well,
And carry out this service for you,
Go to your mother
And tell her this news.

JESUS
You’re not suitable, Abel, as an envoy:
You have a quarrel with Cain;
You could meet him along the way,
Then you’d get into an argument,
And delay the news,
Fighting it out with that schemer.

NOAH
I, too, most dear Lord,
Am your not so insignificant servant,
Noah, the honest man.
Who obeyed you readily
At that time when I built the ark,
In which I stowed all crops,
And the human race
As much as all creation,
At that terrible time
Of the flood of the whole world;
Once I left the ark
I built an altar out of soil;
I made a sacrifice on it
To your honor and glory.
May my meager service
Also please you today –
As envoy to the Virgin Mary,
Your Blessed Mother.

JESUS
The news would be slow
Getting to my mother through you, Noah.
You enjoy wine
And can drink a lot.
Once drunk you’d fall asleep –
With you the mission is uncertain!

JOHN THE BAPTIST
(He is dressed in a grey lambskin, with the wool on the outside.)
I’m here, too, John the Baptist,
Who baptized the Lord Jesus Christ:
I’m very light in step
Because I don’t eat, except for locusts.
I don’t drink wine or liquor,
I only suck up wild honey
In the morning from the leaves on the wood –
That doesn’t make me tipsy.

JESUS
But you are shaggy, my poor man,
In this camel’s-hair coat:
Mother would be frightened of you –
This is no attire for an envoy.

THIEF
(He approaches on crutches.)
Kind Lord,
Since you cannot find anyone
Who pleases you,
And who would complete your mission –
Some are quarrelsome,
Others are gluttons, or they’re greedy,
Others wear inappropriate clothes
When they’re dressed in animal skins –
I will conduct these services

(He jumps about on the crutches.)
Once I get my legs on the crutches.

JESUS
But your services will be poor!
Your legs are broken.
The bones were shattered inside you
When they hung you on the cross.
These are futile arguments,
They’re just like jokes. (IV. ll. 349–437)

(He indicates the ANGEL.)

This parade of the Biblical characters who announce themselves and are eager to help inspires smile and warm laughter. Two types of laughter may be distinguished in the scene. First, the scene is a distant echo of the ‘Platonic laughter’ developed by Plato in his late dialogue *Philebos* (Kuschel 1994, 9). What incites laughter, according to Plato, are those who ‘succumb to deception about themselves, whether in the material, physical or spiritual sphere’ (Kuschel 9). In the case of Abel and Noah, it is laughable when they regard themselves as more pious than they really are, when John the Baptist regards himself as a more ascetic hermit than he really is. Even the Good Thief, although he sees through the appearances of the Patriarchs and lists their little vices in his speech, he, too is unfit for service and is therefore laughable as he regards himself as more somber in appearance, manner and attitude than the rest of the company. While this Platonic ‘discrepancy between appearance and essence, imagination and reality’ (Kuschel 10) may spark off the audience’s laughter that is a mixture of distaste and pleasure (Kuschel 10), in the midst of the scene Jesus acts as the philosopher who is reluctant to laugh. According to Plato ‘the philosopher discovers the laughable element in other human beings, but it is his fundamental task to enlighten those around him who are not philosophical about their deceptions, and at any rate to make them aware of the true
being beyond all appearance’ (quoted in Kuschel, 10). Thus, Jesus teaches a lesson of moral laughter, of laughter and restraint to the audience while at the same time truthfulness of the representation of the Biblical characters is not compromised in the scene and the good effect does not seem to be lost. The warm and friendly laughter that the scene incites, on the other hand, as opposed to the first type of the laughter of distaste and pleasure, stems from the familiarity of the characters and their seemingly witty, yet naïve words. The characters are portrayed by means of verbal comedy that no man can resist. The source of the audience’s gaiety may be the fact that these are familiar Biblical characters and stories presented in an unusual clash of comic and serious. The Patriarchs were the crowd that virtually inhabited late medieval churches, icons, sermons and traditional plays. Not only did their appearance in the episode amuse the audience but it also taught doctrinal lessons. The audience members learn about some of the most important prefigurations of the Last Supper in the Old Testament (the sacrifice of Abel and Noah) as well as about the prefiguration of Christ by Adam: As a figura of Christ, Adam is eager ‘To declare your Resurrection, / Through which you’ve set right / What I corrupted through sin’ (ll. 358–360). Thus, the touch of comedy in the scene has a mnemonic and didactic function: the entertaining content makes the doctrinal lesson more memorable.

Interestingly, the source of this episode may be a fifteenth-century sermon of Gabriel de Brunis, a Dominican preacher more commonly known as Barletta (Okoń 1971, xi–xii; 1991, 60, 63). The forms of Barletta’s sermons verged on the burlesque as he preached on the topics of vices and virtues of life. These picturesque sermons, some of which excited risus Paschalis, when delivered, were probably small shows in themselves and they also lent themselves easily to a dramatic medium, as Mikołaj of Wilkowiecko must surely have discovered. Barletta was blamed by some for his coarseness and lauded by others for his oratory skills, and he also enjoyed the same ambiguous fame in Poland. Despite all the criticism of his excesses, Barletta and other Easter preachers in fact might be following handbooks for preachers that had the imprimatur of the church and told them ‘how they could best get a laugh out of their people.’ (Jacobelli quoted in Kuschel 86). Therefore, what we are dealing with is the mutual influence of liturgical and non-liturgical Easter celebrations and comic elements breaking in irrespectively of the form of exposition.

Taking into consideration this interconnection of forms and transmission of comic elements from sermons to plays and vice versa, it may be concluded that the adventures of the Patriarchs appearing in an Easter play might not be a novelty to the audiences and they might greet their appearance either
in a sermon or on stage with a warm smile of familiarity. What is more, these stories are rendered with a minute attention to detail, the ordinary life has been closely observed and represented in the episode, and thus it may be another source of warm humour. Last, but not least, the audiences may note that the characters have not lost their inherent human features after death: Christ’s descent does not make them impersonal and devoid of their vices and virtues (Okoń 1971, xl). Adam, Noah and Abel are too human to ignore them and give them a cold reception. Is the episode anything but a light comedy? I believe it is, since not only is this a witty mnemonic exercise that imprints important Biblical episodes in the minds of the members of audience, but it teaches important doctrinal lessons.

On a structural level, the purpose of the Harrowing of Hell episode of which the scene of sending the messengers is a part, is clearly to provide comic relief to the preceding scene of the Visitation of the Tomb that focuses on the sublime moment of the epiphanies on the part of the Disciples, the three Maries and Mary Magdalene. In the play the sublime moments appear side by side with the comic scenes from everyday life. The final effect may strike the modern reader/viewer as being inappropriate and indecorous considering the serious matter of the play. Casting off our modern artistic sensibilities, it needs to be emphasized that the Biblical play was one of many different realizations of the specific mixture of styles displayed in the Bible itself and whose tradition may be traced back to late antiquity. The play is consistent with the paradox inherent in the Christian doctrine and the earliest literature it produced. As Erich Auerbach has put it in his seminal study, ‘the story (of the Passion – J.Rz.) engenders a new elevated style, which does not scorn everyday life and which is ready to absorb the sensorily realistic, even the ugly, the undignified, the physically base.’ (Auerbach 1953, 72). The same stylistic considerations apply to the narrative of the Resurrection presented on-stage. The mixture of styles has endured and was converted into the language and form of the Biblical theatre. The world of these plays included the comic, the noisy as well as the violent and the grotesque because it followed form the style of the Biblical narrative itself. Having said this, we have to emphasize that even though the Patriarchs elicit our smile, they were conceived with much reverence. There is a certain sanctity about them, and they are not an object of mockery, unlike the devils appearing earlier in the same episode.

The contrast between the two scenes raises a questions as to laughter and self-restraint, the limits of laughter and its moral character. The Harrowing of Hell is usually depicted in the late medieval theatre as a contest of power (Kolve 195). As V. A. Kolve points out, jokes, game and contest had two
functions in the English Corpus Christi cycle: they helped to put Biblical story into dramatic sequence, and they were designed to elicit our laughter (Kolve 195). It was the type of laughter that belonged to God, the holy laughter since God was in control having resurrected and harrowed Hell, and the only proper reaction to demons behaving stupidly was coarse laughter (Kolve 140). In Historyja, too, Jesus knocks at the door of hell three times and each time the devils respond with bawdy shouts and remarks. Christ eventually silences the commotion and thwarts the devils’ clumsy attempts to hold the ground. As the devils cling to the door of hell screaming and fighting till the last gasp, they excite bawdy laughter. Members of the audience know that the devils’ behaviour is not sane because it is their nature to behave unreasonably. The audience also know that Christ has harrowed Hell on Good Saturday, that God is in control and that the proper reaction to this state of affairs may be joy which becomes concrete in laughter. Since devils failed to be intelligent and decided to act foolishly, we may laugh at them just as God does in his holy laughter (Kolve 140). The criticism of laughter on the part of the church was related first and foremost to the type of laughter that was at the expense of human dignity, those who are weak and outcast (Kuschel xx). Self-restraint in laughter was supposed to be based exactly on these considerations: Christ being once the object of mockery teaches Christians to take the side of the victims of mockery and ridicule. However, the scene of the devils, and devils as the objects of mockery are a different case. The audience laugh with Christ in a sign of confidence that God brought salvation to his people. It is laughter in trust that God will combat those who practice malice, mockery and finger-pointing.

The dramatic narrative of the Historyja in its own dignified way retells everyday as well as solemn scenes. The moving epiphanies are placed next to the scene of the Guards’ petty concern about the payment, and the dialogue of Risen Christ and the Virgin appears next to a lively scene in the shop in which the three Maries buy unguents and haggle with the shopkeeper. The play is concerned with the imitation of reality in order to teach its audience the moral message and to bring the Biblical world closer to the audience. Warm spiritual humour is instrumental in rendering the intense moments of the Resurrection and the destruction of Evil. The fact that late medieval theatre relied on humour to tell Biblical story not only allowed it to preserve the extraordinary immediacy of the Biblical narrative, but to inspire devotion. The interest of the author of the play seems to be in creating a play for a popular audience in order to instruct them and to provide merriment and entertainment. The audience is invited to take active part in the uncovering of the nature of the Biblical events, to ‘judge for themselves’. Like Thomas the Disbeliever, they are invited to touch the
core of the mystery of the Resurrection, a mystery laid out before them in a simple, at times humoristic mode. It also helps the audience to apprehend the consequences the events presented in the play had for mankind at all times. In other words, it opens a new temporal dimension in which the play has to be seen, that of Redemption.

*Historyja* bears important witness to the use of religious performance as a method of moral teaching and entertainment in late sixteenth-century Poland, typical of the late medieval and early modern Biblical theatre of Europe. The double entertaining and didactic address of late medieval and early modern European drama combines with its devotional function, since the plays made the Bible vivid and memorable for a purpose. They helped to understand the Scripture and follow its message. The approach of the European Biblical theatre to laughter is coherent and convincing: against charges of unseemliness and of posing a spiritual threat, there were plays that showed that laughter can be converted to a good end. As V. A. Kolve has put it in relation to the English Corpus Christi drama, it is ‘an institution of central importance to the English Middle Ages precisely because it triumphantly united man’s need for festival and mirth with instruction in the story that most seriously concerned his immortal soul’. (Kolve 134). The serious meaning behind the laughter and humour of the Biblical plays can best be appreciated on stage even though only part of its original resonance may now be restored. Whatever the limitations, it is clear that the late medieval and early modern religious theatre understood the subversive power of laughter, but did not condemn it. Instead, by taking it seriously it sought to tame it and to put it to good use.

**Notes**

1. Beside the major study of Karl-Josef Kuschel (1994), a concise presentation of approaches to humour and laughter from antiquity to the late medieval period has been included in (Kolve 1966).
2. A remarkable exhibition in the National Gallery, London entitled ‘The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600–1700’ that ran from 21 October 2009 to 24 January 2010 explored the extraordinary seventeenth-century lifelike sculptures of the suffering Christ, the saints and the mourning Virgin, many of which still remain objects of veneration in churches around Spain. The exhibition highlighted the compelling realism of the Spanish art that was intended to stir the soul, just as the processions of the Holy Week and passion plays.
5 The priest inserted in his sermon funny stories which would cause his hearers to laugh (*Ostermärlein*), e.g. a description of how the devil tries to keep the doors of hell locked against the descending Christ. Then the speaker would draw the moral from the story. This Easter laughter, giving rise to grave abuses of the word of God, was prohibited by Clement X (1670–1676) and in the eighteenth century by Maximilian III and the bishops of Bavaria. (Wagner, *De Risu Paschali*, Königsberg, 1705; Linsemeier, *Predigt in Deutschland*, Munich, 1886). See: (Holweck 1909).

6 Historyja o chwalebnym Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim. Ze czterech S. Evangelistów zebrana a wierszami spisana. Przez Księędza Mikołaja z Wilkowiecka Zakonu Pa[uliniów] Częstochowskiego (History of the glorious Resurrection of the Lord. Assembled from the four Evangelists and written in verse by Father Mikołaj of Wilkowiecko from the Pauline Order of Częstochowa) [Kraków, n.p., c. 1575–1582] in Ms. Kórnik Library Cim. 0.496. The phrasing of the title is ambiguous since the word for ‘written’ (Polish ‘spisana’) may suggest both an original work as well as a redaction of an earlier text. This ambiguity led to the debate on the authorship of the play recently resolved in favour of Mikołaj’s authorship by Prof. Jan Okoń, who prepared an authoritative edition of History and its two later redactions for the National Library: series I. vol. 201 (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1971). Okoń also established the manuscript family and discussed all the extant versions of the play, Historyja, III-CVII. See also (Okoń 1991, 58–71). Earlier editions of the History: Stanisław Windakiewicz in *Biblioteka Pisarzów Polskich* 25 (Kraków: AU, 1893); Julian Lewański in *Dramaty Staropolskie* vol. 2 (Warsaw: PIW, 1959), 285–354.

7 I am grateful to Rob Sulewski from Ann Arbor, Michigan for his kind permission to use his unpublished translation of the *Historyja* that he prepared for the English language premiere of the play at the University of Michigan Union, Ann Arbor, Mi. on October 16, 1998.

8 Kuschel writes that in Plato ‘the possible superiority of another person on the one hand prompts anxiety (distaste), and on the other hand relief (pleasure), since the other is not really superior but only apparently so.’ Plato, *Philebos* quoted in (Kuschel 1994).


10 The nineteenth-century criticism of Barletta by the authors of *Dictionnaire de Biographie religieuse* is interesting in the way it keeps in line with the medieval and early modern criticism: ‘ses sermons […] sont si ridicules et si burlesques, le sacré est si indignement mêlé avec le profane […] que les savants doutent avec raison si le prédicate dominicain a pu débiter en chaire tant de sottises.’ *Dictionnaire de Biographie religieuse*, 406. The authors also recall Protestant criticism of the style of Catholic sermons who would cite Barletta’s sermons as their main proof and a final argument in the debate.
11 At roughly the same time when Historyja was printed, in 1584, a distinguished political writer Stanisław Orzechowski refers to Barletta in a different light in the royal funerary speech Sigismund I Jagiello: ‘When, my Lords and Brethren, has this Kingdom abounded in so many talents, when were the Arts better practiced? Never, my Lords and Brethren. During the reign of this Monarch everything has flourished. Peace, wealth, literacy . . . Before, even the Latin tongue had a rough and coarse sound. The witnesses to that are Biga and Baralet, good people, but teachers lacking in talent and quite simple. By comparison, consider what you have learned and what your children are learning. Then you will say that Poland is no longer a barbaric country, but Greece, not Sarmatia, but Italy.’ Stanisław Orzechowski, Wybór pism (Selected writings), ed. J. Starnawski (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1972), 37–38. My translation.

12 I discuss the plays’ catechetical function in detail in my dissertation (Szpilewska 2003, 118–121).

13 Historyja, ll. 104–107.

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Chapter 11
The Muslim Sense of Humour
Ulrich Marzolph

Do Muslims have a Sense of Humour?

The trailer for the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, whose first episode was aired in January 2007, contained what was to remain one of the sitcom’s strongest scenes. It showed Toronto lawyer Amaar Rashid on his way to become the imam at the mosque in the fictional town of Mercy, Saskatchewan. Standing in line to check in for his flight at the airport, Amaar talks to his mother over the cell phone, trying to make her understand his move. Obviously, his decision had been the matter of dispute with his parents. This is what Amaar says: ‘Mom, stop over the guilt! No, don’t put that on! I’ve been planning this for months. It is not like I am trying to drop a bomb on them. If dad thinks this is suicide, so be it! This is Allah’s plan for me.’ Hearing the words ‘bomb’ and ‘suicide,’ the woman standing in front of Amaar in the line steps aside rolling her eyes while sighing: ‘Oh my . . . ’ She does not hear Amaar’s following sentences, when he continues: ‘No, I’m not throwing my life away. I’m moving to the prairies, to run a mosque.’ A moment later we see Amaar being arrested by security officers. Taking him as a potential suicide bomber they address him sharply: ‘Step away from that bag, son. You are not going to paradise today!’ When later being interrogated, Amaar wonders: ‘What’s the charge? Flying while Muslim?’ And when the officer dryly informs him that this was not the charge, he comments: ‘I was joking. Muslims around the world are known for their sense of humour.’ Though immediately afterwards, Amaar admits that his statement was intended as another joke, this is exactly what the Canadian sitcom is about: To demonstrate that Muslims have a sense of humour. But do they? And if so, what exactly is ‘the Muslim sense of humour’?
A Philologian’s Approach to Muslim Humour

Aiming to elucidate this question from the viewpoint of an Islamicist philologian with a strong inclination to folklore, my presentation will discuss the role of humour in Islam from two angles. On the one hand, the theoretical debate is concerned with the permissiveness of humour and laughter in Islam; the rules and regulations discussed here against the background of religious concepts and learned as well as pious theological considerations are bound to influence the practical side of humour in the world of Islam to a certain extent. On the other hand, an assessment of the practical side of humour in the world of Islam has to admit the existing abundance of humorous texts in both literature and oral tradition. This apparent contradiction needs to be considered and, if possible, resolved.

But first let me proceed with a few additional introductory remarks, intending above all to clarify my position that Islam is not the essential Other but rather a sibling to the other Near Eastern religions and related cultures that, for various reasons, has been alienated in the course of history (Marzolph 2004). With this basic theoretical assumption in mind let me quote the following joke:

While a man is riding his horse, the horse is stung by a wasp and bolts. On his way to meeting someone he knows, that person shouts at the rider: ‘Where are you going?’ To which the man responds: ‘Don’t ask me – ask the horse!’

It is interesting to note that this joke was one of Sigmund Freud’s favourites (Reik 1954; Oring 1984, 52–53). After all, the joke offers a clear paradigm for psychoanalytical interpretation. In the framework of psychoanalysis, the horse can be seen as equivalent to the libidinous Id to which the human Ego appears to have no choice but surrender. From the perspective of historical and comparative research in jocular narratives, Freud’s fascination with this particular joke stands at the far end of a long tradition that according to present knowledge begins as early as Greek antiquity (Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 56–59). The joke’s first documented occurrence is actually attested in a work attributed to Lucian of Samosata, a Greek writer of the second century CE (Lucian, 409). At least since the beginning of the eleventh century CE, the joke is known in Arabic variants. Since then, it has also become part of the repertoire of jocular narratives attached to the Arabic fool, joker, jester and trickster Juhâ (Marzolph 2006, 31, no. 30). North of the Mediterranean, the joke is attested in Italian Renaissance literature
since the fourteenth century (Sacchetti 1874, 39–40, no. 12). And finally, the collections of sermons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the vernacular languages of Europe have eventually passed it on to German language oral tradition of the beginning of the twentieth century (Moser-Rath 1964, 281–282 and 472, no. 129). Considering the history of diffusion of this particular joke in a wider context, the Arabic and Muslim versions of jocular narratives attested in the European Christian cultures often emerge as the expression of a sibling culture. In consequence, wondering about the position of humour in the Muslim world appears to become somewhat irrelevant in face of a strong feeling of familiarity. On the other hand, contemporary popular opinion in the West strongly advocates the dominant perception that Muslim tradition in its perceived religious zeal does not allow for such a subtle and tolerant trait of character as humour – in other words: that Muslims do not have a sense of humour. This apparent contradiction obviously needs to be resolved.

Muslim Responses to Western Humour

The Western perception of the Muslim world has for long been dominated by stereotypical notions of the East as a sensual paradise, most aptly expressed in the notion of the Arabian Nights (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, vol. 2, 599–701; Van Leeuwen 2006). In today’s popular perception, this image is to some extent tainted by partial and biased notions of the Muslim world as the ultimate harbour of universal terrorism. Both views are, evidently, equally simplistic, and neither view features humour as a prominent characteristic of the Muslim peoples. If Western audiences discuss Muslim humour at all, public opinion focuses on the perceived lack of an adequate reception of Western humorous expression in the Muslim world such as, most prominently, in the context of the ‘cartoons that shook the world’, the Danish Mohammad cartoons published in 2005 that provoked a major international crisis (Klausen 2009). This assessment can be documented by a steadily growing number of conflicts arising from the Western attitude towards Muslim values. While only some of the incidents mentioned in the following listing originally intended to be satirical, each of them provoked heavy protest from parts of the international Muslim community.¹

In 1987, Dutch comedian Rudi Carrell in his German Tagesshow, a satirical version of the German TV news report Tagesschau, showed a photographic montage depicting Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1978/79 Iranian
revolution then still alive, as rummaging through piles of women’s underwear. Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, theorizing about the genesis of some disputed verses in the Koran, earned him Khomeini’s *fatwa*, a religiously motivated legal edict, for blasphemy and, hence, apostasy – a verdict for which Muslim law, the *shari’a*, unambiguously proscribes death as the only possible sentence (Pipes 1990; Sardar and Davies 1990). In 1993, Karl Lagerfeld had his model Claudia Schiffer wear a dress decorated with Arabic writing perceived as an emulation of Koranic verses; when challenged with allegations of religious insensibility, Lagerfeld apologized and withdrew his presentation. In 2001, the leftist Berlin newspaper *taz* provoked Muslim protest for quoting a rhyme from traditional German children’s folklore in which Allâh makes an appearance. In November 2004, Dutch director Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by a Muslim fanatic for projecting Koranic verses onto the naked skin of Somali-Dutch women’s rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali in his movie *Submission*, a passionate plea against the maltreatment of women in the Muslim world. Recent incidents of this kind include the violent protest in various Muslim countries against the series of cartoons treating the image of the Prophet Muhammad as published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in 2005 (Klausen 2009). And in 2007, teacher Gillian Gibbons from Liverpool was sentenced to fifteen days in prison and subsequent deportation from Sudan for allowing her class of primary school pupils to name a teddy bear Muhammad.

**General Frame Conditions of Muslim Humour**

Considering the Muslim world’s reaction to these incidents, the least one would have to admit is that if humour is a general human capacity, its practical consequences quite obviously differ widely. For the purpose of intercultural comparison, Franz Rosenthal’s definition of humour in his seminal study *Humour in Early Islam* is particularly attractive because of its wide-ranging applicability. Rosenthal (1956, 132–138) advocates the so-called ‘relief-theory’ of humour in that humour is connected to the relief one feels when some of the numerous restrictions governing social life are temporarily lifted. If one follows this basic definition, the answer to questions dealing with national, regional or cultural specifics of humour becomes obvious. In terms of theory, the reasons why humans laugh are essentially the same; yet the related social frameworks and restrictions vary in different times and regions. In other words, while the theoretical
foundations of humour is a universal phenomenon, the practical result of humorous disposition is not. Moreover, humour as much as any other human mode of expression is subject to different codes and fashions, and certain forms of humour can only be understood against the background of specific contexts and circumstances. The more these circumstances differ from those of the recipients, the more the latter will have to strive intellectually to comprehend a certain motion’s humorous or jocular potential.

Any study of the phenomenon of humour, much as each and every occupation with a particular religious or cultural phenomenon in the Muslim world, has to take into consideration the two bodies of Arabic texts lying at the basis of the indigenous definition of Islam: The Koran that Muslims perceive as the unchanged and unchangeable word of God, and the Prophet Muhammad’s normative action as expressed in the sunna (i.e. the totality of exemplary tradition), in particular the hadîth (the corpus of the Prophet’s normative utterances). Drawing on these and numerous other sources, Ludwig Amman (1993) has studied the rules applied to laughing and jesting in medieval Islam in great detail, and the following considerations are much indebted to his work. Discussing the position of humour first of all leads to a problem of ethical dimensions, i.e. the question of correct conduct and the permissibility of physical expression connected with humour, in particular laughter (Ammann 1993, 39–143). Since classical Arabic does not possess a word for humour, the discussion in traditional Arabic sources focuses on the position of laughter. The Koran as the word of God does not include any specific rules implying practical implications for laughter and/or jesting (ibid., 21–23). Meanwhile surah 53, verse 43, states God to be the one ‘Who makes (men) laugh and makes (them) weep’. This quotation relates to several problems. One might, e.g., wonder about the statement’s consequences for the Muslim debate on human autonomy vs. divine determination. More important for the present discussion, laughter is here legitimised as an expression that owes its creation to God and that, in consequence, belongs to the legitimate range of human expression as envisaged by Him. Further elaborating this point, the Koranic verse following the one quoted above points to God as the one ‘Who causes death and gives life’ (53, 44), hereby establishing an analogy between laughing and weeping on the one side, and death and life on the other. Though the exact equivalents of the paired terms are not qualified, the analogy implies that laughing and weeping are natural constituents as inseparable from the human condition as are life and death.

Extending this theoretical assumption to practical consequences, several mentions of laughter in the Koran, discussed in great detail by Georges
Tamer (2009), allude to specific situations. To quote but one example of human laughter mentioned in the Koran (11, 69–73), Abraham’s wife Sarah laughs in wonder and disbelief when the angels visited Abraham bringing him the good news of the birth of a son (Tamer 2009, 11–13). And even God Himself has been argued to possess the quality of humour, such as when he transforms the wooden staff of Moses into a serpent (20,17–21), thus mockingly demonstrating the relativity of human perception (Mir 1991). The only jocular expression that is unambiguously prohibited in the Koran is mockery between humans, as stated in surah 49,11: ‘O you who believe! Let not (one) people laugh at (another) people perchance they may be better than they, nor let women (laugh) at (other) women, perchance they may be better than they; and do not find fault with your own people nor call one another by nicknames . . .’ Mockery between humans produces dissent and discord, thus putting the unity between the believers at risk (Ammann 1993, 36–37).

Second to the Koran, the Prophet Muhammad’s normative action, the sunna, is the most important authority for Muslim law (ibid., 39–69). Only very few of the roughly fifty statements in the hadith that mention Muhammad as laughing quote him as ridiculing or making fun of someone else. The majority of cases rather mention a sympathetic or relieved laughter. Meanwhile, several of the anecdotes about the Prophet that are generally accepted by Muslim tradition quote his subtle humour. Incidentally, some of these anecdotes are also quoted by the explicitly traditionalist Muslim website islamisforyou.com (that during the last presidential elections in the United States has been relocated as islamcan.com). In one of the anecdotes (Marzolph 1992, vol. 2, 172, no. 726), Muhammad is asked by one of his followers to present him with a camel for riding; when the Prophet promises to give him the child of a camel, the petitioner wonders how he is supposed to ride the child of a camel, presuming that the animal would not be fully grown; at this point, the Prophet consoles him by clarifying that each and every camel is the child of its mother. In another anecdote (ibid., vol. 2, 32, no. 118), Muhammad in response to an old woman’s question tells her that she will not enter paradise; when the woman is irritated about this apparent rebuttal, Muhammad by referring to a Koranic passage (56,36) informs her that in paradise all women appear as young and attractive hûrâs. Anecdotes such as these prove, if anything, that jocular expression is legitimized through the Prophet’s normative action. Even more, Muslim tradition quotes the Prophet as laughing at times so intensely that his molar teeth were visible (Sellheim 1964).
On the other hand, the Prophet is also quoted as condemning resounding laughter as the expression of people ‘who shorten their prayer and eat all kinds of food’ (Ammann 1993, 60–61); the laughter of the true believers, on the contrary, should rather be a smile. While laughter is thus permitted in principle, the ‘rule of intensity’ refers to a precept of moderation that has also been known to Arabic authors by way of the translation of the Aristotelian ethics. In theological discussions, the ‘rule of intensity’ is often sided by an explicit warning according to which the Prophet is quoted as having said: ‘Frequent (or: intense) laughter kills the heart’ (ibid., 62–65). Meanwhile, this additional ‘rule of frequency’ obviously constitutes a later addition to the corpus of hadîth, most likely deriving from an utterance that had originally been attributed to the Arabic ascetic Hasan al-Basrî (died 728).

Against the backdrop of the rules stated in the Koran and the sunna, early Islam has experienced a discussion, at times heavily biased, that in its main features is somewhat reminiscent of the situation as depicted in Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose. Ascetic opponents would regard laughter as the expression of a human being infatuated by vanity, wondering how people could dare to laugh in face of a deeply felt appreciation of Muhammad’s teachings as well as remembering the transitoriness of human existence and the menace of hellfire for the disbelievers. These ascetics would regard laughter as permissible only when spontaneously expressing delight or wonder (ibid., 74–84). At the same time, we also find pious authors rejecting a ban on laughter. For instance, the learned Muhammad Ibn Sîrîn (died 728) used to laugh until his eyes were filled with tears, or until saliva would drop from his mouth (ibid., 84, 136, 154; Müller 1993, vol. 2, 237–238). Once, when asked whether the Prophet’s early companions, whose behaviour also has a certain normative value, used to joke or jest, Ibn Sîrîn is quoted as having responded: ‘They were just like everybody else’. (Ammann 1993, 154). Against the backdrop of the behaviour accorded to Ibn Sîrîn in Arabic sources, this statement unambiguously classifies the notion and physical expression of humour as an essential quality of the human condition.

The Device of Seriousness and Joking

Meanwhile, joking and jesting was by no means only a topic of learned discussions. In Arabic adab-literature, a genre intending to be both educative and entertaining, the discussion from the earliest times is framed by a dichotomy expressed by the terms al-jidd wa- ’l-hazl, ‘seriousness and joking’.
Humour and Religion

(Pellat 1963). It is most likely not totally coincidental that these terms are similar to the Latin *prodesse et delectare* as coined in the aftermath of Horace’s dictum about the work of poets (*Ars poetica* 333). And similar to the Latin dictum, the Arabic expression incorporates both a general rule as well as an often applied literary device. al-Jâhiz (died 868), one of the most inspired authors of early Arabic literature, frequently refers to laughter and jesting in his writings. An exemplary quotation from one of his epistles contains the following passage: ‘Some things might be mentioned in an earnest tone while intending to be funny; others might be expressed in funny words, while containing a serious meaning. . . . Meanwhile, every item has its average, and every situation has its appropriate place. Laughter has its place as well as weeping; smiling has its place as well as disapproval; the same goes for refusal and permission, punishment and pardon, and all other possible ways of directness and taciturnity’ (Ammann 1993, 132–136). And in his book on stingy persons, al-Jâhiz downrightly advocates laughter as a permitted and essential component of the human condition by founding his argument on God’s creative act and the exemplary behaviour of both the Prophet and the early companions. Against the backdrop of this position, the writings of al-Jâhiz as well as numerous later works of Arabic literature are deeply imbued with a congenial mixture of serious arguments and entertaining anecdotes. The device of *al-jidd wa- ‘l-hazl* rules as a natural principle of composition combining educative instruction with relaxing entertainment (Marzolph 1991, 167–168). An author may present serious and sophisticated topics until they threaten to tire the reader’s attention; at this point, the author should introduce a certain amount of entertaining material in order to ease tension and entertain the reader. The resulting relaxation will enable the reader in the following to devote himself again to the discussion of more serious topics with all the more concentration.

It was only a question of time until this attitude would lead to the separation of entertaining material from serious discussion, leaving the adequate combination of the two areas to the recipients. Already since the tenth century, Arabic literature abounds in extensive compilations of anecdotal, and hence to a large extent also jocular, material. Of all authors, it was the Hanbalite jurist, traditionist, and preacher Ibn al-Jawzî (died 1201), known for his uncompromising interpretations of traditional Muslim rules and regulations, who compiled a triad of books containing anecdotes about witty, perspicacious, and simple-minded people – in fact the only true jest-books of medieval Arabic literature after al-Jâhiz (Marzolph 1991). Considering his reputation, Ibn al-Jawzî could repudiate all potential critique of
taking delight in profane pleasure for the sheer sake of unconditioned entertainment. Even so, he justifies his jocular writings in lengthy introductions claiming their usefulness for the purpose of pedagogical and religious exhortation: when listening to the stories about foolish people, wise readers should acknowledge the degree to which they have been granted intellectual capacities that fools lack; this should lead them to be grateful. In addition, the mention of simple-minded people should admonish the thoughtful ones to beware of the causes of folly. And, finally, reading the jokes, readers would be able to rejoice in recreation, ‘since the soul tires at times from continuous sobriety and longs for permitted pastimes’ (ibid., 171).

To sum up the theoretical debate: While considering the fact that theoretical positions differ in detail, even a strict and uncompromising theological argument does not question the existence of laughter and jesting in Islam, and hence feels the need to discuss its permissibility. Immoderate excess and jesting for the sake of jesting are rebuked, and actions doing harm to the community, such as mockery, are banned. The recommended degree of humour is a moderate one, both in terms of frequency and intensity of jocular expression and practice. So far as for the theoretical foundations of humour in Islam. But what about the practical side of humour? How has humour expressed itself in the course of Islamic history? What are the practical consequences of the relatively tight rules governing the correct ‘Muslim’ conduct? Already the example of Ibn al-Jawzi shows that even strict scholars might tend towards a liberal interpretation of the pious guidelines. Considering this, there is little wonder that the living reality of the Muslim world has documented large amounts of jocular material in a variety of genres.

Practical Consequences of Muslim Humour

The problem of humour in Islam finds itself in a position similar to other human activities or articulations that pious authors as well as bigots advertising their own piety, puritans as well as pietists have criticized since the very beginning, while their factual existence in the Muslim world has been widely acknowledged. A case in point is the Muslim religious interdiction to depict living beings in man-made images, that has been often discussed in Western scholarship. The ‘Bilderverbot’ is made to account for the dominant lack of statues in (most of) the Islamic cultures and the preference of abstract or calligraphic ornaments in Islamic art (Van Reenen
At the same time, since the beginning of Islamic art there is a rich tradition of illustrations in manuscripts that has brought forth innumerable masterpieces of figurative art, particularly during the Iranian dynasties of the Timurids and the Safavids (Lenz and Lowry 1989).

Similar to humour, music and dance within a strict interpretation of Islamic rules also risk to be regarded as unlawful enjoyment of worldly pleasures. Accordingly, even today they suffer from restrictions in traditionalist Muslim societies, while enjoying relative freedom in others. And finally, the Koranic restriction of drinking wine (surah 5,90) has traditionally been interpreted as a ban on all kinds of intoxicating substances. Even so, it has not prevented wine from becoming a widely appreciated beverage in the Muslim world (Sadan 1977; Chebel 2004). Though its consumption is forbidden on earth, pious Muslims are promised wine in the hereafter (surah 52,23; 56,18 f.; 76,5 etc.), and the literatures of the Muslim world contain innumerable references to the consumption of wine (and other intoxicating liquids and substances) in the various Muslim cultures.

As for humour, an adequate assessment cannot but admit that humour has been a natural form of expression in all cultures and in most periods of the Muslim world. Invective mocking poetry was a standard genre of pre-Islamic Arabic oral tradition (Van Gelder 1989), literary works such as those of al-Jâhiz are deeply imbued with a subtle sense of irony (Montgomery 2009), practical jokers and jesters populated the markets and public spaces of Muslim cities, ‘court-fools’ belonged to the standard staff in the houses of the ruling classes (Marzolph 1996, 495–496), drastic humour occurs in the maqâmât of authors such as Bâdi’al-zamân al-Hamadânî (died 1007; Malti-Douglas 1985), and biting satire is found in the works of Persian author ‘Obeid-e Zâkânî (died 1371; Sprachman 1981). Whether or not representative of actual behaviour, Arabic narrative literature cultivates stereotype laughter in innumerable variations of the formulaic expression ‘...and he laughed until...’ – variations including ‘... until he fell on his back,’ ‘... until he fell from the back of his horse’, ‘... until he dug the ground with his feet,’ or even ‘... until he wetted his pants’ (Müller 1993). And besides artistic expressions of refined humour we encounter a tremendous amount of simple jocular prose in jokes, jests, witticisms, pranks and anecdotes, ranging from political criticism to sheer nonsense, from humorous treatments of Islamic core values (Marzolph 2009) to rather coarse bawdy jokes. The range and amount of this material in Arabic literature alone is so large that the following historical survey can only mention some of the more important items.
Milestones of Muslim Humour

Early in the eleventh century, Iranian author al-Âbî (died 1030) compiled a work in Arabic that is modestly titled *Nathr al-durr* (Scattered Pearls; see Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 38–43). Contrary to the modest title, the work is, in fact, an all-encompassing multi-volume encyclopaedia of thousands of poignant anecdotes, jokes and other funny stories that is both unprecedented as well as unparalleled in contemporary and later Arabic (and, for that matter, European) literature. The author has opted to present the jocular material without any context or commentary. Meanwhile, his work implicitly shows that he felt the need to justify the undertaking of publishing hundreds of pages of pure humour: the order of the seven books, the sequence of the chapters within each book, and the listing of the texts within the chapters demonstrate a certain decline, first introducing matters or characters of historical importance and then leading step by step to items of a predominantly amusing, at times even bawdy quality. For instance, the encyclopaedia’s first volume deals with the pillars of Islam and the early caliphs; towards the end of the second volume the author has already reached the popular characters of uninvited guests and greedy persons; the third volume presents a number of jokers known by name and proceeds to list anecdotes about crazy people, stingy persons and crooks; the fifth volume deals with transvestites and homosexuals, the sixth volume contains a chapter about noisy as well as silent farting, the seventh volume presents protagonists belonging to the so-called ‘dishonest’ professions (such as dyers, weavers and canal-sweepers) as well as stupid preachers, *mu’adhhdhins* and *müâms*, thieves and persons who were robbed, sectarians and fanatics. In short, we find a humourous assessment of traditional Arabic society, a comprehensive (and, at times, overflowing) celebration of contemporary humour! The reception of al-Âbi’s encyclopedia has been little studied, since the work has only been discovered and published some years ago. But even so, one is most probably right in assuming that the work has had a tremendous impact in its original context, considering the nature of numerous similar works as well as compilations of previous material.

A special facet of the work’s reception is the fact that the Syrian Maronite Maphrian Bar Hebraeus (died 1286) relied on al-Âbi’s work for large portions of his *Book of Entertaining Stories* (Marzolph 1985). Meanwhile, Bar Hebraeus has cleverly adapted the anecdotes originating from an Arabic and Islamic context to his Syrian Christian context. He succeeded in doing so to such a degree as to mislead virtually all of the international researchers studying his book into presuming that he himself, as the acknowledged
Historian he was, had compiled the book as a pleasant pastime by extracting the anecdotes from numerous unknown works. Considering the enthusiastic reception of Bar Hebraeus’ rather small collection of jokes and anecdotes in Western scholarship one feels inclined to wonder to which extent the praise and admiration he received were due to a biased conception, or more explicitly the fact that Bar Hebraeus was, after all, a Christian author. Probably, a similarly powerful document of humour written by an Arabic and Muslim author seemed beyond the imagination of Western philologists.

Besides the few better known compilations of pre-Mongol Arabic literature, numerous works of pre-modern Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature share a similar jocular content. Moreover, many of them preserve older material, much of which would otherwise be lost today. By way of their reception they thus revitalized jocular items in popular tradition. One of the most powerful works in terms of impact is the *adab*-encyclopedia compiled by fifteenth century Egyptian author al-Ibshîhî, bearing the rhyming title *al-Mustatraf fils kulli fannin mustazraf* (Enchanting items picked from all areas of knowledge; Marzolph 1997). Ibshîhî’s compilation is not, like al-Âbî’s, restricted to jocular items. It is rather nourished by the author’s intention to collect and present in a single volume the total amount of knowledge an educated man of his day (i.e. in Mamluk Egypt) should be expected to command. In general, Ibshîhî follows the well-known practice of mixing serious passages and entertaining tales. The book begins with chapters on Islamic belief, the Koran, and general rules of wise conduct. It ends with chapters on prayer, fate, illness, death, pious trust and the hereafter. Within this rather serious framework, however, the author has included numerous jokes and anecdotes as a perfectly natural part of the human condition. By doing so, the author has succeeded in compiling a work that, on the one side, constitutes a highly successful one-volume *vademecum* and that, on the other side, highlights the pivotal values of traditional Arabic Muslim society. It is thus little surprising that in the Arab world Ibshîhî’s work has become an indispensable constituent of numerous private (and public) libraries. Ever since the introduction of printing to the Arab world in the nineteenth century, the book has been published numerous times in cheap reprints, selections and excerpts and continues to be exploited for publications of a chapbook character until this very day.

The beginning of printing in the Arabic world also opened up new ways for the publication and distribution of humorous material. Printing houses in Egypt and the Levantine countries since the second half of the
nineteenth century, and particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century, published large series of chapbooks. German Orientalist scholar Enno Littmann, who is probably best known for his immaculate German translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and others have studied these jocular compilations (Littmann 1955; see also Khayat 1987; Marzolph 1995). The Arabic chapbooks bear rhyming titles such as *Siyâh al-katâkît fî ’n-nawâdir al-mudhika wa- ’l-hawâdît* (The Crowning of the Little Chicken, containing amusing stories and anecdotes), or *Nûr al-‘uyûn fî taslîyat al-mahzûn* (The Lightened Eye, promising exhilaration to the sad ones). Besides poems and riddles, they contain, above all, short jokes and jests, often written in the local Egyptian dialect. While many of the jocular tales are already documented in classical and post-classical Arabic literature, they often portray contemporary characters such as the man intoxicated from the consumption of *hashîsh*.

As in Arabic literature, one could easily retrace the development and dissemination of jocular tales in the other literatures of the Muslim world. Beyond a chronological assessment, a synchronous and geographical survey proves, if such a proof were needed, that humour in a large variety of different genres has always been a vital constituent of the Islamic cultures. It might well be that genres such as the satirical press and political cartoons of the Muslim world do not correspond to standards deemed adequate in the West, where the freedom of individual expression counts as the pivotal value of culture and society. But even so, critical humour in the Muslim world has existed since long, and it continues to thrive even under unfavourable conditions. Moreover, jocular narratives of whatever genre are so wide-spread that questioning the position of humour in the Muslim world appears rather absurd (Fenoglio and Georgeon 1995). Egyptians tell jokes about the traditional characters of Ash’ab or Qarâqûsh, or modern ones about the Sa’îdis, the alleged epitome of stupidity in upper Egypt equivalent to the Wise Men of Gotham; Turks would delight in traditional shadow-theater known by the name of its main character Karagöz or tell modern jokes about the members of the mystical order of the Bektâshîs; Iranians in the time of the Pahlavi regime delighted in jokebooks translated from Western, predominantly US-American sources, or would read satirical magazines published in the Islamic Republic that employ rather veiled forms of criticism. In other words, humour in the Muslim world is as natural a constituent of human communication as anywhere else. As if to silence once and for all anybody questioning the existence of humour in the Muslim world, Algerian French journalist Mohamed Sifaoui (born 1967) has recently satirized the epitome of Islamicistic terrorism in the cartoon
Ben Laden Dévoilé (Ben Laden Unveiled; 2009), perceived as a humorous attack on al-Qaida.

Some of the most wide-reaching examples of the impact of traditional jocular tales in the Muslim world are the jokes and anecdotes attached to the character of Nasreddin (Başgöz and Boratav 1998; Marzolph 2006). Whether or not a person by this name, obviously a minor cleric, ever lived in Anatolia in the thirteenth or fourteenth century is a question of historical relevance that fades into insignificance considering the character’s spread all over the Muslim world. Today, we witness an all-encompassing reception of the Nasreddin-tales literally ‘in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad’, i.e. in every language and culture that was or still is influenced by Islam, from Sephardic Spain to Uyghur culture in Communist China. Considering the syncretistic nature of popular tradition, Nasreddin over the centuries has incorporated the narrative repertoire of numerous other jocular characters, some of them known by name and others remaining anonymous (Marzolph 1998). In this manner, the tales of the Arabic Juhâ, the Sicilian Giufà, the Sephardic Djoha, the Turkish Nasreddin Hoca, the Greek Nastratin, the Iranian Mollâ Nasreddin, the Òzbek Ependi (Afandi) or the Chinese A-fan-ti derive from a common source. Besides having been published in numerous jestbooks and cartoons, the tales attached to this character are alive in oral tradition and in a truly transnational manner are potentially accessible to virtually each and every inhabitant of the Muslim world.

An Anthropological Theory of Muslim Humour

Remembering Rosenthal’s definition that humour is related to the lifting of restrictions (1956, 132–138), ‘Islamic’ humour not surprisingly deals with topics similar to those known in the West. Jokes in general deal with areas of taboo such as sexuality and scatology, they ridicule norms and values of the surrounding culture, such as social institutions or the cycle of a human’s life from pregnancy and birth to marriage and death as well as religious and political conditions and circumstances. While classical Arabic literature is no exception to the rule, it contains a fairly specific aspect that is best characterized as ‘A just word at the right moment’. Iraqi author Khalid Kishtainy in his book on Arabic political humour (1985, 11–33) has published a rare attempt to assess the anthropological specifics of early Islamic humour. According to Kishtainy, the nomad culture of pre-Islamic Arabia did not allow for the development of artistic expression encountered
The Muslim Sense of Humour

in sedentary cultures such as architecture, sculpture, painting or theater. For practical reasons, the Arabs cultivated forms of art that were more naturally linked to the conditions governing their life. Consequently, verbal expression was the dominant form of art in pre-Islamic Arabia. Educated Muslims would remember thousands of verses of poetry by heart, the correct command of the complicated rules of classical Arabic grammar was a cultural exigency, and all forms of refined verbal expression were held in high esteem. Even the greatest miracle God ever revealed to a human, the Koran as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, is the Word. Considering the high esteem of verbal art, refined verbal expression also holds an important position in jocular texts. This refers, above all, to poignant responses in difficult situations, many of which have been collected in Arabic literature. Even a tyrannical ruler such as al-Hajjâj (died 714) would pardon the person who had just unknowingly reviled him when this person responds to the sudden discovery of the ruler’s identity with the whispered remark that he hopes the previous conversation would remain ‘strictly between us’ (Marzolph 1992, vol. 2, 93, no. 372).

Humour in the Muslim world is thus generally characterized by two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, humour as the expression of a tolerant and appreciative position towards the difficulties and vicissitudes of social existence and towards the human foibles is regarded as imperative. This attitude goes together with the recommendation of a religiously commendable moderate use of humour so that the vanity immanent in human nature does not gain the upper hand in contrast to the respect and awe that humans owe to God’s omniscient and omnipotent nature. On the other hand, living reality in the Muslim world proves that beyond their theoretical foundation, the practical consequences of pious evaluations of humour in regard to the exigencies of social and political reality are limited. While humour and religiosity are complementary to each other, they do not necessarily confine or exclude each other.

Why Study Muslim Humour?

Besides this general assessment it is revealing to question the current interest in problems of humour, in particular humour as related to different religious backgrounds. The recent interest of a larger Western public to understand the phenomenon of ‘humour in Islam’ appears to be fuelled less by a sincere and unconditional intellectual longing to understand the complexity of a fairly unknown phenomenon. I rather argue that it
originates from the interest to solve a contradiction that in the West is largely perceived as indissoluble. On the one hand, we find the Western advocacy of the freedom of speech. In the case of the Danish Muhammad cartoons that are so prominently discussed in recent research, this attitude would include the individual’s right to satirize each and every topic, whether or not it be venerated by or even holy to someone else’s value-system. On the other hand, public opinion in the West is confronted with a contemporary Islamistic stance that bases the notions of adequacy and permissibility on a traditionalist interpretation of Islamic core values. From a researcher’s point of view, it is most unfortunate that this Islamistic notion is often regarded as representative of a general Muslim attitude, which it certainly is not. Western specialists of the Muslim world often convey the pessimistic view that ‘Islam’ in general unconditionally clings to norms and values as codified in early Islamic history. In doing so, the complexity, the inconsistency, the dynamics and the cultural multitude of the Muslim world are disregarded in favour of awarding a dominant position to the monopolistic conduct of Islamistic puritans. Moreover, the debate about which norms and values are truly ‘Islamic’ reveals a deeply felt insecurity and helplessness on the part of the West. Even in today’s modern world, the West appears to cultivate the image of the alien Other so as to delineate and define the Self. Still today, the West largely disregards the common cultural foundations and narrative traditions (Ranelagh 1979) it shares with the Muslim world. And even more, the West appears to be willing to discuss the values of the Other only insofar as the results are applicable to corroborate and further its own preconceived system of norms and values.

As for the problem of humour in the Muslim world, we may or may not indulge in intellectual exercises (such as the present one) studying the related theoretical implications or practical consequences. Considering this point of criticism, it appears necessary to link my study with two important reservations. On the one hand humour, as much as any other cultural expression, is not static. As a case in point, jocular texts dating from the classical period of Arabic Islamic culture today are published in numerous reprints. These publications are, however, often selective in reproducing the least offensive examples, so as not to jeopardize current traditionalist interpretations of the Muslim past by contrasting them with a potentially conflicting depiction of historical realities. On the other hand, we witness a certain prevalence of publications that in contrast to merely humorous ones aim to present entertaining material with an educative purpose. Effected by a conscious process, classical Arabic jokelore gradually fades from memory while other ingredients of the classical heritage are revived in
an attempt to link contemporary cultural memory to the model character of morally unquestionable events and individuals. As a result, any study of the position of humour in today’s Muslim world risks confining the debate to the relatively small area of problems we dare to discuss. In order to overcome this restriction, we constantly need to remind ourselves that the Muslim world is not a solid, homogenous entity. Moreover, many of the contemporary problems of the Muslim world are not at all humorous ones – such as the situation in the autonomous regions of Palestine, in Sudanese refugee camps, or in political systems that pay little respect to individual freedom, be it in terms of social, political, cultural, or religious expression. Beyond a potentially utilitarian curiosity to explore the Other it might well be more deserving to consider the causal relation of social and societal phenomena on an international scale while preserving a general open-mindedness to witness the Other within ourselves as well as the Self within the Other. Expressed in terms of the present subject one feels inclined to advise those who diagnose a lack of humour in the Muslim world to consider seriously whether or not, and if so, to which extent they themselves might have contributed to such an attitude.

Notes

1 Documentation for the quoted incidents is found on numerous websites. All of the websites mentioned here have been accessed 21 January 2010. See, e. g. on Carrell http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/798/319670/text/; on Lagerfeld http://www.cd.sc.ehu.es/FileRoom/documents/Cases/388chanel.html; on the taz http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/archiv/?dig=2001/02/17/a0100; on van Gogh http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3974179.stm; on Gibbons http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article2963737.ece.

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Part 2

Laughing at Religion
Next to its liberating and positive aspects humour also has more negative sides like mockery and ridicule. The first part of this book has raised questions internal to religion like: ‘Is there room for laughter in religion?’ and ‘Can humour be instrumental to salvation?’ The second part of this book brings together essays which offer a more external perspective on humour. Why are religious people so sensitive when it comes to jokes, cartoons and parodies? How do humour, religion and society interact? I start my exploration of the topic in this chapter by paying attention to a common philosophical idea, namely that humour is based on superiority. In the following paragraphs I discuss different aspects of the interconnections between humour and identity.

**Humour and Superiority**

What Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) disliked in the philosophy of his predecessor Thomas Hobbes, was the fact that Hobbes made self-love so central that his philosophy remains blind for everything tender and self-giving in humanity.1 This is true not only of Hobbes’ famous views in political philosophy, but even of his ideas on laughter. According to Hobbes the definition of humour is none other than the glorification which results from being conscious of one’s own superiority. A comparison between ourselves and someone else is therefore crucial to humour.

Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called Laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in
another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able.²

Given this definition it is evident that there is little place for humour in religion. According to Hobbes humour is based on competition and rivalry. The main question is thus: is all laughing at the expense of someone else?

Hutcheson complains that Puffendorf – who is regarded to be the great instructor in morals in these times – has found inspiration in Hobbes in consequence of which notions like natural affections, like sensus communis, decorum and honestum have disappeared from the handbooks of morals. ‘(. . .) all must be interest, and some selfish view; laughter itself must be a joy from the same spring.’ (Hutcheson 1994, 46)

Since Hutcheson wants to contradict Hobbes, a large part of his essay is dedicated to giving counterexamples to the view that laughter is always at the expense of another. The implication that there can be no laughter without a feeling of superiority on our side, is given response by reminding us that there exist parodies of Homer and Virgil. No one feels superior to either of them and yet there is laughter. Laughing does not imply feeling superior. Another implication of Hobbes’ view would be that the greater our superiority the merrier things would be. But this is not the case according to Hutcheson. We laugh at animals when they behave in an anthropomorphic manner – right the opposite of what the Hobbes’ model would predict. The more remote an animal is from the human, and so the more superior we should feel, the less it is likely to evoke laughter. Ergo: superiority is not a condition for laughter.³ We don’t laugh at people in pain or in poverty. A tragic example given by Hutcheson is the following. When a freshly built chimney collapses and the mason is buried under its ruins, one is not inclined to laugh, although one could feel superior. The self-control of many Presbyterian however was put to the test, writes Hutcheson, when they heard about the application of the scripture made by a passing countryman, Dr. Pitcairn: ‘Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, for they rest with their labours, and their works follow them’. (Hutcheson 1994:48). One doesn’t lose one’s respect for the holy scriptures when such an application is made.
As to any great and truly sublime sentiments, we may perhaps find that, by a playing upon words, they may be applied to a trifling or mean action, or object; but this application will not diminish our high idea of the great sentiment. He must be of a poor trifling temper who would lose his relish of the grandeur and beauty of that noble sentence of the holy writ, mentioned in the former paper, from the doctor’s application of it. (Hutcheson 1994:58)

In other words: according to Hutcheson making a joke about Christianity, Islam or any other religion wouldn’t necessarily involve a disdain for the religion in question. Of course Hutcheson is very aware of the fact that most religions as cultural wholes are mixtures of the truly great with the weak and the mean. A person of just discernment will – when presented with ridicule – be able to separate what is great from what is not, while a person with a weak mind will bring the whole into disesteem. The reception of laughter differs depending on the person or group of persons who are at the receiving end. According to Hutcheson also the attitude of the one using the ridicule is important. There’s a world of difference between giving evidence of good-nature, friendship and esteem of the person who is laughed at or not.

In the worst case this can result in ‘hatred against the laughter’. Here is how Hutcheson describes what happens when one laughs with crime or calamity.

A forced unnatural ridicule on either of these occasions, must be apt to raise, in the guilty or the miserable, hatred against the laughter; (. . .). The guilty will take laughter to be a triumph over him as contemptible; the miserable will interpret it as hardness of heart, and insensibility of the calamities of another. (Hutcheson 1994:59)

Hutcheson pays special attention to laughing with futile faults. When done with kindness it works better than a grave admonition, but when not flowing from kindness it is experienced as extremely provoking. Why? Because it shows ‘contempt of us in the ridiculer, and that he designs to make us contemptible to others’ (Hutcheson 1994:60) Ridicule then, is like a knife which in the hands of a wise man is a practical tool, but a dangerous instrument in the hands of a fool. Hutcheson ends his essay with a list of rules to avoid abuse of ridicule. These are his rules in shortened form:

(first, either never to attempt ridicule upon what is every way great, whether it be any great being, character, or sentiments; or, if our wit must
sometimes run into allusions, on low occasions, ( . . . ) let it not be in weak company, who have not a just discernment of true grandeur. ( . . . )

secondly, concerning objects of a mixed nature, partly great, and partly mean, let us never turn the meanness into ridicule without acknowledging what is truly great, and paying a just veneration to it. ( . . . )

This is then another necessary rule, that along with our ridicule of smaller faults we should always join evidences of good-nature and esteem. (Hutcheson 1994, 62, my italics)

Unlike later writers and philosophers4 who still invoke superiority as the essence of humour, Hutcheson cherishes an image of man as not solely motivated by competition. Laughter can be innocent and as such it can have marvellous effects. At the same time he is very conscious of the fact that humour can offend and hurt, which must mean that he agrees in part with the opinions of Hobbes. Applying Hutcheson’s rules to the present day situation would result in making a sharp distinction between ridiculing God on the one hand and, for example, ridiculing priests, rabbis or mullas. The latter are clearly of a mixed nature, while God or revelation is seen, by the believers themselves at least, as in every way great. His last rule reminds of the fact that good humour cannot do without an attitude of politeness. Esteem is – in his view – a precondition of humour.

The Fragility of Humour

Everyone knows from his own experience that humour is an art. Some people are more gifted than others in telling jokes and funny stories. Others will never learn to make the right funny remark to the right people at the right time. We are all acquainted with humour which crosses a tacitly accepted border of good taste and moral acceptability. Such humour causes disgust, long silences, shame, letters to newspapers and even fights. Humour can hurt and offend. Why is this so? In religious matters, things are even more problematic. Jokes about God, about Jesus, about Mohammed, about Buddha and many more divine or sacred figures all balance on the very thin line of the appropriate, as do cartoons, films, paintings, sculptures etcetera in which they appear. As Hutcheson remarks, it all depends on who, what, where and how. A joke told in the company of good friends of like spirit differs widely from a commercial film that is released all over the world. Of course humour, even in its more biting varieties, is not absent from religion. Hutcheson (1994, 61) refers to the mockery of the prophet
Elijah that is meant to highlight the stupidity of the idol Baal and to make the contrast with the omnipotent true God. But the examples can be multiplied of course. There are Catholic jokes about Protestants, Christian jokes about Jews, Islamic jokes about Christians, atheist jokes about believers. This humour can of course also be intrareligious, like jokes of Dominicans about Jesuits, priests about nuns, etc. Intra-religious humour is stronger in monoreligious contexts where the dividing lines within the own religious group have greater importance. Franciscans get the letters OFM behind their names as an abbreviation for ordo fratrum minorum – in German these letters were given a different explanation by other, mildly hostile monastic orders, namely OFM as standing for ohne feine Manieren (in English: ‘without fine manners’).

In all these cases of mockery in which other groups are made fun of, these jokes point to a certain measure of tension between the groups involved. There are forms of distrust, reminiscences about earlier conflicts or facts of aggression. At the same time these tensions are seen as relative – one can laugh them away.

Humour is thus a strange mixture of attachment and detachment. On the one hand, in order for humour to work there must be an involvement. The tension with the other group can only be felt if there is enough attachment to one’s own religious identity. On the other hand, laughing is a clear case of detachment, of letting go, of releasing the tension. Coping with the fragility of humour means to find the right balance between attachment and detachment. Where the involvement is too big, no topic for humour can be found: a recent divorce, an accident, a suffering child. And where the involvement is too little, no humour is found either.

The fact that humour has next to detachment, attachment also built into it, gives a clear indication that humour touches upon sensibilities. How is humour related to human values and the search for identity?

**Humour and Identity**

I want to start with a short reflection on an intrinsic property of humour. In many cultures there is an interconnection between sneezing and laughing. Both events are often seen as blessed moments. After a sneeze benediction is offered. What both have in common is the fact that while sneezing and while laughing a person is out of control. One must passively undergo the sneeze. The laughter is – on penalty of being artificial – also irrepresible and escapes control. Of course cases of becoming angry, mad,
overly enthusiastic or feeling outraged and giving irrepressibly expression to these emotions, are also ways of being out of control.

Contrary to what one would think the moments that characterize our personality the best are not the moments when we are in control of things, when we soberly take everything into account, when we make wise choices, when we are rational and testify of a balanced judgement. Our friends and family will choose the moments when we are out of control as the clearest expressions of our personality. They will make statements like: ‘It is typical for Frank to get angry about that critical review’; ‘My mother got extremely excited about going out shopping. As you can imagine she couldn’t contain her enthusiasm’ and ‘After he got reprimanded by the boss, he – typically – dropped into a mood of melancholy and sadness from which he could not free himself all morning.’ Like anger and outrage, humour is an indicator of what I deem important; of what touches me; of what carries me away. When do I laugh? About what do I laugh? In what way do I laugh? Humour indirectly reveals my values, my hopes and fears. Not only does it reveal my values, it also reveals the values of the group or groups to which I belong.

Humour does not only express some of my group values, but in a sense humour also constructs these groups and holds them together. Many times humour is about other groups of people; professional groups like doctors and patients, like judges and suspects, jailers and prisoners, officers and soldiers. National groups are made fun of: the French tell jokes about the English, the Dutch about the Flemish and vice versa. Of humorous exchanges between religious groups some examples were already given.

Humour is in that sense connected to intimacy just like slang, jargon and dialect.6 By telling certain types of jokes people signal that they belong to the same group and create a bond of intimacy with other members of this group. In this way it can become clear who belongs to our circle and who doesn’t. Humour is an instrument of inclusion and exclusion. With humour recognition can be given or withheld; religious groups can be praised or blamed, honoured or despised.

Humour and Recognition

A lot has been written in political philosophy about recognition in the last decade or so. The discussion concerns mostly the different interpretations given to the notion recognition in a politics of equal dignity and in a politics of difference. In a politics of equal dignity human beings receive respect
without regard for their individual and unique properties. In a politics of difference some groups and individuals can be given, on top of the basic rights they share with all other citizens, special rights or a special treatment. One can think here of the linguistic rights for the people of French speaking Canada, of the exceptional status given to native peoples, or measures of positive discrimination, of social attention for weaker groups.

Those political discussions will not concern me here. Instead, I want to focus on a more anthropological approach: what does it mean for an individual to receive recognition from someone else. According to Charles Taylor, and he obviously doesn’t stand alone on this, ‘our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence’ (Taylor 1995b, 225). Rejection or refusal of recognition can inflict wounds and self-hatred on the victim. Recognition is as vital as food so to speak. However it is not evident to provide everyone with their fair share of recognition, since recognition is in a sense a ‘non-distributable good’ (Honneth 2001, 44).

As a fundamental need of human beings the search for recognition is of all times and all places, yet, according to Taylor, since modernity recognition stands in a new light. ‘What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which the attempt to be recognized can fail’ (Taylor 1995b, 231). In a society in which identity is socially derived from the role one fulfills in society, this recognition – in fact described by Taylor with the term ‘honour’ – is rather unproblematic. With the rise of the ideal of authenticity, recognition has to be won by exchange and this can fail. In such a context people are much more sensitive to compliments, to self-acquired status, to the opinions of others and also to mockery and ridicule.

Rousseau is one of the main critics of the social hierarchy of the ancient regime and its system of honour. He sees in the human craving for recognition a dependency of people on the opinions of others. Some want to interpret Rousseau as saying that we should give up this desire for recognition in accordance with the maxims of stoicism and Christianity. Pride is seen as a vice. Taylor however thinks that Rousseau’s position is more nuanced. In his accounts of the good society esteem still has a role to play. Recognition is not in itself wrong, but its unequal distribution is, because then it gives rise to a desire for preferences and prerogatives. In a healthy republic people live in the public gaze and do care about what others think. Rousseau is especially charmed by the public games in ancient Greece and by popular festivals in which there are no class distinctions. Such festivals are held in open air as opposed to the elitist gatherings in churches and theatres. Everyone is there at the same time spectator and actor. Rousseau is
fascinated by the complete reciprocity of this recognition when all feel united. In Rousseau’s words as quoted by Taylor (1995b, 240):

Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.

Apart from the unity and the complete reciprocity, this sounds like a description of contemporary public space in which one is at the same time onlooker and actor. Metropolitan public space can be seen as a kind of large-scale exhibition hall where people look and are looked upon in a subtle game of recognition and rejection. It is a gigantic ‘Place M’as-tu vu?’ as a mundane square in the Belgian coastal town of Knokke is called by the populace. Adherence to political ideologies, sympathizing with deep ecology, admiration for the fifties, sixties or seventies, success in business, being a yuppie, a Muslim, a Jew, . . . it can all be deciphered with ease in the streets of our pluralist societies, where also different groups – and most certainly religious groups – enter to show their symbols and their sacred objects in the hope of receiving respect and recognition.

This spectacle reveals an important feature of the structure of recognition, namely that it cannot be sought in a direct way (Burms 2000). Nobody walks around with a billboard round his neck announcing his identity and asking for recognition in a direct manner: ‘Hi, I’m rich/a yuppie/a communist. Isn’t that great?’ Asking for recognition is the best way not to get it. Recognition rather has a triadic structure: I feel recognized whenever someone appreciates what I appreciate. When I tell you about the latest novel I just read and you react saying that such a book could never interest you, I undeniably feel a bit down. When you look at the picture of my kids on my desk and you mention that I have fine looking kids, this gives me good feeling. This triadic, indirect structure of recognition sheds some light on what it would mean to live in a ‘culture of narcissism’ (Burms 2000).

It is narcissist to ask in a direct way for estimation: what do you think of me?; am I a valuable person to your mind? Since this direct way of asking for recognition is rarely accepted, there is a temptation to choose things of which I know in advance that they will be appreciated by you. This would mean that I have lost all sense of intrinsic value. I don’t tell you about the aforementioned novel because I think it is great, but because I have hopes that you will think highly of me since I talked about it. Instead of being the
object of my admiration the novel in question is just an instrument for me that can produce your esteem of me. This reflection is not about individual pathology, but about a tendency in our culture – a culture that inclines us to behave in this way. To the public spaces has been added in the last decade the virtual space of internet. ‘Facebook’ could just as well have been called ‘identity book’: people show what they think is important, what makes up who they are. They come together in virtual communities which share the same values and thus provide recognition. Many web-pages that are meant to exhibit the personality of its maker come close to the narcissist behaviour just described. All this testifies of the risk of distorting one’s relation to values. Values should be in a sense transcendent for the one who holds them, but here all values run the risk of being commodified and rendered subordinated to the goal of receiving esteem.

Another way of putting this would be to say that things that give meaning to life – like the recognition of others – cannot be manipulated. A thought experiment called ‘buying compliments’ can explain this further (Burms & De Dijn 1986). Suppose someone hired someone else and paid him to be his personal assistant. This assistant’s only professional duty would consist in nothing else but giving his boss compliments every hour of the day, every day of the week. He pats him on the back, says he looks marvellous today, tells him that he did a wonderful job in doing this or that, and so on. The question to ask here is whether these compliments could ever mean anything to the boss. The answer is obviously ‘no’. And why is this? People – ‘normal’ people – are only interested in the compliments from others who could equally well not offer compliments but criticism instead. With the compliments of this personal assistant, things cannot go wrong and because they cannot go wrong, they cannot go right either. Because it cannot fail, it cannot succeed either. We will pity the person who buys compliments and will have doubts concerning his mental health. In matters of recognition we have to relate to the possibility that recognition is refused. Narcissistic persons cannot cope with this fragility. The business of exchanging forms of recognition is in itself vulnerable, because everything of value is vulnerable.

This example demonstrates that recognition cannot be controlled or manipulated. This is true on a personal level, but the same applies to groups within society. Trying to force people to recognize me and my group will never pay off. Extorting positive recognition can happen with all kinds of means like money, blackmail, lawful means, threats of physical violence or of never ending protests. Those who feel their arm is being twisted will not be happy, but what is more: the ones receiving recognition in this way will not be happy either. They will feel that the recognition thus
received is bogus. The possibility of rejection is part of the possibility of recognition.

In public space, humour can be the cause of tensions, because humour can be used in a complimentary way, in a sarcastic way, thereby blocking all communication and in a mocking fashion. But humour is also a way of coping with such tensions. In other words: humour can be part of the problem and it can be part of the solution, but humour is part and parcel of the game of recognition.

Humour and Vulnerability

So next to formal ways of recognizing people by giving them civil rights, opportunities for education and work etcetera, there remains in people, I believe, a craving for a type of recognition that goes further. Tolerance and dignity are not enough. We tolerate others and treat them with equal dignity even if we think that the way in which they organize their lives is wrong or the opinions which they hold are false. Despite our disapproval and despite our inclination to do something about it, they are tolerated. In the privacy of their homes, even to some extent in the public sphere, and without violating somebody else’s rights, they can do and think as they please. Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth were quite right to bring the idea of recognition to the foreground. People don’t want to be just tolerated, but they want to be respected for who they are. Beyond tolerance and dignity, there is a craving for recognition. It is as if the dream of living among kindred souls, among brothers and sisters (la fraternité), was never completely given up. Formal respect for others doesn’t give society its cohesion. It just avoids or inhibits the work of fragmenting forces. Impulses are very contrary of course. By seeking identity and uniqueness people desire to be set apart, but by seeking recognition they testify of the desire to be included in a larger community.

The fact that the motivation of the recognition is also important, points to the insufficiency of purely formal approval. If we learn that a certain compliment that was given to us at an earlier point in time, was actually given because our colleague thought that we ‘needed one’, then this will be a disappointment for us. The compliment was not genuine. So, we want more than compliments. We want compliments given for the right reasons. In a trial feminists were not happy to hear that the judge condemned certain types of pornography not because it was degrading for women, but merely because it caused some women emotional harm. They didn’t feel
recognized. Here the behaviour of people in holy places is significant. Catholics want that unbelievers take off their caps and hats in churches, that they dress decently. Guests in a mosque take of their shoes. You could think that the dress codes and behavioural codes only apply for the believers, but that is not so. I respect you if I respect what you value. For that to happen I must in some sense be touched by your culture, religion or whatever it is that contributes to your identity. This effects a fusion of horizons, to use the term coined by Gadamer, however small. Deep recognition is when your system of values affects my system of values. It is very presumptuous to think you can pass judgment on the worth of other cultures and religions without being touched in this way. Taylor writes:

Then, however, the act of declaring another culture’s creations to be of worth and the act of declaring yourself on their side, even if their creations aren’t all that impressive, become indistinguishable. The difference is only in the packaging. Yet the first is normally understood as a genuine expression of respect, the second an insufferable patronizing. The supposed beneficiaries of the politics of recognition, the people who might actually benefit from acknowledgment, make a crucial distinction between the two acts. They know they want respect, not condescension. (Taylor 1995b, 254)

A last remark is about values and vulnerability. Most of our values are incarnated in concrete material things or in persons (De Dijn 1999). Friendship as a value means nothing without friends of flesh and blood; veneration for God is experienced in and through rites of worship in which symbols and sacred objects are used; patriotism is expressed in – for example – the pious handling of the national flag, and so on. As symbolic objects, these concrete material things or persons are irreplaceable for us. This concreteness makes our values vulnerable. Our friends can betray us, they can hurt us, they can die. Our churches and temples can be destroyed or desecrated. Our national flag can be put to fire.

When people make fun of their own values, when religious people tell religious jokes, they are in a playful manner conscious of the frailty of their values. David Hume for example gives a joke about the catholic doctrine of the praesentia realis which to his information, the catholics tell themselves. I quote Hume:

I believe, indeed, that there is no tenet in all paganism, which would give so fair a scope to ridicule as this of the real presence: For it is so absurd,
that it eludes the force of all argument. There are even some pleasant stories of that kind, which, though somewhat profane, are commonly told by the Catholics themselves. One day, a priest, it is said, gave inadvertently, instead of the sacrament, a counter [a coin], which had by accident fallen among the holy wafers. The communicant waited patiently for some time, expecting it would dissolve on his tongue: But finding that it still remained entire, he took it off. ‘I wish’, cried he to the priest, ‘you have not committed some mistake: I wish you have not given me God the Father: He is so hard and tough there is no swallowing him.’

When however religious people themselves don’t tell stories, but one denomination tells jokes about another, it is difficult to say where the line of our tolerance lies or should lie. Much depends on who tells the joke and how. From a friend we can take more, which illustrates again that humour forms an integral part of the game of recognition.

Notes

1 Francis Hutcheson’s *Reflections upon Laughter* was first printed in the *Dublin Journal* 1725–1726. He summarizes Hobbes as follows: ‘His grand view was to deduce all human actions from self-love: by some bad fortune he has overlooked everything which is generous or kind in mankind, and represents men in that light in which a thorough knave or coward beholds them, suspecting all friendship, love, or social affection, of hypocrisy, or selfish design or fear’ (Hutcheson 1994, 46).

2 *Leviathan*, Part I, Ch. VI (Hobbes 1983, 125).

3 Another ground for superiority is having the right faith. Hutcheson remarks in an ironic manner: ‘An orthodox believer, who is very sure that he is in the true way to salvation, must always be merry upon heretics, to whom he is so much superior in his own opinion; and no other passion but mirth should arise upon hearing of their heterodoxy’ (Hutcheson 1994, 49).

4 In *De l’essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques* (1855) Charles Baudelaire not only sees a connection between laughter and superiority, but even with something demonic in human nature. In *Le rire* (1899) Henri Bergson wants to show that it is the mechanical in the behaviour of others which triggers laughter. Again the onlooker can feel elevated above the ‘victim’.

5 Among these effects are cheerfulness, bonding, reconciliation. For example, see Hutcheson 1994: ‘Again, laughter, like other associations, is very contagious: our whole frame is so sociable, that one merry countenance may diffuse cheerfulness to many; (...)’ (p. 57); ‘Laughter is none of the smallest bonds to common friendships; (...)’ (p. 58); ‘[Ridicule is] useful to abate our concern or resentment, and to reconcile us to the person who injured us, if he does not persist in his injury. From this consideration of the effects of laughter it may be easy to see for what cause, or end, a sense of the ridiculous was implanted in human nature, and how
it ought to be managed. It is plainly of considerable moment in human society. It is often a great occasion of pleasure, and enlivens our conversation exceedingly, when it is conducted by good-nature’ (p. 60).


7 I depend here on the work of Arnold Burms and Herman De Dijn who opened the eyes of the Flemish and Dutch readership for the importance of recognition in questions of meaning in their (1986).


Bibliography


The incident of the caricatures of the prophet Mohammed of February 2006 cost more than 150 people their lives. Is this affair, in the political sense, now closed? One could not say so with certainty. It will have provoked a heated debate, itself still continuing, in which representatives of two irreconcilable positions will have confronted each other. On the one side, Muslims mostly, with the occasional support of non-Muslim intellectuals, or even Jewish and Christian religious figures, have denounced it as scandalous and demanded that unconditional respect be given to the figure of Mohammed, advancing that it is already forbidden to represent him and therefore a fortiori to caricature him – as if he were God himself. The others, invoking a freedom of expression which is untouchable and non-negotiable, claimed the right to mock any figure of the sacred, including that of God himself, and a fortiori, those of his prophets.

However, these polemical standpoints, taken in the name of sacrosanct principles with their cascades of cut and paste arguments, are less enlightening than the facts put into perspective over the long term, in a spirit of comparison, whether internal or external. My contribution here will consist of a brief history, in five stages, of the relation of Christianity to the mockery of its most sacred figures. To conclude, I will come back, in the light of the affair of 2006, to the double question: Can one laugh at everything? Is it beneficial?

It is not true that it has been possible to laugh at everything and at any time. The historian would point out that it has not always been done, far from it; and even if he is not given to foretelling the future he would add that it would be unreasonable to suppose that it will be possible anywhere in the near future. In fact, at all times, laughter has been subject to collective negotiation and is therefore already bound by certain limits. It is true
that the latter has been pushed very far back in Western and Westernized societies. Not only is this a recent phenomenon, it is also not certain that the *licentia de quacumque re ridendi* can be exported everywhere. History shows us this, and it is sufficient to look on one’s own doorstep: for a long time it was not permitted to laugh at the Christian God and His images were respected. In Europe, this restraint is no longer actual. What happened? Since when have the Church, its hierarchy, its faithful, or the State, and a more or less unanimous society, tolerated that artists can mock God by caricaturing its traditional figures?

Following an initial study it seems one can distinguish five broad periods in the history of mocking-by-images applied to the most sacred figures of Christianity. These are (1) Antiquity, (2) the Middle Ages, (3) the Renaissance and the Reformation, (4) the last decades of the nineteenth century and the (5) second half of the twentieth century.

**Antiquity**

The caricature of the Crucified Christ might actually have preceded the figure itself by two centuries. Indeed, the famous graffito near the Palatine hill in Rome is dated from the third century AD whereas the first representations of Christ on the cross – a wooden carved relief on the door of the Santa Sabina Basilica in Rome, and another in ivory now in London, – date from the beginning of the fifth. In the place of Jesus on the cross, the drawing shows a man with an ass’s head bearing the legend ‘Alexamenos adores God’ with another legend telling us that this Alexamenos is a *fidelis*, a Christian. If this is indeed the case, it would surely be a sign of hatred of Christians, in the time when they were seen as pariahs, as ‘atheists’ who threatened the social bond and the security of the state. One would have reproached them the sin of ‘donkey worship’ (‘they worship a donkey, or a man with a donkey’s head’), which was originally levelled at Jews.

This caricature is a one-off. Nascent Christianity did not escape mockery as such. Verbal mockery was already initiated by Celsus from the second century on (see his *Against the Christians* and the counter-attack on it, the *Contra Celsum* of Origen). It was continued in the following centuries but only *in literary form*: we have but to think of the *Misopogon* of Julian the Apostate, who was convinced that the triumph of Christianity had precipitated the decline of the Empire and that it was therefore high time to restore the pagan cults.

However that may be, before long anti-Christian mockery was no longer expressed in plastic form. Once Constantine was in power, and *a fortiori*
from the reign of Theodosius onwards (end of the fourth century), the images of the Pantocrator, the Madonna and Child and the crucified Christ, now the primary symbols of Christianity, were never, as far as we know, subject to mockery or vandalism. This respect for the images of God lasted as long as Christian society . . . that is, simplifying somewhat, until the French Revolution.

The Medieval Period

The medievals were keen on divesting themselves of their madness periodically by means of charivaris, carnivals and other fools’ festivals, which were a burlesque inversion of existing institutions and a ritual triumph of license and insolence. However, the next day everything would be back in its place. The Middle Ages appreciated the grotesque, the monstrous, and enjoyed hybrids and drolleries of all kinds. It excelled in paradox, laughter, double entendre and equivocation. Yet it also had an acute sense of the boundaries that were not to be crossed. Medieval art did not deny itself the exploration of certain forms of mockery, but these never ventured near the most sacred images, those of God, of Christ in Majesty, Christ on the Cross, or of Mary. Parody was greatly favoured in the Middle Ages. It was, however, essentially let loose on texts – to be precise: on Latin texts. We know of several parodic masses, such as the ‘mass of animals’ which had been sculpted on a capital of Strasbourg cathedral, and all sorts of Fools’ plays or ‘sotties’, of ‘playful sermons’ (on ‘St Herring’ or on ‘St Sausage’) and amusements with habitual prayers, such as the Ass’ office, as collected in the Carmina Burana, the bundle of satirical poems in Latin gathered in Germany in the thirteenth century, without forgetting burlesque texts such as the Testamentum asini, in which a donkey leaves its ears to cardinals, its tail to the friars minor etc. The painted and sculpted figures of God and his saints were never touched, however.

To attack God and His signs incurred the risk of the severest sanctions and involved putting oneself, ipso facto, beyond society. The ‘divinely ordained’ monarchy, by far the most common political system, could not permit the direct source of its legitimate power to be disrespected. In any case, in the course of the thirteenth century the countries of Christendom put in place a repressive system which punished any insult to the honour due to the name of God, from the simple swear word to the intentional blasphemy and taking in perjury on the way, all sins of language became the object of the rigor of the moralist and the anxious surveillance of political
power. Louis IX, aka Saint Louis, promoted a much more exacting justice – on this point as in others – than the episcopal one, judged to be lax, more exacting even than the Holy See itself, which did not favour corporal mutilation in cases of blasphemy. Speaking ill of God, in ‘sweet France’, then became a crime of state. For the faulty enunciation of God’s name was experienced as a menace weighing on the whole of society: if offended, God would avenge Himself by unleashing a series of catastrophes: wars, seditions, famine and pestilence. Respect for speaking well and the repression of ‘speaking badly’ (of damning) were therefore questions of public safety. The penal code proclaimed by Saint Louis was probably impossible to apply literally but it stipulated, that, beyond the second or third repeat transgression, punished by simple fines, the nose be branded with a poker, the tongue be pierced or even cut, then for the bottom lip to be split etc. Pope Clement IV tried in vain to make the king of France yield and to make him soften his punishments.

During the last three centuries of the Middle Ages the amount of playfulness and irony which hovers around images varied with time and place. Certain art forms seemed designed to harbour mockery, such as the sculpted friezes of church facades in which one can discover at times the aping of the cult, indeed of the mass itself, or drolleries in the margins of manuscripts, especially Books of Hours, which seem to multiply from the second half of the thirteenth century on and reach such a peak between 1250 and 1350 that one could speak of a new genre. Blasphemy is brushed against occasionally in these, but only brushed. Mockery does not touch divine figures.

Was there then no exception to this rule? There was, but in a prejudiced way. In the Toledo Moralised Bible of ca. 1230, a manuscript enriched with 5,000 odd medallions painted for the political and religious edification of the young Louis IX, future Saint Louis, there is mockery of clerics of every cloth and rank. Certain medallions dare to paint them as simoniacs or as debauched, taking bribes, playing in taverns, or embracing a woman in bed, and this even depicting bishops. The Jews too are often badly presented or caricatured: depicted in profile with beard and hooked nose. There is even a figure of a Jew turning his back on God or the Cross and/or pulling his tongue. This is a first in medieval art, until further notice, which was otherwise not stingy when it came to disobliging images of Jews. It insinuates that, not content with having been a ‘deicidal’ people, they added blasphemy to their crime by anathemizing the Christian name thrice a day in their synagogues. It is true that the Moralised Bible of the thirteenth century is a document whose daring and liberties were only to be equalled or surpassed in the engraver’s art following the Reformation.
From the Reformation to the End of the Ancien Regime

The caricature in the strictest sense of the word, as a portrait which artfully deforms the traits of a face, is a Renaissance invention. The Renaissance laugh is no longer quite the same as the medieval one, and the sense of ridicule has grown into a more acerbic form of mockery, turning towards derision, with perhaps a touch of bitter disillusionment. At the time of the reforms, engravings also became weapons. They were part of the Protestant arsenal for spreading their ideas. Hence the anti-monastic or anti-papal caricatures, like the woodcut of Eberhard Schön of 1530–1535 entitled *The Devil’s Bagpipe*, which shows him playing music through a monk’s head whose nose is lengthened into a flute with its stops, or the anonymous example of ca. 1600 showing the figure with the twin heads of Pope and devil in the head-to-tail style we know from Arcimboldo; or even the engraving of Henri Vogtherr the Elder representing the Pope and the antichrist (Zurich, 1546). Luther’s work *Against the Papacy at Rome Founded by the Devil* was published with an engraved frontispiece showing the Pope with asses ears astride a pig. It goes without saying that the Catholics paid the Protestants back through their own coin by distributing images of Luther with seven heads, as the Beast of the Apocalypse.

Looking at the vast corpus of polemical engravings allows one to conclude, however, that they never in any way whatsoever attacked the figures of God, Christ or Mary: only their ministers or representatives in either camp were ever targets. If it were to happen – which is likely – that one entertained ribald or insolent thoughts with respect to the Omnipotent and His divine Son, or their common Holy Spirit, one would keep them to oneself and one wouldn’t risk expressing them clearly or draw them in the form of painted or engraved caricatures. The only exception existed through words: Calvin talking of the ‘pigeon’. As for the exceptions in image form, one would have to be patient . . .

The one which could have provided the occasion for an attack on the figure of Christ, such as the medieval miniatures which stage the figure of the fool by illustrating Psalm 14 (13), 1 (*Dixit insipiens in corde suo: non est Deus*), are in reality images at one remove which denounce those who despise God and commit sacrilege. They appear rather timid today compared with actual anti-Christian and anti-Jewish caricatures. One of the rare images of the sixteenth century in which Christ is mocked and which falls outside of the cycles of the Passion, and therefore does not hide behind the executioners of the court, shows a man pulling the hairs of His beard. Yet this engraving from Dürer’s *Great Passion*, which had already appeared in
the Narrenschiff, had been conceived in order to denounce the blasphemers, not to swell their ranks. The artistic history of blasphemy has therefore avoided any blasphemous image and confined itself to the figure of the blasphemer undermining Christ or His image. To repeat, the image of a blasphemer is not reducible to a blasphemous image.

The Libertarian Moment

Mockery only begins to touch on the figure of God at the end of the eighteenth century, often in a hypocritical way, either in English – (James Gillray, an artist both anti-Catholic and anti-revolutionary, author of a ‘blasphemous crucifix’ attributed to the French) – or French engravings which were directly linked to the Revolution. One of these, entitled The Pope Arrives in Paradise, takes the viewer to the heavens; Jesus bravely sits at a school desk and writes under dictation from God the Father, while the Dove of the Holy Ghost, made up as a parrot, is perched on his stick.

Again it is more often the clerics, the pope first among them, who get short shrift, not God. For the Revolution would soon have need of God, in the shape of the ‘Supreme Being’: still essentially a God the Father, but deprived of arms and bidden to keep quiet (engraving by J. B. Compagnie, 1794). Jesus too is required, in the predicted favoured roles (chasing the merchants from from the Temple, Jesus as doctor during the Sermon on the Mount); to such an extent, in fact, that Jesus is also accommodated and protected from any contamination which is visually disobliging, except in a furtive manner. In an [evidently royalist] etching of 1792, The New Calvary, another than Christ is nailed to the cross, Louis XVI as it happens, presented as martyr crucified between his two brothers, the count of Artois and the Count of Provence; Robespierre, in the guise of a preaching friar on horseback of the Constitution, presents him with the sponge dipped in the gall of regicidal nations, while the duchess of Polignac in the role of Mary Magdalene passionately embraces the foot of the cross and Marie-Antoinette as the Virgin, still standing (stabat mater . . .) is close to fainting (the swooning of the Virgin is thus ‘actualized’) – the image hammers the message home, so to speak, with a slightly labourious didacticism which consists of labelling each figure to identify it. Assuredly, a new level is reached with this usage of a key image of Christian iconography. Yet this appropriation of the Crucifixion, which is a first, does not tarnish Jesus himself.

Under the Restoration, the State had to erect barriers of surveillance around anti-religious caricature. Still, on 8 September 1829 the interior
Humour and Religion

Minister distributed a circular warning of the fate that awaited those who would offend religion. France was not alone in this, and I will speak shortly also of Belgium. In Germany, until the end of the nineteenth century, blasphemy was not prosecuted as a spiritual offence, but as public scandal. The same was true in England and America: the punishments given to blasphemers did not so much serve to protect dogma as to safeguard public order, decency and respect for the religious feelings of the people.

It was against this tradition of bourgeois and clerical control of the signifiers of God, as well as the repression of their ‘abuse’, that some revolted, both in word and paint, from the 1870s on. Of all the factors that may account for the rising anti-clericalism, even anti-Christianity in the Europe of the late nineteenth century, one can point, among others, to the evolution of political, scientific and philosophical ideas (Darwin, Marx and Comte published in the 1850s) and the cutting reaction of the Church against them – the syllabus of Pius IX of December 1864 denounced ‘the principal errors of our time’ (sic, 80 in all, duly listed and named) by condemning in advance any compromise with ‘modern civilisation’, not to mention the bull Pastor Aeternus promulgated by the Vatican Council I in 1870 and which proclaimed the personal infallibility of the Pope in doctrinal matters.

The important turning point in history that we are attempting to sketch here, can be dated from the 1870s. This is when a large-scale anti-Christian offensive took place. This started as an attack of ideas. Rationalists, anticlericals and freethinkers coming from philosophy, but also scientists (medicine), took shots at apparitions (Lourdes, la Salette), inhumation (for the benefit of cremation), dogmas etc. This war of ideas was also a war of images. Between 1870 and 1914, illustrated satirical magazines proliferated in Europe, particularly in Paris, capital of caricature between 1870 and 1900 with no fewer than 139 specialized papers. Another 94 made an appearance between 1900 and 1914. The part played by images was an important one. Everything was laughed at: the Bible, the Ten Commandments, Jesus, dogma, the sacraments, the catechism: it was the very content of the Christian faith, and not only the clergy and its demands, real or imagined, which was being criticized as never before.

God himself was not spared. It was during the Commune of Paris that the very first satirical images against God were produced. As E. Money showed in 1872, the caricaturists, not content with attacking the clergy, even went as far as representing the eternal Father in the guise of an old philosopher with spectacles perched on his nose, the beard yellowed by nicotine and beer, his pockets stuffed with railway bonds and shares. The author of this
drawing, published in the first issue of *La Calotte* of 1871, was Paul Klenck, one of the most prolific caricaturists of the Commune.

To be expected as far as Christ was concerned, it was His immaculate conception that was the object of sarcasm. Not without impunity however, for: the directors of the magazine *La Calotte* spent several months in prison for a representation of a pregnant Mary knitting socks with a perplexed Joseph looking on. Nothing could stop the wave at this point, however, and one by one the scenes of the life of Jesus and his ministry (Baptism, Ascension) were mocked. Even the crucifixion, long judged untouchable, fell victim. The threshold of this ‘liberating step’ in the history of this subject, one of the most sacred, was crossed by a Belgian artist, contemporary of Nadar and Daumier, who was greatly influenced by the Marquis de Sade and Charles Baudelaire, Félicien Rops (1833–1898), who now has his own museum in his native Namur. One of his most daring works was *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1878). Here the father of monks is at his desk, meditating on Joseph’s abstinence, when he is pursued by the ardour of the eunuch Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39, 7–20). His meditation is interrupted by a nightmare: on the cross, in the place of the crucified, pushed aside by a grinning Satan disguised as a puppet and sticking out his tongue, is a buxom woman, her head adorned, not with a crown of thorns but a crown of flowers; the traditional INRI inscription has been substituted for something rather less so: EROS. The pig, Anthony’s traditional attribute, is standing with his foretrotters on a book whose spine bears the Greek-sounding title *orgynos* (a neologism fusing * orgasmos* and *gynos*). It was a picture which produced an instant scandal. Some years later, it astonished Freud who saw in it ‘a magnificent illustration of a typical case of repression in Saints and penitents’.

In any case, representing a *naked* woman on the cross in the place of Christ was extremely rare until then, apart from a few female martyrs painted cross-wise. From the same period, which was also one of love of photography, numerous photos of undressed women cross-wise can be found.

Daumier (1808–1879), the Michel-Angelo of caricature, settled scores with a great many figures from the human comedy but almost never ventured to caricature God. One of the rare contacts between his work and the history of the images of God is a lithograph entitled *Le passé. Le présent. L’avenir*, of 1834: it concerns a tricephalic variant of the pear-shaped portrait of Louis-Philippe in a temporal expression; the past offers ‘a fresh and rounded face’, the present ‘a pale, thin and worried figure’ and the future ‘a mournful and decrepit face’, to quote the words of the magazine *La Caricature* which published it in January 1834. Another piece of daring was the political and allegorical lithograph of 1835, entitled ‘When the
Devil Aged he Became a Hermit’, in which Liberty is crucified as a woman with phrygian cap; in place of the inscription, ‘27.28.29’, which commemorates the days of revolution of July 1830; kneeling below, Louis-Philippe as mendicant brother and Talleyrand as devil. This crucified Liberty is an allusion to the novel of Kümernis, Liberata. Daumier was not exactly a defender of the rights of women but did want to represent the martyrdom of a political ideal.

For centuries no one would have dreamt of ‘tinkering’ at will with the motif of the Cross or God the Father: it was unthinkable, or at least unrealizable, and in any event too dangerous. The laws of certain European states (Germany, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands) still provide punishments for sacrilege, and one section of the penal code of Alsace-Lorraine, never applied but never abrogated either, punishes the outraging of God with three years imprisonment. This state of affairs has been superseded for a century or so in the ‘France of the interior’. The separation of Church and State, pronounced in 1905, has largely contributed to rendering religion liable to caricature.

God in the Art and Visual Languages of the Western World in the Twentieth Century

On condition that one defines more closely what is being talked about, one could diagnose an ‘aesthetic death’ of God in culture and art. God the Father or the Trinity, as subjects, fade away to the point of disappearing, at least in ‘high art’, if not ‘Church art’. Inversely, we can see an overdevelopment of the theme of the Cross in twentieth century European art: Rouault, Jawlensky and Picasso in the first half; Bacon, Guttuso and Saura in the second. It is as if there is a settling of scores with Christianity on the part of the whole of culture.

The history of the Judeo-Christian God in twentieth century European art, and more generally in the languages of the image (cinema, television, photography and figurative or commercial drawing, advertising, cartoons, comics, educational tools of all kinds, video games), still has to be written. Meanwhile one is at liberty to take a few samples, for example through the front pages of French-speaking press of the 1990s. It allows us to verify that the border between the tolerated and the taboo keeps being redrawn.

The name of God then, in France, has been used any which way, in a desacralized manner. The incumbent of the Elysee Palace is called ‘God’ and lets it stand, probably for fear of being seen as a regular church
Laughing at God

Again, no protest is heard when «Dieu est-il mysoye? » is published (Le Nouvel Observateur, 5–11 November 1990) and also « Les frasques de Dieu» (L'événement du jeudi, of 31 December 1992), both of dubious taste. Such an absence of reaction, denoting a modification of the social bond in this field, and a real gain in tolerance, was not self evident: such gambits are not possible in all countries, that much is obvious.

A certain kind of France, quick to be scandalized when any trace of anti-religious aggression touches Judaism, is only too glad to pose as champion of freedom of expression when it is a Christian motif that has to pay the price. The front page of the French edition of the international rock magazine, The Best, no. 237, April 1988, with the star ‘crucified’ on the altar of his fans, was censured everywhere in Europe except France.

‘Pourquoi Dieu n’aime pas les femmes’ (VSD, no. 794, 19–25 November 1992) constitutes a case of double mistreatment: of a woman’s body and the cross of Christ, which is not reducible to a falling out of love between God the Father and his Son.

The front page of the special edition of «Spécial Amérique » of L'Événement du jeudi, no. 724, September 1998, is a metaphor painted without making concessions: President Bill Clinton, it says, has been ‘crucified’ by his affair with Monica Lewinsky. The cover is only a remake: the head of the president is replaced in a collage, with that of the chief actor in the poster of the film Larry Flint by Milos Forman (1996), a poster which provoked such uproar that it was finally withdrawn.

On the cover of the economics magazine Bilan, no. 186, August 2005, there was an image of Christ with a crown of thorns and in black tie. It did not occasion any protests.

The front page of France-Soir of Wednesday February 1st, 2006 had as title: «Oui, on a le droit de caricaturer Dieu», while reproducing a drawing by Delize representing, sitting on a cloud, Buddha, Yahwe, Mohammed and God the Father (strange company: neither Buddha nor the Prophet are God!). It made God the Father say, not inappropriately: ‘chill out Mohammed, we have all been caricatured here!’ . I would hate to contradict God the Father, but have some doubt all the same. Has the Buddha ever been caricatured? On the whole, the Father is right, but I would be less sibylline than him, if I can permit myself.

A last example, chosen from among many: the front page of L’Écho des savanes of March 2009 represents Jesus raising his eyes to heaven and blowing smoke from a cigarette held prominently in his right hand. . . . The legend says in small letters: ‘Against waste, fashion, prohibitions,
repression, injustice, prudence . . . ’, and in very large characters: ‘Disobey’. Jesus smoking shows the example of disobedience against the latest social taboo of not smoking in public places. . . . A very similar figure of Jesus smoking (and holding a can of beer) was reproduced in Pakistan, in a very different vein: to assure the smokers-and-drinkers that Jesus understands them for he too has smoked and drunk; the subtext being that he understands the difficulty of giving up. You can therefore count on his understanding.

The actual ‘pictorial situation’ of God, in France and Europe, is therefore characterized by a loss of respect, contractual and civil, for the image of God, at least in certain classes of society. Iconic derision has rejoined verbal derision, and, hand-in-hand they walk dressed in the colours of high culture. Like His image, the name of God is also henceforth considered as heritage available to all, an archival source, no more. It is up to each to use it as wanted. The touched up image also serves as a laugh, like the names of the Christian holy, and it is understood that one can laugh at everything. Evil be to him who is pained by it.

This is particularly clear in the art called ‘avant-garde’. For example, Taroop & Glavel’s bar of honey soap of 1992 with the stamped inscription, as if it were a commercial brand: ‘God & Co.’; or the show Corpus Christi. Les représentations du Christ en photographie, 1855–2002 (Paris, Hôtel de Sully). My Sweet Lord, by Cosimo Cavallaro, 2003, re-done in 2007, was an entirely naked Christ, life-size, made of chocolate. Is this a laughing matter? Everyone will answer . . . All the same one is entitled to think that it is not a laughing matter, certainly not twice. Our last example is the duo Jérôme Prieur and Gérard Mordillat, two hosts of a well-known series of television programmes (‘Corpus Christi. The origin of Christianity’, followed by ‘The Apocalypse’), who have just published a little book with a deliberately provocative title, Concerning the Crucifixion Considered as a Work Accident.

Such freedom, to tinker, polemicize, caricature, such summoning for convenience or militancy, such derision, all for the needs of various causes (political, secular, anticlerical, advertising and commerce, feminist, homosexual etc.), with complete impunity, whether in graphical or literary form, going as far as the eschatological or the obscene, would still have been inconceivable before the end of the nineteenth century.

This perception has something local, even provincial in relation to the whole planet and human history. We no longer feel the need, in order to construct our identity as Europeans or Christians (or post-Christians still attached to our Christian roots), to let everything depend on the recognition of the symbol of the cross, nor the respect (sincere or conventional) that it will be given. If we are at this stage, however, after many crises, it is
because Western societies have chosen democracy, with separation of State and religions, and full freedom of expression and interpretation.

It is of course not certain that the societies and religions with which we have to, and will have to, live (at least through intermediate representatives), have lived the same experience or would want to go down the same road. There is a way of brandishing the idea of freedom of expression with intransigence which is no different from prophetizing in a proud manner that everyone has to go through what we have been through. It is perhaps true, even probable, but there is no science of prediction. In the end we do not know at all and have to respect other ways, just as we demand respect for ours.

Therefore, to sum up my views, in four points:

1) I am in favour of caricatures, including those of God, because in the end, they are only about representations of God; the onus is on those who want to laugh at God to make us think without sinking into stupid and ill-intentioned spite, into grossness and obscenity which are ‘gratuitously offensive’, which renders them incapable of the least debate involving argument; and the onus is on everyone to examine what laughter can bring, and to have the courage to say that it is hollow when it is so.

2) I declare myself therefore opposed to any repression of laughter and of any policing of images, because it is a vain enterprise and an exhausting game of cat-and-mouse, and to any new governmental intervention (law or decree) prohibiting blasphemy – in France, the battery of laws dealing with repression of swearing, defamation and incitement to discrimination is already sufficient.

3) I do not, however, see how one can possibly construct peace without a minimum of self-restraint; there are no right relations between couples, family, friends, community, in business, with respect to the homeland, religion or religions, without a daily dose freely administered self-censure, in dignity and humour – this is an elementary form of charity, without which the latter is not. Not all truths are good, to be told, and it is sometimes proof of intelligence and charity to abstain from laughter . . .

4) All the same, if one had to choose between freedom of expression and derision, even at the risk of caricaturing the sacred, or the unconditional respect of the sacred, even at the risk of thwarting liberty and threatening blasphemers with death, I would opt without a moment’s hesitation for freedom of expression and would defend it to the end, and also the right to laugh. I would rather, a 1000 times over, live in a climate of derision of the sacred, which never lasts long (laughter tires quickly), than
in a climate of terror – which has a way of enduring tenaciously. This choice is, above all, motivated by two irrefutable reasons: the sacred is more hard and the life of a man more vulnerable; the sacred is for the life of man, like the Sabbath, and not the other way round.

Appendix: Ten Propositions on the History of Caricature of the Christian God

1) Caricatures of the most sacred figures of Christianity were expressed verbally long before they were done so pictorially.
2) Apart from a single piece of graffiti from the third century, the extant documents from Antiquity and the High Middle Ages do not reveal any trace of a caricature of Christ in Majesty, of the Crucified, or of the Virgin Mary.
3) During the entire Middle Ages, in all the countries of Europe, laughter was given free rein as long as it did not cross a certain red line, for the laws on blasphemy were of such severity that the mistreatment of the name of God and the painted and sculpted images of the Christian sacred risked major punishment. No blasphemous image is extant; at most the figure of the blasphemer was portrayed.
4) The same was true, with minor variations, for the period of the Reformation. Although caricatures directed at the ministers of various confessions were legion, and sometimes acerbic, neither God nor Christ nor his Mother were ever a target.
5) It is only in the wake of the French Revolution and especially in the course of the nineteenth century that things really begin to change: from 1870 on, a large breach opens up producing large quantities of cartoons seeking to ridicule the most venerable figures of the Christian faith. Though sometimes injurious, but more often playful rather than spiteful, the real target remained the Church and its clergy rather than God himself.
6) During the twentieth century, caricatures of God the Father and the Trinity become scarce, for they are no longer attractive as subjects to art (‘high art’). Christ, on the contrary, and especially the crucifixion motif are ridiculed, as well as used and implemented for all kinds of purposes. Christianity has henceforth been dispossessed of its monopoly of the crucifixion motif, which was for a long time its principal and identifying symbol. This phenomenon of expropriation has grown over the last three decades and today constitutes one of the main pictorial effects of globalization.
7) Certain currents in Christianity, and some of its hierarchical agencies, still dream of legislating on anti-religious images and of censuring images. This is without doubt a fruitless battle to be lost from the start. High-level ridicule provokes thought and has a right to exist in a democratic society, whereas low quality ridicule perishes by itself.

8) Derision and reputedly scientific work, which were strangers to one another, have become bedfellows recently; and verbal and pictorial derision too, with respect to the central figures of Christianity.

9) In all civilizations and all societies the threshold of tolerance of mockery and blasphemy is never fixed once and for all, but can be renegotiated at any time, like the social bond itself.

10) The health benefits and redemptive powers of laughter are not guaranteed. It can be therapeutic, notably when it proceeds from wit or an accurate analysis of situations, but it also has its pathology. Laughter is to be safeguarded, like any other human reality.
Chapter 14

The Fool and the Path to Spiritual Insight

Jessica Milner Davis

The figure of the Fool is both secular and sacred. From early Christian times in the West it has been recognized as holding a licence to speak the truth (both for good and for bad). Arguably, one aspect of this privilege derived from similar powers granted in the Roman triumph to a slave, designated to whisper in Caesar’s ear, ‘Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal’. As with similar pieces of Roman ritual, there was wide variation in both form and the nature of these ambiguous privileges: some rituals, as Mary Beard has pointed out, could be entertaining; others wholly serious; still others, both (Beard 2007, 85–92). The convention was, notwithstanding, a powerful one and demanded respect from participants and witnesses.

Of course, a fool tradition is scarcely unique to the Christian West and its antecedent cultures. Parallel customs are found in many other lands and times, from Amerindia to Japan, although names and roles vary widely (Otto 2001, 7–26; Janik 1998, 1–22). With the added function of general entertainment, the tradition is also found in the office of a family or court jester, for which several independent origins have been identified: Celtic and Carolingian, as well as classical ones (Welsford 1968, 113–114 and 148–149; Doran 1858, 15–20; Southworth 1998, 3–8). Much earlier, Egyptian grotto paintings made some 3,500 years ago hint at specialized entertainers such as dwarves and grotesques who are shown performing in courts and retinues; possibly indicating other origins although the precise nature of the performances remains unclear (Otto, 24).

For the role of a fool or jester with a personal licence to speak truth under cover of humour, Chinese court records and biographies provide the earliest documented examples. The deeds of four remarkable individuals who lived in the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) are set out in the ‘Records of the Grand Historian’ Shiji 史記, compiled by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–81 BCE), which chronicles history and lives of notable figures from the founding
of the Chinese empire by the legendary Yellow Emperor (Shiji, Vol. 10, juan 126, 3197–3203, in Burton Watson, trans. 1993). As Timoteus Pokora first noted, these four were highly intelligent men who, despite the dangerous milieu of the courts they served, successfully acted as ‘ironical critics’ to their emperors (Pokora 1973). They were Chunyu Kun, who lived in the state of Qi during the Warring States period (471–221 BCE), You Meng, jester to the court of King Zhuangwang of the state of Chu (r. 613–591 BCE), You Zhan, jester to the court of the first Emperor of the Qin dynasty (676–652 BCE), and Dongfang Shuo, who served in the court of Han Wudi (156–87 BCE).

Early brief references and names from the Near and Middle East include fools or jesters to Roman and Byzantine Emperors, and even a ‘crazed Scythian’ at the court of Attila the Hun (Halsall 2002, 118), confounding the issue of insanity and folly as so frequently happens. A famous sixteenth century figure, about whom a great deal is known, was the eminently sane and wise warrior and poet, Birbal, who served as witty companion and advisor to the Moghul emperor, Akbar (1528–1586 CE) (Treanor 1998, 91–96). Otto believes King Arthur’s court (ca. 537 CE) was enlivened by a fool called Dagonet (Otto 2001, 277), but nothing is really known about him. Although he is not recorded in Otto’s study, Jean, jester to Charles the Simple of France (898–922 CE) is probably the earliest non-imperial European court fool recorded. Doran recounts how the King proposed (whether in jest or earnest is far from clear) that they should swap places, since Jean believed himself so clever. Jean declined, saying that, as King, he would be embarrassed to be served by such a dull Fool. Reputedly, he got away with it (894 CE, Doran 1858, 241–242). In the Celtic tradition, records come from the Irish sagas and lack precise dates; the earliest may be Taulchinne, juggler and prophet to Conaire, high king of Ireland ca. 200 CE (Otto 2001, 59). Many cultures and conventions therefore have contributed something to the ambiguous figure of the fool.

Ritual Origins of the Licence to Fool

The fool’s licence evidently derives a wider suspension of normal rules of respect which can be found in a type of religious ritual where temporary periods and places are set aside for communal laughter and joking. Here, some participants are accorded the freedom to provoke laughter by questioning, criticizing and jokingly targeting others; the others must permit this provocation without retaliation or resentment. A well-documented
example is the Koyemci fools, traditional to the Zuñi Indians. Part of the katchina dancer-groups originally studied in the 1930s by Bunzel (1932), and Radin (1937), the Koyemci are often identified as ‘sacred clowns’ rather than fools, but the parallelism of the roles is clear. Although some commentators have warned against possibly misleading and ethnocentric labelling such as ‘clown’ (Palmer 1994), the description is upheld by subsequent, more tactful ethnographic studies (e.g. Tedlock 2001). The clowns play a leading part in seasonal corn festival rites (Tedlock 2001, 132–135) and are both beloved and feared in their communities. Radin identifies the Koyemci or sacred clowns as one of four groups of katchinas (the others are the Culawwtsi, the Saiyataca with four important subdivisions and the Cdko or giants; Radin 1937, 293–294). Ambivalence towards the clown-group perhaps derives from their extreme licence ‘to mock at anything and to indulge in any obscenity’ (Radin, 293), but it also respects their supernatural powers which can, among other things, control sexual matters and bring ‘swift and terrible retribution’ (Radin, 294) to those who cross them. Evidently this permitted licence is a potent mix; while the laughter provoked by the Koyemci, both at their own expense and that of others, is enjoyable, it is also tinged by awe (Willeford 1969, 73–82; Levine 1961).

Attitudes to public laughter vary widely according to time and culture. In Japan, for example, overt laughter even today is circumscribed by complex social conventions (J. M. Davis 2008; Oda 2008). Formerly, preserving a serious ‘emotionless’ face was considered highly important under the bushi or samurai culture. The dramatist, Hiroshi Inoue, in a lecture entitled, ‘A Japanese Laughs’ (delivered at the Australian National University, 11 June 1976), quoted one famous proverb: ‘A warrior dimples one cheek in three years (bushi sannen ni kataho).’ Despite such restrictions, Japan has never been a humorless country and plenty of laughter can be found under the right conditions, some of which are ritual, even today. Shintō animism still embraces rites of specially-permitted laughter connected with the creation-myth of the land and people. Some are observed today in various rituals, including seven warai (laughter) festivals which take place annually in dedicated locales across the islands (Abe 2008; list and map, 39–40). Although priests are present, in most of these the ritual laughing and/or joking is principally done by community members designated for the role, perhaps by household, as in the case of the warai-kō festival performed in Hōfu City (Abe 2008, 42; for the case of priestly laughter at the Atsuta shrine, see the account of Gerbert in Chapter 4 of this book). The delineated, ritual time and space creates for ordinary people what has usefully been termed a warai-no-ba (laughter container) (Oda 2008, 18), within which they may
join in the permitted act. Over time, Japanese society has of course evolved many other such spaces and times many of which are purely secular, for relaxation and entertainment involving laughter, including some forms of critical or truth-speaking laughter, such as the licensed fool to the great man (Blyth 1957, 73).

In Japan, the act of laughter possesses special significance because it recalls the important contribution of a minor god-fool, licensed by divine possession, to the nation’s creation. In this creation-myth, laughter in response to a divine strip-tease was needed to persuade the all-powerful Sun Goddess to restore light and life to the world. Retold in the Kojiki, Japan’s oldest extant chronicle (known to have existed in the Nara period 712 CE), is the story of how Amaterasu Ō-mikami (ancestress of the present Imperial family) hid herself in a cave on mount Takama-nō-para, bringing on an eclipse and many disasters. The result was Japan’s first comedy performance, when one of the lesser goddesses intervened to cheer up the sulking goddess:

AMĒ-NŌ-UZUME-NŌ-MIKŌTŌ bound up her sleeves with a cord of heavenly PI-KAGĒ vine, tied around her head a headband of the heavenly MA-SAKI vine, bound together bundles of SASA leaves to hold in her hands, and overturning a bucket before the heavenly rock-cave door, stamped resoundingly upon it. Then she became divinely possessed, exposed her breasts, and pushed her skirt-band down to her genitals. Then TAKAMA-NŌ-PARA shook as the eight-hundred myriad deities laughed at once. (Wells 1997, 23–24)

Wells continues, ‘The gods laugh repeatedly in the story as they go on to trick the goddess into emerging again into the world. The word used is warau, written saku, to blossom. Each time it is a case of humorous laughter’ (1997, 24). Thus, this laughter is linked with renewal as well as with transgression, just as in the special licence for the Koyemci. In both cases, laughter, while providing enjoyment, demands respect and caution.

From Saturnalia to Feast of Fools

The licence given to the slave to act as memento mori to Caesar was personal, but ultimately derived from the nature of the ceremony. It was necessarily matched by a duty incumbent on triumphant Caesar to permit the message without resentment or retaliation – just as the audiences to katchina-dances
must not take offence at the Koyemci’s tricks. In the Graeco-Roman world, special seasonal festivals such as the Saturnalia are known to have been festivals of inversion when the lowly were temporarily made high and laughter and joking was allowed to servants and children against their seniors and betters (Elliott 1970, 10–15; Bernstein 1987; Evans 1978 gives Horace’s own account). The festival seems to have been celebrated on what is now 17 December and it involved the appointment of a *Rex Saturnalis* to preside over the temporary merrymaking and misrule. Together with the Kalends (1–3 January), the feast extended through the winter solstice, corresponding roughly with today’s Christmas and its ‘Twelve Days’. It was connected to the turning of the year by the idea of inverting norms and lying outside normal time (Donaldson 1970, 15–16; Willeford 1969, 69–72).

Lingering traces of the Saturnalia have been seen by many in such traditional Christmas festivities as the reign of the ceremonial Lord of Misrule (*Rex Saturnalis*), the eating of special foods such as beans (a ‘bean-feast’ produces undignified bodily results) and so on (Welsford 1968, 244). These now accompany a religious significance which transmutes simple social inversion into a celebration of ‘God-made-child’. The connection was certainly recognized by the early mediaeval Church in fixing the festive calendar and it perpetuated (or re-created) the tradition of exchanging roles between master and man in its own set feast-days such as that of the Boy Bishop and the Feast of Fools. These provided a time and place within which normal sobriety and rules governing members of religious communities were properly set aside, so that foolishness and clowning could be indulged in as right and proper to the occasion. They were occasions on which it became wise to be a Fool.

By the end of the twelfth century, the Feast of Fools in France had developed into a riotous celebration, evidently requiring reform. Records from the cathedral-schools of Beauvais and Sens give some idea of its extraordinary nature of this culmination of Christmas revels which took place on the Feast of the Circumcision (1 January), sometimes on the Feast of the Epiphany. Essentially, from St. Stephen’s Day (26 December) onwards in ecclesiastical communities, different ranks of clergy were permitted their special day of indulgence: on the Feast of the Holy Innocents (28 December) for example, a Boy Bishop from the choristers might be elected to rule over the festivities. Chambers (1903, 1:321) concluded that this form of Christmas feast was more common in the British Isles than the Feast of Fools itself. Although Sandra Billington later demonstrated a more extensive English history for the Feast (1979, 38–39), its most developed form and important consequences came from French celebrations.
Universally, the Feast of the Circumcision was the day of the despised sub-deacons, who seem to have contributed the greatest disruption to the established order. An Évêque des Fous (Fool Bishop) was elected (Vloberg 1934, 48–54). At Beauvais, the day’s celebrations were titled *festa asinorum*, and an ass was escorted in procession up the nave of the cathedral by canons bearing wine while the burlesque ‘Prose of the Ass’ (Chambers 1903, 1: 280) was sung; the censing at Mass was done with black puddings and sausages; the celebrant was instructed to bray three times to conclude the service, while the congregation responded similarly. The connection of folly with an ass is more fully discussed below, but the celebration was essentially a parody of ecclesiastic ritual.

Chambers describes the ruling idea of all these Feasts as ‘the inversion of status, and the performance, inevitably burlesque, by the inferior clergy of functions properly belonging to their betters’ (1: 325). They were, then, a safety-valve, days of temporary liberation from normal discipline and an opportunity to celebrate. They found their justification in scriptural expressions such as the *deposuit potentates de sede* (he shall put down the mighty from their seats) of the *Magnificat*. Continuing the tradition of the pagan Saturnalia under this colour of religious authority, their popular appeal was immense: they offered a topsy-turvy temporary reign by those of lowly status which also elevated a loyal beast of burden, the foolish, uncomplaining ass. Importantly, the Feast involved mimicry, certainly by the chorus of ‘asses’ as above, and although depictions are not available from this early period, presumably involved some costuming (possibly masks), pointing the way to the future garb of ‘motley’.

Although the symbolism connecting the ass (the simple beast of burden) and folly (the obverse of wisdom) is in many ways self-evident, it is also paradoxical. Beard has pointed out that although laughter (following Aristotle) is definitively a human activity, it is also one in which, ‘in the noise and contortion that is involved, . . . man came most closely to resemble an animal’ (Beard 2009, n.p.). Ovid plays upon this connection in the third book of the *Art of love*, his parodic poem in which the instructor offers schoolmasterly advice to women on how to get and keep a man. Beard notes that the author:

*compares the raucous laughter of one girl to the braying of a donkey – a comparison underlined by the language of the original Latin: the girl ‘laughs’ (*ridet*); the donkey ‘brays’ (*rudit*) . . . [thus] the attribute that defined the human’s humanity simultaneously made him or her one of the beasts – a braying ass, for example.* (Beard 2009, n.p.)
Yet in Christian iconography, the ass is an emblem of peace and patience, chosen by Christ himself; it was also the bearer of the Holy Babe and his Mother during their flight into Egypt. As a beast of burden it is notoriously unintelligent. Nevertheless the Old Testament records the story of Balaam’s ass which, wiser than its master, saw the angel standing in the way, and was beaten for refusing to go forward. There are then many unexpected connections between wisdom and folly, leading to the ultimate paradox by which true Christians can be seen, in the words of St Paul (1 Corinthians 4:10), as being ‘fools for Christ’s sake’.

The Motley Fool

In these mediaeval feasts, the licence for laughter and mockery became identified with the figure we now describe as the ‘motley fool’. This term (like much in the English language) has been strongly influenced by Shakespearean usage, such as that in As You Like It, Act II, sc 7, where the disillusioned courtier, Jacques, reports finding ‘a motley fool’ lying in the forest and wishes that he himself were costumed in motley so he could openly reprove the world and its wicked ways. Motley refers to the fool’s well-documented garb, parti-colored, with a cap with floppy ‘ears’, usually adorned with bells and accompanied by a staff. Commenting on the extraordinary richness of European visual records of fools and jesters, Beatrice Otto (2001, xix–xx) points out that we immediately recognize this costume (or variants of it) in many early modern illustrations including those by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) for Erasmus’ Praise of Folly. Holbein’s marginalia to the 1515 edition of the book repeatedly show that he too conceived the fool as wearing a hood or cowl with ass’s ears and bells (see for example Figure 14.1; Otto also provides many examples, as does Gifford 1979, 18–35, particularly his figures 1–10).

Significantly for the present discussion of the fool, the traditional image also closely resembles that of the wandering Fool (le Fou, le Fol or le Mat) in the major arcana of the Tarot pack (Conford 1999; Hoedler 2004). There, from the first known appearance of the Tarot (a pack painted for the Sforza family in the 1440s, Conford 1998, 453) it is usually linked with a biting dog and a stick (as in the eighteenth century example in Figure 14.2 below), indicating the lone traveller suffering loneliness and pain on a physical and spiritual path through life. Some studies have even identified an ancient link with Egyptian iconography belonging to the god Osiris (Gifford 30–35), suggesting themes of rebirth and initiation.
In France, activities connected with the Feast of Fools were also held outside the Church, some involving a special class of ass-eared fool-figures known as *sots* (Petit de Julleville 1885, 32–34). These lay performers seem to have evolved alongside the religious feast itself (N. Z. Davis 1971, 47) and continued their secular activities when the Church feast was definitively proscribed in 1445 (Chambers 1903, 1: 294). Some religious celebrations however are reported as still clinging on towards the end of the century and
the number of proscriptions issued over long periods of time certainly suggests a lack of immediate success (Fournel 1863, 38). In many centres townsfolk had their own secular societies of *sots* to perpetuate a secular reign of folly outside the church. These were known as *compagnies joyeuses*, or *sociétés des fous* (Chambers 1903, 1: 373). As in universities today, it was often bright young law students who had a particular facility for and interest in ‘playing the fool’: The professional guild of law-clerks, the Basoche, formed a leading group with branches at least in Paris and Rouen, although other fool societies had wider memberships, such as the *Infantérie Dijonnaise*.

Of the comic French play-scripts available today from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many were associated with *les Basochiens*, as those member/actors were known. These and others were played not only at Christmastide, but also pre-Lent at Shrovetide or Carnival, and at other great seasonal fairs such as those of Paris, Rouen and Lyon (Billington, 37; Perret 1998, 415). They could be played alone or as part of a longer repertoire which would include religious plays such as *moralités* and *vies de sains*. Although the texts have various subsets and overlapping categories (Perret
1998, 412–413), these fooling, comic scripts can broadly be divided into two principal kinds, farces and sotties, according to their style and to the type of principal actor – and costume (Perret 1998, 415; J. M. Davis 2003, 76–79).3

Then as now, farces (the French word entered English in early modern times) aimed principally at fun and games, using more realistic characters, costumes and scenes; sotties were more satirical and allegorical, often involving the unmasking of fool-costumed figures to reveal the target beneath. Invoking the traditional festive licence of inversion, the sottie provided writers and sot-performers with a public ‘permission to speak’. This allowed the up-and-coming generation of the bourgeois (among them the law-clerks) to critique the world of Church, State and profession. Both farce and sottie could and did ‘spoof the legal and commercial methods of argumentation which [the Basochiens] were (presumably) studying and using in court’ (J. M. Davis 2003, 21). But the satire of the sottie went far beyond that, daring to lambaste senior ruling figures, both clerical and official. Even members of the royal family were not exempt, although such a topic could be dangerous: in 1516, the actor, Jean du Pont Allais, was imprisoned for having satirized the queen mother. Perret (1998, 416) points out that Louis XII (1498–1515) not only permitted such satire but found it politically useful – perhaps his successor sought to enforce an early change of policy.

Although these satirical attacks were done under cover of the hooded costume traditionally associated with the sot/fol (fool), the dramatis personae adopted allegorical names such as Mère Sot, Premier Sot, le Prince des Sots, L’Archevêque des Sots and so on and a common plot-climax was the unmasking of La Mère or another leader to discover beneath this (cross-) dressing, an identifiable person. The satire of the sottie gave the meaning of the fool’s festive licence its most explicit application. Sot and fol both shared the protection of the ritual feast, as Petit de Julleville makes clear:

The sottie is played by sots and the sot is the ‘fool’: the two names mean equally the same character. He symbolizes mankind in general and great men in particular, indulging in the folly and vice which are basic to our instincts. (Petit de Julleville 1885, 32)

Moriae Encomium

These are the conventions and tropes which lent Erasmus the structure for his celebrated essay, Praise of Folly (Stulticiae Laus or Moriae Encomium, composed in 1509, published in 1511). Written in the serio ludere tradition deriving from Democritus, the essay was declared by its author to be
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a tribute to his much-admired and witty friend, Thomas More, whose name (\textit{moros} = Gr fool) ‘so ill became his personality’, as Huizinga puts it (1952, 69). Unlike the satire in More’s own companion piece, \textit{Utopia} (first published in 1516, revised in 1518), the \textit{Moriae’s} praise of the vital role of folly remains general and philosophical, rather than specifically relating to any nation. Its reformist message was nevertheless sufficiently unwelcome to the establishment that it later rebounded upon its author when religious conflict heated up. Perhaps because of this, Erasmus grew cautious of levity and came to speak slightlyingly of his famous work (Huizinga 1952, 77). Along with his \textit{Colloquies} and some other works it was placed on the Index after Erasmus’ death (Huizinga 168–169); but in its time, it resonated with its public and has continued to do so long afterwards.

This study is not intended to canvas the \textit{Moriae’s} arguments and rhetorical devices, but rather to point out that its concept and text are predicated upon the existence of personae called ‘Fools’, that is, devotees with a leader, fixed costumes and habits of performance. On its frontispiece, the essay describes itself as ‘An oration, of feigned matter, spoken by Folly in her own person’ (quotations here and below are from the 1688 translation by John Wilson), indicating that it is a dramatic soliloquy. It is spoken by La Mère Folle/Sotte (‘not only Folly, but a woman’), from a temporary pulpit or stage. Unlike the plot of the \textit{sottie}, Folly remains masked and still unidentified at the culminating words: ‘Wherefore farewell, clap your hands, live and drink lustily, my most excellent disciples of Folly.’ Holbein’s closing illustration, both in 1515 and in woodcuts to later editions, shows Folly stepping carefully down from her temporary pulpit, hood and costume firmly in place: this is a careful fooling which deliberately retains its ambiguity and does not trespass into the \textit{sottie’s} overt personal satire of unmasking and identifying its target. Significantly, most of her audience are wearing eared hoods as well (see Figure 14.3).

The ambiguity of this message is precisely its point: the fool is in the pulpit, preaching to the bored and bemused fools on the benches. And the biggest fool of all, Folly herself, is exploiting her paradoxical licence to invite the reader/listener to reflect upon what is said and by whom it is said. Scripture is quoted, but then the Devil is famously capable of doing that for his own nefarious purposes. Where does truth lie in such cases? The effectiveness of this approach in liberating the truth is well described by Jerry Palmer:

\ldots because the voice of the fool was the voice of unreason (but an unreason which might always have within it the seeds of a higher reason, a
reason only partially accessible to human reason), the fool had the role of speaking the unspeakable, of revealing through his/her folly the folly that afflicts all humankind. (Palmer 1994, 48)

For Erasmus, the purpose is to stimulate reflection and self-criticism, not merely to attack social evils. He challenges his readers to acknowledge this higher reason which holds that folly is not limited to the fool(ish), but shared by all, and that we should recognize it in ourselves in order to embrace its serious purpose. As La Rochefoucauld would later put it in his maxim of 1665, *Qui vit sans folie n’est si sage qu’il croit*. Another of Holbein’s marginalia shows a man contemplating his reflected face in a mirror, both are wearing hoods, the man’s down, the image’s up and it sticks out its tongue at its owner. The annotation suggests it is the act of a wise man – even decorous – to look for his own ass’s ears (see Figure 14.4).

**From Communal to Professional Fool**

In the growth of professional enactments of Folly, not only on stage, but also at Court and in the marketplace, fairground and Carnival, the role of amateur specialists was important. Lay societies first co-operated in staging religious drama as part of Church ritual and then, by the end of the fourteenth century, were largely responsible for the organization of religious
drama across Europe. In England, trade-guilds shared the presentation of miracle and mystery plays over several days, chiefly at the Feast of Corpus Christi. In Italy and Spain, there were charitable associations known as compagnie and cofradiás respectively. It was in France however, as described above, that a high degree of specialization occurred. Some groups were confrèries (fraternities) devoted to honouring a particular saint by dramatizing his or her life and miracles; others were fool-societies such as the Basoche of the law-clerks. All these groups enjoyed a corporate structure which conferred some authority and protection on their activities. In 1402 for example, the Parisian Confrèrie de la Passion was granted a monopoly to perform religious drama within the city. Although the evidence is sketchy, it seems that the members of religious confrèries could agree with the sots (or fous) of the sociétés joyeuses to combine their talents to stage plays. Certainly there was such an understanding between the Confrèrie de la Passion and the powerful Parisian group of the Basoche calling themselves Les Enfants sans souci, whose enactments and processions of sots continued until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when their last Prince des Sots, Nicholas Joubert dit Angoulevent, was suppressed by royal decree (Fournel 1863, 69–116).

The division of acting skills recognized by such agreements accompanied a differentiation in dramatic structure unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. Not only was a more naturalistic farce distinguished, as described above, from the allegorical sottie, but early fifteenth century texts show that separate comic relief might be included in a typical French religious play, such as a mystère or a vie de sain. A manuscript dated ca. 1420, for example, quite possibly forming part of the repertoire of the Confrèrie de la Passion, contains
a series of plays about the miracles performed by Sainte Geneviève. At the head of one *Miracle* a forthright textual direction reads:

*Miracles de plusiers malades*

*En farsses pour etre mains fades.*

(More miracles of [healing] the sick
Done with farces to be less dull.) (Jubinal 1837, 28)

Among the complaining monologues of various victims who present themselves to be healed by the saint is a short scene between a blind man and his guide, a scabrous and deceitful boy named Hannequin. After some cruel leg-pulling, this pair also joins the queue waiting for the saint and are duly healed in mind and body when she passes by. A much earlier manuscript (dating from 1266) contains a strikingly similar scene of crude farce, known as *Le Garçon et l’aveugle* (The boy and the blind man), which is set in the Tournai region in the French-speaking part of today’s Belgium (Axton and Stevens 1971, 195; Dufournel 1989, 87). Its existence in several manuscripts suggests that this was a very popular playlet, perhaps performed on circuit by itinerant performers who doubtless continued to tour from place to place when roads and times made it possible to do so, as they had throughout the Roman imperium. If the aim was to re-capture the audience’s flagging attention by including such traditional characters in a *Miracle* performance, it must have called for skilled comic acting. Comedians who ‘flopped’ would scarcely have served. Regardless of whether the actors were gifted amateurs such as the *Enfants sans souci*, or professional travellers, they must have specialized in comedy. Rabelais himself noted that in a troupe of jongleurs the most talented and experienced (*le plus perit* and *parfaict jouer*) would be cast as the fool and the clown (*le sot* and *le badin*), although it’s true that this is given by Pantagruel as a sound reason for Panurge to seek advice from a fool (*Tiers livre* 37.550, Rabelais 1961 169).

The 1420 comic insertion is not an isolated case. Similar kinds of comic episodes in other French religious plays are also referred to as *farsses* or *farces*. In Dijon in 1447, for example, a *Mystère de St Eloi* was played which became the subject of a law suit and court records affirm that:

. . . *par dedans ledit mystère y avoit certaine farce meslée par manière de faire reveiller au rire les gens.*

( . . . in the middle of the said mystery there was a certain farce, put in so it would stir people to laughter.) (Petit de Julleville 1886, 330)
The complaint before the court was that the audience had been provoked to laugh critically at the King and the Dauphin by political references in this piece. Despite (perhaps because of) the fact that it was a *farce* and not a *sottie*, the players had clearly exceeded their licence and concerned themselves with subversive criticism, not just ‘stirring the people to laughter’. Was this a case of professional actors who upstaged the worthies on the religious side, or was it the gifted amateurs accustomed to the biting satire of the *sottie*, who could not resist the temptation to point the moral? Since so much of this history of popular entertainment is evanescent and undocumented, the full story of how professional acting troupes evolved is unlikely ever to be known. Sara Beam has judged that professional actors were not the norm in French comic performances until the late sixteenth century (Beam 2007, 21). But when in Paris, and particularly Spain and England, permanent theatres once again were built because they were profitable year-round economic venture, specialized acting skills were clearly available to undertake appropriate roles, however lowly the status of the theatrical profession.

The House Fool

The third alternative to being a member of a fraternity devoted to part-time acting, or an itinerant without the protection of the law, was to find – and keep – a patron. As indicated by the record of Charles the Simple’s personal court fool, most European Courts and wealthy houses probably ‘kept’ a secular fool or jester among their resident entertainers, although titles and roles must have been as many and varied as sustaining households. While it is difficult to say which came first, the typical costume of this office, especially on the Continent, was close kin to that of the fool societies, as is evidenced by an illustration to a fifteenth century manuscript in the Arsenal (reproduced in a history of French costume, see Figure 14.5). The nature of the person and their customary performances might vary widely, of course and a number of studies have grappled with the differences between ‘natural’ fools or simpletons, between clever and educated fools, dwarves and nimble acrobats, witty jesters, buffoons, madmen (and women) and countrified clowns. Some social histories such as Billington (1984) lump all together, despite the fact that such differences might well reflect gradations in social and personal taste. Dwarves for example seem to have been particularly favoured in the Spanish royal courts (as in ancient Egypt), if the paintings of Velasquez may be relied upon. Such differences in the
character of the office-holder and the nature of their performances seem to make little difference to the way in which their licence extended relief from ordinary conventions of proper conduct, as the following cases illustrate.

The court in late mediaeval Scotland inherited both Celtic and French traditions which certainly included the appointment from time to time of a Court Fool. King James III of Scotland (r. 1460–1488) was served by a so-called ‘regular fool’ (Irving 1861, 366 n.3). In his successor’s reign (James IV r. 1488–1513), ‘John Bute the fule’ is recorded as being present at a dance in the Queen’s chamber; and his successor, John Mackilrie, is known to have served in the early part of the next reign (of James V; Irving, loc. cit.).

While little is known about the repertoire of any of these men, terminology and sequence declare the office an established one, in which the ‘fule’s’ functions were well-understood; while the double meaning of ‘regular’ as an adjective implies that one at least had a high level of

Figure 14.5 A French Court Fool in the fifteenth century. Facsimile of a miniature from an MS. in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Th. lat., n° 125. Image reproduced in Project Gutenberg text 10940. PD-ART from Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/ Accessed 10 February 2010.
accomplishment at the task. Since the holder of the office was sanctioned to cross wide social barriers (attending in the Queen’s chamber), his authority evidently derived directly from royal master and/or mistress who had the power of appointment and dismissal.

It is well-known in fact that a fool’s licence carried explicit dangers – not just of being a ‘flop’ or failing to please the patron-in-chief, but also of giving offence. This might be not just to the patron, but also to bystanders, placing the patron in a difficult position. In More’s *Utopia* for example (if it may be taken seriously on this point), mention is made of the power of an offended member of the religious to excommunicate, via a Papal bull, those who laugh at them (More 2005, 9). Although the laughter produced by personal, secular fools was double-edged, combining humour with transgression just as in the case of ritual fooling, it took place within normal time and conversation, and thus lacked the protection of a common rite. When it came under pressure from either lack of skill, overweening confidence, ill-judgment, or worse, rejection of the message, the security of office might well be thrown aside. Archy Armstrong was dismissed by James VI of Scotland and I of England for offending Archbishop Laud (Miller 1998, 53; Otto 2001, 140–141). Although modern scholars tend to discount the story, Chinese jesters were allegedly condemned to a painful death by Confucius himself (551–479 BCE) for inappropriate acts during a meeting between their lord and his (mentioned in Sima Qian’s ‘Records of the Grand Historian’ *Shiji* 史記, vol 6, *juan* 47, 1915, and elsewhere). More reliably, it is recorded that the Roman Emperor Gallienus (r.253–268) burnt several jesters (*scurrae*) alive, offended by their indiscreet wit (Otto 2001, 146).

Despite the occupational dangers, such secular fools flourished in England during the period 1500–1620, leaving many literary reflections, although these may well be embellishments of historical fact. As Wade (1915) has cautioned, Shakespeare’s fools for example vary widely in personality and style from play to play. Despite the fact that professional fools did sometimes play these roles, there is no simple relationship between any figure in a play and an individual, historical court fool. The works of Calderon de la Barca and Lope de Vega in Spain show similar complex traces. Across Europe, the period was the high point for this curious office. In some more traditional noble households in France and Russia however it seems to have clung on till later. Welsford even finds an eighteenth century record of a town-festival in Lille, under the Dukes of Burgundy, with a periodic appointment of ‘le fou de la Ville’ (Welsford 1968, 182–183 and 121). As the power of aristocratic patronage slowly diminished across Europe, both personal and official fools died out.
At the same time, however, other opportunities for licensed public fooling arose, giving access to wider (and possibly more forgiving) audiences in the commercial arena. The public theatre offered its own temporary licence for the secular act(ing) of a fool and every new company, whether in residence in a capital city or travelling on circuit, needed its own comedians. In England, famous court fools such as Richard Tarleton, favourite of Elizabeth I, and Robert Armin, for whom Shakespeare probably wrote roles including that of Touchstone in *As You Like It* (Aspinall 1998, 44; Gray 1927), seem to have moved between private attendance and public appearance, lending their skills to a wider audience. From such a pattern of interchange between private and public, European comedy has gradually evolved its myriad specialist varieties of comedian/ienne – in farce, mime, burlesque, stand-up, circus, music-hall, comedy and satire in film and television etc. Within the ‘laughter-container’ of the theatre, music hall, pantomime, film, television show, comedy-club and other clearly demarcated locales, these professional fools have exercised their licence to satirize their chosen targets and joke at their audience’s expense, becoming such familiar figures that we forget their sacred origins.

**Contemporary Interpretations of the Fool**

For professionals serving a wider audience than a familiar household, the economic imperative of entertainment rather than truth-saying necessarily predominates. Accordingly, in a modern era of increasingly mass media, the connection which Erasmus sought to make between fooling and wisdom has largely vanished. For the Renaissance, Cicero’s adage, *stultorum plena sunt omnia* (All places are replete with fools) (*Ep.* ix, 22) also carried the important converse message, that we are *all* fools: sadly, this is not a message readily embraced by commercial audiences who seek amusement and distraction rather than self-criticism. Outside the professional theatre, some social tolerance has traditionally been afforded by Western democratic cultures to self-appointed amateur fools, such as the office-joker (particularly when gifted at the task) and the heckler. But the ancient licence allowing someone to play the fool in public for the public good has remained largely confined to vestigial fragments of ritual such as the mild upheavals of April Fools’ Day (1 April), school ‘muck-up’ days or the non-threatening indulgences of Carnival. Recently, however, there are signs this may be changing and that new forms of licence for fooling may be evolving.
Significantly, this is occurring outside the protection of the theatre, accompanied by some seriousness of purpose about exploiting the clashing planes of reality and pretence in modern society. The laughter provoked by these new fools can be more reluctantly given than in the theatre, and with more of a sense of shock, because their audiences are being fooled outside theatrical make-believe – that is, hoaxed by real-life circumstances into taking the fool for real and into believing that the fool speaks the truth. Performance circumstances are not clearly marked in either time or space as containers for laughter; and unlike the immediately recognizable motley for the fools of old, no helpful visual prompts are given by the mask and costume of the personae involved. These acts are best described as ‘practical joking turned professional’ and the new fools as comic hoaxers, exploiting and exploding modern gullibility.

Hoaxers have never been absent from democratic societies and strongly-felt satire has often been so realistic that audiences are taken in at first, as were some initial readers of Jonathan Swift’s 1729 pseudo-parliamentary pamphlet, A Modest proposal for preventing the children of poor people from becoming a burthen to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick (Phiddian 1996). But professionalism in comedy, whether on the stage or written page usually signals its comic intentions fairly clearly, if only to avoid the negative consequences of giving and taking offence.

Members of a formal International Association of Hoaxers and Pranksters however see their mission as exposing fraudulent pretentiousness and encouraging independent thinking, as their website makes clear. For the professional comedian, as for the scholar of humour, there is an important distinction between a hoax, which is performed in response to an invitation, and a prank, which is an unauthorized leg-pull or practical joke. Nevertheless, both are motivated by the aim of completely deceiving their audience, at least for a time. Unlike the traditional fool, whether communal or professional, these new figures do not seek to advertise themselves in advance. There is no longer a symbolic costume of cap and bells or other mark to protect them as they pursue their self-appointed licence to speak truth; nor do they seek one.

Indeed, when hoax moved from print to radio, new ground was broken, for example with Orson Welles’ spoof broadcast to the USA on Sunday, 30 October 1938, an adaptation of H. G. Wells’ futuristic novel, The War of the Worlds (1926). This hoax was successful enough to produce caution about the use of broadcast media, since the public alarm was roughly akin to the results of shouting ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theatre. Not only television and radio but also public spaces and even conventional business meetings are
now commonly infiltrated by hoaxers and even if well-prepared by previous experience, audiences are continually taken in. In Australia at least, several comic artists have earned substantial income from their hoaxes, such as Campbell McComas (1952–2005, practice based in Melbourne), or Rodney Marks who works from Sydney. Their work is to perform legitimate hoaxes at the invitation of their hosts for quite serious corporate reasons – to encourage more flexible thinkers and managers in the organizations they hoax.

In 2007, the University of New South Wales in Sydney appointed Marks a ‘Visiting Professor at Large’ to lecture unsuspecting classes of students. Addressing students in the Master of Policy Studies program as Dr Beau Rocraci, Directeur-Général and Président of the Secrétariat du Cabinet for the European Parliament in Brussels, Marks succeeded in hoaxing the somewhat bored evening class on 10 May 2007, as reported by their lecturer-in-charge:

Rodney put on a great performance. It was almost some 30 minutes into his performance before some students picked up that this was a hoax. Rodney very cleverly poked fun at the students, the staff and the broader process of public policy and the institutions involved. When the hoax was revealed the class broke down with laughter. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

Importantly, he continued: ‘Rodney then engaged with the students in a debrief discussion where we examined the need to seriously question how people present their case, probe for evidence etc. It was an extremely valuable and enjoyable learning experience’. Dr Rocraci’s topic was ‘Agenda-setting and the mischievousness of issues management sector: How to insulate democracy from unelected influencers’: not, one would hope, an aim supported by students of public policy. Neither nationality, gender nor colour have proved a bar to Marks’ successful impersonations and certainly not accent and expert jargon, as he demonstrated in a performance as ‘Ennis Say, Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Behavioural Linguistics, University of Oxford’, addressing the National Speakers Association (NSA) (you get the pun?) on 10 July 2007. His topic was ‘The language of professional speaking’ (see Figure 14.6). The audience, despite having been hoaxed by Marks before, fell for the topic and speaker once again.

In many ways, contemporary society has recaptured something of the Renaissance ability to accept humour and laughter as a due part of daily life and work. Another innovation in a normally serious milieu is the ‘Clown
Humour and Religion

doctor’, who has migrated from the circus to become a welcome fixture in hospitals and aged-care centres, where s/he helps relieve tension and pain in a way which is being studied to measure its medical effectiveness. Among street mimes in many cities, who have surely been pursuing this profession since the dawn of time, humorous guerilla artists have become a recognizable figure. Perhaps the most famous is Noel Godin, l’entarteur, aka ‘Georges le gloupier’ (he and his support-team have a nonsense chant of ‘gloup, gloup, gloup’). According to his website, ‘Noel Godin is best known to Americans as “that guy who threw a cream pie in Bill Gates’ face. Godin lives in Brussels, Belgium and is the author of Anthology of Radical Subversion and Cream and punishment, the latter his autobiography. He has been ‘flanning’ (pie-ing) celebrities for 20 years’. Godin is conscious of the significance of his self-appointed work, describing himself as part social philosopher and part guerilla artist. Certainly news of his uninvited pranks, such as flanning the founder of Microsoft, flashes around the world (The Australian, 6 February 1998, 11).

With the arrival of the digital age, studies of the development of the electronic media frequently remark that serious news-bulletins, both radio and TV, are now often eclipsed by satirical comment and that the opinions of Generations X and Y are increasingly informed by these ambivalent secondary sources. One study concludes that this reflects the post-modern tendency for communications to ‘play with multiple levels of ambiguity and
receding perspectives; to borrow or adapt material or forms’ (Condren et al. 2008, 289–290). The influential US program, *The Daily Show*, not only insists on being satirical in all its news coverage, but claims that only satire can in fact give full coverage of the news – a post-modern twist on the traditional newspaper claim of constituting ‘all the news that’s fit to print’. Such claims are likely to be taken seriously by a new-generation audience that is sufficiently media-literate to log directly onto the internet for its news and information, rather than accept an editor’s version of the news.

Even in the po-faced world of serious science, humour has made inroads, reflected in the annual IgNobel Awards. These were instituted in 1990 and are now in their twentieth year, satirically modelled on the Nobel Prizes. According to Marc Abrahams (editor of the *Annals of Improbable Research* and chairman of the IgNobel Board of Governors), their purpose is to seek out and celebrate serious research which ‘first makes us laugh, then makes us think’.11 The winners reflect this ambivalent nature of the Awards: in 1998, for example, the Psychology Award went to Gian Vittorio Caprara and Claudio Barbaranelli of the University of Rome, together with Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University, for their discerning report ‘Politicians’ uniquely simple personalities’ (published in *Nature* 385, February 1997, 493). This was genuinely serious research and Zimbardo himself as well as the junior members of the team proudly attended to collect their prize. In 2005, an Award for Agricultural History went to James Watson of Massey University, New Zealand, for his scholarly study, ‘The Significance of Mr. Richard Buckley’s exploding trousers: Reflections on an aspect of technological change in New Zealand dairy-farming between the World Wars’ (published in *Agricultural History* 78: 3, Summer 2004, 346–360). My own University of Sydney was honoured in 2002, with an Award for Interdisciplinary Research to its honorary associate, Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, for performing a comprehensive survey of human belly button lint – who gets it, when, what colour it is and how much there is.

There are scientists who disdain the annual IgNobel show, with its streamers, cat-calls, obligatory sixty-second acceptance speech (impossible to achieve before being interrupted by a clown figure with hooter) and all the media-hype. *Nature* concedes however that it is ‘arguably the highlight of the scientific calendar’. Although there is little prize-money, an IgNobel Certificate is something to be treasured by a scientist: each one carries the autograph of three (real) Nobel Laureates. With such an endorsement, the Awards present the scientific world with the conundrum of real and excellent research which is concealed beneath a façade of trivial joking and foolery.
The Fool and Spirituality

Although they do not call themselves fools or jesters, these pranksters, hoaxers and burlesque ceremonies serve what Welsford calls ‘the perennial function of the fool... to melt the solidity of the world’ (Welsford 1968, 223). Their acts are designed to break through the façade of normal, everyday life and to allow other realities to shine through. Unlike the professional comedian, these new forms of the fool are not only concerned with entertainment, they deliberately hark back to the older tradition where playing the fool was a way to expose truth and combine Wisdom and Folly. Although they may not claim it, their purpose resonates with that of Erasmus, who cited St Paul for authority that the fool can instruct: ‘“If anyone among ye,” says he [Paul], “seem to be wise, let him be a fool that he may be wise”’ (Erasmus 2005, 43).

Although both More and Erasmus were aware that the charge of levity could be (and was) made against them, they held to the view that the act of provoking laughter could properly be used to stimulate self-criticism. By making themselves partly the butt of the humour (the Preface to Moriae declares it to be ‘An oration, of feigned matter, spoken by Folly in her own person’), they tried to deflect criticism, as Damian Grace has pointed out. This method, they believed, was morally more effective than dogmatic critical assertion of fault or shaming a victim through ridicule (Grace 1989, 275–300). However, the ambiguity of such a technique is easily misunderstood as they and satirists following in their tracks down the centuries have sometimes found. Maybe in current times, when satirical mockery is enjoying the kind of renaissance with appreciative audiences that this study has tried to describe, these techniques can be more widely and safely pursued.

In a deeper subtext to his essay, Erasmus (if we may identify him in the person of Folly) overrides his mask to argue, satirically but also seriously (given his stated purposes in writing), that foolishness itself can be sacred, a path to spiritual insight, perhaps for achieving rapture. Again he quotes St Paul: ‘And this Paul makes clearly out when he said, “God hath chosen the foolish things of this World”’ (Erasmus 2005, 43). The closing sections of the oration seem to mock the blissful state of the godly in ‘life hereafter, after which these holy minds so pantingly breathe’, but they also assert (seriously? satirically?) that this is a state prefigured in earthly moments of divine madness, during which the blessed ‘were the most happy while they were so out of their wits’. Whether Erasmus was joking or not when he praised this access by the fool to divine rapture, he was accurately describing one aspect of the ancient religious philosophy of the Holy Fool;
perhaps the one which lay at the heart of the Feast of Fools itself, if we could recapture the essence of that enigmatic feast.

The many layered voices and meanings of the text make it dangerous to speculate about Erasmus’ true intentions. The fact remains nevertheless, that what he describes here had been a flourishing spiritual model in parts of the early Christian Church. In the Byzantine Church, Holy Fools such as Symeon of Emesa in the early sixth century (Krueger 1996; Ivanov 2006, 104–124) and Andrew the Fool or Andrew Salos (‘holy fool’) in the late fifth century (Ivanov 2006, 156–164) were canonized for their miracles, despite seemingly lunatic behaviour often seen as scandalous during their lifetime. Andrew’s hagiography in particular provided an important model in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for the notion of the Russian iurodivyi (holy fool) such as Vasilii the Blessed (d. ca. 1537; Ivanov 2006, 255–256; 303–304). Despite Ivanov’s note of caution about the differences in Eastern and Western attitudes to the Holy Fool, and noting the distinctions in concept, it is reasonable to say that there were other sainted fools in the Western Church such as Jacopone da Todi (1230–1306) (Ivanov 2006, 387–388) and Joseph of Cupertino (1603–1663) (Willeford 1969, 232–233).

By today’s standards, the acts of many of these enlightened Holy Fools seem to qualify as satirical ‘guerilla theatre’. Symeon for example left his desert hermit’s life in order to perform acts of mockery in his adopted town of Emesa that seem to resemble those of Georges le Gloupier. Marching into the city with a dead dog dragging by its paw at the end of his monastic girdle, dancing with the slave-girls, heading into the women’s bathhouse, throwing nuts and misbehaving in church commands attention by aggressive foolishness (Ivanov 2006, 113–115). The degree of transgression in fact was substantial. Ivanov points out that, unlike the protective licence enjoyed by Western court jester, the Byzantine mime or fool ‘was always despised; in effect, he was regarded almost as an “untouchable”’ (Ivanov 2006, 109). Violating the conventions of civilized life around them, both secular and sacred fools exert considerable power.

Exercising the licence of their role, any fool is both auctor et actor, ‘producer and agent’ for his or her act, producing as an outcome change in others, as well as in themselves as the actor. Mary Beard notes the origin of this phrase in Lucius Apuleius’ playful account of transformation and initiation, The Golden Ass (Graves, trans. 1964). It occurs in the description of an imaginary festival held at the town of Hypata for the God of Laughter. The hero, an eponymous Lucius, has been caught up in this festival unwittingly as a victim, condemned (as he and the reader believes) to die for having drunkenly attacked some town citizens. On the point of being
sentenced to death, however, he learns this is only a practical joke being played on him by the town for their own purposes; and the town Magistrate apologizes for having made him suffer. In Beard’s translation, the Magistrate explains: ‘You see, the public holiday which we celebrate in honour of Laughter, always blossoms with some novelty. That god will propitiously and lovingly accompany the man who is both his producer and his agent wherever he may go’ (Beard 2009, my italics). Lucius may not have intended to play the fool, but he has no choice when later he is transformed into an ass. And it is his actions during this laughable metamorphosis which ultimately produce wisdom, at least for himself and perhaps for the reader.

In the Orthodox tradition of the Holy Fool, foolery by the enlightened became an accepted shock tactic to awaken disciples and the public, just as it continues to be in Zen Buddhism. The Zen Buddhist monk, poet and calligrapher Ryōkan (1758–1831) bore a second Buddhist name of Taigu (great fool) and was famous for enlightening his pupils via joking challenges (Willford 1969, 232–233). This technique, continued today in certain schools (Hyers 1970), is an active mode of spiritual enquiry advocating the achievement of personal enlightenment by dislocation rather than by the more normal routes of instruction and meditative reflection. As Willeford remarks, the fool/teacher stands ‘at the boundaries of consciousness’ (Willeford 1969, 232), and is thus both the producer/director of events and the agent of change for the pupils.

The public pranksters/fools of today are certainly driven by the desire to expose hypocrisy and pretentiousness and can sometimes act with almost as much missionary, reforming zeal as did the Holy Fools themselves. Although they may be unaware of the heritage, these self-appointed fools are perpetuating the role of the licensed slave in Roman triumphs, tasked with reminding Caesar of his mortality, or that of the Court Fool pointing to his sovereign’s folly. Without the protection of any special costume or ‘laughter-container’ such as a ritual ofifice, they seek to puncture the dignity of a business-leader or media star with an unexpected cream pie in the face or an impersonated phone call. The somewhat gullible 2008 American Vice-Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, received one from ‘President Sarkozy of France’. To the great delight of her critics, the caller was in reality one half of a French-Canadian prankster-duo, Marc-Antoine Audette, who together with Sebastien Trudel, forms ‘The Masked Avengers’ (‘Phony Sarkozy punks Palin’, Toronto Star, 2 November 2008). The more realistic and believable the hoax, the better.

Despite sharing the ancient heritage of speaking truth through folly, today’s new fools are not normally concerned with the development of their
own spirituality. Reviving that aspect of the fool tradition seems to fall outside the mostly rational preferences of contemporary society, although minor mystic traditions survive in various religions, from Judaism to Buddhism and Sufism. However, recent books contributing to the quest for spiritual enlightenment suggest that the spiritual role of the fool may still be relevant for alternative, esoteric circles in the West. In 1999, David Ovason published a book entitled The Zelator: The Secret Journals of Mark Hedsel (Ovason 1999) which gives a real or fictional account of one man’s life-journey on a path to spiritual insight called ‘The Way of the Fool’. The writer suggests this can be found, not by withdrawing from the world, but by embracing the wisdom and folly of life in all its bodily, emotional and spiritual experiences. The path involves suffering and pain as well as pleasure, and a good deal of arcane study which includes texts and emblems dealing with the fool from past times and cultures (some canvassed in this study). The end-point is achieving higher mastery of self and a detached insight into what it means to be human. These aims come surprisingly close to Welsford’s summary of the fool-experience itself:

. . . that strange two-fold consciousness which makes each one of us realize only too well that he is a mere bubble of temporary existence, threatened every moment with extinction, and yet be quite unable to shake off the sensation of being a stable entity existing eternal and invulnerable at the very centre of the flux of history, a kind of living punctum indifferens, or point at rest. (Welsford 1968, 320–321)

Ovason’s book takes its epigraph from The Golden Ass (Book X, xxxiii): Ecce nunc patiemur philosophantem nobis asinum? (What! Are we going to let the ass/fool play the philosopher?) This is surely territory very familiar to Erasmus.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Marguerite Wells for this information. Translations in this chapter are my own unless otherwise specified.
2 The following survey relies on the same sources as Chapter 1 in J. M. Davis, Farce (2003), and some material c (2003) by Transaction Publishers is reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.
could use both terms in their titles, as in Les sobres sots . . . Farce morale et joyeuse, a Shrove Tuesday play given at Rouen in 1536 which includes actors called both sot and fol and includes an argument as to which is the truer fool (text in Picot 1912, 3: No. 21).


5 The full broadcast and an analysis of reaction can be found at: http://www.war-of-the-worlds.org/Radio/ (Accessed 20 January 2010).


7 For studies of these artists, see Kristen Murray 1998 and J. M. Davis 1998.

8 Personal communication, 14 May 2007.

9 For example 2007 Australian Research Council grant to The Humour Foundation, established by Dr Peter Spitzer MBBS, Bowral, NSW, Australia.


Bibliography


Chapter 15

Humour, Religion and Politics in Greek Cartoons: Symbiosis or Conflict?

Villy Tsakona

*There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension. So we must do what we can with the third.*

*(John Fitzgerald Kennedy)*

The Greek Context

The aim of the present study is to discuss the semiotic mechanisms and the social function of religious cartoons in Greece. Religious cartoons appear to be quite common in the Greek press and in Greek publications in general, and they also seem to be accepted by the wider audience, as part of the public discussion of issues relating not only to the Greek Orthodox Church, but, most importantly, to Greek politics.

The interplay between religion and politics in Greece is directly related to the socio-historical context of the creation of the Greek state. Ever since the building of the Greek state in the 1830s, the highly conflictual local and regional rivalries were ‘united more by bonds of common religion (Eastern Orthodoxy) than of nationalism’ (Diamandouros et al. 2006, 11). As a result, Greek clerics have often presented themselves (and been perceived) not only as spiritual leaders, but also as political ones, fighting for the interests of the people and even protecting them from ‘evil’ politicians or from political decisions ‘threatening’ people’s religious and national identity (Stavrakakis 2003). Even nowadays, Orthodoxy remains the state religion in Greece and the separation of church and state is one of the most controversial issues in Greek politics. Politicians are often reluctant to put it up for discussion and it appears that a considerable part (if not the majority) of
the Greek people are not in favour of this separation. It is not accidental that Greek religious cartoons are created by the same artists who create political ones and are published in the same newspapers and collections as political ones. In other words, they are all intended for the same readership.

On the other hand, Greek cartoonists often exploit religious subjects in their work. Due to state education and socializing in general, Greek citizens are more or less familiar with religious themes and practices; therefore, religious allusions allow them to easily grasp the humorous message put forward by the cartoonist. Moreover, intertextual allusions to widely known texts for humorous effect are not without significance for the cartoonists themselves: by tacitly assuming an audience sharing some knowledge of religious matters, such allusions appeal to shared values and beliefs and seem to be positively evaluated by the audience, thus enhancing cartoonists’ popularity and, at the same time, contributing to in-group cohesion.

What is important to note here is that religious cartoons are more or less accepted (or even welcomed) by the Greek audience: no public protest has been expressed against Greek cartoonists handling religious issues, at least during the past few decades. Although Greek people, whether they consider themselves religious or not, would at least feel uncomfortable with ‘blasphemous’ or ‘anti-Christian’ material, Greek cartoonists have never been publicly attacked for their religious allusions.

Given the above, I will try to answer the following questions:

1) Which religious themes are used for humorous effect and how are they exploited for commenting on Greek public affairs?
2) How is the interplay between religion and politics manifested in religious cartoons?
3) How religious cartoons become part of the public discussion of political or other affairs and, most importantly, why are there no protests or complaints against the humorous exploitation of religious material?
4) What is the role of cartoonists and the media in this context?
5) What can Greek religious cartoons eventually tell us about the relationship between humour and religion: is it a conflictual or symbiotic one?

In what follows, after a brief overview of the literature on humour and religion, the theoretical framework and the basic concepts of the proposed analysis is presented. The next section offers a qualitative and quantitative
analysis of the data: it includes the semiotic analysis of examples drawn from the corpus under scrutiny and a statistical analysis of the corpus confirming the co-occurrence of religious and political themes in the majority of Greek religious cartoons, which is indicative of the strong interconnection between the Greek Orthodox Church and Greek political life. In this context, I further discuss the function and limits of religious allusions in these cartoons and the role of cartoonists as participants in the public debate on political or other issues. It seems that cartoon humour does not offend the readership, but rather establishes and reinforces a common culture exhibiting specific religious characteristics. The final section summarizes the findings of the present study.

**Humour and Religion: Between Incompatibility and Symbiosis**

The relation between humour and religion is one of the most controversial issues in the relevant literature. Therefore, their co-presence in public or private discourse does not go unnoticed, but usually attracts the attention of scholars. The most central questions are whether religions are inclined towards or sway away from humour, if (and how) can spirituality be connected with humour (Morreall 1999), whether humour surfaces in the Holy Scriptures and how it can be interpreted therein (see, among others, Screech 1997, Friedman 2000, Morreall 2001, Jackson 2002).

This relation is more often than not expressed in terms of suspicion, incompatibility, estrangement and even conflict (see, among others, Lindsey and Heeren 1992, Capps 2006b, Joeckel 2008). Although some psychological benefits of humour have been pointed out for those who would like to embrace both religion and humour (Capps 2006a), it seems that religious people are not often keen on producing or appreciating humour (Saroglou 2002, 2004, Saroglou and Anciaux 2004). On the other hand, it seems that both humour and religion are considered an effective means of dealing with metaphysical questions regarding afterlife. Religious tradition and culture may reflect this compatibility (Popa 2007).

The relation between humour and religion is also manifested in humorous genres. Hempelmann (2003) discusses the characteristics of Christian jokes as a distinctive joke cycle and analyses the way members of the clergy and Biblical figures are represented therein. Davies (1998, 2002) investigates religious jokes belonging to more comprehensive joke cycles, such as Jewish jokes, anti-Semitic jokes, Scottish religious jokes or jokes about
Catholics or Calvinists, all related to the particular history and culture of the people they refer to.

Besides jokes, religious cartoons have also attracted the attention of scholars. Given that cartoons are prototypically published in the media and that, in some states or cultures, religion and politics seem to be closely connected, the social and political aspects of religious cartoons become the main focus of research. For instance, Edwards (1988) points out the controversial nature of cartoons about religion and the negative reader response to such cartoons published in the U.S. press. She observes that, despite the fact that the United States was founded on principles separating church and state, religion has historically been influential in national life and in the personal lives of many American citizens. God and Country are frequently linked in public discourse in such a way as to suggest the existence of a national religion, or, at least, a national religious ethic. (Edwards 1988, 3)

As a result, at least a part of U.S. citizens may not always approve of this kind of humour.

Besides intra-cultural objection to such humour, religious cartoons may also become the source of serious intercultural and international conflict. This is the case, for example, of the social and political repercussions that followed the publication of the so-called Muhammad cartoons in Denmark in September 2005. The relevant literature addresses a variety of issues such as the boundaries between humour and freedom of speech, the cartoons’ degree of offensiveness depending on the religious sensibilities of their readership, their impact on international politics and, more generally, the contextual parameters influencing their reception (see, among others, Sturges 2006, Harkness et al. 2007, Post 2007, Lewis 2008, Smith 2009). In short, the relation between humour and religion becomes even more complicated when politics also comes into play.

Following this line of research, the present study sets out to investigate the use of religious themes and figures in humorous cartoons published in the Greek press. Unlike previous studies, the set of data analysed here does not include cartoons resulting in negative reader response or conflict escalation; rather, they are an integral part of media discourse and refer to a variety of political, religious and social issues, without being considered offensive, blasphemous or inappropriate by the readership.
Some Key Concepts: Script Opposition, Christian Humour and the Humorous Target

Before proceeding with the presentation and analysis of the data, I will refer to some concepts which are central to the proposed analysis, providing a brief outline of the theoretical framework adopted.

**Humour as script opposition**

Humour is based on incongruity, namely on the incompatibility between two co-occurring meanings or ideas. In linguistic, and particularly in pragmatic terms, incongruity is described as an opposition between two *scripts*, where a script is defined as a cognitive structure involving the semantic information associated with the words included in a text, representing speaker’s knowledge of the world, and providing information on the structure, components, functions, etc. of the entity or activity referred to. In other words, a humorous text is compatible with two overlapping, but opposed scripts, in the sense that they would not normally appear in the same context (Raskin 1985, Attardo 2001). In the present case, one of the opposed scripts involves information related to religion, namely religious figures (whether Biblical ones or members of the Greek Orthodox clergy), religious events (Biblical, historical or contemporary ones where clerics are the main participants) and religious practices (such as attending mass, praying, Lent).

Given that most cartoons are based on both linguistic and visual information, their meaning(s) may emerge from either semiotic mode or the interaction of the two modes (see among others Gavriilidou and Tsakona 2004–2005, Hempelmann and Samson 2007, Samson and Huber 2007, Tsakona 2008, 2009a, 2009b). That is to say, in cartoons, the scripts opposed may be evoked via either verbal or visual cartoon elements or via both (see the analysis proposed in the section ‘The Data of the Study’).

**Christian humour**

Hempelmann (2003) discusses the particularities of Christian jokes, suggesting that, for a joke to qualify as a Christian one, ‘[t]here must be some religious, in our case Christian, element in the joke that cannot be easily removed, [i.e. that] is integral to the joke’ (2003, 5). More specifically,
assuming that script opposition is a prerequisite for humour (see the previous subsection), he identifies three categories of Christian jokes (2003, 12):

(a) truly Christian jokes based on a script opposition thematically related to Christianity;
(b) Christian jokes involving Christian situations and targets; and
(c) non-Christian jokes, where Christian elements play a marginal role in the creation of the script opposition.

Although Hempelmann discusses exclusively joke texts with intertextual links to Christian figures and themes, the same categories may hold for religious cartoons as well (see section ‘The Data of the Study’).

The humorous target

Given that the present study focuses on the social dimension of religious cartoons, an important parameter that has to be carefully identified and taken into serious consideration is the target of humour. Since humour is based on incongruity, a humorous event has to deviate from the norm, namely to contradict what is expected or normal in given circumstances. Therefore, humour is directly related to and results from evaluation or criticism procedures and can actually be used as a means of criticism. In other words, humour has a social meaning and a social corrective function: it aims at correcting our way of behaving, whenever this behaviour deviates from what is socially expected or approved (see, among others, Bergson 1997 [1901], Attardo 2001, Archakis and Tsakona 2005, 2006). In this sense, the target of humour may be a person, an institution, or eventually whatever causes an incongruity and is attacked via humour for exhibiting socially inappropriate behaviour.

In sum, by identifying the script opposition and the humorous target of each joke or cartoon, we actually gather information pertaining to the reason of criticism and to the entity criticism is directed to.

The Data of the Study

The data examined in the present study consists of 251 cartoons coming from either Greek newspapers (70 cartoons, 27.88%) or published collections (181 cartoons, 72.11%). In the former case, religious cartoons are
part of a larger corpus of political cartoons coming from popular daily and weekly Greek newspapers (Adesmeftos Tipos, Vima tis Kiriakis, Ethnos, Eleftheros Tipos, Eleftherotipia, Kathimerini, Kiriakatiki Eleftherotipia, Ta Nea) and collected from December 2004 to March 2005 (see also Tsakona 2008, 2009a, 2009b). In the latter case, religious cartoons were selected from collections published with the permission of their creators (Kalaitzis 2002, 2003, Kyr 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, Anastasiou 2004, Stathis 2004, 2005). These cartoons were initially published in the press and were later included in the collections.

Hempelmann’s (2003) categories were used as a criterion for the selection of my data (see subsection ‘Christian Humour’): interestingly, the data compiled confirm these categories, even though they belong to a different humorous genre. In most cases, humour emerges from the opposition between a religious and non-religious script. The data under examination fall under three categories:

(a) Purely religious cartoons based on a script opposition referring to easily recognizable religious figures or situations; anachronisms are typical in this category, relating and contrasting Biblical themes with modern ones.

For example, in Figure 15.1, a shepherd receives a text message saying Χριστός γεννάται σήμερον ‘Christ is born today’.3 Humour here is based on the

**Figure 15.1** Religious cartoon reproduced by permission of Giannis Kyriakopoulos (Kyr) and Kastaniotis publications (Kyr 2005).
following opposed scripts: one involves the way news was announced in Biblical times and the other the way news is announced nowadays. Humour is enhanced by the use of Greeklish in the text message: the phrase Χριστός γεννάται σήμερον ‘Christ is born today’ in New Testament Greek is written in the Latin alphabet, which is common practice among Greek cell phone users (especially adolescents). The target of humour here is people’s exaggerated use of (and attachment to) modern technology.

(b) Cartoons referring to members of the Greek Orthodox clergy; such cartoons may or may not be based on a script opposition involving religious themes.

In Figure 15.2, late Archbishop Christodoulos is chasing after two men, while shouting: ‘[Wait], my children! . . . ’ The dialogue between the two men running for their lives goes like this: ‘Why are you running, re’ Mitsos? His Holiness only wants to save us [from sin] . . . ’. And Mitsos replies: ‘Yes, but he wants to give us 33 interviews saying that he will save us’. Late Archbishop Christodoulos was one of the most popular targets in the cartoons of this category, mostly for his politician-like behaviour: he was famous among other things for deliberately attracting or even inviting the attention of the media to himself. The scripts opposed here refer, on the one hand, to the spiritual guidance and modesty expected from an archbishop and, on the other, to Archbishop Christodoulos’ excessive self-promotion via the media. In this figure, he is targeted for this kind of inappropriate behaviour.
Humour and Religion

In Figure 15.3, an angel is talking to Joseph who stands at the entrance of the crib: ‘I have some bad news! Herod wants the Holy Infant to leave the premises . . . and their own children to occupy them . . . ’. The phrase τα δικά τους παιδία ‘their own children’ evokes a very common political script in Greek: every ruling party tends to promote ‘their own children’, namely their voters and party members, by favouritism rather than merit. As a result, supporters of the ruling party can find a job (or even secure a permanent position) in the public sector more easily than supporters of the opposition, regardless of their qualifications. In addition, contract employees in the public sector are often replaced when the opposed party comes to power. The angel here implies that this occurred even when Christ was born: baby Jesus has to leave the crib, so that supporters of King Herod take his place. In other words, instead of the ‘expected’ script referring to the well-known biblical story, according to which Jesus had to leave Bethlehem because King Herod was afraid of losing his power and hence ordered the massacre of infants in Bethlehem, an ‘unexpected’ one is evoked: Jesus had to leave Bethlehem because King Herod wanted his own supporters to occupy the crib. The cartoonist here criticizes the corruption and lack of meritocracy in the Greek state, and the Greek parties’ practice of buying...
votes with recruiting their supporters as civil servants. This practice is so persistent and widespread in Greek political life that it is humorously represented as part of the Christian tradition as well.

Finally, religious scripts are used to criticize ordinary people, as in Figure 15.4, where the Greeks’ addiction to watching football games is targeted. A TV screen appears right next to the icon screen of the church, so that football fans can enjoy football matches even while attending mass. The scripts opposed here involve, on the one hand, the concentration and piety expected when attending mass and, on the other hand, people’s lack of interest in religious events and their obsession with sports.

The categories identified above involve different humorous targets. In purely religious cartoons, the target involves the modern way of living, thus highlighting the differences between everyday life in modern times and everyday life in Biblical times (see Figure 15.1). In the second category, members of the clergy become the humorous targets: such cartoons usually refer to the improper behaviour of clerics, for instance, their interference with politics and governmental issues (see Figure 15.2) or their participation in financial, drug or sex scandals (see Tsakona 2008, 390, 393–394). In short, clerics are portrayed as failed professionals who concentrate on fund raising instead of spirituality, and are more interested in political power than in complying with the standards of modesty, morality and charity (cf. Edwards 1988, Hempelmann 2003, 17–20). In the last category, politicians

Figure 15.4 Religious cartoon reproduced by permission of Giannis Kyriakopoulos (Kyr) and Kastaniotis publications (Kyr 2006).
or, less often, ordinary people become the targets of humour because of their inappropriate, exaggerated or scandalous behaviour, while religious figures or themes are only exploited for commenting on such behaviour (see cartoons 3–4).

A close look at the statistics of the data (see Table 15.1) confirms the strong interplay between Greek politics and the Greek Orthodox religion, either because clerics may interfere with politics and be represented as part of the Greek political life, or because politicians are attacked via the evocation of religious scripts (see categories (b) and (c1) respectively, a total of 218 cartoons, 86.85%; cf. Edwards 1988).

Finally, it is interesting to note here that, in Greek cartoons, religion seems to be synonymous with Christianity and the Greek Orthodox Church, in particular. Greek religious cartoons do not refer to or target other religions or their respective Gods, but tend to focus on Orthodox Christian targets and themes, especially on particular prominent persons or leaders rather than groups of believers. It appears that Greek cartoonists feel free to comment on the prevailing ‘national’ religion and do not extend their criticism to different religions (cf. Edwards 1988). At the same time, the fact that public criticism or protest against religious cartoons has never been expressed (at least during the past few decades) indicates that the Greek Orthodox audience do not feel offended or shocked by their content, and that there is a considerable degree of tolerance towards the use of religious themes for humorous effect.

### Intertextuality and the Greek Normative Community of Humour

As exemplified above, religious themes and figures are most commonly exploited to convey criticism against politicians or clerics for inappropriate behaviour. In fewer cases, they are contrasted with modern, everyday situations and practices for the creation of a humorous effect. The analysis of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Target of Humour</th>
<th>Number of Cartoons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category (a): Religious figures and situations</td>
<td>22 (8.76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category (b): Members of the Greek Orthodox clergy</td>
<td>146 (58.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category (c1): Politics (domestic and international)</td>
<td>72 (28.68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category (c2): Social issues (sports, human relations, etc.)</td>
<td>11 (4.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>251 (100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the present corpus reveals that humour is actually based on religious references; the humorous effect is cancelled for those who are not familiar with such allusions. For example, in order to understand Figure 15.3, one has to be able to recognize Joseph, the crib where Jesus was born, King Herod’s (implied) fear of losing his power and the angel as a messenger of God. Such intertextual links actually set the boundaries between those who can understand the humorous message and those who cannot, thus creating a sense of inclusion and membership to the former ones and simultaneously a sense of exclusion and distance to the latter ones (see also Archakis and Tsakona 2005, 2006, North 2006, Kuipers 2008a, 10, Smith 2009, Tsakona 2009b). The lack of references to other religions should also be interpreted in this light: Greek religious cartoons reinforce and naturalize a shared culture which is compatible with the particularities of the Greek state, where Orthodox Christian practices and themes are dominant (see section ‘The Greek Context’).

Furthermore, those who can communicate via cartoon humour seem to constitute a normative community of humour based on a sort of consensus on what can become the object of humour. As Kuipers (2008a, 8) puts it,

> every group or society has its (mostly implicit) rules and agreements about what can be joked about. People within such a community generally abide by such rules, even if they do not agree with them [. . .]. Normative communities also have unwritten rules about, for instance, the propriety of jokes about sex or people in power, or situations where joking is or isn’t allowed [. . .]. Normative communities also imply an understanding of what to do when jokes offend: there are institutions to turn to, places to complain and voice dissent, spokespersons to voice groups’ opinions.6

Obviously, the Greek normative community of humour allows religious references and criticism against politicians, members of the clergy and ordinary people, although there appear to be some limits to what can be said or represented: as mentioned above (see section ‘The Data of the Study’), other religions or denominations are not targeted in religious cartoons and the same holds for their respective Gods and groups of believers. Neither does cartoon humour attack the religious faith of Greek people: in the data examined, Orthodoxy is never contested; on the contrary, it is considered ubiquitous in Greek society and widely accepted.

In sum, there is a kind of consensus in the Greek public sphere concerning potential themes and targets of humour. The transgression of boundaries
could bring to the surface the ‘serious’ implications of humour (cf. Mulkay 1988), namely it could result in a public debate on the relation between humour, religion and freedom of speech, or even in an ‘anti-humour’ crisis (cf. the publication of the Muhammad cartoons, see section ‘Humour and Religion’). Greek cartoonists do not cross these boundaries.

The Role of Cartoonists in the Media

Another parameter that has to be taken into consideration in an account of the social function of religious themes in cartoons is the fact that cartoons do not constitute oral material circulating in private and public discourse, but they are written material typically published in newspapers or published collections and produced by professional and (more often than not) popular cartoonists. Cartoons actually constitute an institutionalized humorous genre, namely a ‘free space’ with clear limitations, where public figures can be attacked and ridiculed (Kuipers 2008b, 370). Davies (2008, 31–32) claims that humour publicly circulating in a given normative community is to a considerable extent influenced or even censored by the ruling elite, which has a hegemonic control over the mass media, either by occupying key positions in the media, or through powerful regulatory bodies or by exerting sometimes noisy, sometimes covert political and economic pressure.

In other words, the boundaries set between accepted and unaccepted humour are largely dependent on newspaper editors and book publishers who have the final word on what can or cannot enter the public debate on political or other affairs. In this context, cartoonists cannot ignore or circumvent media control, if they wish to participate in the public discussion. Therefore, their criticism and creativity stays within certain limits and, in the case of religious cartoons, usually supports traditional religious values, such as charity, spirituality, morality and modesty (cf. Edwards 1988). After all, as Billig (2005, 209) puts it, ‘in late capitalism, humour is an entertainment product of the media’. As such, it does not aim at encouraging people to rebel against authority and power; instead, it contributes to maintaining the status quo by playing along with ideas, views and beliefs already in circulation and hence accepted by the normative community (see also Mulkay 1988, 210–212, Tsakona 2009b).

By alluding to specific religious or other events, views and figures, and in order to criticize current affairs, cartoonists operate as framers of events
(cf. Edwards 1988, 19) participating in a public discussion of state or other affairs and do not disseminate previously unknown information in an attractive manner. Such material provides them with the opportunity to readily convey their perspective to the audience. In modern society, this kind of participation seems to be more important than the cartoon content itself or the influence of humour on public issues. Sharing humour and laughter indicates membership in a specific culture and communicating on a subject of mutual interest. In other words, via its intertextual links to religious, political and social affairs, humour becomes an integral part of an ongoing debate where political, social and moral views can be deliberated (Townsend 1997, Kuipers 2008b, 364–373).

On the other hand, the cartoonists’ preference for religious intertextual links here is not accidental: intertextuality is based on the exploitation and re-negotiation of already known material, hence it aims at creating a surprise effect and it is by definition attention-seeking (Goddard 2006, 258). Given that speakers ‘seem to be predisposed to play with other texts, to borrow and rework them, and to value people who can do this most effectively’ (North 2006, 229; my emphasis), cartoonists seem to use intertextuality as a means of attracting public attention to their work and of gaining fame and popularity.

To sum up, it could be claimed that, at least in the Greek society, cartoonists are the modern jesters: they are appointed the role of the official joker who can criticize those in power within certain limits and without suffering any consequences. By challenging political or religious authority, they have become accepted as the ‘official’ commentators and are allowed to publish their ‘highly valued’ humorous comments in newspapers or edited collections. Their institutional(ized) status allows them to articulate truths that would be degrading for political or religious leaders and to attack improper behaviour and opinions expressed by the latter. For these purposes, they allude — among other resources — to religious subjects and themes to express their views, thus bringing to the surface, projecting and contributing to a shared culture. In other words, not only do they voice public discontent, but also reinforce group cohesion via references to a common historical, religious and cultural background.

Concluding Remarks

Being a popular and widely accepted humorous genre, cartoons constitute the ideal material for investigating the interplay between humour and religion, in particular, the limits between what aspects of religion can and cannot be contested via humour.
The present study reveals that religious themes are often used in Greek cartoons to create humour and express criticism against public figures or other social targets. Moreover, it reveals that religious cartoons are not by definition considered offensive or blasphemous; their uptake depends on the social context of their production and consumption. The Greek data analysed here confirm the important social and political dimension of religious cartoons: political affairs are critically commented on via the use of religious scripts, while at the same time clerics are attacked for their politician-like behaviour. Religion is represented as part of the fabric of political reality (cf. Edwards 1988).

Furthermore, it seems that allusions to religion are easily recognized by the majority of the Greek readership, thus allowing cartoonists to participate in the ongoing public discussion about political, religious or other issues, without, however, pushing the limits of their criticism beyond what is socially permitted. Cartoonists are free to criticize politicians, clerics and Greek citizens in general, but they are not allowed to contest Orthodoxy as a system of beliefs, practices and moral values. Hence, cartoonists appear to be in a challenging (but also rewarding) position: on the one hand, they wish to express their criticism as part of their institutional role (for which they gain fame and popularity), while, on the other, they are not permitted to push the joking limits too far by contesting the religious feelings of the readership. In other words, it is the cartoonists’ duty to let off some critical steam against public figures and ‘abnormal’ situations, but they are also strongly motivated to preserve their right to do so. After all, shaping public opinion may not be as important as participating in the ongoing discussion of public affairs, reinforcing values and beliefs and voicing dissent with authority. Thus, cartoonists succeed in establishing and maintaining solidarity bonds with the wider audience via the media.

Finally, it could be argued that, at least in the Greek case examined here, the relation between humour, religion and politics is not a conflictual one, but rather a symbiotic one, not only reflecting the strong interconnection between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Greek state, but also resulting from the implicit norms established in this particular community and regulating the content and targets of humour. In this context, cartoonists are expected to strike a balance between voicing dissent with authority, respecting norms on the limits of humour and avoiding censorship by the media.9

Notes

1 It is interesting to note here that there actually have been protests against literary texts, plays, films and works of art which were considered by Greek religious people
to be ‘anti-Christian’ or offensive, but not against cartoons. This difference in audience reaction is not without significance. However, its interpretation lies beyond the scope of the present study.

This definition of script draws on what is called schema or frame in psychology, artificial intelligence and linguistics (see, among others, Schank and Abelson, 1977).

All cartoon texts were translated by the author for the purposes of the present study.

Untranslatable Greek particle, which is very frequent in everyday interaction, indicates intimacy, and marks the context as informal.


In a similar vein, Critchley observes that ‘humour is a form of sensus communis, common sense. That is, jokes are the expression of sociality and possess an implicit reasonableness’ and that ‘humour is a shared or intersubjective practice that requires the assent of others’ (2002, 79, 80; emphasis in the original).

One of the most debated issues in humour research relates to the impact of humour on politics and to its influence on public opinion as an integral part of public discourse. This issue lies beyond the scope of the present study. However, it could be noted here that some scholars suggest that humour reflects ideas and views already in circulation and is often based on stereotypes which are already part of the readership’s background knowledge (see, among others, Raskin 1985, Davies 1998), while others argue that humour targeting specific persons, ideas or situations is capable of creating and establishing a negative impression or stereotype at their expense (see, among others, Billig 2001, Lockyer and Pickering 2005). Between these two poles, Mulkay (1988) claims that the audience themselves decide to ignore or to capitalize on the ‘serious’ implications and consequences of a humorous text. However, the question remains unanswered mostly because there is no empirical research confirming any of the above hypotheses.

For the role of jesters from a social and anthropological perspective, see, among others, Plester and Orams (2008, 255–262) and references therein.

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