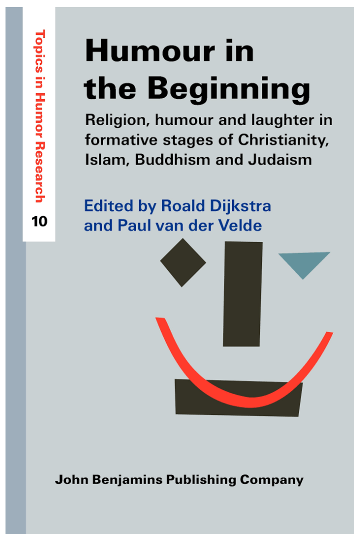
HUMOUR IN THE BEGINNING



DIJKSTRA, ROALD & VAN DER VELDE, PAUL (EDS.) (2022). *Humour in the Beginning. Religion, Humour and Laughter in Formative Stages of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. XII, 306 pp., 99,00 € [ISBN 978-90-272-1153-8].

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THE VOLUME BRINGS TOGETHER 14 CASE STUDIES ON HUMOUR in late antique testimonies from Christianity and Judaism (pp. 33-141), in the Koran and early Arabic literature (pp. 145-217) and in Buddhism (pp. 221-269). According to the concluding essay, the current occasion for exploring the protean phenomenon of "humour in religion" in more detail is the protest against the publication of some cartoons about the Prophet Mohammed in the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 and the subsequent justification of acts of terrorism in view of the denigration of Islam (Dejkstra, p. 273). Are positive religions capable of humour, and if so, do they allow laughter only at others or also at themselves? How do they deal with incongruities in the perception of others and in self-perception? Or with humorous representations of serious things that religions still stand for? How do they deal with transgression? And

what is the aim of humour, if it is a “risky form of communication” (Kuipers, p. 3)? These questions provide an initial epistemic framework for researching in this sense.

The hasty accusation that religion could *eo ipso* be humourless is already contradicted in many ways in the introductory four essays (cf. p. 109). How much more plausible is this contradiction made by the anthropological turn of the question in Roald Dejkstra’s “conclusion” at the end of the volume: “It is the human need for humour, their intrinsic inclination towards the comical sphere that explains why it cannot be seen separate from that other domain of intrinsic inclination: religion” (p. 295). If this is right, then it depends on the degree of humour and which of its types the respective religion allows in order to contribute in its own way to the processes of humanization of man in his culture. And this criterion should be supported by an ethic that applies to everyone. In such a perspective, laughter at the expense of others would appear in its own problematic sense.

However, this focus on the question has not yet been achieved at the beginning, as the introductory essays approach the problem in different ways. They communicate critically with each other, and in this way already correspond to the fact that the relationship between religion and humour only exists in plural diversity. However, the common denominator of an inductive method remains recognizable, which cultivates a panoramic view in order to collect the many things that are revealed here and to arrange them according to limited interpretative guidelines – such as the five “ingredients” (p. 4) of humour as a form of communication in comparison with others, which have just been referred to in question form. With regard to the case studies, the comparison should also lead to progress in knowledge. So let’s take a closer look at them. How do the patterns of interpretation for the relationship between religion and humour developed at the beginning and tested at the end prove themselves in the case studies?

A first set aims to correct the widespread impression that early Christianity almost completely lacked humour due to its own deep seriousness. These case studies set out in search of counter-tendencies, however hidden they may be in remote apocryphal texts from the first Christian centuries, and follow the trail of the anything but uniform phenomenon of laughter. Using three examples from the Nag Hammadi texts, Ingvild Saelid Gilhus shows that polemic and mockery were part of Christian identity-making (pp. 33-44). But it is not always the same laughter, be it the spiritual laughter of Eve, which rises above the power of the archons at the tree of knowledge, or that of the Savior, which rises “above the cross” and therefore also above the world. This is to be distinguished from Jesus’ smile in the face of his disciples which “shows the complicity between a master and his disciple” (p. 41, quoted by Fernando Bermejo Rubio).

Nicole Graham takes up the thread to approve of its “pedagogical” use in the sense of distinguishing one’s own truth from that of others on the basis of Clement of

Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, the first Christian investigation of laughter (p. 291), while other forms, i.e. drunken laughter, erotic laughter, comic laughter (p. 47) are viewed critically. Clement understood laughter as a natural human attribute (p. 48), which could have its place in the life of a Christian. However, it must be controlled and regulated in terms of context, intention and social consequences.

With his analysis of the rhetorical means found in the letters of Gregory of Nazianzus, Floris Bernard then makes a small contribution to the great task of better understanding the impact that Christianity has had on "what people considered humorous and why and how they laughed" (p. 79). For this early Christian theologian used "humour, derision and allusion" (p. 63) to push his interests. By using witticism and irony (p. 69) as a means of neutralizing misunderstandings (not without risk [cf. pp. 3ff.]) in his correspondence with Basil of Caesarea, as if he were serious instead of jesting, he contributed to the development of a Christian culture of discourse "that could match their pagan counterparts in wit and sophistication" (p. 74).

Pierluigi Lanfranchi (pp. 81-92) now focuses attention on the difference between laughter and smiling, a difference *nota bene* that is taken in later theory by Hermann Cohen as a clue to the definition of humour as a phenomenon *sui generis*. It is true that the smile of the martyr is not immediately clear – it can be a stoic or an eschatological smile (pp. 83-84). In any case, however, it is the sign of "the refusal to accommodate to foreign powers" (p. 82), sometimes reinforced by "martyr's jokes" (pp. 89-90), and this resistance is based on an inner attitude of one who does not want to revoke his convictions. Such smiles also have a context in which they have an effect on others – especially in the situation of interrogation – but they differ from mocking laughter in the power of the soul they express, however this can be defined more precisely (pp. 87-88).

The quotation from Rabbi Akiva (p. 86), the only passage so far that also makes a Jewish voice heard, deals particularly clearly with the power of the soul (*nefesh*). It is reinforced by the contribution of Reuven Kiperwasser (pp. 93-105), who, based on a passage from the Babylonian *Talmud* (*Sanhedrin* 69a) – combining *Isaiah* 7:20 with a rabbinical word – reveals the message hidden therein about God's worldly rule: this happens "not according to the laws of heroic drama, but according to the laws of comedy" (p. 101), even if this means that the worldly actors – such as the Assyrian king Sennacherib in this case – become entangled in their idolatrous projections and unjust promises. A comparison with "the first-century Roman novel *Satyricon* of Petronius" (p. 101) shows on the one hand that "common humoristic *topoi*" are at play, but on the other hand also that "rabbinic mockery" is "addressed against something important for the construction of their own identity" (p. 102). In the case of the

interpreted *Talmud* passage, distance is gained with the world in which the Jewish community asserts itself (p. 104).

The "*Taufmimen*" (p. 110), this "small genre of obscure, but fascinating texts that presents a curious mixture of Christian apologetics in a (meant to be) comical context: a set of stories about mime – i.e. comical – actors converting to Christianity on stage, in the midst of mockery of that same religion", is also about identity formation in a critical environment (p. 108). According to Roald Dijkstra, "the religion that was ridiculed (Christianity) ... stroke back by showing its power through the conversion of the main actor of the play" (p. 113). However, this interpretation of a "counterattack" showing the "superiority of the Christian religion" (p. 121) is not the only possible one. If one brings the "characteristics of humorous texts" of Kuipers (cf. p. 4) into play, then "incongruity" and "transgression" could be understood as moments of an "appropriation strategy" (p. 121). The mime reports would then be "proof of the fact that it was impossible to keep the two worlds of fiction and religion apart" (p. 122).

As an example of this, Vincent Hunink brings "the *Cena Cyriani*, a 4th century *curiosum* in early Christian literature" (p. 127) into the discussion: against the background of all the "most serious or very serious" texts that have produced "the first centuries of Christian writing", here is a witty, even satirical alienation of biblical material, the combination of which has to be taken neither literally nor seriously (p. 138) – from the allusion to the wedding at Cana to the long series of biblical names, the foods and wines that match or do not match with them, to allusions to "the rather rough sort of humour we often find in Roman satire and epigram" (p. 137), as if it were a postmodern game without consistency (p. 131), just for fun so to speak.

Farooq Hassan then opens the second set of case studies by correcting the widespread impression today that Islam is "a stiffy austere religion that denigrates humour" by taking a look at the early Islamic era. At that time, however, Islam encouraged "humour of the positive kind and ... [has discouraged] the humour, which becomes a tool for insulting people". Following the "medieval Islamic heritage", this contribution raises the question of "the ethics of humour", which is fundamental to the aim of the present volume (p. 145). A further rule of such an ethic, in addition to the one already mentioned (respect for the person of the other), appears to be (not unlike some previously cited Christian sources) the demand for an appropriate measure of humour. It is conceded "that humour is a human trait", but it has to be "handled with care and in small amounts, like salt" (p. 147). A third rule prohibits making fun "to cause material or physical harm" (p. 152). Furthermore, a long series of examples from the prophetic tradition of Islam conveys a colourful picture of the forms and functions of humour "as an integral part" of life (p. 149), without devaluing the sexual sphere

(as in some testimonies of the Church Fathers). Some things are already present here that will only be explained in later theory.

In the tension between "Sunni approval and Shi'ite rejection" (p. 155), Yasmin Amin then discusses the question of whether God laughs and, if so, in what contexts and for what reasons. In the sources she works with, in the Hadith (and not in the Qur'an), these are diverse and include "martyrdom, altruism, avoiding hopelessness and despair of God's mercy, unity of men especially in war or on sea voyages, voluntary night prayer whether at home or in the mosque, fighting the enemy and performing charity silently and in secret and remembering God at all times, even in the markets" (p. 168). The list refers to the problem of the scope and limits of anthropomorphisms already raised by Inger Kuin at the beginning on the basis of Homer's epic work. They "appear to contain an irresolvable tension that consists in having to negotiate the precise extent to which gods are like and unlike humans" (p. 165 quotes p. 20). The motives of divine generosity or mockery of finite and fallible humans, which in Greek polytheism can be distributed among different actors, must, however, be thought of in monotheism as different occasions or reasons for the laughter of only one actor. However, "God's laughter is a metaphor for rewards and kindness" (p. 163). If this is right, then "laughter and sadness" can prove to be "part of the blessings that God provides to humans" (p. 167).

As if it were a parallel to the *Cena Cypriani* in a Christian context, Geert Jan van Gelder presents the poet Abu Nuwas with his "poetic parodies of Islamic discourses" (p. 183). However, the comparison is misleading, as the "delight in subverting religion" (p. 199) seems to far exceed the Christian parallel, in which "Bacchic poetry and love poetry, most of which is on boys" (p. 184) are not to be found. Abu Nuwas' parodies are to be found in his "libertine verse with commandments to people of depravity" and in his "libertine verse supported with chains of authority". As "himself well-versed in Hadith" who "even seems to have taught it" (p. 190), he cultivated in his poetry "two kinds of incongruity: one between the form (verse) and the genre (Hadith being always in prose) and another between the antinomian content of the poem and the always pious content of the true Hadith" (p. 196), as if the tradition could only be preserved through alienation. One might ask whether the ethical rules emphasized in Hassan's contribution can keep the violent fantasies in one of the poems cited (p. 194) in check.

Furthermore, Ulrich Marzolph's case study traces "Greek and Buddhist jokes" (p. 207) in the classical Arabic literature and thus leads to the third set. In this literature, which is counted among the "largest repertoires of jokes and humorous anecdotes" at the time, "humour focusses on human foibles, particularly ignorance and stupidity, and does not ridicule the basis of the religion of Islam" (p. 208) However, the ignorance targeted here first and foremost concerns the not universal acceptance

of the foundations of Islam, for example from a Jewish or Bedouin perspective (p. 209). The flip side of this narrowing, however, is the openness to the "reception of jocular tales from other cultures". Particularly with regard to Greek antiquity, it is made plausible that "early Arabic literature draw on a similar, if not largely the same, pool of ideas, topics and narrative motifs" (p. 212), which – as in the only Greek joke book that has survived, the *Philogelos* ("*Laughter-Lover*") – on the one hand concern the "stupid *scholastikos*", on the other hand human weaknesses in general (cf. p. 210). In contrast, the influence of "Buddhist jokes" is more difficult to prove (p. 212), although "the frame tale of *The thousand and one nights*, universally known through its Arabic manuscripts, owes some of its constitutive motifs to ancient Indian sources mediated to the Arabs through ancient Persian literature" (p. 213). Referring to *The book of 100 parables* that forms part of the Chinese Buddhist canon, Marzolph proves a correspondence in classical Arabic literature. However, the transmission is unlikely to have taken place in writing, but rather orally.

In his introductory essay, Bernard Schweizer had already called for further research into the role and function of laughter in Zen Buddhism with regard to the Dalai Lama, "who refers to himself as a 'professional joker'" (p. 14). The last three case studies set out to make progress on this issue. Michel Dijkstra, for example, examines laughter in this context "as a spiritual therapy" (p. 221). In order to achieve "freedom of mind" (p. 227), one must open oneself "to the manifold truths of the ten thousand things" (p. 233), but without identifying with them "as objects of desire" (p. 228). Wit and laughter help to recognize them in their relativity. A second aspect is closely linked to the first, as human desire inevitably tends towards illusion again and again. Therefore, "being able to detach yourself from all your opinions is a way to express the natural freedom of your mind and hence a way of cutting through illusion" (p. 229), and this can be found not only in the attachment to objects, but also in the self-image (p. 230). In this second respect, too, enlightenment leads through a "playing with incongruity" (p. 231). "Liberating intimacy" is a third aspect that now concerns the incongruities of communication, in which the first two aspects are constant companions. This is why this process of enlightenment cannot end, for which the "metaphor of two clear mirrors reflecting each other's light endlessly" (p. 232) is a fitting illustration.

While the Zen Buddhist stories Dijkstra deals with "function purely within a tradition", the sources Arjan Sterken "utilizes have an outward-directed function: to show why one's own tradition (either Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism) is superior to others" (p. 238). The protagonist of the narrative scenes that illustrate this function is the Chinese trickster figure Sun Wukong (Monkey King [cf. p. 235]). In a first story "the Buddhists... seem to forget much of their teachings when tempted by immortality", a second "shows Daoists who, even if specialized in magic, are unable

to outcheat the Buddhists" (p. 250), and in the third, the "Journey to the West, considered to be one of the most important novels in Chinese history" (p. 246), figures "Confucians, who see themselves as the perfect keepers of order, [in] need to call in the help of Tathagata Buddha to undo the chaos caused by Sun Wukong". Humour takes place here on two levels: "First there is an immediate reaction due to the nature of the scenes themselves, which comprises slapstick-like humour or clever solutions to situations. Next to that, however, there is the more subtle humour of the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucians failing at what they normally do best" (p. 250).

The last case study begins with a joke that should not be withheld from the reader of this review: "The Dalai Lama comes to a pizzeria and orders a pizza. / 'Alright!' the pizza maker tells him, 'that'll be thirteen dollars!' / The Dalai Lama pays with a banknote of twenty dollars. / The pizza man bakes the pizza. After some time the Dalai Lama asks him: / 'How about my change?' / 'Change comes from the inside', the pizza man answers" (p. 253). "Ancient Buddhism is not that funny" like this nowadays version, admits Paul van der Velde. But he who seeks, will also find in the sources of early India, even if it comes at the price of the risk of not being able to prove the thesis that texts considered serious today "over the years somehow lost their original double or humorous intentions" (p. 255). On the basis of several examples from the Vedic tradition, he makes it probable that behind the figure handed down as "serious and solemn" (p. 264) there was an earlier layer on which, for example, "the workings of the rituals and the abilities of the Brahmin priests" (p. 263) were satirized or whose task to "repair time and space" was compared with the disappearance and sudden reappearance of frogs (p. 266). It is as if the authoritative text had been recorded like a palimpsest on a previously written paper, without the earlier layer being able to be restored beyond doubt. Similarly, jokes may have been lost, "or they have become part of the serious lore. Their maybe funny origin is lost in time" (p. 268). In this respect, too, humour in the beginning is difficult to trace.

First of all, this anthology lives up to the etymological meaning of its name: this bouquet of flowers includes a wealth of colours and shapes, and these flowers have their origins all over the world. This bundle is also bound according to an order specified at the beginning. Or to say it again in a slightly different metaphor: According to its own claim, this anthology offers "a kaleidoscopic view of the ways in which humour and religion can be related" (p. 294). Yes, the meaning given to the concept of "humour" is also kaleidoscopic, and the fact that its "universality" is invoked (p. 28), its anthropological potential, does not change this. However, it is the consequence of a comparison with a kaleidoscope that, with its slight rotation, the image previously composed of fragments falls apart to reveal another – just as laughter (which is inextricably linked to humour in this volume at the beginning) takes on a different

meaning when it is problematized in the perspective of the Church Fathers, subjected to ethical control in the *Koran* or "in the Sunni Hadith" (p. 155) without much shyness of anthropomorphism, while the Shi'ite tradition opposes precisely this view. The situation is different again in Buddhism in its function leading to enlightenment.

In a way Yasmin Amin has reflected this kaleidoscopic approach in her introductory essay. She admits that a comprehensive theory of humour remains a *desideratum* and that this "multifaceted issue" (p. 25) can only be dealt with in a "multi-methodological approach". But one would like to ask whether her summary of previous "historical" fragments of theory, which are juxtaposed with "modern" or "contemporary" ones, recalls with sufficient thoroughness the horizons already opened up in theoretical work on humour. The fact that the "relief theory" could go back to Freud (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* [1905]), the "superiority theory" and the "incongruity theory" to Bergson (*Le Rire* [1910]) is not mentioned (with one exception p. 186), just as one searches in vain for the names of authors who tried to develop a theory of humour in the 18th century (Joseph Addison on the connection between good humour and good nature) and in the 19th century in the context of aesthetics (in Jean Paul, Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Hermann Cohen) in search of the definition of humour as a specific form in difference to irony, sarcasm or cynicism.

For indeed, if one were to take a closer look at humour as a "mood or state of mind" (p. 23), to quote the quoted Oxford dictionary, laughter would be more closely associated with joke and its related aesthetic forms of parody, satire and comedy than with humour itself. It would find its physical expression in smiles rather than in resounding laughter, which can indeed be better understood in the patterns of interpretation focusing on sociality and communication that the introductory essays provide. *Nota bene*, in his little work on humour from 1927 [*Der Humor*], Freud took this form quite seriously as a way for subjectivity to regulate itself and thus also its behaviour, in contrast to the joke as a risky form of communication (cf. p. 17). If progress is to be made in this direction to define humour as a *sui generis* phenomenon (and this does not seem to be a problem of "Western-centeredness" [p. 26], if one considers the wealth of phenomena in the case studies), the inductive method could be supplemented by working on the concept (including a deductive approach). This requirement would also be justified by the claim that humour is – and this is to be agreed with unreservedly – a general human phenomenon, and that it enriches life (p. 28).

Finally, it should be asked whether the path to the "beginning" chosen in the present study, the path *ad fontes*, should not be supplemented by the fundamental historical-theoretical question for what reasons and in what contexts religions can undergo a development in self-understanding and self-definition, and be it through a reflection on the anthropological meaning and function of religion in

general. Only the essay by Bernard Schweizer traces a history of the emancipation of humour from ecclesiastical and theological control (p. 13), thus fulfilling a moment of the concept of secularization. While there are virtually no "blasphemy-laws" in the Western world today, and especially in Europe, "an informal set of restrictions based on social control" has replaced "the formal legal apparatus to exercise a species of censorship" (p. 14). Even in the more recent history of Christianity, that is the thesis here, the question remains as to how much or what kind of humour is culturally permitted (p. 15). However, as can be seen particularly clearly in the case of Protestant Christianity and Judaism religion can undergo a development that is favourable to the humanizing function of humour, and the conceptualisation of these developments have taken place in modern times.