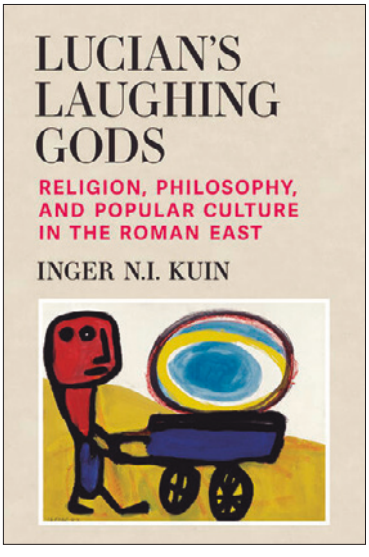
Lucian's Laughing Gods



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This book offers a fresh and holistic interpretation of the gods and religion in Lucian's comic works. The author adopts an innovative approach that contextualises the pieces within the framework of ancient religion, literary traditions, and philosophical polemics of the 2nd century CE and simultaneously attempts to reconstruct their performance context and effect on the potential audiences. The resulting rich and engaging discussion will be of great interest to the scholars of Lucian's corpus and Second Sophistic, and to anyone dealing with the phenomenon of comedy and comic in antiquity, especially when it is applied to religious matters.

The main object of Kuin's analysis is Lucian's representation of the gods and of their interaction with humans in the comic speeches and dialogues. The author does not go through the texts systematically but instead concentrates on several themes, such as anthropomorphism and morality (Chapter 2), sacrifice (Chapter 3), sex and marriage (Chapter 4), politics (Chapter 5), and sorcery (Chapter 6), that are important for her argument; within the development of each theme, the relevant texts are presented and cited. The Introduction outlines the author's approach (explaining among other things why cognitive science of religion is not being applied) and includes a brief overview of the theory of laughter.

One of the book's most significant contributions is the identification and examination of the philosophical underpinnings of Lucian's comic works. Kuin convincingly demonstrates how Lucian weaves into his comic scenes satirical responses to prevailing concepts of the philosophy of religion, expounded in works by Maximus of Tyre, Dio Chrysostom, Aelius Aristides, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, and others. The author argues that Lucian addresses and challenges through comedy such ideas as: gods being highest moral examples and models of personal and political virtue, divine ataraxia and providence, reciprocity of sacrifices, (non) normativity of certain religious practices, free will, and fate. It is thus established in the book that Lucian's comedy was part of an ongoing philosophical conversation about the gods and humans. Kuin goes beyond religious concepts extending her argument to the political and social ideology built on religious ideas. According to her, Lucian consciously debunks the "theodicy of good fortune", Max Weber's term that Kuin repeatedly uses to describe the implications of Stoic and Middle Platonist theologies.

In Chapter 1, Kuin presents evidence (mainly internal such as metaliterary jokes and use of deixis) that Lucian performed his comic dialogues – a unique genre combining elements of rhetoric, philosophical dialogue and comedy – himself. She then suggests that the performance context was similar to that of the deliveries of speeches and that Lucian's audiences were large and mixed, consisting both of uneducated masses and elitist *pepaideumenoi*. This assumption is further used to explain the social aspects of Lucian's representation of gods and religion, which would appeal to the underprivileged among his listeners.

In Chapter 2 and 3, Kuin explores among other things Lucian's reliance on the earlier tradition of comedy and laughter in Greek literature and in particular discusses parallels with Aristophanes' comic treatment of gods and rituals. Lucian was undoubtedly familiar with Old Comedy, including lost plays. The question that could be of significance for the discussion but is not asked in the book is whether his (mixed) audiences were equally knowledgeable. I wonder if the performances of

ancient comic plays that are attested for the 2nd century CE (*e.g.*, at the *Demostheneia* in Oinoanda and other agonistic festivals) could be considered as part of popular culture as well. If so, Lucian's representations of gods receive an additional layer of intertexts that would resonate with his listeners.

Regarding Roman popular culture, although it features in the title, it receives only sporadic discussion in the book, including parallels between Lucian's texts and comic representation of gods on vases, Babrius' fables, Roman pantomime, and the later collection of jokes *Philogelos*. The book lacks a clear definition of the term 'popular culture' and an explanation of why certain sources, such as inscriptions, graffiti, or papyri, are not referenced.

Let us now turn to the relation between Lucian's mockery and actual religious practices. Kuin's presumption throughout the book is that the gods of ancient Greek religion could not be in any way damaged by human laughter directed at them; on the contrary, laughter and aischrology were a natural part of ancient ritual practices (and still were regarded as such in the 2nd century CE). Hence, comic representations in Lucian's pieces should not be regarded as blasphemy or criticism of religion. This claim (with which I fully agree) is examined at length in Chapter 2.

On the other hand, the author interprets Lucian's satire as an invitation for audiences to question their relationship with the gods in daily life (p. 32). One of the book's fundamental assumptions is that the divine characters of Lucian's dialogues are recognised by his audiences as the gods of their cultic experiences (*e.g.* p. 3 "laughing and laughable gods who were being worshipped in everyday religious practice", and p. 19 "Lucian's comedy of gods was part of a long Greek tradition (…), in which literature and cult converge", following a citation from Olga Freidenberg about cult character of Lucian's satire).

However, when speaking of rhetorical literature of the 2nd century CE, this statement is far from self-evident and requires some deeper exploration. The audiences were likely conscious of the conventions of the literary genres and therefore their experience while attending a comic performance did not overlap with or influence their religious experiences and beliefs. Lucian himself addresses the distance between his dialogues and ritual events in the programmatic dialogue *Fisherman*, which Kuin makes central to her argument (pp. 63-64 and 80-82). Diogenes in attacking Parrhesiades (*alter ego* of Lucian) says that mockery is allowed only in special contexts, namely, at religious festivals, and the circumstances of Parrhesiades's performance do not qualify as such. In her defence of Parrhesiades, Philosophy confirms the appropriateness of Comedy for the festival emphasising its conventionality, and hence the division between literature and reality. Moreover, some elements that point to the

setting of the dialogues in classical Athens, such as foreign gods portrayed as metics in the *Assembly of the gods*, further highlight the distance of Lucian's comedy from real life.

Even if Lucian's intention indeed was, as Kuin suggests, to expose his listeners to the inconsistencies of religious practices, would they not merely enjoy these as good jokes for the sake of entertainment, leaving reflection on religious matters to other more serious genres and occasions? Similarly, we would find jokes of a stand-up comedian about absurdities of bureaucracy and shortcomings of democracy funny and relatable yet continue to be law-abiding citizens not questioning the status quo after the show.

In any case, just like Lucian's comedy did not desacralise religion and ancient gods, my critical remarks in no way undermine the relevance of the book for the scholarship, especially for our understanding of the representation of religion in ancient literature.