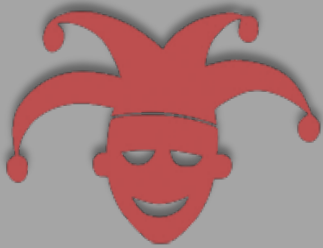


THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

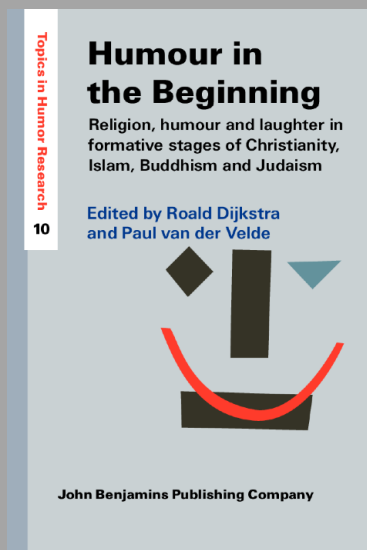
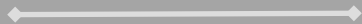
May 2023

Roald Dijkstra and Paul van der Velde, eds. 2022. *Humour in the Beginning: Religion, humour and laughter in formative stages of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. ISBN (hardcover): 978-90-272-1153-8 ISBN (eBook): 978-90-272-5746-8



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This series of articles resulted from an international conference held in the Soeterbeeck, a former convent in Ravenstein, the Netherlands, in 2019. Four humour scholars participating at the conference were asked to write short essays on the topic summarised by the book's title. The essays were then distributed to writers of the subsequent case studies, which are here organised into the three broad areas of Christianity and Judaism, the Qur'an and early Arabic literature, and Buddhism; They are followed by an integrative concluding chapter.

In the first of the introductory essays, Giselinde Kuipers lists the five ingredients of humour (its connection with laughter, its basis in incongruity, its non-serious nature, its connection with transgression of some kind, the fact that it often has a target). She notes that these elements make humour a risky form of communication and proposes a fourfold division for humour as it applies to religion: humour in religion, religion in humour, religion against humour, and humour against religion. Bernard Schweitzer's second essay notes that humour and religion are "odd bedfellows" which are often in a state of friction but that human societies have worked out ways of reconciling them or pitting them against each other. He suggests that, in Christianity, the temporal change in their relationship may be illustrated by contrasting the gentle ribbing of pious individuals in Dante to the blasphemous mockery of God in the work of David Javerbaum, a contemporary American comic. Schweitzer concedes that this pattern of progressive comic permissiveness does not fit clearly with other religions.

Inger Kuin's essay notes the importance of considering the person or group who appreciate/s a humorous event, as well as the creator and object of the event. She argues that the (unproven) trajectory of increasing liberality proposed by Schweitzer for Christianity may not be applicable in other historical contexts (exemplified by the Homeric epic), and notes the inappropriateness of positing a sharp break between Dante and earlier historical periods. The fourth essay, by Yasmin Amin, briefly summarises the main theories of humour: the classical approach, historical theories (relief, superiority, incongruity) and modern/contemporary theories (response, stimulus, functional). She suggests that the "child-like innocent laughter" reportedly enjoyed by the Prophet Mohammed does not fit easily into any of the above models, and argues for a "more comprehensive, yet simpler, model" which allows for the extraordinary complexity of humorous events across time and culture.

In the first of the case study chapters, established scholar Ingvild Gilhus examines the use of the laughter motif in ancient (probably monastic) Christianity as revealed in six of the Nag Hammadi texts (4th to 5th century CE Egypt). Such laughter is derisive, often strongly so. However, she argues, because it is a serious rhetorical tool which guides the reader towards superior knowledge, it is not inconsistent with the strong antigelastical tendencies of ancient Christianity. Nicole Graham then discusses the views of Clement of Alexandria (150-212CE) on laughter. Influenced by Plato and Aristotle as well as the Christian Scriptures, Clement considered that neither laughing nor smiling is appropriate when it does not serve a rational purpose, or is disorderly or immoderate in degree or frequency. However, laughter which is rational and controlled can be appropriately used as a pedagogical tool, or to mock the views of non-Christians.

Another case-study examines the letters of Gregory of Nazianzus (circa 329-390). Floris Bernard notes that, while Gregory was generally averse to humour, in a letter concerned with desirable epistolary style, he allowed that "jokes and riddles", among other adornments, can be used in moderation to give letters grace and charm, and to maintain friendship. Pierluigi Lanfranchi then discusses the smile of the martyr in Early Christian literature. In line with Greek philosophical tradition, those writers differentiated laughing, often seen as a sign of emotional excess, from smiling, which was seen as indicating self-control and wisdom. The martyr's smile thus not only indicates courage in the face of death, but is also a provocative response, exposing the stupidity and absurdity of violence.

In the single Judaistic chapter, Reuven Kiperwasser examines the role of humour in expressing theological ideas in the Babylonian Talmud. One story discussed at length involves God Almighty coming in disguise as a joker to converse with, deceive, and scoff at, the Assyrian emperor. In fact, the main objects of this mockery are theological views that the narrator is attempting to highlight.

While theatre was among the forms of mass-entertainment specifically condemned by early church leaders and Christian writers, not all Christians agreed. Roald Dijkstra examines some unusual mime reports from late antiquity, which reveal that a small literary genre originally intended to ridicule Christianity in some cases showed

the actor suddenly converting to Christianity and dying as a martyr. Dijkstra suggests these could have been written by Christians wanting to reconcile the entertainment of the theatre with their faith. A further case study is that in which Victor Hunink discusses the *Cena Cypriani* (“Banquet of St Cyprian”), a 4th century Christian *curiosum* of unknown authorship. It describes a wedding in which many, mostly biblical, characters appear and engage in quite uncharacteristic, and sometimes violent, unexpected, or incredible behaviour. Hunink finds in this work suggestions of postmodernism and even the playful irreverence of Monty Python and reminds readers of the work’s crucial role in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*.

In the first of four Islamic articles, Farooq Hassan reflects on the use of humour in the early Islamic period. Smiling, as well as moderate and balanced laughter, was permissible, but not excessive laughter, though there are clear examples of the Prophet laughing heartily. It was believed sinful to use humour based on lies, or to use it to mock or belittle others, or to arouse fear, whereas virtuous and benign humour was to be encouraged. Next, Yasmin Amin discusses examples in the Sunni Hadith of the Prophet describing instances where God Himself laughs to express His satisfaction and pleasure, and to reassure believers of His mercy and benevolence. She discusses why these depictions are universally rejected in the Shi’ite Hadith corpus on the grounds of veracity and authenticity.

Geert Jan van Gelder discusses some of the poems of the great Arabic poet, Abu Nuwas (c. 756-813), focusing on both his obscene poems and those which flout or parody the precepts of Islam. The author notes that the term “normative Islam” tends to refer to a puritanical form of Islam often quite different to the way it is and has been practiced. Humour scholar Ulrich Marzolph discusses the fact that, among the very large repertoire of classical (9th to early 13th century) Arabic jokes and jests, there are a number with corresponding versions in ancient Greek and Buddhist sources. While it is likely that some have been orally transmitted from Greek sources, making a clear connection to Buddhist jokes is more problematic.

Opening the section on Buddhism, Michel Dijkstra contrasts the negative view of humour in early Indian Buddhism with its use as a “skilful means” of gaining enlightenment in the Daoist-influenced Buddhism of China. Zen masters used jokes to open the minds of their students, to cut through illusion, and to attain a liberating connectedness to all things. Arjan Sterken then discusses the humorous figure of the Monkey King, who occurs regularly in the historical discourse concerning the relative superiority of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, in scenes where he steals or is tempted to steal food. Three texts are discussed, including the well-known *The Journey to the West*, in each of which the Monkey King is employed differently. In the third Buddhism case study, Paul van der Velde begins his essay by noting that, in contrast to many later Zen stories, “Ancient Buddhism is not that funny”. Using four examples from early Indian writings, he argues that some writings may well have been intended cynically, or as a joke, but have lost their intended meaning once the original context is forgotten.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Roald Dijkstra notes the relevance of historical material to the present day and attempts to summarise current knowledge in the areas covered by the earlier chapters. A major section entitled “Approaches and basic principles” briefly explores what is meant by the “beginning” with respect to different religions, the pervasiveness of humour in human history, the connection between humour and laughter, and issues arising from the definition, nature, and functions of humour. Seven aspects of religious humour are then discussed: Differences between religions concerning the nature of the divine, the use of superiority humour, the use of humour didactically, the differential use of humour “for fun”, whether humour needs to be moderate (“Not too much, nor too loud”), the difficulty of assessing historically the category of humour against religion, and how religious rules (sometimes against humour and laughter) are often quite different to reality.

Dijkstra’s overall conclusion that “humour is a protean phenomenon” points to the many unanswered questions in the area, suggesting the need for both further relevant case-study material around religious “beginnings”, and further exploration of patterns within that material. He notes the pre-eminence of context as the common feature in all the case-studies, using as an example the different political, social, and religious environment of early Christianity compared with early Islam. This general point might help provide direction for future research.

Almost without exception, I found these chapters stimulating and thought provoking. Infrequently, there are statements that require specialist background knowledge, as in occasional allusions or short (untranslated) passages of Latin or German. This is rare, however, and the generalist humour scholar without a background in early religion will find the book accessible and readable. Indeed, such readers might find it useful as an entry point to the understanding of a religion or a religious community, although the seriousness of the topics and the complexity of the discussion demands a graduate readership at least. The volume usefully collects some of the leading scholars who have written on the topic of humour and religion, making it an excellent foray into the complexities of this not very well understood field.

DAVID RAWLINGS



Following completion of a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oxford University (Magdalen College, 1983), David Rawlings worked for most of his academic career in the Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne, where he is currently an honorary Senior Fellow. In 2016, he completed a Master of Arts (Theology) degree at the University of Divinity, Melbourne. The focus of his research has been personality psychology, particularly the interface between personality and such areas as humour, aesthetic preference and creativity, religious belief and experience, and psychopathology. David is a long-standing member of the AHSN Review Panel.