

8. Humour and Religion

Pause and Reflect

Can you think of any objections that religions or religious people might have to humour?

Humour and laughter might appear to be removed from the question of morality—this is the implication of Howard Jacobson’s view as we’ve seen. Though they have moral consequences, humour and laughter sometimes look amoral. As Vassilis Saroglou has written, ‘humour seems to be located in an area beyond the distinction of good and evil: it implies an “arrest of moral judgment.”’⁴⁷ This may be one of the reasons why there has been such an uneasy relationship between religion and humour over the years. Indeed, according to Saroglou, there is strong evidence for suggesting that religion and humour are incompatible, certainly in a psychological sense: in his view a strongly religious disposition seems to be at odds with a sense of humour. For one thing a religious temperament suggests a desire for meaning, and a tendency to privilege unity and integration. By contrast humour—particularly absurdist humour—can challenge meaning and undermine unity. To make his point Saroglou cites Milan Kundera’s excellent distinction between tragedy and comedy:

By providing us with the lovely illusion of human greatness, the tragic brings us consolation. The comic is crueller: it brutally reveals the meaninglessness of everything.⁴⁸

47 Vassilis Saroglou, ‘Religion and Sense of Humor: An A Priori Incompatibility? Theoretical Considerations from a Psychological Perspective,’ *Humor* 15–2 (2002), 191–214.

48 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, Translated by L. Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 126.

Comedy's association with meaninglessness is at odds with religion's desire for meaning. In this sense religion is at odds with philosophy too: traditionally the latter is about asking questions, while the former assumes it knows the answers! Also, as we have seen, humour is born of incongruity and ambiguity, qualities which allow it to challenge norms and conventional ways of thinking; this may be another reason for incompatibility between humour and religion: the latter is inclined toward conservative thinking, and can rarely tolerate dissent from sacred narratives:

It seems reasonable to suspect that religion may not be attracted to a celebration of incongruity, ambiguity and, most importantly, possibility of nonsense. In more strictly cognitive terms, one may hypothesize that the perception, or at least enjoyment, of incongruity is not encouraged by religion (Vassilis Saroglou, 'Religion and Sense of Humor,' 195).

Also religions tend to privilege security and reliability, and therefore the element of experimentation often found in humour can be unsettling for people of a religious disposition. Religions are underpinned by predictability whereas humour depends on surprise. Humour's associations with unproductive play, hedonism and self-indulgence also sit uneasily with religion, as do its links to taboo topics like sex and aggression. Humour is at odds with literal truth too, of course, while religions tend to see lapses from truth as morally dubious.

However, while Saroglou's argument seems to suggest that humour and religion appeal to different kinds of thinking, humour can play a part in religion, and this section will go on to consider some of the ways in which humour features in three of the world's great religions.

8.1 Humour and Christianity

Early Christianity has a history of being critical of humour and laughter. The Bible makes several negative references to both, including famously in The Book of Ecclesiastes, purportedly written by Solomon:

Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the coun-

tenance the heart is made better.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth (Ecclesiastes 7: 3–4; King James Version).

This warning against laughter is a warning against succumbing to pleasure in the world; the implication is that laughter only offers short-lived fulfilment, and in the long-run a pious, serious, sorrowful life is better for the soul. Sorrow might be painful, but pain is ennobling.

In the first years of Christianity, Christians sought to define themselves against behaviour associated with pagan Rome, and this was one factor in shaping their attitude to laughter. For the early Christians there was virtue in self-restraint because it contrasted with the debauchery and excesses of Rome. Laughter came to be allied with such excesses and, given its physical dimension, with the body and possible lack of control over base instincts. Later in middle ages this mistrust of laughter continued: many Christian writers banned laughter altogether as they associated it with a variety of sins; Barry Sanders, for instance, notes that for Hildegard of Bingen laughter was linked to sin because it offered a relief from labour—in other words it offered relief from a punishment meted out by God for defying him in the Garden of Eden. We only need laughter because we are sinful, and we should aspire instead to be in Heaven where, purged of our sins, we may experience laughter-free bliss (*Sudden Glory*, 129).

The Church emphasised piety and seriousness, then, deeming laughter to be something irreverent that mocked Heaven; indeed it was considered one of the worst vices for Christian monks, as Jerry Palmer has written:

In the earliest monastic regulations (in the fifth century) laughter is condemned as the grossest breach of the rule of silence, and later it is considered as a breach of the rule of humility; it is also considered the greatest dirtying of the mouth, which should act as a filter for good and evil to enter and leave the body; therefore it must be prevented (*Taking Humour Seriously*, 44).

Though the Church authorities tried various methods to outlaw laughter, there is evidence that this didn't work and that jokes flourished even in monasteries. Eventually the hard line on laughter eased somewhat and in medieval times the Church attempted to make a distinction between good and bad laughter. The smile came to be seen as an acceptable alternative to laughter, and was eventually deemed to be something that should be cultivated as evidence of good humour, sound character, and even saintliness.

It has often been noted that Jesus never laughs in the Bible, although he is shown weeping more than once. The issue of Jesus's apparent lack of humour has been a huge one for many Christian theologians. If laughter is an essential human quality, something that sets us apart from animals, then signs of humour and laughter become an important factor in showing Christ's human status. Medieval theologians scrutinised the Bible assiduously for evidence of humour, and there was even an annual conference on this issue organised by the University of Paris in the thirteenth century. Genuine evidence of Christ's humour is very hard to find, although Simon Critchley makes reference to the story of the marriage at Cana (John 2: 1–11) as a possible contender. This is the occasion of Christ's first miracle, and the story suggests that Mary ordered Jesus to help out when the host informed her that the wine had run dry: 'They have no more wine' she tells Jesus, to which he replies, 'Woman, my time has not yet come.' Mary then seems to take the matter out of his hands by telling the servants to, 'Do whatever he tells you;' at this point Jesus gives in and performs the miracle. Critchley compares this scene to Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, and Brian's mother's excellent line: 'he's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy.' I'm not sure the comparison is that convincing, although there is perhaps a parallel in the potentially humorous dynamic between a Messiah and his mother. The fact that Jesus is willing to submit and do his mother's bidding despite his elevated status perhaps signals a capacity for humour. As will be seen, however, humour and laughter have featured in the history of Christianity in more radical ways.

8.2 Holy Fools

In the discussion of carnival humour earlier I mentioned the Feast of Fools, and this is something that began in the Church. It was an annual ecclesiastical festival in which priests and clerks would engage in impious activities, parodying Church dignitaries and rituals. In terms of Christian theology, the laughter associated with the Feast of Fools symbolised vice and human failings: the low behaviour at the Feast represented the lowly nature of man and his urgent need for spiritual deliverance; in practise, however, it probably served a similar function to a lay carnival, offering the clergy a chance to let off steam, a welcome, and one would imagine psychologically necessary diversion.

Humour and laughter have been seen as a route to the spiritual life by some Christians: there are certainly comic elements associated with the phenomenon of the Holy Fool. The sixth century Christian monk, Simeon is the patron saint of Holy Fools; he adopted this role in his efforts to serve the Lord, and his behaviour often had a comic facet, characterized as it was by clowning, bizarre pranks and feigned madness. So-called Foolishness-for-Christ has a long tradition in both Western and Eastern Christianity, and variations of the Holy Fool phenomenon can be seen in other religions too, including Judaism and Islam. The purpose is often to use clowning, grotesquery, and extreme behaviour as a way of shocking people out of conventional ways of thinking in order to make them more receptive to the otherness of religious experience. There are references to holy folly in the Bible itself: Peter L. Berger mentions David's insane naked dancing in front of the Ark of the Covenant in the Second Book of Samuel as a clear example. He sees significance also in Jesus's statement that we should try to be more like children, and in his decision to enter Jerusalem on a donkey (with its traditional associations with folly). Berger makes the point too that, in the final moments of his life, 'Jesus was crowned as the king of folly' by the Roman soldiers who made him endure a mock coronation with his crown of thorns and reed sceptre. In other words the notion of folly seems to have a place in the Christian narrative; for Berger the behaviour of the fool

becomes a way of deprivileging reason, offering a fresh perspective on the apparent irrationality of faith: when we encounter holy folly, ‘the empirical world, far from being paramount, is disclosed as being very finite indeed. The madness of the fool is now seen to be the infinitely more profound truth.’⁴⁹ Folly can offer insight into the fleeting nature of the empirical world by allowing us access to another, non-rational way of thinking. For people without faith, faith belongs to the realm of fantasy; however the fool’s madness turns the reality/fantasy hierarchy on its head: for the fool the *real* fantasy is mundane reality. The fool refuses to partake of reality, with its faith-denying rationality. Instead he embraces the ostensibly irrational, which refuses to be constrained by logic and reason; in this way folly becomes wisdom, as Enid Welsford writes in her history of the fool:

The theist believes in possible beatitude, because he disbelieves in the dignified isolation of humanity. To him, therefore [...] comedy is serious [...] because it is a foretaste of the truth; the Fool is wiser than the Humanist, and clownage is less frivolous than the deification of humanity.⁵⁰

Comedy offers a preview of whatever lies beyond the human; it reveals the latter’s misplaced preoccupation with its own affairs, and its intolerance of anything that contravenes the codes of reason. In this sense humour loses its connotations of frivolousness, and can even provide a ‘way in’ to religious conceptions of truth and wisdom.

So this reveals a way in which humour can be compatible with religion, and even facilitate religious insight. Indeed, the idea of the Holy Fool continues to inspire some Christians: there is a UK based performance troupe called Holy Fools UK who perform as clowns at churches. The membership is drawn from all denominations and their mission is to use clowning as a way of promoting their faith.

49 Peter L. Berger. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1997) 195.

50 Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961) 326–7.

Creative Writing Exercise

Create a character who feels that everyone in the world apart from them is living in a fiction produced by an evil genius. The fiction depends on logic and reason for its existence, but every time someone has an illogical or irrational thought, a crack appears in the fiction. Laughter at bizarre humour is its biggest enemy. If enough people can be made to entertain or be entertained by so-called 'irrational thoughts' then the fiction will collapse altogether and a higher truth will be revealed. It is your character's mission to try to achieve this.

8.3 Judaism and Humour

Arguably the association between Judaism and humour is stronger than in Christianity; certainly there is a tradition of humour in Jewish culture that can be traced back centuries and is still with us in the modern world. Once again it is worth considering Ted Cohen's thoughts on this issue. According to Cohen, Jewish humour is particularly associated with jokes that deal in incomprehensibility, and humour that offers bizarre, apparently illogical logic. He quotes the following joke as an example:

A man is lying asleep in bed with his wife one night when she wakes him, saying, 'close the window; it's cold outside.'

He grunts, rolls over, and goes back to sleep.

His wife nudges him. 'Close the window; it's cold outside.'

He moans, pulls the blankets closer, and goes back to sleep.

Now his wife kicks him firmly and pushes him with both hands. 'Go on. Close the window; it's cold outside.'

Grumbling, he slides out of bed, shuffles to the window, and bangs it closed. Glaring at his wife he says, 'So now it's warm outside?' (Ted Cohen, *Jokes*, 46)

This joke makes no sense on one level, and yet there does seem to be a weird logic to the punch line. The narrative is structured around a conflict that ends with a statement that doesn't resolve it; rather it adds another dimension to it, which seems to justify the husband's initial reluctance to yield to his wife's request. It suggests the futil-

ity of his action. While he has agreed to his wife's demand he also implies that he has wasted his time in doing so. We get the impression that the characters in this narrative could continue to argue in perpetuity: the widow is closed but the issue is not. Cohen finds philosophical precedent for such jokes in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, and suggests that they suit Judaism because argument is so fundamental to the Jewish tradition; there is no final word or answer in Judaism: when someone studies the Jewish faith their engagement is characterised by never-ending debate and argument; there is, to use Cohen's words, 'no systematic finality. In a word there is no Pope' (Cohen, *Jokes*, 66). The Jewish tradition more readily accepts the incomprehensible then; it accepts that life is baffling and that there are no simple answers—just like there is no end to the conflict between the chilly woman and her weary husband. There are certainly many Jewish jokes not cited by Cohen that would appear to support his argument, not least this one: 'What do you get when you lock two Jews in a room? Three opinions.' Here is another:

A rabbi was in hospital recovering from a heart attack when a representative of the congregation visited him.

'Rabbi, he said, 'I have good news and bad news.'

'First tell me the good news'

'On behalf of the board I am here to wish you a speedy recovery.'

'That's great' said the rabbi, 'what's the bad news?'

'The vote was 7 to 4.'

Again this is clearly a joke which has the topic of argument at its heart, and which implies that at least one dispute remains unresolved!

According to Cohen there is evidence of God laughing in the Talmud; he cites a reference to Elijah who claims to have seen it: God apparently laughs when he hears about human attempts to interpret one of his laws so that they might better understand his will; however, the humans in question end up ignoring God's own opinion on the matter, constructing instead an interpretation of God's will at odds with God's own statement. This is a laugh at the expense of the human condition, then, and an indication that there is something about

our predicament that we should find funny: principally its absurdity. It also suggests that when confronted by absurdity laughter is a valid response; perhaps the only response.

Cohen also offers an interesting interpretation of the story of Abraham in Genesis. When God tells the 100 year old Abraham that he is going to have a son, Abraham laughs, as does his 90 year old wife Sarah. This is understandable, of course. However Sarah is frightened of offending God, and when he makes reference to her laughter she denies it. Importantly, God insists on her acknowledging it. It could be argued that Sarah's laughter at God's plan is indicative of her lack of faith, but Cohen has another reading: he points to the passage following the birth of her son, Isaac, where she says: 'God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' (Genesis 21: 1-7). For Cohen this could refer both to the gift of Isaac, whose name means laughter, and to Sarah's laughter when she heard God's intention. Laughter is God's gift, then, and this notion is further supported by God's decision to have Abraham spare Isaac from sacrifice, instructing him to kill a ram instead; in effect God is instructing Abraham to set laughter free: 'directing that laughter be freed, let loose in the world.' (Cohen, *Jokes*, 55). As suggested, the laughter signifies helplessness in the face of ignorance; it acknowledges our limitations, and perhaps provides the only consolation. Cohen states his thesis in the following terms:

What I claim is that Abraham, Sarah, and those of us who laugh at these jokes are all laughing at the same kind of thing. It is something not fully comprehensible, and our laughter is an acceptance of the thing in its incomprehensibility. It is the acceptance of the world, a world that is endlessly incomprehensible, always baffling, a world that is beyond us and yet our world (Cohen, *Jokes*, 60).

Given their history of debating apparently irresolvable arguments, Jewish people are inclined toward this kind of laughter, according to Cohen; they are more willing than most to accept the incomprehensible 'in their wonder,' and thus for them laughter becomes 'an echo of faith' that somewhere, beyond the ostensibly illogical, lies meaning.

It has to be said that, while there are jokes that support Cohen's view, it is possible to find examples of Jewish joking that seem to close arguments down rather than leave them unresolved; also there are examples that appear to abandon the quest for meaning altogether: for instance there is a well-known humorous Yiddish proverb that goes, 'If you want to alleviate your worries, wear tighter shoes,' which would work as an effective way of terminating most arguments! Still, Cohen's thesis is an interesting attempt to establish a parallel between jokes and the narrative that purports to give meaning to the Jewish experience.

Creative Writing Exercise

Try to create a comic argument between two stubborn characters that involves an apparently irresolvable issue. For instance, 'it is more acceptable to shoot birds than rabbits because rabbits don't shit on your head.' Have them discuss the issue from as many angles as possible for as long as possible until the futility of the argument becomes comically apparent. This is one particularly entertaining way of exploring the comic possibilities of illogical-logic, incomprehensibility, and the farcicality of the human situation.

8.4 Humour and Buddhism

Humour has a role in Buddhism, perhaps more so than with any other religion, but this was not always the case. In the early stages of its development in ancient India, humour and laughter were actively discouraged by Buddhist masters; it was actually an offence for monks to laugh in public. Michel Clasquin offers the following quote from Buddhist scripture as an example of early Buddhist attitudes to humour:

One should not go amidst the houses with loud laughter. Whoever out of disrespect, laughing a great laugh, goes amidst the houses, there is an offence of wrongdoing (but) there is no offence if it is unintentional, if he is not thinking, if he does not know, if he is ill, if he only smiles when the matter is one for laughing, if there are accidents, if he is mad, if he is the

first wrong–doer.⁵¹

It was felt that laughter should be kept in check then; however this can be contrasted with the approach to humour and laughter found in Zen Buddhism, which emerged in China around fifteen hundred years later. Here there is a much more positive view, and the difference can be seen in Buddhist iconography: the serene, but essentially humourless image of the Indian Buddha is replaced by the corpulent Chinese laughing Buddha. Also humour comes to occupy a central role in the education of monks in the ways of Zen:

humour in Zen Buddhism has been changed from something to be avoided if at all possible to a teaching device in its own right. Time and again we read of Zen monks and their masters laughing uproariously, of revered teachers clowning around, playing the fool, joking even about things ordinarily held sacred by other Buddhists, not excluding the Buddha himself (Michel Clasquin, 'Real Buddhas Don't Laugh,' 99).

For Clasquin, the differences in attitude reflect different philosophical positions on humour and laughter. The Buddhists of ancient India tended to think of humour in terms of superiority. In the extract cited from ancient Indian scripture, for instance, the underlying assumption is that laughter is inappropriate because the monks would be using it to elevate their own position in relation to the people of 'the houses,' and hence disrespecting them. Even if their position is indeed superior, this superiority should be shown through humility, not through boastful laughter. Clasquin draws an interesting parallel between this and how people from higher social strata in general relate to humour: 'If laughter expresses a feeling of superiority, and if one is already convinced of one's superior status, then laughter becomes otiose and humour, the object of laughter, an unnecessary luxury' ('Real Buddhas Don't Laugh,' 111). This conception of humour can be contrasted with that among Chinese Zen Buddhists. They think of humour more in terms of incongruity,

51 Michel Clasquin, 'Real Buddhas Don't Laugh: Attitudes towards Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China,' *Social Identities*, Volume 7, Number 1, 2001, 97–116 (97).

and this is why it is valued as a useful teaching aid. Zen Buddhists feel that before we can achieve enlightenment we must jettison our attachment to everything that shapes our thinking. We need to relinquish conventional models of thought, and we can only do so if we find ways of circumventing the rational mind. The task is to free ourselves from the ego and the notion that it has any meaning in the broader scheme. The incongruous nature of humour can help us to do this; humour can invert concepts and create startling contrasts in ways that shock students out of their predictable thought patterns, enabling them to side-step rational thought, opening the mind to ‘truths’ that would ordinarily seem counterintuitive. This is the function of *kōans*—the questions or statements given by Zen masters to their students to help them in their quest for enlightenment. The answers to these questions cannot be deduced by logic, or with reference to existing knowledge, but must be arrived at via intuition. In Western thinking the *kōan* has come to denote an ambiguous or unanswerable question, but Zen teaching does anticipate an answer, although there may be more than one. The student is asked to reflect on the *kōan* until they arrive at a satisfactory response. *Kōans* are often given by the master at the conclusion of a dialogue, then the student is given time to consider the potential meaning. Perhaps the most famous example of a *kōan*, for instance, is: ‘what is the sound of one hand clapping?’ This question itself defies logic and as such invites an illogical or humorous response. Occasionally the *kōan* is intended to help the student understand the irrelevance of hierarchy, reinforcing the notion that nothing is better than anything else; or they can be employed to reveal how outwardly dissimilar things are actually united in essence, helping students to think in terms of unity rather than duality. The following well-known *kōan*, ‘Echo Asks about Buddha,’ potentially serves both functions:

A monk asked Hogen, ‘I, Echo, ask you, Master. What is Buddha?’

Hogen said, ‘You are Echo.’

You can see how this might encourage a student to comprehend the irrelevance of the distinction between himself and Buddha, and of

the hierarchy between master and pupil. It has the characteristics of humour, of course, because there is an incongruity between what Echo expects to hear and what the master actually says: as with a joke, the student must move beyond conventional thinking in order to get the point.

Creative Writing Exercise

Try to construct a question/answer style kōan that expresses the illusory nature of difference in the way that the 'Echo Asks about Buddha' kōan does. Experiment with different questions and off-beat answers until you have one that you feel might conceivably be germane to the issue. Think of it in terms of writing a joke that only another joker on the same wavelength will understand!