

ROALD DIJKSTRA – PAUL VAN DER VELDE (eds), *Humour in the Beginning. Religion, Humour and Laughter in Formative Stages of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism* (Topics in humor research 10). Amsterdam – Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2022. XII, 306 pp. – ISBN 978-90-272-5746-8

• PRZEMYSŁAW MARCINIAK, Institute of Literary Studies, University of Silesia in Katowice | Hamburg Institute for Advanced Study
(przemyslaw.marciniak@us.edu.pl)

Humour studies is a serious discipline, which that has recently gained in popularity. Scholars have not only investigated humor and laughter as present sociological and cultural phenomena but have also delved into the more difficult subject of historical humor studies. The humor of the past is a slippery concept; reconstructing what chronologically and culturally distant cultures considered funny and laughable is challenging. In his chapter on humor in Byzantium, JOHN HALDON convincingly shows that one must be familiar with the economic and social reality of the Byzantine Empire to understand the humor in the *Ptochoprodromika*.¹ The situation becomes even more complicated when one adds religion to this mix. As BERNARD SCHWEIZER, one of the contributors to the volume under review, aptly claims, “Humour and religion are odd bedfellows” (p. 11). This statement, reiterated by several contributors to the volume, has been proven right on many occasions. Not so long ago, we witnessed extremely violent reactions to making fun of religion (namely the reaction after the publications of satirical images in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*). On the other hand, the reaction of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to the satirical musical *The Book of Mormon* (replete with profanities) was very moderate.²

This volume, edited by ROALD DIJKSTRA and PAUL VAN DER VELDE, is not the first to tackle humor in religions from a historical perspective,³

1. JOHN HALDON, *Humour and the Everyday in Byzantium*, in GUY HALSALL (ed.), *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Cambridge 2002, p. 50.

2. See, for instance, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/07/book-mormon-musical-south-park> (accessed 10.10.2023).

3. See, for instance, eds. HANS GEYBELS – WALTER VAN HERCK (eds), *Humour and Religion. Challenges and Ambiguities*. London 2011.

but unlike earlier studies, this collection is purposefully limited to the respective religions' beginnings (called "formative stages" by the editors). This assures a respectable level of coherence (which is not always possible). The volume comprises 19 chapters, with four designated "essays" in the book's first part. These chapters are authored by renowned specialists (such as GISELINDE KUIPERS, INGVILD GILHUS, and ULRICH MARZOLPH) and a group of younger researchers, and they cover topics related to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. This is a genuinely interdisciplinary volume, and one would need an equally interdisciplinary reviewer to do full justice to such a diverse collection. Scholars in humor studies who focus on past societies often stay within the boundaries of specific historical periods and languages. However, ULRICH MARZOLPH's text on the potential interconnections between Greek, Buddhist, and Arabic jokes successfully demonstrates that exceptions are possible, albeit rare.

The interdisciplinary nature of this collection is the reason I have chosen, perhaps somewhat unconventionally, to provide general comments on the volume as a whole rather than discussing each chapter in detail. I apologize for allocating more space to chapters that align closely with my research interests than to others.

As mentioned above, the volume begins with four essays, written by GISELINDE KUIPERS, BERNARD SCHWEIZER, INGER KUIN, and YASMIN AMIN. I am unsure about the rationale for labeling them as essays (although they are briefer than other pieces in the collection). Still, these chapters are intended to serve as introductory material for not only the readers but also the contributors, who often refer to them. They fulfill their purpose quite effectively. I find YASMIN AMIN's contribution particularly relevant, as she raises two pivotal issues in her chapter. First, she questions how far we can extend contemporary theories of humor to investigate culturally distant phenomena. Second, she raises another important but surprisingly seldom-discussed issue—humor theories are Western-centered, formulated by Western scholars, and much more importantly, derived from Western-centered sources (pp. 26–28). To what extent can scholars use them to discuss non-Western phenomena? This is not a new concern, but it remains valid. Her somewhat predictable response comes off a bit vague, as she argues for the need to use various tools and even a less Western-oriented theory. This ultimately boils down to whether identifiable common mechanisms behind the humorous exist across different cultures and religions. After reading a few of the chapters dealing with religious/cultural phenomena that are unfamiliar to me, I remain doubtful. Some examples

the contributors gave in “Part IV–Buddhism” were hardly amusing to me. PAUL VAN DER VELDE’s chapter “Are You Really Serious?: The Buddha, the Brahmins and Humor in the Śramaṇa Tradition of India” opens with a funny, although modern, anecdote followed by a somewhat disappointing statement: “Ancient Buddhism is not that funny” (p. 253).

The guiding principle behind nearly all the volume’s chapters remains BERNARD SCHWEIZER’s conclusion. In his essay, “Religion and Humour. The Big Picture,” he offers, “The historical study of the interplay between religion and humor, therefore, has to limit itself to case studies” (p. 16). Such a case study is presented in many chapters, be it one author (e.g., Clement of Alexandria in a chapter written by NICOLE GRAHAM) or one work (*Cena Cypriani*, discussed in a chapter penned by VINCENT HUNINK). A few are more general, such as FAROOQ HASSAN’s “Humour and Its Ethics: Reflections from the Early Islamic Era” and YASMIN AMIN’s “A Laughing God, Between Sunni Approval and Shi’ite Rejection.” Some chapters are more demanding than others because they require more knowledge from the reader (at least, this reader). Certain chapters include long collections of either original material or translations (whose accuracy I cannot evaluate).

Understandably, several chapters more or less directly address whether humor was accepted or condemned by a given religion. Do God(s) of different religions laugh? Christian writers maintain that God is emotionless, and this would exclude humor. AMIN shows in her chapter that in Islam, God can laugh; I especially liked the information that God’s laughter manifests in the clouds as thunder and lightning (p. 160). Several chapters demonstrate that particular mechanisms seem similar across various religions/cultures. DIJKSTRA, in his concluding chapter, speaks about the strong interconnectedness of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religious writers about both Christianity and Islam recommend and/or allow gentle humor but not malicious *ad personam* jokes.

While I found all chapters to be solid, well-researched, and interestingly presented, I felt that a few struggle to successfully combine the discussion about humor and religion. Or, to put it differently, some contributors were eager to look for humor in their respective texts at any cost. I enjoyed VINCENT HUNINK’s “Humour in the *Cena Cypriani*,” but I remain unconvinced that what he describes “as the elements of fun” (p. 138) in this truly peculiar work were really meant to be funny. However, I am ready to admit that I might be wrong and that the *Cena Cypriani* was intended to be

a humorous work. I had similar difficulty with the material in “The Smile of the Martyr.” FLORIS BERNARD’s elucidating chapter on the humor in Gregory of Nazianzus’ letters brilliantly shows how one of the Church fathers employed jokes in his correspondence. Still, I am not sure that this elevated humor was representative of his fellow Christians.

The volume is rounded up by a chapter by ROALD DIJKSTRA, which gives a good overview and summary of the volume’s topics.

If something is missing, it would be a notable omission of visual sources. I understand the multifaceted challenges of such a task. Attempts to identify humorous elements in visual culture are cautiously approached in Byzantine studies.

This is a well-thought-out, thought-provoking volume. While I may have some reservations, they do not diminish the overall value of this collection. It is not an easy read, but it is enjoyable and instructive.

Keywords

Laughter; religious aspects; history of wit and humor