

The Migration of Didactic Narratives across Religious Boundaries¹

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Introduction

The Latin dictum *prodesse et delectare* constitutes the backdrop against which didactic narratives in the Western world have developed over the centuries.² Owing its coinage to Horace's *Ars poetica* (verse 333), the principle of entertaining instruction reigns supreme in medieval Latin exempla and baroque *Predigtmärlein* as much as in the moral narratives told in the Enlightenment period or in didactic tales published in German schoolbooks since the eighteenth century.³ Whether deriving from the ancient dictum or resulting from independent reasoning, didactic narratives in the Muslim world are governed by a similar principle. In Arabic this principle has been coined as *al-jidd wa-'l-hazl*, «seriousness and humor».⁴ Western research has often referred to what has been perceived as a traditional opposition of learned Muslims against entertaining narratives without any inherent instructive value. This opposition can be aptly illustrated by a number of quotes from Arabic literature before the Mongol period.⁵ Most prominently, it has been voiced by Ibn al-Nadīm, a tenth century

¹ Earlier versions of this essay have been published as «Seir-e qessehâ-ye ta'limi dar bein-e mazâheb» [Lerngeschichten im Rahmen der verschiedenen Religionen; Translated by K. Jahândâri]. In: *Bokhârâ* 7 (Mordâd/Shahrivar 1378/1999), 372–381 and «Interreligiöse Lerngeschichten». In: *Iranzamin* 12/6–7 (1999/2000), 281–291.

² See Curtius, Ernst Robert: *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*. Second ed. Bern 1954, 419–434.

³ Tubach, Frederic C.: *Index Exemplorum. A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*. Helsinki 1969; Moser-Rath, Elfriede: *Predigtmärlein der Barockzeit*. Exempel, Sage, Schwank und Fabel in geistlichen Quellen des oberdeutschen Raumes. Berlin/New York 1964; Alzheimer, Heidrun: *Handbuch zur narrativen Volksaufklärung. Moralische Geschichten 1780–1848*. Berlin/New York 2004; Tomkowiak, Ingrid: *Lesebuchgeschichten. Erzählstoffe in Schullesebüchern 1770–1920*. Berlin/New York 1993.

⁴ Pellat, Charles: *Seriousness and Humour in Early Islam*. In: *Islamic Studies* 3 (1963), 353–362; Van Gelder, Geert Jan: *Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature*. In: *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23 (1992), 83–108, 169–190; Ammann, Ludwig: *Vorbild und Vernunft. Die Regelung von Lachen und Scherzen im mittelalterlichen Islam*. Hildesheim 1993; Tamer, Georges (ed.): *Humor in der arabischen Kultur. Humor in Arabic Culture*. Berlin/New York 2009.

⁵ Marzolph, Ulrich: *Re-locating the Arabian Nights*. In: *Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta* 87 (1998), 155–163, also published in Marzolph, Ulrich: *Ex Oriente Fabula. Exploring the Narrative Culture of the Islamic Near and Middle East. Part 2*. Dortmund 2006, 175–184, here 177f.

Bagdad bookseller, who judged the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* as «dull and boring».⁶ Meanwhile, even the most serious Muslim critics of «light» entertainment had to admit that straightforward instruction without any entertaining value would soon result in tiring the audience, eventually lead to a loss of attention and thus risk to miss the intended instructive purpose. A case in point for this attitude is Ibn al-Jawzî (died 1201), a Hanbalite religious scholar who was renowned for the captivating oratory style of his sermons as well as for his uncompromising struggle to protect the spirit of Islam against undue innovations.⁷ This stern advocate of a strict interpretation of the rules governing Muslim life polemicized against the telling of religious stories popular in his day. At the same time, he compiled a total of three booklets of entertaining, often outright jocular narratives. While Ibn al-Jawzî presents the humorous texts without the least commentary, he has prefaced his collections by apologetical introductions explaining why he actually published what critics might regard as unsuitable. Ibn al-Jawzî's justifications culminate in a statement that reads like a Muslim adaptation of the Latin dictum when he says: «The soul gets annoyed when it remains in earnest too seriously, and it rejoices in permitted pastimes.»⁸

In the following, I suggest to present a survey of didactic narratives in the Muslim world from the perspective of historical and comparative folk narrative research. While some aspects of this topic are fairly well known, others may not be. Particular attention will be drawn to the aspect of transreligious communication, i. e. to those tales or collections of tales that during the process of migration travelled across and beyond the religious boundaries of their original context, thus demonstrating a wide appeal and probably even a universal adaptability.

In Ibn al-Jawzî's three compilations of jocular narratives, the contrast between the narrative material presented and the alleged didactic goal is particularly evident. Even so, the compilations demonstrate two points that are of particular relevance for assessing the position of didactic narratives in the Muslim world. On the one hand, even a superficially declared didactic aim would obviously justify the presentation of entertaining and even outright jocular narratives. On the other, from a traditional Muslim point of view, it is instruction, not entertainment, that constitutes the main purpose of narrative communication,

⁶ Grotzfeld, Heinz and Sophia: *Die Erzählungen aus Tausendundeiner Nacht*. Darmstadt 1984, 16 («ein armseliges Buch mit albernen Erzählungen»); Irwin, Robert: *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. London 1994, 50 («a coarse book, without warmth in the telling»); Chraïbi, Aboubakr: *Les Mille et une Nuits. Histoire du texte et classification des contes*. Paris 2008, 36 («un livre froid qui ne vaut rien»).

⁷ Marzolph, Ulrich: «Erlaubter Zeitvertreib». *Die Anekdotensammlungen des Ibn al-Ğawzî*. In: *Fabula* 32 (1991), 309–321; also published in Marzolph, Ulrich: *Ex Oriente Fabula. Beiträge zur narrativen Kultur des islamischen Vorderen Orients. Teil I*. Dortmund 2005, 187–206.

⁸ Marzolph 2005 (as in note 7), 195.

whether earnest or jocular. The latter argument relates to the ancient tradition, both Western and Oriental, to teach knowledge and wisdom by way of instructive stories. The genre of «mirror for princes» constitutes a case in point here, particularly since it serves best to demonstrate the common aim of didactic narratives beyond the narrow confines of specific religious boundaries.⁹

The Large Oriental Collections of Didactic Narratives

It is particularly revealing to see that until the European middle ages, many of the most successful and influential narratives were transmitted by way of collections originating from the Orient¹⁰, each of which constitutes an exemplary case of transreligious communication in its own right. Probably the best known of these collections is *Kalila and Dimna*, a mirror for princes that owes its name to the two jackals acting in the collection's frame-tale.¹¹ In its majority, the tales of *Kalila and Dimna* derive from the Sanscrit *Pañcatantra*, a collection originating in ancient Hindu wisdom literature. According to tradition, the *Pañcatantra* was brought to Iran by Burzôe, the physician of Sassanian emperor Khosrou I. Anôsharvân (reigned 531–579). Burzôe's Persian version of this work was, however, much more than a simple translation. In adapting the collection and its tales to the Iranian context, Burzôe also transmitted the embedded concepts. These concepts originate from a context different in terms of historical experience, culture, and religion. The *Pañcatantra* was originally conceived in the Indian context of polytheistic Hinduism (and, to a certain extent, austere Buddhism). It was transmitted to pre-Islamic Iranian culture that during the Sassanian period was dominated by Zoroastrianism and its dualistic worldview. After the advent of Islam and the Arab conquest of Iran, the Persian version in its turn was translated into Arabic by 'Abdallâh ibn al-Muqaffa' (died 756), a Zoroastrian convert to Islam, and hereby entered the world of a strictly monotheistic religion. Ibn al-Muqaffa's text served as the basis for several other versions in the Muslim world, particularly Persian and Turkish ones. The Byzantine Christian translation of *Kalila and Dimna* by Simeon Seth, prepared at the end of the eleventh century, resulted in the work's appreciation in the

⁹ De Benedictis, Angela (ed.): *Specula principum*. Frankfurt 1999; Leder, Stefan / Mühleisen Hans-Otto: *Art. Speculum principum*. In: *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*. Berlin 1975ff. [henceforth: EM], vol. 12 (2007), 974–988.

¹⁰ While I am aware of Orientalist implications (in the Saidian sense), for sake of brevity I use the terms Orient and Oriental in the present context as denoting an area comprising the Near and Middle East as well as South Asia.

¹¹ De Blois, François: *Burzôy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah wa Dimna*. London 1990; Falk, Harry: *Art. Pañcatantra(m)*. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 10 (2002), 497–505; Grotzfeld, Heinz and Sophia / Marzolph, Ulrich: *Art. Kalila und Dimna*. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 7 (1993), 888–895.

Balkans as well as in the Slavic languages. The reception of *Kalīla and Dimna* in the West is most probably due to the Hebrew (and thus Jewish) version prepared by Rabbi Joël at the beginning of the twelfth century. This version was introduced to the European Christian context by way of the Latin translation prepared by John of Capua, a Jewish convert to Christianity, in the second half of the thirteenth century.¹² The details of this complex process of transmission are well known, and many of the numerous individual versions of *Kalīla and Dimna* have been repeatedly studied. Meanwhile, besides the work's general adaptability, the main argument here is the fact that it also lent itself to a variety of religious contexts, including Indian Hinduism and/or Buddhism; Persian Zoroastrianism; Arabic, Persian and Turkish Islam; Judaism; and Orthodox as well as Catholic Christianity. Quite obviously, the tales of this collection offered such a basic and universally valid set of teaching that it could migrate from one cultural and religious context to another without major adaptations.

A process of transreligious adaptation similar to that of *Kalīla and Dimna* can be argued for other influential collections of tales of Oriental origin, particularly the one known in Western tradition as *The Seven Sages*.¹³ Ultimately, even the epitome of Oriental narrative art, *The Thousand and One Nights*, fits into the category of transreligious didactic narrative. Though we do not know which tales the lost Persian original of this work might have contained, recent research has argued that the original tales were probably less of an entertaining than of an instructive character.¹⁴ One of the arguments supporting this assumption is documented in a little-known Arabic source dating from the ninth century. This source credits the translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* from the original Persian to Arabic to none other than Ibn al-Muqaffa', the Zoroastrian convert to Islam who is best known for his translation of *Kalīla wa Dimna*.¹⁵ The *Thousand and One Nights* are, however, a very particular case the various implications of whose reception would need to be discussed in great detail. After all, this work owes its current international reputation as part of «world literature» to a conscious interference from the side of Western scholars from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards. Another collection of Oriental didactic narrative to be mentioned in this context is the *Book of the Parrot*.¹⁶ Even though the tales of this collection mainly deal with adultery, they are narrated with a clear didactic purpose, namely to prevent the female listener from succumbing to her sexual

¹² Kühne, Udo: Art. Johannes von Capua. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 7 (1993), 580–583.

¹³ Lundt, Bea: Art. Sieben weise Meister. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 12 (2007), 654–660.

¹⁴ Chraïbi, Aboubakr: Idéologie et littérature: Représentativité des *Mille et une nuits*. In: Les Mille et une nuits en partage. Ed. by Aboubakr Chraïbi. Paris 2004, 95–104.

¹⁵ Zakeri, Mohsen: Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb: 'Alī b. 'Ubayda al-Rayhānī (died 219/834) and His Jawāhir al-kilām wa-farā'id al-hikam. Leiden/Boston 2007, here vol. 1, 129; Chraïbi (as in note 6), 25.

¹⁶ Marzolph, Ulrich: Art. Papageienbuch. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 10 (2002), 526–531.

desire and thus risking to discredit her own as well as her travelling husband's reputation. In terms of chronology, the *Book of the Parrot* has become known in the West at a comparatively late date. Originating from the Indian *Sukasaptati* and passing through various Persian versions from the early fourteenth century onwards, the medium through which the collection was passed on to the West was here Persian and Turkish tradition.

Converts as Transmitters of Didactic Narratives

Given the predominant philological nature of previous research, it probably comes as little surprise that the inherent religious aspect of the narratives in question has usually been taken for granted, and research has focused instead on matters of content and language. In travelling from «mouth to ear»,¹⁷ or, as the Persian wording has it, from «breast to breast» (*sine be sine*), any given tale would, in fact, have to overcome a number of boundaries. Some of these boundaries would be physical ones, such as those implied in the transmission of a tale from one individual to another, or the migration of a tale from one region to another. Other boundaries would be rather of an immaterial nature, such as those between written and oral tradition, between the individual and the collective, as well as frontiers of a geographical, ethnic, linguistic or cultural nature. As for the crossing of boundaries between traditions dominated by different religious creeds, the impact of converts deserves particular attention. Authors already mentioned above include Ibn al-Muqaffa', a Zoroastrian convert to Islam, and John of Capua, a Jewish convert to Christianity. For the present purpose, another person that must be added to this listing is Petrus Alphonsus (died 1121), again a Jewish convert to Christianity. This author is credited with compiling the *Disciplina clericalis*,¹⁸ a Latin work that draws heavily on ancient Greek as well as on Muslim Arab wisdom literature.¹⁹ Meanwhile, apart from the tales embedded in the large collections, there are numerous other sources for studying the reception of didactic tales of Oriental origin across religious boundaries, including more extensive collections as well as single narratives. Out of the large number of re-

¹⁷ Schenda, Rudolf: *Von Mund zu Ohr. Bausteine zu einer Kulturgeschichte volkstümlichen Erzählens in Europa*. Göttingen 1993.

¹⁸ Lacarra, María Jesús (ed.): *Estudios sobre Pedro Alfonso de Huesca*. Huesca 1996; Lacarra, María Jesús (ed.): *Pedro Alfonso: Disciplina clericalis*. Zaragoza 1980; Petrus Alfonsi: *Die Kunst, vernünftig zu leben*. Trans. Eberhard Hermes. Zürich/Stuttgart 1970; Lacarra Ducay, María Jesús: *Art. Petrus Alfonsus*. In: *EM* (as in note 9), vol. 10 (2002), 797–802. See also Cristiano Leone's contribution in this volume.

¹⁹ For the context of Greek and Arabic wisdom literature see Gutas, Dimitri: *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation. A Study of the Graeco-Arabic Gnomologia*. New Haven 1975; id.: *Classical Arabic Wisdom Literature: Nature and Scope*. In: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101 (1981), 49–86.

levant items studied by previous research I propose to discuss some that are of particular relevance for Muslim tradition.

«Payment with a Promise»

One of the most ancient anecdotes that may serve to demonstrate the complex process of transmission is the known as «Payment with a promise».²⁰ In reward for his panegyric ode to the emperor, a poet is promised a large amount of money. When he later inquires about the money, he is informed that his praise had very much pleased the emperor. In return, the emperor had decided to please the poet with the similarly immaterial gift of a promise. Yet, he had never considered to turn the promise into a physical delivery. This anecdote had already been current in the fourth century BCE, since Aristotle mentions it in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (9, 1; 1164a). Its earliest documented occurrence thus belongs to Greek, i. e. pagan tradition. By way of Plutarch's *Moralia*, the anecdote later engendered versions in the Christian European literatures. An analogous version of the anecdote in Indian Buddhist literature, documented since the fifth century CE, does not necessarily derive from «indigenous» Indian tradition, since it might well constitute an offspring of ancient Greek tradition transmitted during the Hellenistic period. Most likely, the anecdote reached Arabic (and, from there, Persian) Muslim tradition through the intermediary of translation activities from Greek to Arabic since the early ninth century CE.²¹ In a similarly short mention as in the Greek original it is encountered in the Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Ethics* (in Arabic *al-Akhlâq*) prepared by Ishâq b. Hunayn (died 910).²² Meanwhile, the anecdote's mention in the book about stingy persons (*al-Bukhalâ'*) compiled by the Arabic polygrapher al-Jâhiz (died 868) is probably connected with the version given by Plutarch.²³ As a late representative of the Platonic school, the work of Plutarch did not belong to the standard corpus of Greek philosophy taken into account by the Arabic translators. Even so, the translator might have read the original Greek version of Plutarch's *Moralia*, since the catalogue of books prepared by Ibn al-Nadîm in the tenth century lists the translation of a certain *Kitâb al-Ârâ' al-tabî'îya* prepared by Qustâ b. Lûqâ

²⁰ Harkort, Fritz: Die Schein- und Schattenbußen im Erzählgut. Diss. Kiel 1956, 38–52; Hansen, William: Art. Scheinbuße. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 11 (2004), 1314–1319, here 1316f.

²¹ Gutas, Dimitri: Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbâsîd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries). London/New York 1998.

²² Peters, Francis E.: Aristoteles Arabus. The Oriental Translations and Commentaries on the Aristotelian Corpus. Leiden 1968, 52, 17; Aristûtâlîs: *al-Akhlâq*. Ed. 'Abdarrahmân Badawî. Kuwait 1979, 306, l. 11.

²³ Marzolph, Ulrich: Arabia ridens. Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht. vol. 1–2. Frankfurt 1992, here vol. 2, 15, no. 58.

(died around 912) that is said to be an Arabic rendering of a book about «the views of the philosophers in respect to physics and the practice of virtue» (*De placitis philosophorum physicis*).²⁴

Benfey's «Indian Theory»

The transmission of the anecdote of the payment with a promise proves, if such a proof were needed, that the literatures of the early period of Islam were related to the cultures of both East and West. In many instances, the inherent process incorporates both giving and taking rather than a unilateral direction of tradition such as proposed by European scholars of the nineteenth century. A case in point here is the influential «Indian theory» proposed by German scholar of Indian studies Theodor Benfey.²⁵ Benfey suggested that most of the internationally documented traditional folktales originated from Indian literature, from where their distribution would have started. Unilateral models such as Benfey's «Indian theory» – that has since undergone considerable modifications – may serve to draw attention to specific aspects of tradition. Yet, their simplified approach does not do justice neither to the multilayered complexity nor to the interdependency of different cultural backgrounds. Even so, Benfey's model retains a certain fascination in relation to the hypothetical or actual age of didactic narratives.

Buddhist Wisdom Literature

Yet another collection of ancient Indian didactic narratives I would briefly like to mention links Muslim tradition to the East rather than to the West. The Indian *Tripitaka*, a collection of Buddhist tales, was translated to Chinese some 1,500 years ago. As for the use of tales for religious instruction, the *Book of 100 parables* (in Chinese *Bo yu jing*) that forms part of the *Tripitaka* deserves special attention.²⁶ This book, originally compiled around the year 450 CE by Buddhist monk Samghasena, was translated to Chinese by Samghasena's disciple Gunavridhi in 492. Meanwhile, a large amount of the jocular tales contained in the *Bo yu jing* are also quoted in the Indian collection of stories, Somadeva's *Kathâsaritsâgara* («The Ocean of Stories») compiled in the eleventh century. Judging from this overlap, German Scholar of Indian studies Johannes Hertel deduced the existence of a book of «Indian tales of fools» already in the fifth

²⁴ Brockelmann, Carl: *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*. vol. 1. Second ed. Leiden 1943, 223 (204); *The Fihrist of al-Nadîm. A Tenth-century Survey of Muslim Culture*. vol. 1–2. Translated by Bayard Dodge. New York 1970, here vol. 2, 611.

²⁵ Pfeiffer, Martin: *Art. Indische Theorie*. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 7 (1993), 151–157.

²⁶ Von Hinüber, Oskar: *Art. Tripitaka*. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 13 (2010), 933–940; Bäcker, Jörg: *Art. Po-Yu-King*. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 10 (2002), 1220–1227.

century CE.²⁷ The jocular stories of this compilation did, however, not primarily intend to induce laughter. At least in their original context of Buddhist wisdom literature they meant to demonstrate the vanity of the human condition as well as the subjectivity and defectiveness of human perception. A small number of the tales of this *Book of 100 Parables* are also encountered in subsequent Arabic and Persian tradition. Cases in point are the tale of the fool who was ordered to keep an eye on the front door of the house – when he left the house, he took the door along to keep an eye on it;²⁸ and the tale of the «imagined sick person» exemplified by the stupid teacher who believed the jocular lie of his pupils that a meat-ball in his mouth in reality was an ulcer – he eventually had a surgeon cut the meat-ball from his mouth.²⁹

«The Blind Men and the Elephant»

Probably the best-known example of a didactic tale of Indian-Chinese origin is the tale of the blind men and the elephant.³⁰ This tale's earliest Muslim version is documented at the beginning of the eleventh century in Abū Hayyān at-Tauhîdî's *Kitâb al-Muqâbasât* («The Book of Derivations»). Here, it goes as follows:

Once, a number of blind men encountered an elephant. Every one of them touched one of the parts of its body with his hand and imagined the animal in his mind. Then they turned away. The one who had touched the leg said that the shape of the elephant was long and round like the trunk of a tree or a palmtree. The one who had touched the back thought that its shape was similar to that of a high mountain or a hill. The one who had touched its trunk described it as something smooth without any bones. And the one who had touched its ear thought it to be of a large size, thin, and constantly moving. In that manner, each of the blind men described that part of the animal that he himself had sensed. At the same time, each of them said something different from the others and accused them of misjudgement and inaccuracy in relation to the elephant's shape as sensed by himself.³¹

²⁷ Hertel, Johannes: Ein altindisches Narrenbuch. In: Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlichen Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Philologisch-historische Klasse 64 (1912), 1–67.

²⁸ Marzolph (as in note 23), vol. 2, 200, no. 877.

²⁹ Marzolph (as in note 23), vol. 2, 44, no. 165.

³⁰ Zieseniss, Alexander: Zwei indische Lehrerzählungen im Islâm. In: Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft 99, 2 (1945–49), 267–273; Muhammad al-Gazzâlî's Lehre von den Stufen zur Gottesliebe. Die Bücher 31–36 seines Hauptwerkes eingeleitet, übersetzt und kommentiert von Richard Gramlich. Wiesbaden 1984, 31f.; see also Van der Kooi, Jurjen: Art. Identität: Irrige I. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 7 (1993), 20–27, here 24f.

³¹ Abū Hayyān al-Tauhîdî: *al-Muqâbasât*. Ed. Muhammad Tawfiq Husayn. Bagdad 1970, 269 (chapter 64) [All translations, unless otherwise stated, U. M.].

Abû Hayyân at-Tauhîdî quotes the tale as narrated by Abû Sulaimân as-Sijistânî, who is said to have used it to exemplify a quotation by Platon. The relevant quote by Platon is given as follows: «Humans do not grasp the truth in all its emanations, nor do they understand it in all its forms. On the contrary, each human being is only able to grasp part of the truth.» While originating from the philosophical context of ancient Greece, the essence of this Platonic utterance was so attractive for Buddhist as well as Muslim cultures that it was quoted repeatedly in the framework of philosophical and mystical speculations. Examples from the Muslim literatures include mystical author al-Ghazzâlî's (died 1111) Arabic magnum opus *Ihyâ 'ulûm al-dîn* («The Revival of the Religious Sciences») and its Persian shorter version titled *Kîmîyâ-ye sa'âdat* («The Elixir of Happiness») as well as the works of Persian mystical poets Sanâ'î (died 1131) and Rumi (died 1273).

«The Squint-eyed Apprentice and the Bottles»

It may be noted in passing that numerous narratives from a large variety of cultures are concerned with the subjectivity of human perception. This question is of such general a concern for humanity that it is not limited to any specific religion, and many of the related tales would lead to a jocular end. Numerous examples for this kind of narratives are given in the works of the Persian mystics, such as Farîdoddîn 'Attâr (died 1221) or Jalâloddîn Rumi, for whom human perception (of Divine Truth) was a major concern. Out of the tales the works of 'Attâr (in this case his *Asrâr-nâme* [«Book of Secrets»]³²), and Rumi (the long poem known as *Masnawî*) have in common, the tale of the squinter convincingly exemplifies the importance of perception with particular practical consequences.³³ In 'Attâr's versified version (Verse 1610–1615), the tale of the squint-eyed apprentice reads as follows:

A master had a squint-eyed apprentice
 Once he sent the apprentice to a certain place (and said):
 «There I have a bottle of oil,
 fetch it soon!» The apprentice got up.
 When he came to the designated place and trusted his eyes
 he saw two bottles. The squinter was astonished.
 He came back to the master (and asked): «O master,
 I see two bottles, what shall I do?»
 Angrily, the master said to him: «You unfortunate person!
 Smash one and bring the other!»

³² 'Attâr: *Asrâr-nâme*. Ed. Sâdeq Gouharin. Tehran 1338/1959, 99.

³³ Marzolph, Ulrich: Der Schieler und die Flasche. Zur Rezeption einer arabischen Anekdote in der persischen mystischen Dichtung. In: *Oriens* 32 (1990), 124–138, also published in Marzolph 2005 (as in note 7), 153–169.

Because he did not doubt his perception,
he went, smashed the one bottle and then failed to see the other one.

'Attâr uses this parable to exemplify the mystic's metaphysical consciousness.³⁴ For the mystic, the different manifestations of physical objects constitute but emanations of one and the same pivotal point of origin. The mystic aims to put this insight into practice. His ultimate goal is to abandon the Self so as to unite with the all-encompassing divine. For 'Attâr, the squinter is a misguided person, a character entangled by a delusionary worldview: The squinter is convinced to perceive a correct image of reality and does not realize that the image he perceives (the two bottles) is, at least partly, an illusion. The squinter's perception is hampered by both the physical deformation of his eye-sight and his intellectual inability to take into account his faulty vision so as to transform the perceived image into an image of physical reality. In a similar manner, a human being not possessing mystical insight, *gnosis*, will not understand that he himself and the objects he perceives ultimately constitute an inseparable unity, as a consequence of which his individual character would dissolve in the totality of true existence. 'Attâr expresses this pivotal thought in the sentences framing the parable, culminating in the phrase «You yourself are everything!»

You do not yield power over your reign, a Dîv sits on Salomo's throne.
When you regain the (magic) ring,
the Dîvs and Djinnis will once again follow your command.
You are King, in the end as much as in the beginning,
but you are placed behind a veil of misperception, you are squint-eyed.
You perceive one as two, two as a hundred.
Was does one, two, a hundred mean? You yourself are everything! (1606–1609)

If you see something else but yourself,
you are similar to this squinter.
You are all what you see,
but what do you know about being caught in error! (1616–1617)

Similar versions of the tale, some of which with differing interpretations, are quoted in Persian mystical poet Sanâ'i's *Hadiqat al-haqiqa* («The Garden of Truth») and Rumi's *Masnavi*. Probably all of the Persian versions ultimately rely on an earlier Arabic text such as the one given in Ibn al-Jauzî's book about the harmful ensnarement of the devil, *Talbis Iblis*. The tale's essential point of demonstrating the subjectivity of human perception by alluding to a squinter's double vision ultimately goes back at least as far as late Greek antiquity, when a version of the tale is quoted in the collection of jokes known as *Philogelos*

³⁴ Ritter, Hellmut: *The Ocean of the Soul. Man, the World and God in the Stories of Farîd al-Dîn 'Attâr*. Translated by John O'Kane. Leiden/Boston 2003, 645.

(«The Laughter-Lover»)³⁵ Again, it is interesting to see that most of the tale's versions in the Christian West have adapted it to a decidedly profane context: Here, the character who perceives two items instead of one is not a person whose perception is hampered by a physical defect. Instead, we encounter a person who is so drunk that his vision is impaired. This change in context does not only relate the tale to a different cultural background but also suggests a different use in terms of interpretation.

«Crescentia»

Returning to the phenomenon of didactic narratives across religious boundaries, as a researcher of folk narrative, I am fascinated by the extent to which tales and narratives contribute to the dialogue of religions. Muslim narrative literature, in particular, is a perfectly hybrid conglomerate incorporating the worldview and teaching of tales originating from a variety of religious backgrounds. Probably the most impressive example for this kind of narrative communication is constituted by the genre of so-called «Isrâ'îlyât». This term denotes stories quoted in various genres of Arabic Muslim literature – such as Koranic interpretation (*tafsîr*), history and biography – that derive from or are presented as relating to ancient Jewish (and to some extent, Christian) tradition. The point in including this genre in the present discussion is not so much the extent to which the quoted tales derive from Jewish tradition or the question whether they have consciously been fabricated or attributed to Jewish tradition for one reason or another.³⁶ Undoubtedly, even though the genre of authentic Isrâ'îlyât might be fairly small, it is potentially a major vehicle for transmitting tales from Jewish to Arabic tradition. A particularly fascinating case of multi-layered tradition has recently been discussed for the tale of the innocently persecuted heroine known in Western tradition as Crescentia.³⁷ Previous research has not been in a position to determine the tale's origin. Until recently, the tale's earliest documented occurrence was known from the German *Kaiserchronik* («Chronicle of Emperors») an epic poem compiled toward the middle of the twelfth century. Meanwhile, an Oriental origin had long been suspected, due to the tale's occurrence in later Muslim sources. New findings now document the tale's first occurrence in al-Kulayni's

³⁵ Marzolph, Ulrich: Philogelos arabikos. Zum Nachleben der antiken Witzesammlung in der mittelalterlichen arabischen Literatur. In: *Der Islam* 64 (1987), 185–230, also published in Marzolph 2005 (as in note 7), 57–108, here 96, § 228.

³⁶ For a Muslim perspective of the subject see Qâsemi, Mohammad Hamid: *Isrâ'îlyât va ta'sir-e ân bar dâstân-hâ-ye anbiyâ' dar tafâsîr-e Qor'ân* (The tales of alleged Jewish origin and their influence on the tales of the prophets in the exegesis of the Koran). Tehran 1380/2001.

³⁷ Marzolph, Ulrich: Crescentia's Oriental Relatives: The «Tale of the Pious Man and His Chaste Wife» in the Arabian Nights and the Sources of Crescentia in Near Eastern Narrative Tradition. In: *Marvels & Tales* 22, 2 (2008), 240–258; 299–311.

tenth century guide to Shiite doctrine *al-Kāfi fi 'ulūm al-dīn* («A Comprehensive Commentary to the Science of Religion»), still famous today, where it is said to have occurred in the days of «a certain Jewish king». From this early occurrence, the tale on the one hand was transmitted to a number of Persian, Arabic, and Turkish sources, and eventually even ended up in a recension of the *Thousand and One Nights*. On the other hand, the tale at least from the thirteenth century onwards is also documented in a Jewish collection of narratives (notably said to derive from a Jewish source originating in Iran). It is not altogether clear how the tale ended up in the German *Kaiserchronik*,³⁸ but Jewish tradition might well constitute the link between the tale's Oriental and Western versions.

Muslim to Christian Tradition: Bar Hebraeus

Another fascinating example of this kind of migration across religious boundaries is the *Book of Laughable Stories* compiled by the Syrian Maphrian Grīgōr Abū I-Faraj Bar 'Ebrāyā, better known in the West as Bar Hebraeus (died 1286).³⁹ This book's jokes and anecdotes in the vast majority derive from an Arabic Muslim source from which they have been adapted to the Syrian Christian context so ingeniously as to mislead scholars about their true origin until quite recently. Bar Hebraeus served as the Jacobite patriarch's deputy from 1264 until his death in 1286, and thus was the second highest authority of the Jacobite church. He is praised in literary history as one of the most versatile and productive writers in the Syrian language. His excellent command of various languages enabled him to use Arabic sources as well as to write in Arabic himself. Besides numerous important works of a theological, historical, or scientific nature, Bar Hebraeus also compiled the *Book of Laughable Stories*, a work that is quite unique in Syrian literature. For a long time, scholars believed this book of entertaining and instructive tales to result from the author's perusal of a large variety of works, probably even works in various languages. Only recently, philological studies – that were to a large extent facilitated and even inspired by the publication of the author's major Arabic source – have proved beyond reasonable doubt that Bar Hebraeus to a large extent adapted the tales from a single Arabic source. This fact had been veiled for so long mostly because the

³⁸ See, recently, Plagwitz, Frank: Die ironische Dulderin. Zum Gattungsproblem der Crescentia-Erzählung in der Kaiserchronik. In: *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 36 (1992), 103–120.

³⁹ Marzolph, Ulrich: Die Quelle der Ergötzlichen Erzählungen des Bar Hebräus. In: *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), 81–125, also published (in a shorter version) in Marzolph 2005 (as in note 7), 21–56; Idrīs, Salāh 'Abdal'azīz Mahjūb: Kitāb al-hikāyāt al-mudhika li-Abī al-Faraj b. al-'Ibrī wa-athar kitāb Nathr ad-durr li-Abī Sa'd al-Ābī fihī (The «Book of Entertaining Stories» by Abū I-Faraj Bar Hebraeus and the influence of Abū Sa'd al-Ābī's «Nathr ad-durr»). Cairo 2006.

author had adapted the tales from the original Muslim Arabic context to his own Syrian Christian context so ingeniously that a direct translation has never been seriously considered. A single sample from this collection shall suffice here to demonstrate the author's method:

Muzabbid heard a man say to another one: «When the dogs (in the street) attack you at night, recite (the Koranic verse): (O company of spirits and humankind, if you can manage to penetrate beyond the realms of Heaven and Earth and then pass beyond them! Yet you will only penetrate them through some authority.)» (Q 55/33) Thereupon Muzabbid replied: «I suggest that you had better have a stick or a stone along with you – because not all dogs know the Koran by heart!»⁴⁰

Another actor heard a man saying to his companion, «When thou art travelling by night and wouldst that the dogs should not molest thee, shout in their faces the Psalm wherein occur the words, '[And save] my only one from the mouth of the dogs'» [XXII, 21]. And he said to him, «Nay, but let him also take a stick in his hand, for all dogs do not understand the Psalms, although there may be among them some who read them.»⁴¹

Bar Hebraeus's major source text is the Arabic encyclopedia of jokes *Nathr al-durr* («Scattered Pearls»). This encyclopedia has been compiled by Abû Mansûr al-Âbî (died 1030), an author of Iranian origin who is also known for his history of the town of Rayy, now a suburb of modern Tehran. In the quoted example, Bar Hebraeus has ingeniously replaced the Koranic quote by an equivalent quote from the Bible, thus generating the impression that his version of the tale had originated in a Christian context. At other times he would adapt the names of places or protagonists so as to create the impression of an original and «authentic» Christian compilation. His main achievement thus lies in adapting the tales from a Muslim context, and to replace references to the original Muslim context with analogous ones referring to a Christian context.

Transreligious Focusees of Jocular Narrative

Besides didactic narratives written or compiled by identified authors, various characters of anonymous popular tradition in the Muslim world may also serve to demonstrate the adaptability of didactic narratives across religious boundaries. Of particular interest are the protagonists of jocular narratives that I have

⁴⁰ al-Âbî: *Nathr ad-durr*. vol. 3. Ed. Muhammad-'Alî Qarna / 'Alî Muhammad al-Bijâwî. Cairo 1984, 242 (chapter 7, no. 57); see also Marzolph (as in note 23), vol. 2, 182, no. 778.

⁴¹ *The Laughable Stories Collected by Mâr Gregory John Bar-Hebraeus. The Syriac Text Edited with an English Translation by E. A. Wallis Budge. London 1897, 137 (no. 518).*

previously labelled as «focusees»,⁴² i. e. those characters to whom over the course of time a large number of narratives has been attached. Besides the widely known character of Nasreddin Hodja,⁴³ many of whose tales offer themselves for mystical instruction, the wise fool Buhlûl is another case in point.⁴⁴ Buhlûl, as can be reconstructed from a substantial number of Arabic and Persian works, apparently lived in eighth-century Iraq, i. e. during the time of Abbasid caliph Hârûn al-Rashîd. His most extensive biography is given comparatively late in the encyclopedic work *Majâlis al-mu'minin* («The Learned Meetings of the Believers»), compiled by Shiite author Nûrallâh al-Shûshtarî (died 1610). Here, Buhlûl is regarded as a faithful follower of the sixth Shiite Imâm Ja'far al-Sâdiq, who was put to death in the reign of Hârûn al-Rashîd. The sources largely agree on the fact that Buhlûl protected himself from the Sunnite ruler by practising the strategem of *taqiya*, i. e. he denied his true (Shiite) belief by feigning to be insane. The tales attributed to Buhlûl advocate a sincere mysticism while at the same time denouncing the human adherence to vanity. Today, Buhlûl is probably best known from a large number of works of Shiite learning. Meanwhile, the general appeal of his tales has resulted in his presence in a variety of other religious contexts, including the theology of the Kurdish *ahl-e haqq*, where he is regarded as a reincarnation of divine truth, as well as tales of the Iranian Jewry or neo-Aramaic Christian tradition in Eastern Anatolia.

Back again: The Transmission of Western Didactic Narratives to the East

Last, but not least, it should also be mentioned that the migration of narratives is not necessarily restricted to a single direction. Previous research in the West has to a large extent focussed on the origins of Western narratives as deriving from Oriental origins. Yet narratives, and particularly didactic narratives with their short, unambiguous, and easily apprehensible (or easily adaptable) message also offer themselves to be transmitted in the opposite direction. A case in point is the appendix to Francis Gladwin's *Persian Moonshee*, a comprehensive introduction to the Persian language «as adapted to the use of the College at Fort

⁴² Marzolph, Ulrich: «Focusees» of jocular fiction in classical Arabic literature. In: Story-telling in the Framework of non-fictional Arabic Literature. Ed. by Stefan Leder. Wiesbaden 1998, 118–129.

⁴³ For the most comprehensive collections of Nasreddin anecdotes see Kharitonov, M. S.: *Dvattsat' chetyre Nasreddina* (Nasreddin in 24 languages). Second ed. Moscow 1986; Mojâhed, Ahmad: *Juhi*. Tehran 1382/1993; Marzolph, Ulrich: *Nasreddin Hodscha*. 666 wahre Geschichten. Third ed. Munich 2006; Duman, Mustafa: *Nasreddin Hoca ve 1555 fikrasi*. Istanbul 2008.

⁴⁴ Marzolph, Ulrich: *Der Weise Narr Buhlûl*. Wiesbaden 1983; Marzolph, Ulrich: *Der Weise Narr Buhlûl in den modernen Volksliteraturen der islamischen Länder*. In: *Fabula* 28 (1987), 72–89, also published in Marzolph 2005 (as in note 7), 109–133; Marzolph, Ulrich / Qorbâni, Rezâ: *Bohlul-nâme*. Tehran 1389/2010.

William in Bengal», first published in 1795.⁴⁵ This appendix, containing about 80 short narratives of a didactic import, was most probably compiled by an Indian native speaker of Persian who, by virtue of his linguistic capacity, was familiar with both Indian and Persian narrative tradition and who, in addition, had also access to English language sources. In that respect, it comes as little surprise that the collection he compiled contains tales from a variety of different traditions, including a version of the internationally distributed tale known as «The Pound of Flesh».⁴⁶ In Western tradition, this tale is probably best known from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, but in Eastern tradition it was until then completely unknown. Both as an appendix to Gladwin's grammar as well as in separate editions in the Indian vernacular languages, the collection later gained considerable prominence in South Asia. Many of its tales of either Western or Persian provenance were thus transmitted to the general reading public and could potentially be retold in native oral tradition. It is not without a certain irony that several tales from Gladwin's collection were later presented to the Western public as being germane to the oral tradition of Afghanistan⁴⁷. As recent as 1996, the booklet was even published in an Iranian edition, thus reintroducing to Persian language tradition a collection some of whose didactic tales had travelled from Europe to a Persian language version in India and back again to Iran.⁴⁸

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to draw attention to the truism that a dialogue of religions, as in fact any form of dialogue, takes place in a variety of arenas. When followers of different religions communicate with each other, their creeds are not abstract entities whose arguments meet in a neutral sphere. All religions might agree in that they refer to some kind or other of divine wisdom, yet their actual doctrine and practice are always linked to a specific historical experience. The historical dimension comprises individual backgrounds as well as collective experience, whether cultural, linguistic, or sociological. Narratives are by no means the only medium employed in the dialogue of religions, and most probably they are not even the most important one. While tales may or may not include serious teaching, their entertaining nature to a certain extent contradicts a serious message. At the same time, the entertaining nature of narratives allows

⁴⁵ Marzolph, Ulrich: «Pleasant Stories in an Easy Style». Gladwin's Persian Grammar as an Intermediary between Classical and Popular Literature. In: Proceedings of the Second European Conference of Iranian Studies. Ed. B. G. Fragner et al. Rome 1995, 445–475, also published in Marzolph 2006 (as in note 5), 96–130.

⁴⁶ Lixfeld, Hannjost: Art. Fleischpfand. In: EM (as in note 9), vol. 4 (1984), 1256–1262.

⁴⁷ See Marzolph (as in note 23), vol. 1, 129.

⁴⁸ Javâdi, Seyyed Kamâl Hâjj Seyyed: Hekâyât-e latif. Tehran 1375/1996.

them to present truths of a religious as well as those of a general human nature in an appealing manner. This unique capacity enables them to transcend dogmatic differences between the various religions by exemplifying basic instruction in an attractive garb.