

Chapter 11

The Muslim Sense of Humour

Ulrich Marzolph

Do Muslims have a Sense of Humour?

The trailer for the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, whose first episode was aired in January 2007, contained what was to remain one of the sitcom's strongest scenes. It showed Toronto lawyer Amaar Rashid on his way to become the imam at the mosque in the fictional town of Mercy, Saskatchewan. Standing in line to check in for his flight at the airport, Amaar talks to his mother over the cell phone, trying to make her understand his move. Obviously, his decision had been the matter of dispute with his parents. This is what Amaar says: 'Mom, stop over the guilt! No, don't put that on! I've been planning this for months. It is not like I am trying to drop a bomb on them. If dad thinks this is suicide, so be it! This is Allah's plan for me.' Hearing the words 'bomb' and 'suicide,' the woman standing in front of Amaar in the line steps aside rolling her eyes while sighing: 'Oh my . . .' She does not hear Amaar's following sentences, when he continues: 'No, I'm not throwing my life away. I'm moving to the prairies, to run a mosque.' A moment later we see Amaar being arrested by security officers. Taking him as a potential suicide bomber they address him sharply: 'Step away from that bag, son. You are not going to paradise today!' When later being interrogated, Amaar wonders: 'What's the charge? Flying while Muslim?' And when the officer dryly informs him that this was not the charge, he comments: 'I was joking. Muslims around the world are known for their sense of humour.' Though immediately afterwards, Amaar admits that his statement was intended as another joke, this is exactly what the Canadian sitcom is about: To demonstrate that Muslims have a sense of humour. But do they? And if so, what exactly is 'the Muslim sense of humour'?

A Philologist's Approach to Muslim Humour

Aiming to elucidate this question from the viewpoint of an Islamicist philologist with a strong inclination to folklore, my presentation will discuss the role of humour in Islam from two angles. On the one hand, the *theoretical debate* is concerned with the permissiveness of humour and laughter in Islam; the rules and regulations discussed here against the background of religious concepts and learned as well as pious theological considerations are bound to influence the practical side of humour in the world of Islam to a certain extent. On the other hand, an assessment of the *practical side* of humour in the world of Islam has to admit the *existing abundance of humorous texts* in both literature and oral tradition. This apparent contradiction needs to be considered and, if possible, resolved.

But first let me proceed with a few additional introductory remarks, intending above all to clarify my position that Islam is not the essential Other but rather a sibling to the other Near Eastern religions and related cultures that, for various reasons, has been alienated in the course of history (Marzolph 2004). With this basic theoretical assumption in mind let me quote the following joke:

While a man is riding his horse, the horse is stung by a wasp and bolts. On his way to meeting someone he knows, that person shouts at the rider: 'Where are you going?' To which the man responds: 'Don't ask me – ask the horse!'

It is interesting to note that this joke was one of Sigmund Freud's favourites (Reik 1954; Oring 1984, 52–53). After all, the joke offers a clear paradigm for psychoanalytical interpretation. In the framework of psychoanalysis, the horse can be seen as equivalent to the libidinous *Id* to which the human *Ego* appears to have no choice but surrender. From the perspective of historical and comparative research in jocular narratives, Freud's fascination with this particular joke stands at the far end of a long tradition that according to present knowledge begins as early as Greek antiquity (Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 56–59). The joke's first documented occurrence is actually attested in a work attributed to Lucian of Samosata, a Greek writer of the second century CE (Lucian, 409). At least since the beginning of the eleventh century CE, the joke is known in Arabic variants. Since then, it has also become part of the repertoire of jocular narratives attached to the Arabic fool, joker, jester and trickster Juhâ (Marzolph 2006, 31, no. 30). North of the Mediterranean, the joke is attested in Italian Renaissance literature

since the fourteenth century (Sacchetti 1874, 39–40, no. 12). And finally, the collections of sermons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the vernacular languages of Europe have eventually passed it on to German language oral tradition of the beginning of the twentieth century (Moser-Rath 1964, 281–282 and 472, no. 129). Considering the history of diffusion of this particular joke in a wider context, the Arabic and Muslim versions of jocular narratives attested in the European Christian cultures often emerge as the expression of a sibling culture. In consequence, wondering about the position of humour in the Muslim world appears to become somewhat irrelevant in face of a strong feeling of familiarity. On the other hand, contemporary popular opinion in the West strongly advocates the dominant perception that Muslim tradition in its perceived religious zeal does not allow for such a subtle and tolerant trait of character as humour – in other words: that Muslims do not have a sense of humour. This apparent contradiction obviously needs to be resolved.

Muslim Responses to Western Humour

The Western perception of the Muslim world has for long been dominated by stereotypical notions of the East as a sensual paradise, most aptly expressed in the notion of the *Arabian Nights* (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, vol. 2, 599–701; Van Leeuwen 2006). In today's popular perception, this image is to some extent tainted by partial and biased notions of the Muslim world as the ultimate harbour of universal terrorism. Both views are, evidently, equally simplistic, and neither view features humour as a prominent characteristic of the Muslim peoples. If Western audiences discuss Muslim humour at all, public opinion focuses on the perceived lack of an adequate reception of Western humorous expression in the Muslim world such as, most prominently, in the context of the 'cartoons that shook the world', the Danish Mohammad cartoons published in 2005 that provoked a major international crisis (Klausen 2009). This assessment can be documented by a steadily growing number of conflicts arising from the Western attitude towards Muslim values. While only some of the incidents mentioned in the following listing originally intended to be satirical, each of them provoked heavy protest from parts of the international Muslim community.¹

In 1987, Dutch comedian Rudi Carrell in his German *Tagesshow*, a satirical version of one of the German TV news reports *Tagesschau*, showed a photographic montage depicting Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the

1978/79 Iranian revolution then still alive, as rummaging through piles of women's underwear. Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, theorizing about the genesis of some disputed verses in the Koran, earned him Khomeini's *fatwa*, a religiously motivated legal edict, for blasphemy and, hence, apostasy – a verdict for which Muslim law, the *shari'a*, unambiguously proscribes death as the only possible sentence (Pipes 1990; Sardar and Davies 1990). In 1993, Karl Lagerfeld had his model Claudia Schiffer wear a dress decorated with Arabic writing perceived as an emulation of Koranic verses; when challenged with allegations of religious insensibility, Lagerfeld apologized and withdrew his presentation. In 2001, the leftist Berlin newspaper *taz* provoked Muslim protest for quoting a rhyme from traditional German children's folklore in which Allâh makes an appearance. In November 2004, Dutch director Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by a Muslim fanatic for projecting Koranic verses onto the naked skin of Somali-Dutch women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali in his movie *Submission*, a passionate plea against the maltreatment of women in the Muslim world. Recent incidents of this kind include the violent protest in various Muslim countries against the series of cartoons treating the image of the Prophet Muhammad as published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in 2005 (Klausen 2009). And in 2007, teacher Gillian Gibbons from Liverpool was sentenced to fifteen days in prison and subsequent deportation from Sudan for allowing her class of primary school pupils to name a teddy bear Muhammad.

General Frame Conditions of Muslim Humour

Considering the Muslim world's reaction to these incidents, the least one would have to admit is that if humour is a general human capacity, its practical consequences quite obviously differ widely. For the purpose of intercultural comparison, Franz Rosenthal's definition of humour in his seminal study *Humour in Early Islam* is particularly attractive because of its wide-ranging applicability. Rosenthal's (1956, 132–138) advocates the so-called 'relief-theory' of humour in that humour is connected to the relief one feels when some of the numerous restrictions governing social life are temporarily lifted. If one follows this basic definition, the answer to questions dealing with national, regional or cultural specifics of humour becomes obvious. In terms of theory, the reasons why humans laugh are essentially the same; yet the related social frameworks and restrictions vary in different times and regions. In other words, while the theoretical

foundations of humour is a universal phenomenon, the practical result of humorous disposition is not. Moreover, humour as much as any other human mode of expression is subject to different codes and fashions, and certain forms of humour can only be understood against the background of specific contexts and circumstances. The more these circumstances differ from those of the recipients, the more the latter will have to strive intellectually to comprehend a certain motion's humorous or jocular potential.

Any study of the phenomenon of humour, much as each and every occupation with a particular religious or cultural phenomenon in the Muslim world, has to take into consideration the two bodies of Arabic texts lying at the basis of the indigenous definition of Islam: The Koran that Muslims perceive as the unchanged and unchangeable word of God, and the Prophet Muhammad's normative action as expressed in the *sunna* (i. e. the totality of exemplary tradition), in particular the *hadith* (the corpus of the Prophet's normative utterances). Drawing on these and numerous other sources, Ludwig Amman (1993) has studied the rules applied to laughing and jesting in medieval Islam in great detail, and the following considerations are much indebted to his work. Discussing the position of humour first of all leads to a problem of ethical dimensions, i. e. the question of correct conduct and the permissibility of physical expression connected with humour, in particular laughter (Ammann 1993, 39–143). Since classical Arabic does not possess a word for humour, the discussion in traditional Arabic sources focuses on the position of laughter. The Koran as the word of God does not include any specific rules implying practical implications for laughter and/or jesting (ibid., 21–23). Meanwhile surah 53, verse 43, states God to be the one 'Who makes (men) laugh and makes (them) weep'. This quotation relates to several problems. One might, e. g., wonder about the statement's consequences for the Muslim debate on human autonomy vs. divine determination. More important for the present discussion, laughter is here legitimized as an expression that owes its creation to God and that in consequence, belongs to the legitimate range of human expression as envisaged by Him. Further elaborating this point, the Koranic verse following the one quoted above points to God as the one 'Who causes death and gives life' (53, 44), hereby establishing an analogy between laughing and weeping on the one side, and death and life on the other. Though the exact equivalents of the paired terms are not qualified, the analogy implies that laughing and weeping are natural constituents as inseparable from the human condition as are life and death.

Extending this theoretical assumption to practical consequences, several mentions of laughter in the Koran, discussed in great detail by Georges

Tamer (2009), allude to specific situations. To quote but one example of human laughter mentioned in the Koran (11, 69–73), Abraham's wife Sarah laughs in wonder and disbelief when the angels visited Abraham bringing him the good news of the birth of a son (Tamer 2009, 11–13). And even God Himself has been argued to possess the quality of humour, such as when he transforms the wooden staff of Moses into a serpent (20,17–21), thus mockingly demonstrating the relativity of human perception (Mir 1991). The only jocular expression that is unambiguously prohibited in the Koran is mockery between humans, as stated in surah 49,11: 'O you who believe! Let not (one) people laugh at (another) people perchance they may be better than they, nor let women (laugh) at (other) women, perchance they may be better than they; and do not find fault with your own people nor call one another by nicknames . . .' Mockery between humans produces dissent and discord, thus putting the unity between the believers at risk (Ammann 1993, 36–37).

Second to the Koran, the Prophet Muhammad's normative action, the *sunna*, is the most important authority for Muslim law (ibid., 39–69). Only very few of the roughly fifty statements in the *hadith* that mention Muhammad as laughing quote him as ridiculing or making fun of someone else. The majority of cases rather mention a sympathetic or relieved laughter. Meanwhile, several of the anecdotes about the Prophet that are generally accepted by Muslim tradition quote his subtle humour. Incidentally, some of these anecdotes are also quoted by the explicitly traditionalist Muslim website islamisforyou.com (that during the last presidential elections in the United States has been relocated as islamcan.com). In one of the anecdotes (Marzolph 1992, vol. 2, 172, no. 726), Muhammad is asked by one of his followers to present him with a camel for riding; when the Prophet promises to give him the child of a camel, the petitioner wonders how he is supposed to ride the child of a camel, presuming that the animal would not be fully grown; at this point, the Prophet consoles him by clarifying that each and every camel is the child of its mother. In another anecdote (ibid., vol. 2, 32, no. 118), Muhammad in response to an old woman's question tells her that she will not enter paradise; when the woman is irritated about this apparent rebuttal, Muhammad by referring to a Koranic passage (56,36) informs her that in paradise all women appear as young and attractive *huris*. Anecdotes such as these prove, if anything, that jocular expression is legitimized through the Prophet's normative action. Even more, Muslim tradition quotes the Prophet as laughing at times so intensely that his molar teeth were visible (Sellheim 1964).

On the other hand, the Prophet is also quoted as condemning resounding laughter as the expression of people ‘who shorten their prayer and eat all kinds of food’ (Ammann 1993, 60–61); the laughter of the true believers, on the contrary, should rather be a smile. While laughter is thus permitted in principle, the ‘rule of intensity’ refers to a precept of moderation that has also been known to Arabic authors by way of the translation of the Aristotelian ethics. In theological discussions, the ‘rule of intensity’ is often sided by an explicit warning according to which the Prophet is quoted as having said: ‘Frequent (or: intense) laughter kills the heart’ (ibid., 62–65). Meanwhile, this additional ‘rule of frequency’ obviously constitutes a later addition to the corpus of *hadīth*, most likely deriving from an utterance that had originally been attributed to the Arabic ascetic Hasan al-Basrī (died 728).

Against the backdrop of the rules stated in the Koran and the *sunna*, early Islam has experienced a discussion, at times heavily biased, that in its main features is somewhat reminiscent of the situation as depicted in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. Ascetic opponents would regard laughter as the expression of a human being infatuated by vanity, wondering how people could dare to laugh in face of a deeply felt appreciation of Muhammad’s teachings as well as remembering the transitoriness of human existence and the menace of hellfire for the disbelievers. These ascetics would regard laughter as permissible only when spontaneously expressing delight or wonder (ibid., 74–84). At the same time, we also find pious authors rejecting a ban on laughter. For instance, the learned Muhammad Ibn Sīrīn (died 728) used to laugh until his eyes were filled with tears, or until saliva would drop from his mouth (ibid., 84, 136, 154; Müller 1993, vol. 2, 237–238). Once, when asked whether the Prophet’s early companions, whose behaviour also has a certain normative value, used to joke or jest, Ibn Sīrīn is quoted as having responded: ‘They were just like everybody else’. (Ammann 1993, 154). Against the backdrop of the behaviour accorded to Ibn Sīrīn in Arabic sources, this statement unambiguously classifies the notion and physical expression of humour as an essential quality of the human condition.

The Device of Seriousness and Joking

Meanwhile, joking and jesting was by no means only a topic of learned discussions. In Arabic *adab*-literature, a genre intending to be both educative and entertaining, the discussion from the earliest times is framed by a dichotomy expressed by the terms *al-jidd wa-‘l-hazl*, ‘seriousness and joking’.

(Pellat 1963). It is most likely not totally coincidental that these terms are similar to the Latin *prodesse et delectare* as coined in the aftermath of Horace's dictum about the work of poets (*Ars poetica* 333). And similar to the Latin dictum, the Arabic expression incorporates both a general rule as well as an often applied literary device. al-Jâhiz (died 868), one of the most inspired authors of early Arabic literature, frequently refers to laughter and jesting in his writings. An exemplary quotation from one of his epistles contains the following passage: 'Some things might be mentioned in an earnest tone while intending to be funny; others might be expressed in funny words, while containing a serious meaning. . . . Meanwhile, every item has its average, and every situation has its appropriate place. Laughter has its place as well as weeping; smiling has its place as well as disapproval; the same goes for refusal and permission, punishment and pardon, and all other possible ways of directness and taciturnity' (Ammann 1993, 132–136). And in his book on stingy persons, al-Jâhiz downrightly advocates laughter as a permitted and essential component of the human condition by founding his argument on God's creative act and the exemplary behaviour of both the Prophet and the early companions. Against the backdrop of this position, the writings of al-Jâhiz as well as numerous later works of Arabic literature are deeply imbued with a congenial mixture of serious arguments and entertaining anecdotes. The device of *al-jidd wa-l-hazl* rules as a natural principle of composition combining educative instruction with relaxing entertainment (Marzolph 1991, 167–168). An author may present serious and sophisticated topics until they threaten to tire the reader's attention; at this point, the author should introduce a certain amount of entertaining material in order to ease tension and entertain the reader. The resulting relaxation will enable the reader in the following to devote himself again to the discussion of more serious topics with all the more concentration.

It was only a question of time until this attitude would lead to the separation of entertaining material from serious discussion, leaving the adequate combination of the two areas to the recipients. Already since the tenth century, Arabic literature abounds in extensive compilations of anecdotal, and hence to a large extent also jocular, material. Of all authors, it was the Hanbalite jurist, traditionist, and preacher Ibn al-Jawzî (died 1201), known for this uncompromising interpretations of traditional Muslim rules and regulations, who compiled a triad of books containing anecdotes about witty, perspicacious, and simple-minded people – in fact the only true jest-books of medieval Arabic literature after al-Jâhiz (Marzolph 1991). Considering his reputation, Ibn al-Jawzî could repudiate all potential critique of

taking delight in profane pleasure for the sheer sake of unconditioned entertainment. Even so, he justifies his jocular writings in lengthy introductions claiming their usefulness for the purpose of pedagogical and religious exhortation: when listening to the stories about foolish people, wise readers should acknowledge the degree to which they have been granted intellectual capacities that fools lack; this should lead them to be grateful. In addition, the mention of simple-minded people should admonish the thoughtful ones to beware of the causes of folly. And, finally, reading the jokes, readers would be able to rejoice in recreation, 'since the soul tires at times from continuous sobriety and longs for permitted pastimes' (*ibid.*, 171).

To sum up the theoretical debate: While considering the fact that theoretical positions differ in detail, even a strict and uncompromising theological argument does not question the existence of laughter and jesting in Islam, hence, feeling the need to discuss its permissibility. Immoderate excess and jesting for the sake of jesting are rebuked, actions doing harm to the community, such as mockery, are banned. The recommended degree of humour is a moderate one, both in terms of frequency and intensity of jocular expression and practice. So far as for the theoretical foundations of humour in Islam. But what about the practical side of humour? How has humour expressed itself in the course of Islamic history? What are the practical consequences of the relatively tight rules governing the correct 'Muslim' compartment? Already the example of Ibn al-Jawzî shows that even strict scholars might tend towards a liberal interpretation of the pious guidelines. Considering this, there is little wonder that the living reality of the Muslim world has documented large amounts of jocular material in variety of genres.

Practical Consequences of Muslim Humour

The problem of humour in Islam finds itself in a position similar to other human activities or articulations that pious authors as well as bigots advertising their own piety, puritans as well as pietists have criticized since the very beginning, while their factual existence in the Muslim world has been widely acknowledged. A case in point is the Muslim religious interdiction to depict living beings in man-made images, that has been often discussed in Western scholarship. The 'Bilderverbot' is made to account for the dominant lack of statues in (most of) the Islamic cultures and the preference of abstract or calligraphic ornaments in Islamic art (Van Reenen

1990; Naef 2007). At the same time, since the beginning of Islamic art there is a rich tradition of illustrations in manuscripts that has brought forth innumerable masterpieces of figurative art, particularly during the Iranian dynasties of the Timurids and the Safavids (Lenz and Lowry 1989).

Similar to humour, music and dance within a strict interpretation of Islamic rules also risk to be regarded as unlawful enjoyment of worldly pleasures. Accordingly, even today they suffer from restrictions in traditionalist Muslim societies, while enjoying relative freedom in others. And finally, the Koranic restriction of drinking wine (surah 5,90) has traditionally been interpreted as a ban on all kinds of intoxicating substances. Even so, it has not prevented wine from becoming a widely appreciated beverage in the Muslim world (Sadan 1977; Chebel 2004). Though its consumption is forbidden on earth, pious Muslims are promised wine in the hereafter (surah 52,23; 56,18 f.; 76,5 etc.), and the literatures of the Muslim world contain innumerable references to the consumption of wine (and other intoxicating liquids and substances) in the various Muslim cultures.

As for humour, an adequate assessment cannot but admit that humour has been a natural form of expression in all cultures and in most periods of the Muslim world. Invective mocking poetry was a standard genre of pre-Islamic Arabic oral tradition (Van Gelder 1989), literary works such as those of al-Jâhiz are deeply imbued with a subtle sense of irony (Montgomery 2009), practical jokers and jesters populated the markets and public spaces of Muslim cities, 'court-fools' belonged to the standard staff in the houses of the ruling classes (Marzolph 1996, 495–496), drastic humour occurs in the *maqâmât* of authors such as Badî'al-zamân al-Hamadânî (died 1007; Malti-Douglas 1985), and biting satire is found in the works of Persian author 'Obeid-e Zâkânî (died 1371; Sprachman 1981). Whether or not representative of actual behaviour, Arabic narrative literature cultivates stereotype laughter in innumerable variations of the formulaic expression '. . . and he laughed until . . .' – variations including '. . . until he fell on his back,' '. . . until he fell from the back of his horse', '. . . until he dug the ground with his feet,' or even '. . . until he wetted his pants' (Müller 1993). And besides artistic expressions of refined humour we encounter a tremendous amount of simple jocular prose in jokes, jests, witticisms, pranks and anecdotes, ranging from political criticism to sheer nonsense, from humorous treatments of Islamic core values (Marzolph 2009) to rather coarse bawdy jokes. The range and amount of this material in Arabic literature alone is so large that the following historical survey can only mention some of the more important items.

Milestones of Muslim Humour

Early in the eleventh century, Iranian author al-Âbî (died 1030) compiled a work in Arabic that is modestly titled *Nathr al-durr* (Scattered Pearls; see Marzolph 1992: vol. 1, 38–43). Contrary to the modest title, the work is, in fact, an all-encompassing multi-volume encyclopaedia of thousands of poignant anecdotes, jokes and other funny stories that is both unprecedented as well as unparalleled in contemporary and later Arabic (and, for that matter, European) literature. The author has opted to present the jocular material without any context or commentary. Meanwhile, his work implicitly shows that he felt the need to justify the undertaking of publishing hundreds of pages of pure humour: the order of the seven books, the sequence of the chapters within each book, and the listing of the texts within the chapters demonstrate a certain decline, first introducing matters or characters of historical importance and then leading step by step to items of a predominantly amusing, at times even bawdy quality. For instance, the encyclopaedia's first volume deals with the pillars of Islam and the early caliphs; towards the end of the second volume the author has already reached the popular characters of uninvited guests and greedy persons; the third volume presents a number of jokers known by name and proceeds to list anecdotes about crazy people, stingy persons and crooks; the fifth volume deals with transvestites and homosexuals, the sixth volume contains a chapter about noisy as well as silent farting, the seventh volume presents protagonists belonging to the so-called 'dishonest' professions (such as dyers, weavers and canal-sweepers) as well as stupid preachers, *mu'adhdhins* and *imâms*, thieves and persons who were robbed, sectarians and fanatics. In short, we find a humourous assessment of traditional Arabic society, a comprehensive (and, at times, overflowing) celebration of contemporary humour! The reception of al-Âbî's encyclopedia has been little studied, since the work has only been discovered and published some years ago. But even so, one is most probably right in assuming that the work has had a tremendous impact in its original context, considering the nature of numerous similar works as well as compilations of previous material.

A special facet of the work's reception is the fact that the Syrian Maronite Maphrian Bar Hebraeus (died 1286) relied on al-Âbî's work for large portions of his *Book of Entertaining Stories* (Marzolph 1985). Meanwhile, Bar Hebraeus has cleverly adapted the anecdotes originating from an Arabic and Islamic context to his Syrian Christian context. He succeeded in doing so to such a degree as to mislead virtually all of the international researchers studying his book into presuming that he himself, as the acknowledged

historian he was, had compiled the book as a pleasant pastime by extracting the anecdotes from numerous unknown works. Considering the enthusiastic reception of Bar Hebraeus' rather small collection of jokes and anecdotes in Western scholarship one feels inclined to wonder to which extent the praise and admiration he received were due to a biased conception, or more explicitly the fact that Bar Hebraeus was, after all, a Christian author. Probably, a similarly powerful document of humour written by an Arabic and Muslim author seemed beyond the imagination of Western philologists.

Besides the few better known compilations of pre-Mongol Arabic literature, numerous works of pre-modern Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature share a similar jocular content. Moreover, many of them preserve older material, much of which would otherwise be lost today. By way of their reception they thus revitalized jocular items in popular tradition. One of the most powerful works in terms of impact is the *adab*-encyclopedia compiled in fifteenth century Egyptian author al-Ibshîhî, bearing the rhyming title *al-Mustatraf fî kulli fannin mustazraf* (Enchanting items picked from all areas of knowledge; Marzolph 1997). Ibshîhî's compilation is not, like al-Âbî's, restricted to jocular items. It is rather nourished by the author's intention to collect and present in a single volume the total amount of knowledge an educated man of his day (i. e. in Mamluk Egypt) should be expected to command. In general, Ibshîhî follows the well-known practice of mixing serious passages and entertaining tales. The book begins with chapters on Islamic belief, the Koran, and general rules of wise conduct. It ends with chapters on prayer, fate, illness, death, pious trust and the hereafter. Within this rather serious framework, however, the author has included numerous jokes and anecdotes as a perfectly natural part of the human condition. By doing so, the author has succeeded in compiling a work that, on the one side, constitutes a highly successful one-volume *vademecum* and that, on the other side, highlights the pivotal values of traditional Arabic Muslim society. It is thus little surprising that in the Arab world Ibshîhî's work has become an indispensable constituent of numerous private (and public) libraries. Ever since the introduction of printing to the Arab world in the nineteenth century, the book has been published numerous times in cheap reprints, selections and excerpts and continues to be exploited for publications of a chapbook character until this very day.

The beginning of printing in the Arabic world also opened up new ways for the publication and distribution of humorous material. Printing houses in Egypt and the Levantine countries since the second half of the

nineteenth century, and particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century, published large series of chapbooks. German Orientalist scholar Enno Littmann, who is probably best known for his immaculate German translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and others have studied these jocular compilations (Littmann 1955; see also Khayat 1987; Marzolph 1995). The Arabic chapbooks bear rhyming titles such as *Siyâh al-katâkût fi 'n-nawâdir al-mudhika wa-l-hawâdît* (The Crowing of the Little Chicken, containing amusing stories and anecdotes), or *Nûr al-'uyûn fi taslîyat al-mahzûn* (The Lightened Eye, promising exhilaration to the sad ones). Besides poems and riddles, they contain, above all, short jokes and jests, often written in the local Egyptian dialect. While many of the jocular tales are already documented in classical and post-classical Arabic literature, they often portray contemporary characters such as the man intoxicated from the consumption of *hashîsh*.

As in Arabic literature, one could easily retrace the development and dissemination of jocular tales in the other literatures of the Muslim world. Beyond a chronological assessment, a synchronous and geographical survey proves, if such a proof were needed, that humour in a large variety of different genres has always been a vital constituent of the Islamic cultures. It might well be that genres such as the satirical press and political cartoons of the Muslim world do not correspond to standards deemed adequate in the West, where the freedom of individual expression counts as the pivotal value of culture and society. But even so, critical humour in the Muslim world has existed since long, and it continues to thrive even under unfavourable conditions. Moreover, jocular narratives of whatever genre are so wide-spread that questioning the position of humour in the Muslim world appears rather absurd (Fenoglio and Georgeon 1995). Egyptians tell jokes about the traditional characters of Ash'ab or Qarâqûsh, or modern ones about the Sa'idîs, the alleged epitome of stupidity in upper Egypt equivalent to the Wise Men of Gotham; Turks would delight in traditional shadow-theater known by the name of its main character Karagöz or tell modern jokes about the members of the mystical order of the Bektâshîs; Iranians in the time of the Pahlavi regime delighted in jokebooks translated from Western, predominantly US-American sources, or would read satirical magazines published in the Islamic Republic that employ rather veiled forms of criticism. In other words, humour in the Muslim world is as natural a constituent of human communication as anywhere else. As if to silence once and for all anybody questioning the existence of humour in the Muslim world, Algerian French journalist Mohamed Sifaoui (born 1967) has recently satirized the epitome of Islamistic terrorism in the cartoon *Ben*

Laden Dévoilé (Ben Laden Unveiled; 2009), perceived as a humorous attack on al-Qaida.

Some of the most wide-reaching examples of the impact of traditional jocular tales in the Muslim world are the jokes and anecdotes attached to the character of Nasreddin (Başgöz and Boratav 1998; Marzolph 2006). Whether or not a person by this name, obviously a minor cleric, ever lived in Anatolia in the thirteenth or fourteenth century is a question of historical relevance that fades into insignificance considering the characters spread all over the Muslim world. Today, we witness an all-encompassing reception of the Nasreddin-tales literally 'in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad', i. e. in every language and culture that was or still is influenced by Islam, from Sephardic Spain to Uyghur culture in Communist China. Considering the syncretistic nature of popular tradition, Nasreddin over the centuries has incorporated the narrative repertoire of numerous other jocular characters, some of them known by name and others remaining anonymous (Marzolph 1998). In this manner, the tales of the Arabic Juhâ, the Sicilian Giufâ, the Sephardic Djoha, the Turkish Nasreddin Hoca, the Greek Nastratin, the Iranian Mollâ Nasreddin, the Özbek Ependi (Afandi) or the Chinese A-fan-ti derive from a common source. Besides having been published in numerous jestbooks and cartoons, the tales attached to this character are alive in oral tradition and in a truly transnational manner are potentially accessible to virtually each and every inhabitant of the Muslim world.

An Anthropological Theory of Muslim Humour

Remembering Rosenthal's definition that humour is related to the lifting of restrictions (1956, 132–138), 'Islamic' humour not surprisingly deals with topics similar to those known in the West. Jokes in general deal with areas of taboo such as sexuality and scatology, they ridicule norms and values of the surrounding culture, such as social institutions or the cycle of a human's life from pregnancy, birth, marriage and death, as well as religious and political conditions and circumstances. While classical Arabic literature is no exception to the rule, it contains a fairly specific aspect that is best characterized as 'A just word at the right moment'. Iraqi author Khalid Kishtainy in his book on Arabic political humour (1985, 11–33) has published a rare attempt to assess the anthropological specifics of early Islamic humour. According to Kishtainy, the nomad culture of pre-Islamic Arabia did not allow for the development of artistic expression encountered

in sedentary cultures such as architecture, sculpture, painting or theater. For practical reasons, the Arabs cultivated forms of art that were more naturally linked to the conditions governing their life. Consequently, verbal expression was the dominant form of art in pre-Islamic Arabia. Educated Muslims would remember thousands of verses of poetry by heart, the correct command of the complicated rules of classical Arabic grammar was a cultural exigency, and all forms of refined verbal expression were held in high esteem. Even the greatest miracle God ever revealed to a human, the Koran as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, is the Word. Considering the high esteem of verbal art, refined verbal expression also holds an important position in jocular texts. This refers, above all, to poignant responses in difficult situations, many of which have been collected in Arabic literature. Even a tyrannical ruler such as al-Hajjâj (died 714) would pardon the person who had just unknowingly reviled him when this person responds to the sudden discovery of the ruler's identity with the whispered remark that he hopes the previous conversation would remain 'strictly between us' (Marzolph 1992, vol. 2, 93, no. 372).

Humour in the Muslim world is thus generally characterized by two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, humour as the expression of a tolerant and appreciative position towards the difficulties and vicissitudes of social existence and towards the human foibles is regarded as imperative. This attitude goes together with the recommendation of a religiously commendable moderate use of humour so that the vanity immanent in human nature does not gain the upper hand in contrast to the respect and awe that humans owe to God's omniscient and omnipotent nature. On the other hand, living reality in the Muslim world proves that beyond their theoretical foundation, the practical consequences of pious evaluations of humour in regard to the exigencies of social and political reality are limited. While humour and religiosity are complementary to each other, they do not necessarily confine or exclude each other.

Why Study Muslim Humour?

Besides this general assessment it is revealing to question the current interest in problems of humour, in particular humour as related to different religious backgrounds. The recent interest of a larger Western public to understand the phenomenon of 'humour in Islam' appears to be fuelled less by a sincere and unconditional intellectual longing to understand the complexity of a rather unknown phenomenon. I rather argue that it

originates from the interest to solve a contradiction that in the West is largely perceived as indissoluble. On the one hand, we find the Western advocacy of the freedom of speech. In the case of the Danish Muhammad cartoons that are so prominently discussed in recent research, this attitude would include the individual's right to satirize each and every topic, whether or not it be venerated by or even holy to someone else's value-system. On the other hand, public opinion in the West is confronted with a contemporary Islamistic stance that bases the notions of adequacy and permissibility on a traditionalist interpretation of Islamic core values. From a researcher's point of view, it is most unfortunate that this Islamistic notion is often regarded as representative of a general Muslim attitude, which it certainly is not. Western specialists of the Muslim world often convey the pessimistic view that 'Islam' in general unconditionally clings to norms and values as codified in early Islamic history. In doing so, the complexity, the inconsistency, the dynamics and the cultural multitude of the Muslim world are disregarded in favour of awarding a dominant position to the monopolistic conduct of Islamistic puritans. Moreover, the debate about which norms and values are truly 'Islamic' reveals a deeply felt insecurity and helplessness on the part of the West. Even in today's modern world, the West appears to cultivate the image of the alien Other so as to delineate and define the Self. Still today, the West largely disregards the common cultural foundations and narrative traditions (Ranelagh 1979) it shares with the Muslim world. And even more, the West appears to be willing to discuss the values of the Other only insofar as the results are applicable to corroborate and further its own preconceived system of norms and values.

As for the problem of humour in the Muslim world, we may or may not indulge in intellectual exercises (such as the present one) studying the related theoretical implications or practical consequences. Considering this point of criticism, it appears necessary to link my study with two important reservations. On the one hand humour, as much as any other cultural expression, is not static. As a case in point, jocular texts dating from the classical period of Arabic Islamic culture today are published in numerous reprints. These publications are, however, often selective in reproducing the least offensive examples, so as not to jeopardize current traditionalist interpretations of the Muslim past by contrasting them with a potentially conflicting depiction of historical realities. On the other hand, we witness a certain prevalence of publications that in contrast to merely humorous ones aim to present entertaining material with an educative purpose. Effected by a conscious process, classical Arabic jokelore gradually fades from memory while other ingredients of the classical heritage are revived in

an attempt to link contemporary cultural memory to the model character of morally unquestionable events and individuals. As a result, any study of the position of humour in today's Muslim world risks confining the debate to the relatively small area of problems we dare to discuss. In order to overcome this restriction, we constantly need to remind ourselves that the Muslim world is not a solid, homogenous entity. Moreover, many of the contemporary problems of the Muslim world are not at all humorous ones – such as the situation in the autonomous regions of Palestine, in Sudanese refugee camps, or in political systems that pay little respect to individual freedom, be it in terms of social, political, cultural, or religious expression. Beyond a potentially utilitarian curiosity to explore the Other it might well be more deserving to consider the causal relation of social and societal phenomena on an international scale while preserving a general open-mindedness to witness the Other within ourselves as well as the Self within the Other. Expressed in terms of the present subject one feels inclined to advise those who diagnose a lack of humour in the Muslim world to consider seriously whether or not, and if so, to which extent they themselves might have contributed to such an attitude.

Notes

¹ Documentation for the quoted incidents is found on numerous websites. All of the websites mentioned here have been accessed 21 January 2010. See, e. g. on Carrell <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/798/319670/text/>; on Lagerfeld <http://www.cd.sc.edu/FileRoom/documents/Cases/388chanel.html>; on the *taz* <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/archiv/?dig=2001/02/17/a0100>; on van Gogh <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3974179.stm>; on Gibbons <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article2963737.ece>.

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