

Book review

Schweizer, Bernard, Molokotos-Liederman, Lina, & Amin, Yasmin (eds.) (2022). *Muslims and Humour: Essays on Comedy, Joking, and Mirth in Contemporary Islamic Contexts*. Bristol University Press.

The edited volume by Schweizer, Molokotos-Liederman and Amin contributes to a still small, but valuable literature field that investigates humour in relation to Islam and Muslims. This research explores, among other things, how humour may question Islam-related political policy and authority (cf. Tsakona & Popa, 2011), and counter persistent orientalist stereotypes that portray the Muslim as suffering from a host of deficiencies, including stupidity, a violent temper, misogyny, sexual perverseness and, of course, a bad (if not absent) sense of humour (Shaheen, 2000; Kuipers, 2011). The book by Schweizer et al. offers a diverse, informative and thought-provoking collection of essays that investigate such issues in many different countries – in the Middle East and, unlike what the book title suggests, in Western contexts as well.

Part I of the book focuses on manifestations and interpretations of humour in the Quran and hadith (sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad). The first chapter by Mostafa Abedinifard, “Ridicule in the Quran: The missing link in Islamic humour studies”, focuses on what the author sees as an ‘obsession’ of the Quran with ridicule, that is, the ‘dark side’ of humour. The author contends that the holy book’s aversion to ridicule should not be understood as a reflection of some inherent Islamic incompatibility with laughter, but more as the outcome of how the religion emerged historically: in the earliest development stages of Islam, especially in Mecca, ridicule was used to mock, control and exclude the prophet Muhammad and the nascent Islamic community.

The second chapter on “Laughter in the discursive tradition: Emotions of Muhammad as the topic of a pious Arabic-English reader”, authored by Georg Leube, focuses on the anthology *This Beloved (PBUH) Smiling*, which was originally compiled by Muhammad Ali Uthman Mujahid (2006/2009). This work offers a collection of 68 hadiths in which the prophet is depicted as laughing or smiling. Based on these hadiths, Leube discusses the various motivations, types, purposes and rituals pertaining to the prophet’s laughter or smiling. It seems, for instance, that the prophet loved to laugh and smile, and that he did so often, normally “until his back teeth were visible” (p. 84), but many times not because of humour *per se*, but to signal forgiveness of improper behaviour of other Muslims, or out of ‘benevolent forbearance’ toward his followers and the questionable things they do, among other reasons.

In the third chapter titled “Humour in Islamic literature and Muslim practices: Virtue or vice”, Walid Ghali examines how Islamic jurists use the Quran, hadith and Sufi traditions to ‘regulate’ the expression of humour in everyday life for ethical or social purposes. The chapter makes clear that humour can be understood as either permissible or forbidden by Islamic jurists. The eminent Persian Sufi jurist Al-Ghazali, for instance, tends to condemn humour for violating various norms. Jokes are permissible, according to Al-Ghazali, if they fulfil several criteria. For instance, jokes must stay close to the truth, they should not cause any fear, they should avoid bawdiness, and they should be told with ‘friendly’ words.

Part II of the book, including chapters 4 and 5, focuses on textual humour practices in Islamic societies. In chapter 4, “Using/abusing the Quran in jocular literature: Blasphemy, Quranophilia, or familiarity”, Yasmin Amin discusses why literature and other works may employ quotations from the Quran. The chapter first mentions reasons for the use of the Quran in ‘serious’ (non-comedic) texts, such as letters, speeches and poetry. Authors may quote the Quran in such works for various reasons, such as gaining legitimacy in arguments and receiving divine blessings. Subsequently, the chapter focuses on ‘frivolous’ works. Amin contends that authors use Quranic quotations in such works deliberately and instrumentally. Quranic text is often memorised and therefore easily recognised by Muslims, which helps authors clarify and Islamic audience appreciate the punchline of a joke.

The next chapter titled “A ‘stupid Lur’ mocks Allah and Mullah: Sociocultural implications of the Luri jokes cycle” by Fatemeh Nasr Esfahani focuses on ethnic joking in Iran. Such humour has been popular in Iran for centuries, which is perhaps not surprising in light of the considerable ethnic diversity in the country. Iranian authorities may regard some of these jokes as undesirable, but the jokes continue to thrive as they circulate anonymously or in people’s private spheres. The chapter focuses on the most popular ethnic jokes in Iran of the last two decades, which are about the Lur people (an ethnic minority in the west and south-west of Iran) and their relation to religion. Nasr Esfahani explores no less than 550 different jokes and anecdotes about the Lurs, which illustrates how vast this joking domain is. Based on her assessment, she demonstrates how these jokes construct the Lur people as ignorant, coarse and irreligious, and she discusses how these jokes developed historically.

Part III of the book focuses on visual and performative expressions of Muslim humour in Islamic contexts. First, in chapter 6, “*Al-Bernameg*: How Bassem Youssef ridiculed religious fundamentalists and survived the ‘defamation of religion’ charge”, Moutaz Alkheder examines the comedic activism by Bassem Youssef, the ‘Egyptian Jon Stewart’. After a career as a cardiothoracic surgeon, Youssef rose to fame in Egypt and beyond, when he launched his YouTube channel and later used his own TV programme to ridicule the Egyptian political leadership during the ‘Arab Spring’, in the early 2010s. Alkheder’s chapter demonstrates how Youssef managed to ridicule religious leaders without being charged with ‘defamation of religion’ by employing a combination of rhetorical tactics. One of the ‘passive/defensive’ tactics consisted of not addressing core Islamic principles. A ‘proactive/offensive’ tactic involved claiming that the glorification of the Egyptian Islamist leadership is un-Islamic in and of itself.

In the 7th chapter on “Arab cartoonists and religion: The interdependence of transgression and taboo”, Chourouq Nasri further explores the complex and confined spaces in which Arab humourists, cartoonists in particular, can critique Islam and political and religious leadership. Cartoonists in the Middle East risk a host of penalties (including fines, confiscation of their work, or even detention). if they transgress certain cultural, political and religious norms. Using examples from different Arab countries, Nasri depicts how brave cartoonists nonetheless managed to question political and religious ideology and authority.

In the next chapter, “Hizbullah’s humour: Political satire, comedy, and revolutionary theatre”, Joseph Alagha analyses how ‘resistance art’ is construed by Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shia political and social organisation. Hizbullah deems humour and other artistic expressions halal (allowed), the chapter explains, if it has a didactic purpose and if its presumed advantages outweigh what are deemed its disadvantages. Alagha explores the more concrete meaning of these principles by looking into various artistic expressions. He finds, for instance, that Hizbullah seems to be more supportive of laughing because of the enjoyment of acrobatics, singing and other performative show than laughing because of politically or religiously critical humour.

Chapter 9 titled “‘Putting the fun back into fundamentalism’: Toying with Islam and extremism in comedy”, authored by Mona Abdel-Fadil, offers an in-depth comparative assessment of two comedic skits that ridicule ISIS, the transnational militant Islamist group. The first skit, titled *The Real Housewives of ISIS*, was aired by the BBC in 2017 for primarily a British public, and aims to make fun of the idea of being married within the violent and oppressive ISIS culture. The second skit, called *Daesh*, was produced by a Palestinian satire show. Aired in 2014 for the Arab world, it aims to ridicule what it sees as the arbitrary violent inclination of ISIS fighters. The chapter demonstrates nicely how different forms of short and light-hearted comedy may effectively raise awareness about and criticise political-religious extremism.

Part IV of the book focuses on Muslim comedy in North America. First, in chapter 10, “Queering Islam in performance: Gender and sexuality in American Muslim women’s stand-up comedy”, Jaclyn Michael investigates jokes about religion, gender and sexuality as conveyed through the irreverent and sometimes controversial stand-up comedy of female American Muslims. The author points out that their performances articulate an alternative, more diverse and inclusive Islam, one that is “feminine, sexual, queer, Black and Brown, and includes differently abled bodies” (p. 228). An example presented right in the opening of the chapter offers an effective illustration of this point about ‘being Muslim’, with Iranian-American comic Zahra Noorbakhsh jokingly describing herself “as the pork-eating, alcohol-drinking, pre-marital-sex-having kind of Muslim” (p. 225).

In the last chapter, “Comedy as social commentary in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*: Decoding humour in the first ‘Muslim sitcom’”, Jay Friesen examines the Canadian Muslim-centred sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (originally aired between 2007-2012). The author argues that this TV show demonstrates how the sitcom genre can both facilitate and restrict the expression of ‘social commentary’. On the one hand, the show’s core message is that not all Muslims are scary and weird. It depicts Muslims as human and Canadian, thus ‘normal’ in these respects. On the other hand, the lessons the audience can learn from the sitcom genre seem to be limited. Critics argue that the structure and culture of typical sitcom do not incentivise the audience to empathise on a deep level with people with other backgrounds or experiences, or gain nuanced understanding of something complex or unfamiliar.

The critically reflective approach on the societal value of humour expressed in chapter 11 would have been welcome in other parts of the book, too. The societal impact of humour, after all, forms a recurring theme in the book (particularly in parts III and IV), and for good reasons. Next to amusing and causing mirth on an individual level, the significance of humour lies also (and perhaps more importantly) in its potential to benefit fundamental societal themes, such as equality and freedom. In this context, the book might have paid further attention to whether and how the case studies it presents may inform, engage, empower and mobilise the public even more effectively than other, more expected sources, such as news programmes and formal education.

Further nuance could have been reached if the book would offer more reflection on the margins within which humour can have societal impact. This would have required specific empirical illustration of and more critical reflection on the extent to which the presented examples of comedy and humour in fact have affected and benefited important societal themes, and in which respects this did not happen.

The book does pay abundant attention to how humour is constructed and conveyed, which is certainly warranted given the many possible restrictions that can complicate public joking. The book illustrates that such restrictions are not only imposed in the conservative and authoritarian Middle Eastern context. The editors rightfully note, for instance, that certain

‘woke’ activists in Western countries seem to share with some religious zealots a predilection for ‘humour regulation’, leading to diminishing freedom of humour expression. While wokeness is a notoriously ambivalent notion, it is clear that the editors are referring to the surge of activists who aim to shield historically disadvantaged sociodemographic groups from what these activists call ‘toxic’ or ‘offensive’ language, particularly in superiority humour (i.e., laughing at the perceived misfortunes of others), on the premise that such language is effectively “equivalent to aggression or violence” (p. 274).

It is not a coincidence that the editors take a lot of space in their concluding chapter to reflect on this seemingly intensifying trend. The type of wokeness that in its pursuit of social empathy, justice and cultural awareness is unable to digest humour in all its possible forms might play a counterproductive role in the long run. “Banning, even selectively, disparaging humour that punches down”, as the editors argue, “may risk affecting humour culture across the board, with a chilling effect leading to self-censorship and even outright censorship” (p. 275). With such censorship there will still be humour, but it will be bound to be more careful and conformist by nature and therefore lose much of its ability to challenge existing norms and beliefs.

Fadi Hirzalla

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
hirzalla@egsh.eur.nl

References

- Kuipers, G. (2011). The politics of humor in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humour scandal. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 63-80.
- Mujahid, M. A. U. (2006/2009). *This beloved (PBUH) smiling*. Dar Al-Manarah. Retrieved June 24, 2023 from <https://islamfuture.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/this-beloved-peace-be-upon-him-smiling.pdf>
- Shaheen, J. (2000). Hollywood’s Muslim Arabs. *The Muslim World*, 90(1/2), 22-42.
- Tsakona, V., & Popa, D. E. (2011). *Studies in political humour: In between political critique and public entertainment*. John Benjamins.