

Book Review

Muslims and Humour. Essays on Comedy, Joking, and Mirth in Contemporary Islamic Contexts. (Bernard Schweizer and Lina Molokotos-Liederman with Yasmin Amin, Eds.). Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781529214673.

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In 2015, French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo became a global symbol of free speech after a deadly attack on its office, following its publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The Western world rallied around the slogan Je suis Charlie, hailing the magazine as a bastion of comedic defiance against religious extremism. But amid the outpouring of solidarity, a deeper question lingered: Was this truly about defending humor, or was it about reinforcing the idea that some cultures, some religions, are inherently hostile to satire? After all, outrage over religious mockery is hardly exclusive to Islam—Hindu nationalist groups have protested depictions of their gods, and conservative Christians have long decried irreverent portrayals of Jesus. Yet, in public discourse, Islam alone is framed as uniquely humorless, its followers unable—or unwilling—to take a joke.

This is the stereotype that *Muslims and Humour: Essays on Comedy, Joking, and Mirth in Contemporary Islamic Contexts* seeks to unravel. Edited by Bernard Schweizer and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, with Yasmin Amin, this volume systematically dismantles the notion that humor and Islam exist in irreconcilable opposition. The book presents a diverse collection of essays that explore humor's role in religious texts, social norms, media, and performance, demonstrating that what is often perceived as an outright rejection of humor is, in fact, a complex negotiation of power, faith, and identity.



The introduction by Schweizer and Molokotos-Liederman establishes the book's central premise: the deconstruction of the long-standing Orientalist myth that humor is absent in Islam (p. 1). They argue that humor in Muslim societies is not a marginal or modern phenomenon but rather a deeply embedded aspect of religious, social, and political life (p. 1-2). The introduction situates humor within Islamic traditions, addressing its theological permissibility, historical manifestations, and its evolution into modern satirical expressions.

In fact, if one were to compare the central figures of the three major monotheistic religions, Islam appears to be the most explicitly supportive of humor (p. 1). The Prophet Muhammad is well-documented as having a warm and humorous nature, with numerous hadiths recounting moments where he smiled, laughed, or playfully engaged with his companions. One well-known account describes how he jokingly told an elderly woman that the old would not enter paradise, only to clarify with a smile that in heaven, everyone would be made young again (Tirmidhī).

Schweizer notes that a search through the four Gospels reveals no mention of Jesus laughing, despite his expressions of sorrow, joy, and anger (p. 1). In contrast, Muhammad emerged as a leader who embraced humor within moral boundaries, using it to foster closeness, convey messages, and create a welcoming atmosphere—without undermining religious values.

Chapter One explores humor in Islamic texts and teachings, offering different interpretations of its role within theological and historical contexts. Mostafa Abedinifard in *Ridicule in the Qur'an: The Missing Link in Islamic Humour Studies* challenges the assumption that the Qur'an entirely rejects humor, arguing instead that ridicule appears in the text within a specific socio-historical context (p. 29). He highlights verses that condemn mockery, particularly in relation to the early Muslim community's struggles in Mecca, suggesting that these prohibitions were a strategic response to the systemic derision faced by early Muslims rather than an outright rejection of humor itself (p. 29-30).

Georg Leube, in *Laughter in the Discursive Tradition? Emotions of Muhammad as the Topic of a Pious Arabic-English Reader*, examines the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad's laughter in Islamic literature. By analyzing an Arabic-English anthology of hadiths, he argues that portrayals of the Prophet's laughter serve to humanize him while maintaining his prophetic authority (p. 53-54). The

chapter explores the tensions between reverence and relatability, showing how different traditions navigate these dual aspects of Muhammad's character.

Meanwhile, Walid Ghali, in *Humour in Islamic Literature and Muslim Practices: Virtue or Vice?*, engages with classical Islamic debates on the ethical dimensions of humor. He discusses how scholars such as al-Ghazālī distinguished between permissible, lighthearted humor and excessive jesting, which was often viewed as a moral failing (p. 75-77). The chapter further highlights how Sufi traditions incorporated humor as a pedagogical tool, while more legalistic interpretations tended to be skeptical of their value.

The second section investigates humor in written Islamic traditions, focusing on its role in literature, folklore, and social commentary. Yasmin Amin, in *Using/Abusing the Qur'an in Jocular Literature: Blasphemy, Qur'anophilia, or Familiarity?*, examines how the Qur'an has been integrated into humorous storytelling. She explores *iqtibās*, the practice of inserting Qur'anic phrases into jokes and anecdotes and argues that while modern audiences may view such usage as blasphemous, historical Muslim societies had a more flexible and nuanced engagement with sacred texts (p. 105).

Fatemeh Nasr Esfahani, in *A 'Stupid Lur' Mocks Allah and Mullah: Sociocultural Implications of the Luri Jokes Cycle*, analyzes ethnic humor in Iran, particularly jokes targeting the Luri people. She interrogates how such jokes serve as both a mechanism of social control and a means of cultural resistance, revealing the complex power dynamics embedded in ethnic humor (p. 120). The chapter further questions whether these jokes reinforce stereotypes or, paradoxically, function as a subversive critique of religious and political authority.

Part three shifts from textual traditions to visual and performative expressions by exploring satire in television, cartoons, and revolutionary theater. Moutaz Alkheder, in *Al-Bernameg: How Bassem Youssef Ridiculed Religious Fundamentalists and Survived the 'Defamation of Religion' Charge*, examines the career of Egyptian satirist Bassem Youssef. Alkheder contextualizes Youssef's political satire within Egypt's shifting political landscape, showing how he targeted both political and religious figures while carefully navigating state repression and accusations of blasphemy (p. 152).

Chourouq Nasri, in *Arab Cartoonists and Religion: The Interdependence of Transgression and Taboo*, explores how Arab political cartoonists engage with

religious satire. She highlights the fine line between transgression and acceptability, documenting instances where cartoonists faced backlash for their depictions of religious themes. Nasri argues that humor in Arab cartoons reflects broader societal struggles over freedom of expression, censorship, and religious authority (p. 168).

Joseph Alagha, in *Hizbullah's Humour: Political Satire, Comedy, and Revolutionary Theatre*, investigates the unexpected role of humor within Hizbullah's ideological framework. Contrary to the assumption that Islamist movements reject humor, Alagha argues that Hizbullah strategically employs satire as both an internal bonding mechanism and a rhetorical tool against political adversaries (p. 196).

Finally, Mona Abdel-Fadil, in *Putting the Fun Back into Fundamentalism: Toying with Islam and Extremism in Comedy*, critically assesses Western parodies of Islamic extremism, particularly comedic portrayals of ISIS. She argues that while such portrayals ostensibly mock radicalism, they often fail to address the structural political and socio-economic conditions that contribute to extremism in the first place (p. 204).

The final section examines how humor operates within Muslim diaspora communities in North America, focusing on its role in identity negotiation and social commentary. Jaclyn A. Michael, in *Queering Islam in Performance: Gender and Sexuality in American Muslim Women's Stand-Up Comedy*, explores how Muslim women comedians in the United States challenge both Western stereotypes of Muslim women as passive and patriarchal interpretations of Islamic norms that marginalize female voices. By using humor to navigate these dual constraints, their performances become a space for both critique and empowerment (p. 235).

Jay Friesen, in *Comedy as Social Commentary in "Little Mosque on the Prairie": Decoding Humour in the First Muslim Sitcom*, provides an analysis of Canada's groundbreaking sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Friesen demonstrates how the show employs humor to address Islamophobia, cultural misunderstandings, and the complexities of Muslim identity in the West (p. 250). While avoiding overt political satire, the sitcom subtly challenges dominant narratives about Muslims through its comedic framing.

Overall, one of the book's key strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bringing together scholars from diverse fields such as religious studies, anthropology, media studies, and literature. This broad academic scope allows the volume to challenge the reductive assumption that Islamic traditions inherently discourage humor. While the book offers a rich and varied discussion, its geographical focus is somewhat uneven. A noticeable emphasis is placed on Middle Eastern and North American contexts, with limited attention given to regions such as Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa — areas that also possess vibrant traditions of humor within Islamic societies. Expanding the scope to include these regions would have further strengthened the book's claim to represent the global diversity of Muslim humor.

This book will be of particular interest to scholars in Islamic studies, anthropology, media studies, and postcolonial studies. It is also a valuable resource for journalists, comedians, and cultural critics who seek to understand the socio-political dimensions of humor in Muslim contexts. Given its scholarly rigor and relevance, I would highly recommend this book, particularly for academics. While the book is accessible to general readers, its depth of analysis makes it best suited for those with prior familiarity with Islamic studies and humor research.

Muslims and Humour is an essential contribution to the study of humor in Islamic contexts. It successfully challenges dominant narratives, foreground voices from Muslim societies. Despite minor gaps in regional representation, the book remains a compelling and necessary intervention in both Islamic studies and humor research, offering valuable insights for scholars, students, and cultural critics alike.