Katharina Heyden, 2026

Laughing At and About One Another



A Muslim, a Christian and a Jew are on the road together; they find a coin and use it to buy a cake. The Jew suggests that the cake should go to the person who has the best dream over the coming night. In the morning, the Muslim recounts a dream in which Muhammad led him through paradise. The Christian tells the story of how Jesus showed him a vision of hell. The Jew says: “Moses took me by the hand and said: ‘Your Muslim travel companion is in paradise, your Christian travel companion is in hell. So don’t worry – just eat the cake.’ And that’s what I did.”

We do not know whether the story is a Jewish, Muslim or Christian invention. The version reproduced here can be found in a 19th-century Arabic collective manuscript, now kept in the Bibliothéque Nationale in Paris (Nuzhat al-Udaba', BNF arab. 3594, fol. 123). Is it an example of the famous “Jewish humor”? Or a sarcastic polemic penned by Muslims or Arab Christians, which uses the popular motif of the cunning Jew taking advantage of the religious sincerity of others?

This question confronts us not only with gaps in transmission and the limits of historical knowledge, but also with stereotypes about the three religions and their relationship to humor. Witty Jews who cunningly steal their way through life, devout Christians whose fear of divine punishment prevents them from laughing, humorless Muslims who sacrifice their joie de vivre in the hope of a pleasurable paradise. It is also widely believed that Muslims and Christians suspect blasphemy behind every joke, while Jews are masters of satirical sayings about their own religious traditions. Like all stereotypes, these are neither entirely accurate nor entirely arbitrary.

A co-production from social conflicts

The spectrum of humor is broad in all three religions. It includes liberating laughter about the inadequacies of life and self-deprecating distance from religious precepts; satirical distortions of one’s own and others’ notions of God and holiness, or subversive sarcasm towards religious hopes; and scornful mockery of others people’s ways of life. Christianity knows holy fools and Easter laughter in the church. Islam is rich in humorous narrative traditions, one of them claiming that the wisdom teeth of Prophet

Muhammad were visible when he laughed. Jewish humor is probably also to be seen as a survival strategy in the long history of oppression and persecution.

A look at different versions of the story of the three hungry travelers and their religious dreams sheds light on the ambivalent function and effect of humor in the co-produced stories and history of the three religions. The narrative plot is much older than the Arabic manuscript in Paris. The story has circulated in all three communities since antiquity and has been constantly adapted to suit new comic and polemical needs. It is one of many examples of how Jews, Christians and Muslims negotiate their rivalries in narrative traditions that they produce together. The laughing third party is not only a figure of fun, but also a religious co-production arising out of social conflict. Different contexts could make him either the butt of the joke (greedy and impious) or the winner over the other two (crafty and blessed).

Religious mockery as resistance to power

In a collection of Jewish parodies about Jesus, the “Toledot Yeshu”, dating back to the early Middle Ages, the three companions compete not for a cake, but for a roast dinner. Jesus and his two disciples Judas and Peter are served a goose by their hostess. But Jesus declares it too figcaption for three hungry eaters. So whoever has the best dream that night should get the roast for themselves. In the morning, Peter recounts his dream in which he sat next to the throne of the Son of God. Jesus replies: “I am the Son of God, and I dreamed that you would sit next to me. So I’m better in my dream than you are in yours, and the goose is mine.” But Judas simply says: “In my dream, I ate the goose.” And Jesus then discovers that this dream indeed came true overnight. Jesus appears here as a selfish and victorious type of ruler who stakes his claim not only to the roast, but also to infinite power, but in the end is shown up as a loser. This could be a humorously subversive Jewish response to oppression under Christian rule.

However, this version of the story can only be found in a Latin translation of the *Toledot Yeshu* dating back to 1705. In his foreword, the Christian editor says that by publishing these satirical legends, he wants to make the “uselessness of the Jews” known to the public. So what may have functioned as subversive amusement about Christian rulers in the protected space of a Jewish community for many generations is eventually presented to the Christian public as dangerous blasphemy with an anti-Jewish twist. We know from both distant and recent history how quickly such accusations can turn into violence.

Claiming superiority through modesty

Other Christians have turned the same narrative plot into an uplifting and exhilarating educational story. In a late medieval collection of exemplary stories of moral edification, the “Gesta Romanorum”, the story serves not only to reinforce claims to Christian superiority, but also to teach Christian modesty. This time the story focuses on a piece of bread, and in this version the three companions are interpreted by the author as allegorical figures. The first companion represents Saracens and Jews reveling in their religious dreams of paradise. The second companion is the rich Christian, whom the reader can assume will be punished in hell. Only the humble Christian emerges victorious from the religious battle for food. However, the critical reader of the story will notice that this humble Christian cannot actually be all that modest as he was the one who invented the rules of the game after all.

The most detailed and artistic version of the story is presented by the Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273) in his “Masnavi”. The object of desire is now a sweet, Halva. This

time, it's the Muslim who proposes the dream contest. He's been fasting all day, while the Christian and the Jew have been eating, and the hungry Muslim thus suggests that they share the cake. The Christian and the Jew, however, are so full and yet so insatiable that they refuse. They agree on the dream decision. In the morning, the Jew recounts how Moses led him to Mount Sinai, surrounded by a cloud of light. The Christian counters with the account of his being taken up with Jesus into the fourth heaven. The Muslim then justifies his nocturnal consumption of Halva by saying that Muhammad told him in a dream: "Oh, you who have been left behind by the other two and have experienced injustice, so you may as well get up and strengthen yourself with sweetness."

Rumi writes for a Muslim readership in predominantly Muslim societies. In this context, the story of the laughing third party reads like a legitimization of the prevailing power relations. The dominant group is haunted by the spectre of being subject to unjust discrimination by nasty minorities. But while Jews and Christians indulge in the most beautiful hopes of the afterlife, the Muslim can at least benefit in this life.

Conclusion

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have developed their ambivalent humorous potentials in a long and entangled history with each other and against each other. Religious reference to a divinity can create a humorous distance between oneself and the world, condemn any joke about God and worship as blasphemy, or seek to elevate the mocking humorist above those of other faiths. The comic potential depends not only on individual styles of humor, but also on the social status and recognition of religious groups in any given society.

A German version of this article first appeared in uniFOKUS, the University of Bern print magazine 4/2025.

Further Reading

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Marcel Porthuis, The Three Rings: Between Exclusivity and Tolerance, in: The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Trialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, ed. by Tim Porthuis, Barbara Roggema and Pim Vaklenberg, Leuven-Dudley: Peeters 2005, pp. 275-285.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.48620/96707
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