



# laetus in praesens

Alternative view of segmented documents via Kairos

30 June 2005 | Draft

## Recognized Role of Humour in politics, leadership, religion and creativity

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Annex to: *Humour and Play-Fullness: Essential integrative processes in governance, religion and transdisciplinarity*

Varieties of humour

Research on humour

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Recognized need for humour in leadership and management

Recognized need for humour in religion and spiritual development

Recognized need for humour in religion and spiritual development (Christianity)

Recognized role of humour-playfulness in the media

Recognized role of humour-playfulness in creativity

Recognized role of humour in philosophy and cultural studies

### Varieties of humour

There are many typologies of humour. Wikipedia has an extensive categorization of styles or techniques of humour [[text](#)].

Ken Willis provides a critical discussion of the [problems of classification](#) of humour (cf Ken Willis. *Making Sense of Humour: Some Pragmatic And Political Aspects*, 2002 ) with reference to the schema of Sigmund Freud (*Jokes And Their Relation To The Unconscious*, 1905) regarding the techniques of joking.:

1. Condensation: (a) with formation of composite words (b) with modification
2. Multiple use of the same material: (c) as a whole and in part (d) in different order (e) with slight modification (f) of the same words full or empty
3. Double meaning: (g) meaning as a name and as a thing (h) metaphorical and literal meaning (i) double meaning proper (play upon words) (j) double entendre (k) double meaning with an allusion (pp. 76-7)

Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg (*Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media. Media Psychology* 2004) identified 41 humour techniques. Their analysis gave rise to 7 categories of humour: slapstick, clownish humor, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody. However, according to Joel Goodman ([The Humor Project](#)), there are (at least) 57 varieties of humour. 14 are distinguished in another study by Roy Paul Nelson (*Fourteen Varieties of Humor Comedy*, 1984).

Five varieties of humour have been identified as valuable in stressful emergency situations : (1) tension-relieving nonsense, (2) play on words, (3) sense of the preposterous and incongruous, (4) gallows humor, and (5) foolish jest (cf K van Wormer K and M Boes (*Humor in the emergency room: a social work perspective, Health Soc Work. 1997 May, 22(2):87-92*). (see also Frank Henry Katz. *Screaming Laughing: the functions and varieties of humor in American Holocaust Literature*. Diss. Arizona State U, 2000).

### Research on humour

As noted in the newsletter *Humor*, there are a number of arenas through which the role of humour is studied:

- International Society for Humor Studies (resources and [bibliographies](#))
- International Conference on Humour and Laughter
- European Workshop on Humour Studies
- International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter
- Australasian Humour Scholars Network which brings together cartoonists, satirists and scholars to discuss the subversive nature of humour and its role in reflecting public life [[more](#)]

- CORHUM (Association pour le développement des recherches sur le COMique, le Rire et l'HUMour)

In addition, gatherings like the International Cognitive Linguistics Conference (University of La Rioja, Spain, 2003) may devote special sections to cognitive linguistic approaches to humor.

## Marginalization of humour

As reviewed by Karl-Josef Kuschel (*Laughter: a theological reflection*. SCM Press, 1994):

- For Plato, laughter is a mixture of anxiety and pleasure, a Schadenfreude. Ethically, therefore, laughter is to be avoided and "persons of worth, even if only mortal men, must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less must such a representation of the gods be allowed"
- For Aristotle, laughter cannot be condemned because it is a natural characteristic of human beings; but, it should only be used to refresh and relax, as well as to confound opponents .

However, Kuschel points out, in response to the argument of the novel of Umberto Eco (*The Name of the Rose*, 1983) around the lost second half of Aristotle's *Poetics* (which dealt with laughter), that,

...if the poetics of postmodernity is a poetics of play ...then this poetics corresponds to an aesthetic of laughter: laughter at the fact that one is free from all binding ties, values, and norms ... If nothing is binding any more and everything is fluid, if the 'as' reigns, then in fact laughter can be a congenial expression of this poetics.

The modern marginalization of humour might be understood as a reaction against views held in the medieval and renaissance periods. The persistence of carnivals might be understood as an exception.

The nature of the marginalization of humour is well-made with respect to cognitive linguistics:

In concentrating on conceptual and cross-cognitive aspects of language use, cognitive linguists have given centre stage to phenomena like metaphor, metonymy and conceptual integration, which more traditional paradigms of linguistic inquiry have relegated to the periphery of cognitive processing. It is the organizers' firm belief that another peripheralized area of conceptual inquiry, humour, will return similar dividends as the study of metaphor, inasmuch as it will shed light on crucial aspects of cognitive processing that extend beyond the purely 'humorous'. Jokes, to take the prototype of a humorous text, are extremely fragile linguistic and conceptual constructs, the meaning of which depends vitally on a nexus of quantitative criteria (such as the time of delivery, and the activation of key expectations) and qualitative criteria (such as social context, cultural taboos, shared world models, etc.). This fragility of humorous language makes it an ideal linguistic form in which to theorize about the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of language and cognition. [\[text\]](#)

## Recognized role of humour in conventional political processes

Humour is a well-recognized part of the political process. It is exemplified by the work of political cartoonists (cf New Zealand's House of Representatives, *Parliament in cartoons*). In an article in the *Australian Marxist Review* (No. 27, 1991. pp. 33-36) entitled *Humour is Serious Business*, appears the statement: "It is a generally admitted truth that humour is a serious business".

Both within parliament and in reporting on parliamentary activities, satire is extensively used. Arguments may be won through humour -- or an opposing case can be reframed so that it does not carry the weight its proponents would wish. US President Jimmy Carter found that his encounter with an "attack rabbit" on 20 April 1979 became, through humorous media presentation of the story, a symbol of his floundering presidency -- photos of the incident were "accidentally" released by Ronald Reagan to the press. Tony Blair has subsequently been framed as America's "attack poodle" [\[more\]](#).

More generally, in whatever form, humour is vital to the the process of political campaigning and parliamentary debate -- and sustaining interest in debates which are of marginal interest to an audience (cf C B Crawford and C S Strohkirch. *An analysis of humor frequency and types in the 1992 and 1996 presidential debates*, 1999). For example:

- In South Africa, the Government Communication and Information System reports "No one should expect the media to take the 'bite' out of their reporting. The satire, the humour and the sharp criticism are what Parliament is all about". [\[more\]](#)
- "To survive in the Parliament we need a sense of humour otherwise we would be totally mad by now." [\[more\]](#).
- "With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die." (Abraham Lincoln)

Humour poses a notable challenge in multilingual parliaments, such as the European Parliament. For example, Elsa-Maria Michael (*Interpreting Jokes, Swear Words and Brusque Remarks: Experience in the European Parliament*, 2003), points out "To find oneself interpreting jokes, swear words or brusque remarks in the European Parliament is by no means a rare occurrence. To the contrary, it is the order of the day."

Parliamentary written records typically include parenthetical indications of "[laughter]" -- or, on occasion, ["a titter ran through the crowd"]. This suggests an interesting piece of research to determine the criteria under which this is inserted, and the parliaments where this is not used. It should however be noted that in a multilingual context, what is recognized as humour within one language group may not be so recognized by another

The widely cited commentary of Sheila Samples (*Laughter of the Gods*, *DemocraticUnderground.com*, 5 March 2004) looks at the "religions" of the Neocons in the USA, the "God People", and the "Chosen One" and finds them to be following some God different than

the rest of the world. For them, in the words of Michael Ledeen: "Creative destruction is our middle name. We do it automatically...It is time once again to export the democratic revolution." Furthermore, "God understands that all men are evil, and the only way to achieve peace is through total war." Consequently "the sparing of civilian lives cannot be the total war's first priority... The purpose of total war is to permanently force your will onto another people."

Given Samples title, this view would be consistent with Francis H Buckley (*The Morality of Laughter*, 2003) for whom laughter "announces and enforces a code of behavior through the jester's signal of superiority over a butt. There is no laughter without a butt, and no butt without a message about a risible inferiority." Laughter was used as a moral tool to justify intervention in Iraq and to mock those (notably the French) unwilling to engage with the Coalition of the Willing in that enterprise.

- Governance humour paper \*\*\*

## Recognized need for humour in leadership and management

Humour is widely recognized as an important attribute of leadership. As noted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower: "A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done."

For Carson Pue ("*Fun*" *damentals of leadership*. *ChristianWeek*, April 2005):

Many leaders believe that to be successful, they should always be serious. However, leadership is not simply about being serious. It's about motivating and inspiring others, and it requires a variety of skills, including humour.

**Corporate management:** For Carolyn Barker (*The 7 Heavenly Virtues of Leadership*. Australian Institute of Management's *Management Today*, 31 July 2003):

Humour as a leadership virtue is difficult to define. As E. B. White once said, "analyzing humour is like dissecting a frog... few people are interested and then the frog dies from it". It is, however, more than jokes, riddles, gags, clowning and laughter. It is a virtue because it positively enhances personal and organisational well-being.

Even under the most frustrating work conditions, it enables leaders to return perspective to the situation, restore sanity and fraying tempers, and keep people going when all they want to do is quit. In organisational terms humour allows leaders to increase morale and productivity, drive corporate culture and strengthen alignment.

Humour may be used as an educational device as with the the humorous, yet eminently practical parables, based on real problems by real managers (cf Russell L. Ackoff, *Ackoff's Fables: Irreverent Reflections on Business and Bureaucracy*, 1991)

**Working environment:** In addition to the management perspective on the value of humour, its value in the working environment has also been recognized. For example, Kathy Jourdain (*Humour at work Approaching Change*, Volume 3, no. 7, March 2003) argues:

Laughter is a powerful way to reduce tension and stress, create a sense of well being, increase contentment and alertness, and help us to place the problems and difficulties of life in context.... Humour is a means of communication and to determine exactly what is being communicated you need to look underneath the laughter.

**Military leadership:** The value of humour is clearly recognized by the military. For example, Robert F. Priest and Jordan E. Swain (*Humor and its implications for leadership effectiveness*. *Humor*, 15-2 (2002), 169-189) note:

Research on the relation between using humor and organizational leadership is scarce.... The United States Army leadership manual describes, "Having a good sense of humor" as a valuable character trait for leaders (Department of Army, 1983).

**International relations:** Beyond commentary on political humour at the national level, there appears to be relatively little study of the role of humour in international relations. This was probably the reason for the creation of APHIA -- the Association for the Promotion of Humour in International Affairs, co-founded by [John Fobes](#), former Deputy Director General of UNESCO. An interesting pointer to the possibility of such study is a little-known work by V S M De Guinzbourg (*Wit and Wisdom of the United Nations: Proverbs and Apothegms of Diplomacy*. United Nations, 1961).

Aneurin Hughes, Head of the European Commission delegation in Australia (*The Importance of Language Services in International Relations*, 1997) recognizes the value of humour as "the affectionate communication of insight which makes the wheels turn round".

Jacob Bercovitch and Patrick M. Regan (*Managing Risks in International Relations: The Mediation of Enduring Rivalries*) argue that:

Reflexive strategies involve behaviour that allow a mediator to establish the groundwork upon which later activities will be built. These entail such tactics as seeking to gain the trust and confidence of the parties, using humour to diffuse tension, dealing with the constituency and representational problems of the parties, and taking responsibility for concessions.

**Local authorities:** In this case the argument has been well made by Joey Novick (*Politics unusual: the dollars and sense of humor in government*. *County News Online*, National Association of Counties, Vol. 37, No. 11, 6 June 2005):

A good sense of humor is an important management tool that will carry you a long way in government and in political life. Good humor skills enhance creativity and problem solving, relieve the stress of leadership, provide good communication skills and enhance team building and cooperation.

Particularly interesting are the local communities that recognize a need to challenge a level of boredom which may be held to be a characteristic of their town. For example the new mayor of the city of Salisbury in the UK decided to do something about the city's malaise in that respect. He brought back a long-lost tradition -- that of the court jester [more].

**Court jester:** The role of the [court jester](#) was well-recognized in the past in many cultures, as various historical studies attest (cf Beatrice K. Otto. *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*, 2001 [excerpt]). The First Congress of the New Age (Florence, 1978) benefitted significantly from such a role through [Brother Blue](#) (see *A Congress that Dared the Unthinkable*, 1978).

As noted above, the model continues to be seen as having relevance in the present [more]. In the UK, English Heritage has advertised in a national newspaper in 2005 for the post, last held in the court of King Charles I in 1649 and abolished by Oliver Cromwell as part of the purges that followed the Civil War and was not reinstated after the Restoration. [more]

Wim Bos, responsible in the Netherlands for artistic support at the Stichting Milieubewustzijn (1996-2000), had the idea to revitalize the role of the court jester in society. His innovation was that the court jester would not be employed by the Court of the King, but within organizations. He argues:

The Court Jester offers new perspectives and helps people to look at their daily work and every day reality in new ways. Here the court jester is concerned with the quality of the organizations and the well-being of all employees, independent of their positions. [text]

Although the role of an officially appointed "national poet" is recognized in a number of countries, the value of a court jester is seen to be more relevant by Gilbert K. Chesterton (*Revive the Court Jester: Utopia of Userers, et al*)

Instead of reviving the Court Poet, why not revive the Court Fool? He is the only person who could do any good at this moment either to the Royal or the judicial Courts. The present political situation is utterly unsuitable for the purposes of a great poet. But it is particularly suitable for the purposes of a great buffoon. The old jester was under certain privileges: you could not resent the jokes of a fool, just as you cannot resent the sermons of a curate. Now, what the present Government of England wants is neither serious praise nor serious denunciation; what it wants is satire.

## Recognized need for humour in religion and spiritual development

There is widespread recognition of the value of laughter and humour to physical health and psychological well-being -- valuable preconditions for spiritual development (cf George S. Riggins III, *The Worth of Mirth*, 2001). Humour, through laughter, is recognized as valuable for: increasing muscular and respiratory activity; stimulating the cardiovascular system, and the muscular and skeletal systems; increasing antibodies; increasing pain tolerance; decreasing levels of stress hormones; and decreasing heart rate

It is curious that sacred literature in general tends to be totally lacking in humour. There is little reference to the founders of spiritual movements laughing or telling jokes (cf Todd Leopold. *Is 'religious humor' an oxymoron?* CNN, 19 November 2002). The tendency is for humour to be considered incompatible with the serious business of religion and salvation, as explored by Vassilis Saroglou (*Religion and sense of humor: an a priori incompatibility? Theoretical considerations from a psychological perspective*, 2002):

Although humor is not absent from religion, one may wonder whether religion's historical mistrust of the comic is not accidental, but reflects a deeper reality. Based on theory and research on both psychology of humor and psychology of religion, as well as on the psychological anthropology of early Christianity....

It appears that, from a psychological, and especially from a personality psychology perspective, religion associates negatively with personality traits, cognitive structures and social consequences typical to humor: incongruity, ambiguity, possibility of nonsense, low dogmatism and low authoritarianism, playfulness, spontaneity, attraction to novelty and risk, lack of truthfulness and finality, affective and moral disengagement, loss of control and order as implied by emotionality, and finally transgression, especially transgression of prohibitions related to aggression/dominance and sexuality.

M. Conrad Hyers (*The Ancient Zen Master as Clown-Figure and Comic Midwife. Philosophy East and West*, 1970, 10, pp. 3-18) generalizes this marginalization beyond her focus on Zen:

In the dimension of humor visible in such enigmatic koans and commentaries... is to be found a much-neglected side of Zen, as well as of the entire Buddhist tradition -- indeed, ultimately, of religion as such. Because of a long-standing prejudice against associating the comic too closely with the sacred, a prejudice which has been supported by both religious and academic taboos, the function and place of humor in religion has been almost completely ignored by phenomenologists and historians of religion. This "conspiracy of silence" is as much in evidence with respect to Buddhism as to every other tradition.

Hyers adds:

It is apparent upon closer examination, nonetheless, that in Buddhism, and in Zen Buddhism in particular, as in any religious tradition, a place has been granted to the comic spirit and perspective -- a time to laugh and to dance, as well as a time to weep and to mourn (*Ecclesiastes*. 3:4). One very illuminating and seldom explored method, therefore, of approaching a religious tradition, and of disclosing even its innermost features, is to examine what the comic means, and in what ways it has been employed, or at least permitted, in that particular context. The experiences and expressions which we associate with the terms laughter, humor, and comedy often play a far greater and more significant role in relation to religious experience and expression than scholarly inquiry has been ready to admit or careful to recognize. Human existence, in fact, as it is religiously lived and understood, is only given adequate definition in terms of a dialectical interplay between seriousness and laughter, between "holiness" and humor; and apart from an appreciation for both sides of this dialectic, the sacred and the comic, no religion is fully comprehended or interpreted. It must be acknowledged at the outset that the inclination of a religious tradition, especially insofar as it moves toward an orthodoxy, is often to squelch the comic spirit and perspective, or at least to keep it at a relatively safe and innocuous distance.

**Islam:** Concern at the role of humour has been expressed within Islam (*Does Islam Go against Laughter?* 2004), to which a prominent Muslim scholar Yusuf 'Abdullah Al-Qaradawi has responded:

Laughter or joy is part of the instinctive feelings created in humans, and Islam, being a religion that calls man to the natural phenomenon of monotheism, is not expected to forbid humanity from expressing such natural feelings. On the contrary, it welcomes pleasure. A Muslim should develop a positive and optimistic personality, and not a gloomy and pessimistic one that is negative towards life. One must try to follow the good example set by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) on this aspect. Despite his enormous responsibilities, he always had time for jokes; however, he never lied when joking. On many occasions the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) shared in the good cheer of his Companions; he'd joke with them and have fun. But as he shared in their joy, he shared in their sorrow.

The [Al-Islam.org](http://Al-Islam.org) through its Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project (*Allah: The Concept of God In Islam*) points to issues relating to laughter:

- Laughter is not at all dignifying. Whenever a Muslim laughs, he/she is supposed to seek Allah's forgiveness and say, "*Allahomma la tamquni*" (O Allah! Do not despise me!). Such is the Islamic code of conduct. Yet there are numerous references to the Prophet laughing in *hadith* the authenticity of which leaves much to be desired.
- Whenever you laugh, you ought to remember verse 82 of *Surat Bar'a*: "So they shall laugh a little and weep much as a recompense for what they earned" (*Qura'n*, 9:82).
- Imam Ja'fer al-Sadiq quotes his fathers citing the Messenger of Allah saying, "A good deal of jesting is not at all dignifying, while a good deal of laughter wipes out *iman* (conviction)."
- One of the pieces of advice given by the Messenger of Allah to Abu Tharr al-Ghifari was this one which is recorded in 'Uyoon Akhbar al-Rida: "Strange how one who knows that there is the fire (of hell) and who still laughs." He has also said, "Beware of much laughter, for it causes the death of the heart." The Messenger of Allah always smiled but never laughed.

The extent to which the founder of Islam laughed is a concern in Islam [[more](#)] -- as with founders of other religions. is said to have smiled rather than laughed. In a Hadith, The Prophet Muhammad (p) is quoted as saying: "O followers of Muhammad! By Allah, if you knew what I know, you would weep much and laugh little." [*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 8, #627]

Amir Taheri (*Spirit of Allah*, 1985) cites Ayatollah Khomeini's comment on the matter when endeavouring to combat the presence of music in Iran:

The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer. There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun and joy in whatever is serious. (page 259)

A related concern has been explored by Khaled Nusseibeh (*Is Laughter Banned in the Holy City?* 2000) arguing that: "The Muslim faith encourages laughter to the extent that it is a religion that seeks to achieve human well being". There is however a specific concern with "excessive laughter" since it "deadens the heart" spiritually [[more](#)]. There is a marked intolerance of satire which may be considered and treated as blasphemy.

Laughter is considered a characteristic of corporeal entities. The Al-Islam.org text (*Allah: The Concept of God In Islam*) clarifies the question of the "laughter of Allah":

References to Allah laughing exist in lengthy "traditions" narrated by Ma'ath ibn Fulah who quotes Hisham quoting Qatadah quoting Anas ibn Malik and is recorded on pp. 119-120 of *The Divine Traditions*. It depicts one of the scenes on the Day of Judgment. A variation of it is narrated by Abd al-'Aziz ibn Abdullah who quotes Ibrahim ibn Sa'd quoting Ibn Shihab quoting 'Ata ibn Yazid al-Laythi quoting Abu Hurayra, and it is recorded by al-Bukhari and cited on pp. 121-122 of *The Divine Traditions*. We do not think it is worth quoting here.

With regard to humour, the renowned exception within Islam is its use by Sufis (the mystical branch of Islam) against foolish rigidity and willful ignorance -- notably through the numerous teaching tales of Mullah Nasruddin (cf Idries Shah, *Special Illumination: the Sufi use of humor*, 1977).

**Buddhism:** In the case of Buddhism according to Conrad Hyers (*Humer in Zen: Comic midwifery*, 1989):

One of the early Buddhological debates was over the question of whether the Buddha ever laughed, and if so in what manner and with what meaning... There were those among the Buddhist scholastics who clearly would have preferred to believe that the Buddha never laughed at all, especially after his enlightenment experience at Bodhgaya. The Buddha's wisdom and the Buddha's mission seemed to require the ultimate in seriousness, gravity, and solemnity....The difficulty is that some sutras seem to suggest, if not state outright, that on such and such an occasion the Buddha laughed.

On this topic see Michel Clasquin (*Real Buddhas Don't Laugh*, 2001). To resolve the contradiction, this "laughter" of Buddha was considered to have been limited to the first of six types of laughter, using a classical scale derived from drama by Bharata:

- *sita*, a faint smile -- serene, subtle, and refined.
- *hasita*, a smile which slightly reveals the tips of the teeth.
- *vihasita*, a broader smile accompanied by modest laughter.
- *upahasita*, a more pronounced laughter associated with a movement of the head, shoulders, and arms.
- *apahasita*, loud laughter that brings tears to the eyes.
- *atihāsita*, uproarious laughter accompanied by doubling over, slapping the thighs, "rolling in the aisles" and the like [\[more\]](#).

However this reservation did not apply in the case of Zen Buddhism according to Hyers:

... what is especially striking about the Zen Buddhist tradition, in both its Chinese and Japanese forms, is that in its literature, art, and religious practice, what one often encounters is the opposite of *sita*, namely, the fifth and sixth and supposedly lowest levels of laughter, offered both as authentic expressions of Buddhist enlightenment and evidence of the authenticity of the enlightenment. In Zen, Bharata's aristocratic and spiritualistic schema seems abruptly to have been stood on its head. Zen anecdotal records contain frequent reference to "loud roaring laughter": of the master in response to a foolish statement by a monk, or of a monk in experiencing a breakthrough to enlightenment, or of the master in attempting to precipitate such an experience. [\[more\]](#)

In his account of a Zen master, Ishwar C. Harris (*The Laughing Buddha of Tofukuji: The Life of Zen Master Keido Fukushima*, 2004) notes:

Roshi Keido Fukushima is not against people seeing humor in Zen. However, they should understand it for what it is. He reiterates: 'A Zen person laughs when he laughs and weeps when he weeps. That's all!' During our discussion on humor I asked the Roshi about those Zen masters in China and Japan who told funny stories to their disciples or behaved like the legendary Sufi, the incomparable Mulla Nasrudin. The Roshi agreed and pointed out that such stories or acts can be used as an *upaya* (means) to illustrate a point. However, he pointed out that the purpose behind such activities is to engender Zen experience, not to teach about humor. Furthermore, within the narratives, the Zen person who is the object of the humor, does not think of himself as funny. Only the others do....On this issue I find a remarkable similarity between Sufi tradition and Zen.

In China, Bodhisattva Maitreya (Chinese: *Pu-tai*, *Ho-shang*, Japanese: *Hotei*), known also as the "laughing Buddha", is usually represented as a rotund figure of happy disposition. The tradition of the Laughing Buddha derived its beginnings from a mix in Buddhist, Taoist, and Shinto religions and can be traced back to the time of the Liang Dynasty in China. Chinese Buddhists have integrated the Laughing Buddha into the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon. He is not to be confused with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Buddha Maitreya is the Buddha of the future, the one to follow the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. [\[more\]](#) [\[more\]](#)

With regard to the spiritual significance of humour, *A Zen Study of Humour* notes:

Reality, Truth, Wisdom may not be imprisoned in the pigeonholes of ordinary consciousness, and one may be hindered in experiencing them by too rigid and narrow categories. In Zen and Taoism many categories of the common man and woman are turned upside down or reversed. Effects of that may well challenge the ranking business of the discriminating mind. In a similar vein Santayana argues that at the heart of the comic lies a confusion of categories. And in the Zen anecdotal records, there are many tales in which the master is depicted behaving in ways we might associate with clowns or fools.

It further notes:

There are some known, related functions of humour in Zen, as examples of ways in which the Zen tradition self-consciously employ humour:

1. As a technique for reversing and collapsing categories, and
2. As a technique for embracing opposites....
3. As an expression of enlightenment, liberation, and inner harmony....

The study recognizes the role of humour in enlightenment and liberation:

[Lama Anagarika Govinda](#) once wrote "The Buddha's sense of humour—which is so evident in many of his discourses—is closely

bound up with his sense of compassion [...] His smile is the expression of one who can see the "wondrous play of ignorance and knowledge" against its universal background."

Such humour goes beyond Buddhadatta's laughter over the degraded or even the joyful laughter of one who has found wisdom; it is the laughter of compassion, which seeks the enlightenment of others and their liberation. Humour in this context can give vent to a higher knowledge which sees through much worldly foolishness; and it may help in preserving higher knowledge too. This type of humour is of enlightenment and liberation.

**Judaism:** Lionel Blue (*To Heaven With Scribes and Pharisees*, 1976) argues that "the most typical weapon of Jewish spirituality is humor." In commenting on this, A. Roy Eckardt (*Divine Incongruity: comedy and tragedy in a post-Holocaust world*, 1992) notes that:

Insofar as Blue is on to something, I submit that he is pointing up one of the major dissonances, if not the major dissonance, between Jewishness and Christianity -- a conflict of telling sociological, psychological, and moral import. How can it be, for example (speaking of mysteries), that in the United States today (an unofficially Christian land) Jews, constituting 2.7 percent of the population, should comprise some eighty percent of the humorists?

The extensive article in Wikipedia on [Jewish humor](#) indicates:

Jewish humor is rooted in at least two traditions. The first is the intellectual and legal methods of the Talmud, which uses elaborate legal arguments and situations so absurd as to be humorous in order to tease out the meaning of religious law. The second is an egalitarian tradition among the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe in which the powerful were often mocked subtly, rather than attacked overtly... Jesters known as *badchens* used to poke fun at prominent members of the community during weddings, creating a good-natured tradition of humor as a levelling device... Jewish humor was also a device for self-criticism within the community.... The humorist, like the prophet, would basically take people to task for their failings. The humor of Eastern Europe especially was centered around defending the poor against the exploitation of the upper classes or other authority figures, so rabbis were made fun of, authority figures were made fun of and rich people were made fun of. It really served as a social catharsis

Other sources include:

- Yehuda Radday and Athalya Brenner (Eds.) *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield, Almond Press, 1990
- Hershey H Friedman. He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh: divine humor in Talmudic Literature. *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 17.1-2 (1998): 36-50
- Hershey H Friedman. Is There Humor in the Hebrew Bible? A Rejoinder. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 15.2 (2002): 215-222.
- John Morreal. Sarcasm, Irony, Wordplay, and Humor in the Hebrew Bible: a response to Hershey Friedman. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 14.3 (2001): 293-302.
- Jakob Jónson. *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: illuminated by parallels in Talmud and Midrash*. Reykjavík, Islande: Bókauitgafa Menningarjóns, 1965
- Henry Daniel Spalding. *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor: from Biblical Times to the Modern Age*. Jonathan David, 1987.
- Avshalom C. Elizur. Psychodynamic and Cognitive Aspects of Humor/Sihot/Dialogue: *Israel Journal of Psychotherapy* 6.1 (1991): 5-18. (In Hebrew).

**Hinduism:** Humour is considered to be rampant in Hindu literature, both sacred and secular. The rishis of the *Rig-Veda* jested about the ordinary human state of mind. The point is made that:

Where else is there laughter in Heaven, bantering among the Gods? In most faiths, there's rarely a smile in the sacred texts, and heaven and its denizens are seldom viewed as having a lighthearted side... The *Mahabharata* excels in its mastery of trickery and satire... Both Krishna and Siva sanctify humor, but in different ways.... Either way, their laughter links Heaven and Earth. This not-so-serious side of Hinduism is evident in saints and sages. Some consider wittiness a warrant of egolessness and spiritual attainment, for the greatest souls are often jovial, and many go for the jocular vein." (*Hinduism Today*, May 1997)

As studied by Lee Siegel (*Net of Magic Wonders and Deceptions in India*, 1991):

At the core of Indian comedy there is an irony, a revelation of the humanness of the Gods and the divinity of human beings. The human comedy has two heroes -- the fool and the trickster. The divine comedy recapitulates the human. The trickster and fool find their wholeness embedded in consciousness as the laughing child, and that child is deified as Krishna. As that God has been examined for the ways in which He reveals the seriousness of humor and its capacity to affirm life, so Siva has been invoked to indicate the humor of seriousness -- the ludicrousness of all human endeavors in the face of death.

**Taoism (Daoism):** As with Zen, Taoism has traditionally made extensive use of various forms of humour to give expression to paradox and to allude to ways of comprehending it. Perhaps more than any other religion or philosophy (even including Zen), Taoism has integrated humour into spiritual discourse and relevant texts. However, consistent with the elusive nature of the way with which Taoism is associated, there are surprisingly few "studies" of the role humour actually plays.

**Neopagan:** In an excerpt from his work on *Rites of Worship: a neopagan approach* (1994), as a liturgist Isaac Bonewits (*Dramatic Tension, Humor, Play and Pacing in Liturgy*, 2001) considers the role of humour in the designed drama of druidical ceremonies. He notes:

How does humor fit into all this? Very carefully. I have seen humor used in ceremonies with positive results on several occasions, both as theatrical inserts in large-scale liturgies, and as quiet quips to bring back a congregation's focus after a minor disruption of the mana flow. I've also seen it used, often deliberately, to drain the power from rituals that are getting "too heavy" for the jesters (sometimes the clergy themselves!) to handle. Humor is a two-edged blade that should be handled with the greatest of care, or left out entirely.

Within the framework of the neopagan culture, he offers valuable cautions with respect to Trickster deities discussed earlier and to the role of play in liturgy, notably citing Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*, 1938). He also notes: "Healing deities, on the other paw, are sometimes serious, sometimes playful, and a small bit of humor and play is often helpful when doing a healing spell, especially if the sick person is present".

**Other:** Different cultures express the sense that laughing brings one closer to heaven:

- "He deserves Paradise who makes his companions laugh" (Koran).
- "Time spent laughing is time spent with the Gods." (Japanese proverb)
- "What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul." (Jewish proverb)

From the perspective of atheist David Nicholls (*Made in the Image of a Humourless God*, 2004):

Of all the traits of this alleged god and the godly proclamations of its followers, the most important one is completely missing. I refer to humour. Without humour, people would exist in a conscious state of total despair. Humour is the safety valve allowing both recognition of the pain, suffering and ridiculous components of life and a method of being able to deal effectively with them....

The Bibles and its theologians give scant regard to the importance of humour as a necessity for our survival in this life. Not only that, but rules, mores and laws have been instituted to prevent religious jocularity. They come under the heading of blasphemy. Religions are oh such serious affairs, so much so, that the 'faithful' find it extremely difficult to even laugh at themselves.

None of the above is to suggest that there is no humour associated with religion. Religious humour is a significant branch of humour however it is not an activity inherent in religious practice. There are however some exceptions.

As recognized in the case of leadership (above), humour may be considered an important attribute of the rapport between religious leader and congregation. For example, Tim Bulkeley (*Study Notes on Jonah, including Hebrew narrative*) quotes:

"Warning: if a congregation has no conception of spiritual humour, if it has no sense of irony and has quite failed to discover the secret of laughter, it is perhaps better to let [Jonah] lie; for here the laughter never lets up." (K H Miskotte. *When the Gods are Silent*. Collins, 1967)

Humour may be understood as a guarantee of appropriate humility on the part of religious leaders, as noted by Ittoop Panikulam (*A Portrait of a Religious Leader* (Conference given to the General Chapter of his Congregation, June 2000) in quoting Gerald A. Arbuckle (*Provincials as "Cultural Revolutionaries": The Role of Provincial Superiors*):

"Together (all the virtues of Superiors) they could be united under one virtue -- the gift of humour. He who has a sense of spiritual humour recognizes deep in his heart that ultimately he can do nothing by himself. He needs God, he needs other people. When he tries to do everything himself, he plays God." And he asks: "And what would be funnier!"

Jokes are successful because they play with the rules of language, often in ways that suggest new relationships. In some spiritual traditions, as noted above, humour is used precisely for this reason to elicit new levels of insight -- -- as with the tragi-comic Sufi tales of the Mullah Nasruddin [more], the "crazy wisdom" and "spiritual foolishness" promoted by Taoists such as Chuang Tzu as paradoxical "ways of knowing", or the deadly paradoxes and savage black humour of Tukaram.

## Recognized need for humour in religion and spiritual development (Christianity)

The response of some concerned Christian commentators to the challenge of humour is a slightly defensive struggle to prove that humour is acceptable, despite Biblical quotes such as: "Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep" (*Luke 6:25*). Piety has been understood to be necessarily associated with "gravity". Humour and laughter have been considered unseemly because of the association of laughter with triteness, superficiality, debauchery and carousing. Most telling is because there is little about laughter in the Bible and in particular Jesus never seemed to use humour or commend laughter (cf Stuart D. Robertson, *What Did Jesus Have Against Laughter?* 2003). A very old tradition relates that he never laughed. Whether he laughed is therefore considered by some to have major Christological implications. The God of the Bible is not a laughing God. In fact, there is only one reference in the Scriptures where Jesus actually rejoiced (*Luke 10:21*). He was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (*Isaiah 53:3*) [more].

As a Christian theologian, [Paul Tillich](#) (*The New Being*, 1955) makes the point:

But let us be honest. Is there not enough foundation for criticism? Are not many Christians--ministers, students of theology, evangelists, missionaries, Christian educators and social workers, pious laymen and laywomen, even the children of such parents--surrounded by an air of heaviness, of oppressive sternness, of lack of humor and irony about themselves? We cannot deny this. Our critics outside the Church are right. And we ourselves should be even more critical than they, but critical on a deeper level. [[more](#)]

One early argument to the contrary was presented by Leslie B Flynn (*Serve Him With Mirth: the place of humor in the Christian life*, 1960). [Charles Schutz](#), creator of the cartoon *Charlie Brown and Peanuts*, set his entire life's work within the context of humor, stating:

Humor is a proof of faith, proof that everything is going to be all right with God, nevertheless those who find no humor in faith are probably those who find the church a refuge for their own black way of looking at life.

In the case of Alan Morrison (*A Laugh a Day keeps the Pharisees away: a Biblical analysis of humour*, 2001), he however asks:

Is there humour in the Bible? Are Christians supposed to enjoy "a good laugh"? Is comedy permitted for Christians? These are serious questions. For there are some believers who would answer soundly in the negative to all three. Or, even if they would not openly say "No", they appear to do so with their lives and by the sombre expression on their faces whenever something humorous occurs or is uttered.

Morrison sees laughter as inappropriate: in the context of corporate divine worship; when it stands in the way of sorrow; when it is used merely as an addictive diversion from a grim reality; when it is crude and coarse; when it is unduly at the expense of others. However Morrison sees it as justified at the expense of others:

- when it glorifies God and ridicules rebellion against Him
- when it is carried out by God Himself

In a sermon on Psalm 2, Steven R. Key (*Christ Our Etenral King*, 1996) states:

But let us stand reminded, there awaits another great day of the Lord, a day of final judgment. And that laughter of God will again be heard, a terrible laughter to all who stand outside of Christ the Savior. For that laughter of God is not a laughter that expresses joy, nor an unholy delight in the torment or pain of another. But that laughter of Jehovah is a laughter of mockery, of derision, and hence of fierce anger and hot displeasure. And it is a laughter of mockery because those ungodly, in all their raging and proud boasting, simply serve Christ's purpose and do His will.

Four kinds of laughter have been usefully distinguished in the Bible. These appear to have been first identified by W. Herschel Ford (*Simple Sermons for a Sinful Age*, 1972) and developed by R. L. Hymers, Jr. (*Four Kinds of Laughter*, 2002) and Don Robinson (*Laughter: Ecclesiastes 3:4*) with Biblical references:

- laughter of unbelief, [Genesis 18:11-15](#); [Luke 8:52-56](#)
- laughter of a fool, [Ecclesiastes 7:6](#); [Proverbs 14:13](#).
- laughter of God, [Psalms 2:1-4](#); [Proverbs 1:24-26](#).
- laughter of salvation, [Luke 6:21](#).

For Morrison, "laughter is inextricably linked with the end of the age for the believer ([Luke 6:25](#)). And without a doubt, the experience of heaven will be one huge eternal smile!" He also notes: "However, the Lord Himself can be said to have the last laugh". There is however the curious ambiguity of: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" ([Psalms 2:4](#)).

For Francis H Buckley (*The Morality of Laughter*, 2003) there is an element of malice in humour, making it one of the earthly rather than one of the divine pleasures. He agrees with Baudelaire that, though there will be joy in Heaven, there will not be laughter, as the latter reflects human impurity. For some Christian commentators, such as Tim Spiess (*Joy versus Jokes?*):

Laughter is not joy, and humor is not of the Lord. The confusion on this important distinction is both enormous and extremely misleading and damaging, for it portrays God as something He is not.

The emphasis on "joy" (which occurs 250 times in the Bible) is notably stressed by the "Fun Nun" Sister Mary Christelle Macaluso (*Discovering Joy in Spirituality*). The word "laughter" (occurs 40 times in the Bible, of which 22 refer to scornful laughter) has a distinct root from "joy" in both Hebrew and Greek (*Is the Laughter Phenomenon Scriptural?*). Concerns have however been expressed at the phenomenon of "holy laughter", "laughter revival" [[more](#)], otherwise known as the Toronto Blessing" [[more](#) | [more](#) | [more](#)], as well as that of "Holy Ghost laughter" [[more](#)] and "laughing in the spirit" [[more](#)].

Less ambiguous points are made by Martin Luther ("If they don't allow laughter in heaven, then I don't want to go there.") or by Walter C. Lanyan (*Laughter of God*): "Under the aegis of Jesus Christ you can 'go' with the Laughter of God in your heart".

Curiously old Christian [religious practices](#) of various denominations are now being resuscitated to celebrate -- notably through practical

jokes -- the joke that God played on Satan at Easter. An active role in this process is played by the [Fellowship of Merry Christians](#). Easter was understood as an appointed "time to laugh" (*Ecclesiastes* 3:4). The perceived abuses arising from the earlier practices had previously resulted in their prohibition (cf [Risus Paschalis](#); John M. McCoy, *Risus Paschalis*, 2000). For theologian Jürgen Moltmann: "The laughter of the universe is God's delight. It is the universal Easter laughter in heaven and earth" (*A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, 1998).

The traditional practices of Easter laughter had been associated with the role of humour in the Middle Ages and Renaissance as noted by [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 1981):

The laughing, parodic-travesty literature of the Middle Ages was extremely rich. In the wealth and variety of its parodic forms, the Middle Ages was akin to Rome. It must in fact be said that in a whole series of ways the medieval literature of laughter appears to be the direct heir of Rome, and the Saturnalia tradition in particular to live in altered form throughout the Middle Ages

Medieval laughter is holiday laughter. The parodic-travesty 'Holiday of Fools' and 'Holiday of the Ass' are well known, and were even celebrated in the churches themselves by the lower clergy. Highly characteristic of this tendency is *Risus Paschalis*, or paschal laughter. During the paschal days laughter was traditionally permitted in church. The preacher permitted himself risqué jokes and gay-hearted anecdotes from the church pulpit in order to encourage laughter in the congregation — this was conceived as a cheerful rebirth after days of melancholy and fasting. No less productive was 'Christmas laughter' (*Risus Natalis*); as distinct from the *Risus Paschalis*, it expressed itself not in stories but in songs. Serious church hymns were sung to the tunes of street ditties and were thus given a new twist

The most helpful study of the theology of laughter from a Christian perspective is perhaps that of Karl-Josef Kuschel ([Laughter: A Theological Reflection](#), 1994) who notes the following:

- Christian condemnation of laughter and the praising of weeping in Augustine,
- Chrysostom ("Christ never laughed"), and other church fathers as well as in the monastic tradition: "weeping alone unites with God, while laughter leads a person away from God"
- whereas humans laugh, in the Bible Sarah and Abraham see the discrepancy between their bodily capacities and God's promise of seed and laugh "the laughing doubt of God." They are not punished; rather, God proceeds with his plan and laughs with the doubters
- God also laughs a "laugh of partisanship and superiority" at the wicked, as in Psalms.
- God laughs an "enigmatic, arbitrarily uncanny" laugh at the suffering of Job
- apocryphal and gnostic gospels depict Mary laughing, and Jesus, and others too.

In a lecture to the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Paul Thigpen ([God has Given Me Cause to Laugh: Toward a Theology of Humor](#), 2001) presents a complementary view, citing American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "Laughter is the beginning of prayer". Thigpen then considers the way in which humour "can become a prelude to wisdom and to worship, as a spiritual discipline of the virtue of hope". He provides a series of examples of humour in the Bible. He quotes G K Chesterton ([Orthodoxy](#), 1908): "the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear," and that "joy, which was the small publicity of the pagans, is the gigantic secret of the Christians."

Thigpen disagrees with Chesterton's subsequent speculation about why the Gospel writers never speak of Jesus smiling or laughing, and his conclusion that perhaps "the one thing that was too great for God to show us while He walked upon our earth -- was His mirth." He queries Chesterton's view that Jesus hid his sense of humour. Indeed Thigpen then explores the Gospel as humour, in the light of the degree of paradox that it embodies:

Now these comical remarks of our Lord, though certainly significant in themselves, point beyond themselves, I think, to a more profound reality. In a sense, the entire Gospel is permeated with the liberating vision of humor.

Thigpen then explores the evidence for humour amongst Christian saints (cf Jyles Jacques et al. *L'humour chez les saints*, 1938) before exploring the probability of humour characterizing the afterlife, whether heaven or hell. He concludes with a reference to Sarah, wife of Abraham, who called her son Isaac (meaning "laughter") who had declared: "God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me" (*Genesis* 21:6).

Kuschel puts forward three arguments:

- with respect to "messianic jubilation, namely the joy and healing of the Christian message .... the foundation of Christian existence is the new joy made possible in the 'event of Jesus Christ' in and to God and the world, a joy which need not always express itself in laughter, but which becomes concrete in laughter.... has the character of liberated and redeemed joy which breaks down barriers and brings integration.... especially in the interests of those who are marginalized and excluded ... It is laughter in trust that God's laughter is ... a laughter of boundless goodness and joy in his creation and creatures..."
- "A Christian theology of laughter protests above all against a laughter from above; at the cost of those who in any case are weak, exploited and socially despised; laughter at the expense of human dignity; laughter as a kind of further delimitation and declassification"
- "... a Christian theology of laughter ... will also speak out against the absolutizing of laughter'... For "it is impossible for the believer, the Christian, to remain permanently in the aesthetic sphere ... to leave decisions open, to replay the game *ad infinitum*, to keep exchanging the masks and roles for new ones and continually enjoying ... Rather, believers feel challenged to a basic decision about their life and death, an ultimate seriousness and an infinite wager: discipleship of Christ, and thus trust in the God

who has shown himself in Jesus Christ". [\[more\]](#)

Daniel L. Migliore (*Reappraising Barth's Theology*, *Theology Today*, Vol 43, No 3, October 1986) draws attention to [Karl Barth's](#) theology of humour, arguing that as theologians go, Barth was uncommonly appreciative of the rightful place of humor in human life in general and in Christian life in particular:

- First, humor for Barth is often and perhaps primarily self-directed. "Humor is the opposite of all self-admiration and self-praise" .
- Second, for Barth true humor, far from being an escape from the realities of suffering and evil in the world, is "laughter amid tears." True humor "presupposes rather than excludes the knowledge of suffering".
- Third, and most decisively for Barth, humor is grounded in the grace, faithfulness, and promise of God. Humor is part of the freedom which is ours to exercise, thanks to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is a sign of liberation and release rather than bondage and resignation. Grace creates "liberated laughter," laughter made possible by the memory of God's faithfulness, the present foretaste of God's new creation, and the hope in the fulfillment of God's promises. While it is certainly correct to speak of his theology as Christ-centered, to say that it was rooted in a life-long, uninterrupted conversation with the Bible, and to note how important prayer was in his life and theology, all such characterizations of Barth's work would still miss something essential if they overlooked his remarkable freedom and playfulness. Laughter was deeply etched in Barth's theology and spirituality. He was a theologian with a rare sense of humor. He is quoted as saying "Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God".

For Migliore:

Humor often arises from the experienced discrepancy between reality and appearance, from the distance between what we pretend we are and what others know us to be, or between what others imagine us to be and what we know of ourselves. Humor thrives on incongruity, disproportion, the sometimes bizarre disparity between assumptions and facts, protocol and performance, the imagined past and the real past, the awaited future and the experienced present. The quality of humor -- whether it is harsh or gentle, destructive or humanizing -- depends on whether these contradictions and incongruities are held to be eternal and inescapable or provisional and redeemable.

In reviewing the work of [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) on humour in the medieval and renaissance periods, Peter J. Leithart notes that the role of laughter and the comic that arose during the Renaissance was quickly suppressed. "Modernity, beginning philosophically with Descartes, is an effort to harness and control the vitality of the Renaissance. Bakhtin sees something similar with the comic... Something drastic happened to the comedy of theology after the Reformation, something that needs to be discovered and recovered" [\[more\]](#).

## Recognized role of humour-playfulness in the media

Adrian Strong. *Why Every Newsroom Needs a Cultural Mythologist: How Hard Are Hard Facts?* 2001

The news of the day is often used or abused to create polarities and stress a particular morality, so that one sides with the good and scorns the evil. Myth, however, like Nature and Life stresses neither good nor bad. An identification with the process of Life through the larger window of myth leads not to judgement but to compassion. If George Bush behaves like an arrogant thunderbolt-wielding Indra, we may well decide to take action and protest, but we can also smile in the mythic knowledge that Indra's arrogance reduced his form in many incarnations to the status of an ant. Thus through a mythic reading of news we may, simply through a shift in our own focus, proceed from the tragedy of events in this particular time and space to the endless divine comedy -- the laughter of the gods who participate eternally in the processes of life and death. In dark and tragic times, how much more do we need this laughter and the deeper wisdom which accompanies it? And when we act out of mythic wisdom and compassion our play may bring warm smiles, not only to the gods but even perhaps to those mortals whose temporary snow-blindness limits them to cold and lonely dwellings in neon forests of fact, devoid of meaning. [\[comments\]](#)

Marianne Cianciolo, in a 1998 doctoral thesis for the College of Business Administration of the University of Cincinnati, noted that each year over \$150 billion was spent on advertising in US national media -- with as much as 30 percent of it used to place humorous ads. However, despite this widespread use, there was little understanding of the dynamics of humor, let alone how effective it can be in advertising. [\[more\]](#)

## Recognized role of humour-playfulness in creativity

Practitioners of research disciplines naturally perceive themselves as creative in the advancement of knowledge. It is therefore worth noting their enthusiasm for humorous initiatives such as the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, founded in 1955 by virologist Alexander Kohn and physicist Harry J. Lipkin.

Arthur Koestler (*The Act of Creation*, 1963) considered "bisociative thinking" -- recognizing, linking or combining ideas -- as all important to creative thinking. Creativity -- in response to dilemmas, paradoxes and complexity -- has since been studied in the light of bisociative and divergent thinking (cf René Victor Valqui Vidal. *Creativity and Problem Solving*, 2004). But although a considerable range of skills has been devoted to creativity, the experiential nature of humour in providing a bridging dynamic between the dissociated elements of a dilemma seems to have been largely ignored -- except perhaps as a personality characteristic of the "creative". However humour may well be a precursor to what is labelled as creativity -- a carrier or catalyst for it.

Edward de Bono (*Lateral Thinking for Management*, 1971) indicates that learning most effectively occurs through this process. He cites humour as the most evident example of how the brain works as a thinking tool -- with learning occurring when a jump in perception occurs. The result is a new idea or insight. The process of creative (generating from nothing) thinking is therefore exemplified in humour. When an alternative perception is not seen, it is the process of bridging this gap and understanding the alternate paths, and their interplay, through which the humour is generated. Linear, or progressive logic is indeed effective in processing information such as in computer technology. But active, creative thought requires a process based on perception and pathways, or interconnecting webs of information. [\[more\]](#)

Innovation in physics, "playing with the rules", is illustrated by the classic tale of a lecture in which Wolfgang Pauli proposed a new theory of elementary particles and came under heavy criticism. Niels Bohr summarized this by saying "We are all agreed that your theory is crazy. The question which divides us is whether it is crazy enough to have a chance of being correct. My own feeling is that is not crazy enough."

Francis H Buckley (*The Morality of Laughter*, 2003), as director of the Economics and Law Center at the George Mason School of Law, recognizes the humorlessness of academe and its consequences. He notes:

"The loss of a sense of humor has impoverished academic discourse, where nonsensical theories that could not survive the test of ridicule are now taken seriously."

## Recognized role of humour in philosophy and cultural studies

Mikhail Bakhtin (*Rabelais and his World*, 1984) notes with respect to the Renaissance view of the comic:

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint... Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.

He sees similar perspectives in medieval parodies:

For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology. It was the world's second truth extended to everything and from which nothing is taken away. It was, as it were, the festive aspect of the whole world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter.

Mark Weeks (*Beyond a Joke: Nietzsche and the Birth of "Super-Laughter"*) *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (Penn State University Press), 27, Spring 2004, pp. 1-17

There is no question that in the latter decades of the twentieth century philosophical, literary, and cultural studies were infected with something of a comic spirit. Postmodernism was identified with and through images of play, energy, and movement that sought to ceaselessly and joyfully throw into crisis our faith in the permanence of structures. The only thing that would be permanent now was the need for change that the ascendancy of desire itself as a cosmological principle was driving. Here, of course, postmodernist theory revealed its continuity with, and indeed its debt to, high modernist dynamism--most conspicuously, Nietzsche's Dionysianism, Bergson's quasi-mystical *élan vital*, and Freud's "energo-economics."

Thus when Derrida announced the triumph of "becoming," of endless desiring and *jouissance*, through his linguistic concepts of signifying force and *différance*, it was in Nietzsche that he found inspiration: "we must affirm this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance." Desire and play were inseparable, and laughter was the privileged icon--the transcendental signifier, if you like--of that unruly force that drove us. Amid the excitement the celebration of difference and playful energy introduced, especially as it was reinforced by the not unrelated rise of Bakhtinianism, it was common to overlook the qualifying adjective in Derrida's reference, that "certain." It was just as easy, and perhaps convenient, to overlook the fact that Nietzsche's laughing hero Zarathustra, from whom poststructuralist notions of "Nietzschean laughter" commonly derived, was, first, a fictional projection, and second, not a proponent...

Useful questions can be raised about the role of humour in some cultures -- especially when assumed by others to be humourless. This is particularly valuable in the case of instances cultural domination, notably indigenous and aboriginal cultures. In the case of the indigenous cultures of North America, Drew Hayden Taylor (*Me Funny*, 2006) offers a collection of studies of the humour, wittiness and repartee dominant among the First Nations people of Canada. Humour has always been an essential part of North American Aboriginal culture. This fact remained unnoticed by most settlers, however, since non-Aboriginals just didn't get the joke. Indians, it was believed, never laughed. But Indians themselves always knew better. Humour may also be seen as an integral part of the healing journey for displaced nations.

In the case of Australian Aborigines, Lillian Holt explores the question as to whether humour is both a weapon of resistance and/or a tool for healing [\[more | more\]](#). The healing role of humour is also recognized amongst Aboriginal communities [\[more\]](#). (cf WEH Stanner, *Aboriginal humour*, *Aboriginal History*, 1982, Vol 6)



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