

Laughter in Islam

by Mohamed Ben Mansour

The texts are clear: far from proscribing joking and joviality, Muslim culture gives significant place to laughter, whether by madmen, social parasites, and Bedouins or by the two main figures of authority, the caliph and the Prophet themselves.

The terrorist attacks that took place at *Charlie Hebdo* magazine on January 7th, 2015 raised afresh the question of the place of humour in Muslim consciousness in general and in Islam in particular. Are humour and Islam inherently antithetical? In order to answer this question, we must look to different forms of laughter and their aims, study their different expressions and dimensions, and uncover their strengths and limitations. From this perspective, Medieval literary, philosophical, theological, and political sources are ideal for observing the controversies raised by the place of humour in Muslim society from the very inception of Islam, particularly regarding figures of authority such as the caliph and the Prophet.

Allowed or prohibited?

When Islam appeared in the seventh century, it went hand-in-hand with a certain number of prohibitions. The new religion tried to redefine what was allowed and what was prohibited, whether in terms of slavery, alcohol, or games of chance. However, as these practices were firmly rooted in Arab society, Islam did not manage to ban them altogether. The same is true of laughter. Islam tried to reform people's attitudes in society, painting an ideal characterised by seriousness and restraint, in contrast with the nonchalance of non-believers with little concern for resurrection and the moral principles supposed to ensure it. It would seem that Islam called for a dignity in manners that was naturally incompatible with any of the carefree or casual attitudes characteristic of laughter.

This distrust of laughter is confirmed in the Qur'an, where it often has negative connotations. Of the ten occurrences of the term, seven emphasise its unhealthy and pernicious use by non-believers, whose ignorance and pride leads them to reject the message of Islam. Driven by mockery and pre-Islamic pride, laughter underlines the haughty, contemptuous attitudes of non-believers towards the new Muslims: 'But you took them for a laughing-stock, till they made you forget My remembrance, mocking at them' (23, 'The Believers', v. 110).¹ 'Behold, the sinners were laughing at the believers / when they passed them by winking at one another / and when they returned to their people they returned blithely' (83, 'The Stinters', v. 29-31). God Himself, as well as the first followers of the new religion, apparently suffered from this impious mockery. Non-believers mocked at tales of peoples and towns destroyed by God: 'Do you then marvel at this discourse / and do you laugh, and do you not weep' (53, 'The Star', v. 59-60).

Like Jesus Christ, who was laughed at by the crowd as he agonised (Matthew, 26-43), Mohammad was often mocked and derided. In the sacred texts, non-believers are characterised by this sort of behaviour, whoever the Prophet in question, as evidenced by the welcome reserved for Moses: 'But when he brought them Our signs, lo, they laughed at them' (43, 'Ornaments', v. 47). The Old Testament does not stray from this – the Prophet Elisha was mocked by young children for his baldness: 'And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head' (2 Kings 2: 23). In all the sacred texts, the prophetic message was often welcomed with a mocking laugh, challenging its authenticity and truth.

According to the Qur'an, it is in the afterlife that the mocked Prophet and believers will take their revenge, bursting into a laughter that resonates as an eternal vengeance. Seated in Paradise, the chosen ones laugh as they watch the inferno consuming the atheists: 'So today the believers are laughing at the unbelievers / upon couches gazing' (83, 'The Stinters', v. 34-35). The Qur'an insists on this emotional dichotomy between this life and the after-life, evoking the treatment awaiting non-believers come the Day of Judgment: 'Therefore let them laugh little, and weep much, in recompense for what they have been earning' (9, 'Repentance', v. 82). This verse is reminiscent of Jesus's words who, according to Saint Matthew, declared: 'Woe unto you that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep.' (Luke 6:25).

Given how religious texts discredited laughter, Muslim men of letters could not help themselves from justifying their approach when they wrote books entirely or partly devoted to the subject. The most lively and skilful defences were to be found in belle lettres collections (*adab*, see insert box). Books such as *The Book of Misers* by al-Ġāhiz (776-869), *Fountains of Information* by Ibn Qutayba (828-889) and *Intelligent Madmen* by al-Nisābūrī (933-1012) all begin with a manifesto in favour of humour and entertainment. Other texts worthy of mention in this regard include: *Al-Murāh̄ fi l-muzāh̄* by abū l-Barakāt al-Ġazzī (904-984),

¹ The translation we refer to is Arthur Arberry's : « The Koran Interpreted ».

completely devoted to jokes in the circle of the Prophet and his Companions; *'Aḥbār al-ḥamqā wa l-muġaffalīn* by Ibn al-Ġawzī, the main subject of which is false stupidity; and *al-Taṭfīl wa ḥikāyāt l-ṭufayliyyīn* by al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī (1002-1071), which looks at party crashers and social parasites. Laughter is usually legitimised in the introduction, using arguments drawn from the Qur'an, the collections of prophetic words (*ḥadīṭ*, see insert box) and the narratives of the Prophet's Companions (*ṣaḥāba*, see insert box).

Adab: 'This genre, designed to be at once informative and entertaining, possessed a distinctive discourse in which verse and prose coexisted with materials ranging from the legal to the philosophical, but where the anecdote reigned supreme', *'Ṭufaylī*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), vol. 10, p. 586.

Ṣaḥāba: the Companions, [...] considered as reliable transmitters of statements, deeds and instructions of the Prophet. Their own deeds and statements, too, are worthy of imitation, particularly in the history of Islamic rites.', *'Ṣaḥāba*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 8, p. 827.

Fatwā: 'opinion on a point of law, the term "law" applying, in Islam, to all civil or religious matters', *'Fatwā*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 2, p. 866.

Ḥadīṭ: '(narrative, talk) with the definite article (*al-ḥadīṭh*) is used for Tradition, being an account of what the Prophet said or did, or of his tacit approval of something said or done in his presence.', *Ḥadīṭh*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 3, p. 23.

Tābi: Muslim who frequented the Prophet's Companions but did not know the Prophet himself.

Among other sources, al-Ġāḥiẓ drew on the verse in the Qur'an where God, speaking in the third person, states: 'and that it is He who makes to laugh, and that makes to weep / and that it is He who makes to die, and that makes to live' (53, 'The Star', 43-44) to show that laughter was so important that God linked it to life, whereas tears were synonymous with death.² A second passage corroborates this idea, as the laughter of the chosen ones is contrasted with the tears of the people in Hell: 'Some faces on that day shall shine / laughing, joyous; / some faces on that day shall be dusty / overspread with darkness / those – they are the unbelievers, the libertines' (80, 'He Frowned', v. 38-42). When laughter is not sniggering, schadenfreude or mockery, it represents life in this world and salvation in the next.

In rehabilitating laughter in the Muslim sphere, the authors largely base their arguments on the attitude of the Prophet – the model to follow when it comes to legitimising or delegitimising actions. It is noteworthy that the prefaces of these books all reveal the idea

² Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Book of Misers: a Translation of Al-Bukhālā*, transl. R.B. Serjeant (Reading: Garnet, 1997), p.5-6.

that, contrary to the representations we have of them today, Muhammad and his Companions were not austere, dark figures. The texts all remind their readers of the following *ḥadīth*, a manifesto for humour and laughter: ‘Lighten hearts moment by moment, for when hearts are weary they become blind’. Laughter was therefore part of the life of the Prophet and of those close to him, as evidenced by the many tales in these compilations:

According to Yaḥyā, who had heard it from Abū Kaṭīr, one of the Prophet’s friends was a laugher. This attitude was reported back to the Prophet, as if looking to reproach him for it. ‘What are you surprised about?’ asked the Prophet, ‘there is no doubt that he will enter Paradise laughing’.³

Unlike Jesus, who never laughs in the Gospels, Muhammad laughs and makes others laugh, to the extent he is often cited as a model to lend legitimacy to humour. The testimony of Anas b. Mālik, the Prophet’s servant until his death, tells us that: ‘The Prophet was one of the men who joked the most’ (*al-Murāḥ fi l-muzāḥ*, *op. cit.*, p. 12).) And who better than his wife to corroborate this:

One day, ‘Ā’iṣā – may God be pleased with her – was asked if the Prophet liked joking. Yes, she answered. I had an old lady with me when the Prophet entered. ‘Pray to God, she said to him, that He will count me among the inhabitants of Paradise!’ ‘But old women do not go to Paradise!’ he replied, before leaving. Then he returned. ‘The woman was in tears. What is wrong with her?’ asked the Prophet. ‘You told her that old women do not go to Paradise.’ ‘That is because in Paradise, God will make her into a young virgin,’ he told her, smiling.⁴

Another anecdote foregrounds a Prophet far from the portraits painted of an emissary of God who contented himself with a smile or, at best, a shy and discreet laugh:

When Ṣuḥayb arrived from Mecca, he went to the Prophet and to Abū Bakr. He went into the Prophet’s home, complaining of pain in his eye, while eating dates. ‘Abū Ṣuḥayb, you are treating the pain in your eye by eating dates?’ ‘But I’m using my good eye’. The Prophet roared with laughter. (*al-Murāḥ fi l-muzāḥ*, *op. cit.*, p. 19-20).

The Companions of the Prophet are another authority often called upon to legitimate laughter and entertainment in the Muslim tradition. They inherited their joyful behaviour and proclivity towards pranks and jokes from God’s messenger. Al-Naḥā’ī, one of the Prophet’s Companions, was asked whether Muhammad’s contemporaries laughed: ‘Yes, he replied, but faith was so deeply embedded in them that they seemed to be immovable mountains’ (*al-Murāḥ fi l-muzāḥ*, *op. cit.*, p. 23). Al-Naḥā’ī’s answer summarises the thorny issue of laughter in Islam – how humour and faith can be compatible. The example of the Prophet and his Companions resolves this debate through behaviour reconciling both existential stances, which at first hand, seem irreconcilable. Therefore, in order to rehabilitate

³ *Al-Murāḥ fi l-muzāḥ* (Cairo: Maktabat al-ṭaqāfa al-dīniyya, 1986), p. 21 (unless otherwise indicated, translations from Arabic texts have been translated into English from the French translations quoted in the original French version of the article).

⁴ Jean-Jacques Schmidt, *Le Livre de l’humour arabe* (Arles: Actes Sud), p. 23.

laughter, Muslim men of letters drew on the sacred text and on these emblematic figures with real moral and spiritual authority in the Muslim world.

Politics of laughter

Like the Prophet, the representation of the Prince in the classical age reveals a different attitude towards laughter. The caliph's relationship to humour sheds a different light on the mythical and quasi-mystical image we have of this political authority today. While theologians⁵ emphasise the caliph's austerity and rejection of all forms of entertainment, he does not appear so austere in the texts of men of letters. Certain radical religious views⁶ seeking to 'reincarnate' the 'original' Islam paint an idealised picture of the caliph to the point that it becomes deformed, as tragically shown by the so-called caliph al-Baġdādī since the inception of the 'Islamic State'. As the cornerstone of this endeavour, the caliph is presented as a deeply pious man, who is always serious and abhors any form of joking. His life is nothing but prayer and holy war (*ġihād*) to defend orthodoxy and to conquer new lands.

However, in reality, caliphs who rejected light-heartedness and fun were few and far between. Whatever the period (early Islam or the Umayyad or Abbasid period), humour was a constant feature in caliphate life and in the prince's day-to-day. The leaders were aware of the need for a balance between affairs of the state and needs of the soul, hence the search for a balance between the serious and the light-hearted. For the princes, this duality was a vital principle. Caliph 'Alī b. abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, said, 'There's no harm in indulging in joking because it frees man from austerity' (*al-Murāḥ fi al-Muzāḥ*, op. cit., p. 30).

The Umayyad caliphs were the first to truly implement this approach to life. They joked and surrounded themselves with slave-singers (*qayna*) and poets to listen to anecdotes, stories, and odes. Even the most powerful governor of the Umayyad period, known for his gloomy disposition and severity, could not help himself from laughing:

« One day, Al-Hajjaj went out hiking. When his companions left him, he was left alone in a field, where an old man from Bani 'Ijl came across his way. Al-Hajjaj asked, 'From where, old man?' He said, 'From this village'. He asked, 'And what is your opinion of the governors in this region?' He said, 'They are the worst of governors. They oppress the people and deem lawful their wealth'. Al-Hajjaj then asked, 'And what is your opinion of Al-Hajjaj?' He said, 'No-one has ever ruled over Iraq who was more evil than him'. He asked, 'Do you know who I am?' He said, 'No'. He said, 'I am Al-Hajjaj!' The old man said, 'And do you know who I am?' He said, 'No'. He said, 'I am such and such, son of such and such, I am the madman of Bani 'Ijl; every day I am afflicted with two fits of

⁵ See *al-Hilāfa wa l-mulk* by 'Ibn Taymiyya (Beirut: Maktabat al-Manār, 1994).

⁶ See Sayyid Quṭb, *Ma'ālim fi l-tarīq* (Beirut: Dār al-šurūq, 2008).

madness, and I do not know what I say during those fits'. Al-Hajjaj laughed and gave him an endowment.' (Abdul Malik Mujahid, *Gems and Jewels*, Darussalam, p. 75)

Commensality, during which poetry, music, and dancing afforded an atmosphere of jubilation and gaiety,⁷ offered an ideal context for banter and joking. During these gatherings, everything serious was proscribed. Each guest had to entertain the caliph in his own way because 'the company of the boring is harmful to the soul'.⁸ This reveals another side to the caliph who, like Saint Louis, the only King of France to be canonised and known for his penchant for joking and laughter, 'liked laughing and having fun'.⁹ Despite his piety and devotion, Hārūn al-Rašīd, the fifth Abbasid caliph, Charlemagne's correspondent, and a central figure in the *Arabian Nights*, could not do without humour and gaiety. The anecdote recounted by al-Aṣḫānī in the *Book of Songs*¹⁰ offers a perfect illustration of this attitude. Hārūn asked al-Ḥārīṭ b. Bushūnnar, one of his table companions, to invite the singers who regularly participated in his festivities and to give them everything they desired. Accompanied by certain members of his family, the caliph then hid behind a curtain to watch them acting impulsively and spontaneously. He did not want to embarrass them by his presence in any way. However, his guests' joking, wit, and repartee, as well as their constant requests, made him burst out laughing, thus giving his presence away.

While Harun hid behind a curtain to enjoy the hilarious spectacle of his table companions, al-Ma'mūn, his son and heir to the throne, went about things differently. He was centre stage, looking to amuse his companions by trying to catch out an interlocutor:

Al-Ma'mūn was sitting with some table companions, on the banks of the Tigris, chatting and joking about bearded men. When a man came by with a long beard, the caliph invited him to sit beside him and asked him who he was: 'Alawiyya', answered the man. 'And what is your kunya?' 'Abū Ahmadawyh'. Al-Ma'mūn burst out laughing and winked at one of his companions before saying to the bearded man: 'What is your profession?' 'I am a jurist' 'Ah!' said al-Ma'mūn. 'What do you think of a man who buys a sheep which, just after he pays for it, expels a dropping from its rear end that blinds someone? Is the price to be paid to compensate for the damage the responsibility of the buyer or the seller?' 'The seller', answered the bearded man. 'And why is that?' asked al-Ma'mūn. 'Because, when he sold his animal, he failed to mention she had a catapult in her arse'.¹¹

An initial remark is necessary regarding the two sides to Al-Ma'mūn's personality. His palatial seriousness and gravitas would also make way for light-heartedness and banter, and he

⁷ Al-Aṣḫānī's *Book of Songs* describes this atmosphere, particularly in the biographical notes devoted to the poets of the Abbasid period. It can be compared with the Greek tradition of the banquet, cf. Françoise Frazier, 'Théorie et pratique de la $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ symposiaque dans les Propos de table de Plutarque', in Monique Trédé and Philippe Hoffmann (eds.), *Le rire des Anciens* (Paris: Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, 1998), p. 281-292 and, by the same author, 'Rires et rieurs dans l'œuvre de Plutarque', in Marie-Laurence Desclos (ed.), *Le rire des Grecs (Anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne)* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Million, 2000), p. 487-492.

⁸ 'Muḡālasat al-ṭāqil ḥummā l-rūḥ', by al-Rāḡib al-Iṣḫānī (d. 1018), *Muḡāḍarāt al-'udabā' wa muḡāwarāt l-ṣū'arā' wa l-bulaḡā'* (Beirut: Manṣūrāt dār Maktabat al-Hayāt, [no date.]), p. 701.

⁹ In the face of reprimands from the clergy, he restrained himself once a week on a Friday, M. Cool, *Prier 15 jours avec saint Louis* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 2014).

¹⁰ Al-Aṣḫānī *Kitāb al-'Aḡānī*, Bayrūt. Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīyya, Second Edition, 1992, vol. XIX, p. 303 – 307.

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Schmidt, *Historiettes, anecdotes et bons mots* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2013), p. 37.

would remove his caliph dress, donning the tunic of a mischievous table companion instead. In fact, it was important that a good caliph knew how to entertain his guests and make them laugh; otherwise, he ran the risk of losing them fairly quickly. And no matter if that humour was sometimes vulgar: a caliph was not a full-time Imam!

As a cultured man, often trained by the most gifted intellectuals and men of letters of his time, the caliph's conversation was not lacking in brilliance. Filled with funny repartee, witty remarks, and lively, captivating lines, his speech was infused with a light touch of humour:

A caliph said to a man: 'What is your name?' He replied 'Ember' (*ġamra*). 'Son of whom?' 'Son of Shooting star' (*Ibn Šihāb*). 'From which tribe?' 'The burning tribe' (*al-ḥurqa*). 'And where do you live?' 'In the desert of fire' (*ḥarrat al-nār*). 'Which one?' 'The one with flames' (*dāt lazā*). 'Go back to your people before they are consumed!' (*Le Livre de l'humour arabe*, op. cit., p. 61 translation of *Zahr al-'ādāb*, t. 1, p. 172).

Before being a caliph, the vicegerent of God on earth was, like any mortal, a man who laughed and cried, had fun and was sad, rejoiced and lamented. The first caliphs, who frequented the Prophet, established a tradition of the bon viveur caliph, who was jovial and prone to jokes and humour. This tradition was maintained until the abolition of the caliphate in the early twentieth century. Laughter was a constitutive element of the very identity of the caliphate role. In Medieval times, laughter was first and foremost the distinctive feature of the caliph.

The laughter of the people

Medieval Muslims took a much freer and more flexible approach to the dogma than their descendants. During the first centuries of Islam, they laughed about everything, even the most sensitive and private of topics, without worrying about the consequences and without asking themselves whether the joke might offend those listening, whether irony might hurt men of religion, or whether mockery was against the principles of the Holy Book. These concerns were mainly to be found among men of letters, concerned with justifying themselves to their chosen readership. The further we go from these first generations of Muslims, the stricter and more set in stone the relationship to humour becomes. Thus, the Salafists, claiming to emulate their ancestors (*salaf*, in Arabic), conjured up a mythical and legendary image of Islam at its origins, endeavouring at all costs to frame it as an ideal of piousness, purity, and rigor. This is particularly the case for the fundamentalist wing, advocating a literal reading of the Qur'an and rejecting any form of light-heartedness and pleasure. However, the texts, which are little read and sometimes never consulted by this movement's proponents, often contradict this. Proponents exclude any form of humour or joking from the lives of the Prophet and the caliph, whom they seek to emulate in all aspects of their conduct. But this is

broadly debatable, as shown above. Moreover, the behaviour of those who frequented this first generation, and more particularly the two charismatic figures of the Prophet and the caliph, contradict the image portrayed by the Salafists.

The question of laughter in Islam cannot be addressed without mentioning some of the key figures in popular humour. Most amusing anecdotes refer to people who actually existed, such as 'Aš'ab¹², Ğuḥā¹³ and Bahlūl¹⁴, and were passed down orally. The reader follows their peregrinations, laughs at their false stupidity, and makes fun of their strange behaviour. All the *adab* treatises recount short tales in which these figures are either heroes or anti-heroes. Their lively wit and presence of mind were what marked Muslims at the time, as evidenced by the following anecdotes, the first about Bahlūl:

Bahlūl was asked: 'Could you count the number of madmen in your country?' 'It would take too long! But I can count the number of reasonable people'. (*Le Livre de l'humour arabe*, op. cit. p. 86, translation of *Zabr al-rabī'*, p. 70)

The second about 'Aš'ab:

'Aš'ab was asked: 'What is the most beautiful of all songs?' He replied: 'The crackling of the frying pan!' (Ibid., translation of *Adabunā l-dāḥik*, p. 36)

And the third about Ğuḥā:

One day, a beggar knocked at Ğuḥā's door. Ğuḥā came out and asked him: 'What do you want?' The beggar said: 'I am a guest of God!' 'Follow me!' replied Ğuḥā. The other man followed him until they arrived at the Mosque, where Ğuḥā said to him: 'You came to my house by mistake! This is God's house, guest of God!' (Ibid., p. 151, translation of *Nawādir Ğuḥā l-kubrā*, p. 267).

However, these key figures must not overshadow another variant of humour, which has not really made its way into posterity. In particular, it is represented by the Bedouin, at the heart of comic scenes in the classical period related to the religious sphere. Far from any form of sacredness, this sphere was a space conducive to joking and teasing. Two anecdotes testify to this, both devoted to religious obligations and providing an insight into this humour about the sacred. In the first, a Bedouin in the Abbasid period could no longer bear the recital of long surahs during prayers:

A Bedouin had prayed behind the Imam during the Morning Prayer. The Imam recited the surah of the Cow (*al-Baqara*). The Bedouin was in a rush and he missed an appointment.

¹² 'Aš'ab came from Medina and was known for his greed.

¹³ Having lived in both the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods, Ğuḥā was the perfect embodiment of the buffoon in the Arabic-Muslim tradition. However, his pranks hid a subtle and wily mind, capable of detecting the weaknesses of others. He was immortalised in the cinema by Jacques Baratier in 1958, who won the International prize at the Cannes film festival that year. Almost five centuries later, the figure of Nasr Eddin Hodja (http://www.numilog.com/package/extraits_pdf/e24096.pdf) took up this myth in Medieval Turkey.

¹⁴ Abū Wahīb, Bahlūl ibn 'Amr al-Sayrafi, known as the 'madman', was originally from Kufa. He became famous for his pranks, his witticisms, and also his poetry. He died in 805/190.

Early the next morning, he went to the Mosque. The Imam began by reciting the surah of the Elephant (*al-Fil*). The Bedouin interrupted his prayer and left saying: 'Yesterday, you recited 'The Cow' and you were not finished before the middle of the day. Today you are reciting 'The Elephant'. I would be surprised if you were finished before the middle of the night!' (Ibid., p. 95, translation of *'Aḥbār al-ḥamqā wa l-muḡaffalīn*, p. 111)

As for the second, it shows another Bedouin ridiculing the night prayer:

Some people had been talking about the qiyām [night prayer]. There was a Bedouin with them. 'Do you do the qiyām at night?' they asked him. 'Yes, by God!' he answered. 'And what do you do?' 'I go and piss and then I go back to bed!' (Ibid., p. 34, translation of *'Aḥbār al-ḥamqā wa l-muḡaffalīn*, p. 111)

No matter how surprising these two anecdotes may seem to modern-day Muslims, they illustrate the particular relationship to religion that characterised the Medieval period. Even though prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam, it was mocked as if definitively no longer sacred. The same could be said of the other foundations of Islam such as fasting during the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Nothing escaped the derisive wit of the early Muslims. Therefore, far from dissipating any form of humour, Islam, on the contrary, was the source of a remarkable collection of humour. This was particularly the case when it came to superstition and the magical power of reciting certain verses:

A man's bag had been stolen. He was told: 'if you had recited a verse from the surah of 'The Kingdom' over it, it would not have been stolen from you!' He replied: 'There was a whole Qur'an inside it!' (*Le Livre de l'humour arabe*, op. cit., p. 104, translation of *Mamlakat al-daḥīk*, p. 320)

The same is true of the imaginary surrounding the after-life:

Abū al-Šamaqmaq [a poet who lived across both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods (d. 815) and was a formidable satirist, known for his witty eloquence and subtlety] stayed at home dressed in worn rags [...]. One of his friends who had come to see him came inside and, seeing the sorry state he was in, said to him: 'Be thankful, Abū al-Šamaqmaq: there is a hadith that states that those who are naked in this world will be clothed at the Last Judgment.' 'By God! If what you say is true, I shall sell clothes that day!' (*Le Livre de l'humour arabe*, op. cit., p. 110, translation of 'al- *'Iqd al-farīd*, t. 3, p. 35)

One subject that never ceased to liven up circles of laughter was genealogy and filiation. Very attached to pure ascendancy and excellent lineage, Arabs developed a whole body of comic literature on this topic. This led to humour based on well-chosen repartee and quick retorts:

It is said that a man had married a woman who gave birth on the fifth day after the wedding. He went to the market and bought a plank and an ink well. 'What is that?' he was asked. He answered: 'Someone who is born in five days is capable of going to the Qur'anic school after three days!' (*Le Livre de l'humour arabe*, op. cit., p. 35, translation of *Zabr al-rabī*, p. 558)

This second example is on the same register, but shows even more quick-wittedness:

Someone said to Abū 'Ishāq al-Madanī: 'Can an eight-year-old man have a child?' He answered: 'Yes, if he has a thirty-year-old neighbour!' (*Le Livre de l'humour arabe*, op. cit., p. 97, translation of *Fawāt al-wafāyāt*, p. 594)

The condemnation of laughter by salafism, radicalism, and despair, does not stand up to the test of the sources themselves, because the *adab* texts tell a very different story. Whether on a theological, political, literary, or aesthetic level, as Ishāq b. Sulaymān al-'Isrā'īlī¹⁵ put it long before Rabelais, laughter is 'the property of man'.¹⁶ No man can escape its grasp, be he Prophet, prince or caliph. Lively repartee, delectable anecdotes, and amusing stories filled the Prophet's conversations, princes' gatherings, poets' vigils, and banquets alike. The joker Prophet and the prankster caliph were no less wise and no less serene for their humour. These 'sacred' figures do not overshadow the defiant and carefree laughter of the people either: a laughter that suffers no restrictions and accepts no prohibition. In short, there nothing is as sacred as the omnipotence of laughter.

Further reading (in French):

- 'L'humour en Orient', special section in the *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, n° 77-78, 1995.
(http://www.persee.fr/issue/remmm_0997-1327_1995_num_77_1?sectionId=remmm_0997-1327_1995_num_77_1_1710)
- Jean-Claude Ravet, 'Le rire de Dieu : entrevue avec Richard Kearney' *Relations*, n° 761, 2012. (<http://www.erudit.org/culture/rel049/rel0367/68018ac.pdf>).
- René Nouailhat, 'Le rire chrétien', *Médium*, n° 43, 2015/2
(<http://www.cairn.info/revue-medium-2015-2-page-120.htm>)

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¹⁵ An Egyptian doctor and philosopher (ca. 243-343/858-955), his career took place in Kairouan under the Aglabids and Fatimids. His work became known in the West from as early as the eleventh century, translated into Latin by Constantine the African.

¹⁶ Michael Andrew Screech, *Laughter At the Foot of the Cross* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 2.