

# Humor and Laughter

By Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Universal House of Justice

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## Introduction

BY OMID DJALILI AND ANNABEL KNIGHT

Faith and humour are two aspects of life that have never been totally at ease with each other. There has always been a struggle between the incongruity of worldly (material) and other-worldly (spiritual) aspirations, with laughter and religion seemingly the ultimate of unholy misalliances. It seems strangely natural then that relatively few references to humour in the Bahá'í writings are presented in this compilation. It may be that few actually exist or it may be that there is still a great deal of research to be done. Nevertheless it is important to point out, lest expectations result in disappointment, that these references along with many others not included here underline a common vein in nearly all references to humour in Bahá'í literature: they are delightful, fascinating and even amusing - but never as funny as you hoped they would be. In colloquial terms, laughs are usually pretty thin on the ground.

Amongst religious communities, including in Bahá'í society, the place for humour is invariably segregated from spiritual life. It is confined to a carefully placed joke in a talk by a keynote speaker, or in the form of an evening programme where “the youth,” as they are affectionately called, can run amok with a mish-mash of “challenging” sketches. There is a time for spirituality, and there is a time for humour. The two do not mix. Faith and humour, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and religious people everywhere are recognising that not having a sense of humour or a sense of fun can risk being alienated by a secular and cynical society. However, laughing and developing a sense of humour is an art. The ability to laugh at oneself and have a sense of humour is a key to balanced living. As a leading psychiatrist, Warren Poland has written:

Humour ... reflects a regard for oneself and one's limits despite pain. With such humour there is an acceptance for what one is, an ease in being amused even if bemused ... such humour often linked to an appreciation of irony, requires a self-respecting modesty based on underlying self strength and simultaneous recognition and regard for others.<sup>1</sup>

As the human being is the only organism on earth that has the ability to laugh - no other animal has the capacity - the extent to which we have humour in our lives must be seen almost as a gauge for spiritual growth. It is a fact that it is the mature and emotionally healthy individual who laughs frequently and enjoys it. But in western civilization, ever more hectic and stressful, we are faced with a new and remarkable dichotomy: the thirst for laughter and gratification has become frenzied and unquenchable; yet more and more people—possibly as a consequence of such a society—are unable to enjoy humorous pleasure. Humourlessness, in some cases, is even beyond repair. Real quality of life is dependent on the capacity for humour, the ability to laugh at oneself and at one's place in the world. Lack of it implies a disability of the very worst kind: a dullness of the soul—the very demon that religion purports to exorcise.

Humour is a powerful asset in today's society. We love, respect and even revere those who make us laugh. We respond to them intellectually and by pressing our laughter buttons they massage our positive emotions. In the early 1990's, comedy in Britain was even dubbed “The New Rock'n'Roll.” Comedians replaced pop stars to raise money for famine relief when “Band Aid” became “Comic Relief” and they are now being employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation to cajole us to pay our television licenses and taxes. Comedy in Britain has never been in a healthier state,

with over 500 clubs around the country attracting proportionally fuller audiences than the theatres.

Even though it is now big business, humour and comedy have not always been monopolized by secular society. Within the worldwide Jewish community humour has a very rich vein and has helped reinforce Jewish identity. It is a modern phenomenon that a religion has been so associated with self-deprecation, humour and indeed the entertainment industry. Even though Judaism today may be regarded by some as more of a race than a religion, Jewish identity may even be fuelled by aspiring to the very Jewish stereotypes that comedians make jokes out of. For example, a Jew may not be familiar with the Torah, he may find orthodoxy repugnant and he may not even believe in God, but he will be proud to be perceived as Jewish simply by being quick-witted, a good businessman or simply "careful" with money. This is why secular Jews are often known to be as staunchly Jewish as rabbis in Jerusalem. Woody Allen and Jackie Mason—two of the most famous Jewish American stand-up comedians—have played heavily on their cultural identity and as a result have achieved world-wide popularity. Their work has served as a testament to the fact that Jews can and will probably always laugh at themselves; a remarkable quality to have by any standards.

As a group, Bahá'ís for the most part have the capacity to laugh at life as well as at themselves. If they don't they certainly should have; there are aspects of the Bahá'í community which are worthy of comic analysis. For example, being a world-wide and diverse community, Bahá'ís are asked to live in unity and harmony with their fellow Bahá'ís. This can mean involving oneself with people one would never normally meet or even stand the sight of, let alone socialise with. The fact that Bahá'ís do so regardless is as funny as it is admirable. They have needed wisdom and a very developed sense of humour to have even attempted this, let alone achieve it. Wisdom, humour and indeed joy are the bridges that connect the material with the spiritual, and are essential ingredients in "walking the spiritual path with practical feet". Bahá'ís should indeed take their cue from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whose wit is known to have been razor sharp<sup>2</sup> and is rumoured to have advocated a time after an evening meal as "laughter time." But how powerful a tool humour and satire will become for the Bahá'í community remains to be seen.

Humour is about being honest and open. It can be truly uplifting and has the power to transform in an instant. It deals with our fears and prejudices and will highlight certain truths which will invariably come close to the bone. Sometimes religious-minded people deprive themselves of some of the pleasure inherent in the process of adopting a "way of life" advocated by a religion or philosophy. The different spiritual processes open to humankind are often misinterpreted and carried through by

firmly following a set of principles with a grim rigidity. Rather than living in honesty and openness and addressing reality, inevitably, those very principles lead to stagnancy, leading ultimately to the individual at best becoming the butt of “God-squad” and “Jesus Freak” jokes. It is a brave person who will try to lead a truly religious life, let alone a Bahá’í life, and humour and laughter are important tools in developing our openness and honesty, two of the most prominent prerequisites in our struggle for spiritual transformation.

As to what we laugh at, and why, are questions that still inspire intellectual thought. There are many different forms of humour from the base to the sophisticated, the drier, broader, sharper, gentler, the cruel, the sardonic, the sadistic or the kind of humour that is charged with sexuality. But perhaps there is still nothing funnier than watching a man, unintentionally and in a public place, drop his trousers or slip on a banana. Whether witnessed live or watching Jeremy Beadles’ “You’ve Been Framed,”<sup>3</sup> this essentially absurd event, evoking embarrassment and pain, is unsurpassable. However much we intellectualise about humour, it is moments such as these that we respond to because they essentially address the realities of life: a man’s trousers may fall and true that does happen, it is absurd that it should happen, the pain that he feels is a pain that we all could potentially go through ourselves, and the fact that it is him and not us prompts the laugh of relief. Whatever encapsulates the absurdity of life will evoke laughter and delight; a delight that is also tinged with hints of tragedy, confusion or pain. As Byron once wrote, “and if I laugh at any mortal thing, ‘tis that I may not weep.” With life being full of such absurd happenings, the human race, at least in theory, should be laughing all the time.

OMID DJALILI AND ANNABEL KNIGHT

1 Warren Poland, “The Gift Of Laughter” in *The use of humour in psychotherapy*, ed. H. Streehan (London: Aronson, 1994) 3.

2 See, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response to a commission of enquiry investigating claims of Bahá’í wrongdoing cited in A. Taherzadeh’s *The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1992) 235-6.

3 A family light entertainment programme on British Independent Television made up of video clips sent in by viewers of real life humorous mishaps and accidents.

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### From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh

Methinks at this moment, I catch the fragrance of His garment<sup>4</sup> blowing from the Egypt of Bahá;<sup>5</sup> verily He seemeth near at hand, though men may think Him far away.<sup>6</sup> My soul doth smell the perfume shed by the Beloved One; My sense is filled with the fragrance of My dear Companion.

The duty of long years of love obey  
And tell the tale of happy days gone by,  
That land and sky may laugh aloud today,  
And it may gladden mind and heart and eye.<sup>7</sup>

(The Four Valleys, in The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys, pp. 56-57)

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<sup>4</sup> Literally, the garment of Há, which is the letter 'H' and here represents Bahá.

<sup>5</sup> This reference is to the story of Joseph in the Qur'án and the Bible.

<sup>6</sup> This refers to those who did not expect the imminent advent of Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest.

<sup>7</sup> The *Mathnavi*.

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### From the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Even as the clouds let us shed down tears, and as the lightning flashes let us laugh at our coursings through east and west. By day, by night, let us think but of spreading the sweet savours of God. Let us not keep on forever with our fancies and illusions, with our analysing and interpreting and circulating of complex dubieties. Let us put aside all thoughts of self; let us close our eyes to all on earth, let us neither make known our sufferings nor complain of our wrongs. Rather let us become oblivious of our own selves, and drinking down the wine of heavenly grace, let us cry out our joy, and lose ourselves in the beauty of the All-Glorious.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, section 195, p. 247)

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The Prison was a garden of roses to him,<sup>8</sup> and his narrow cell a wide and fragrant place. At the time when we were in the barracks he fell dangerously ill and was confined to his bed. He suffered many complications, until finally the doctor gave him up and would visit him no more. Then the sick man breathed his last. Mírzá Áqá Ján ran to Bahá'u'lláh, with word of the death. Not only had the patient ceased to breathe, but his body was already going limp. His family were gathered about him, mourning him, shedding bitter tears. The Blessed Beauty said, "Go; chant the prayer of Yá Sháfi - O Thou, the Healer - and Mírzá Ja'far will come alive. Very rapidly, he will be as well as ever." I reached his bedside. His body was cold and all the signs of death were present. Slowly, he began to stir; soon he could move his limbs, and before an hour had passed he lifted his head, sat up, and proceeded to laugh and tell jokes. He lived for a long time after that, occupied as ever with serving the friends. This giving service was a point of pride with him: to all, he was a servant. He was always modest and humble, calling God to mind, and to the highest degree full of hope and faith. Finally, while in

the Most Great Prison, he abandoned this earthly life and winged his way to the life beyond.

(Memorials of the Faithful, pp. 157-58)

8 Mirzá Ja'far-i-Yazdi.

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I desire to make manifest among the friends in America a new light that they may become a new people, that a new foundation may be established and complete harmony be realized; for the foundation of Bahá'u'lláh is love. When you go to Green Acre, you must have infinite love for each other, each preferring the other before himself. The people must be so attracted to you that they will exclaim, "What happiness exists among you!" and will see in your faces the lights of the Kingdom; then in wonderment they will turn to you and seek the cause of your happiness. You must give the message through action and deed, not alone by word. Word must be conjoined with deed. You must love your friend better than yourself; yes, be willing to sacrifice yourself. The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh has not yet appeared in this country. I desire that you be ready to sacrifice everything for each other, even life itself; then I will know that the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh has been established. I will pray for you that you may become the cause of upraising the lights of God. May everyone point to you and ask, "Why are these people so happy?" I want you to be happy in Green Acre, to laugh, smile and rejoice in order that others may be made happy by you. I will pray for you.

(The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912, rev. ed., p. 218)

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My home is the home of peace. My home is the home of joy and delight. My home is the home of laughter and exultation. Whosoever enters through the portals of this home, must go out with gladsome heart. This is the home of light; whosoever enters here must become illumined....<sup>9</sup>

(From a reported utterance, published in *Star of the West*, vol. 9, no. 3, 28 April 1918), p. 40)

<sup>9</sup> "...not an authentic text, but is to be regarded as a pilgrim's note," (letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 21 May 1978).

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### From Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

The Universal House of Justice has requested us to acknowledge your letter of November 6, 1977 and to say that while laughter should not be suppressed or frowned

upon, it should not be indulged in at the expense of the feelings of others. What one says or does in a humorous vein should not give rise to prejudice of any kind. You may recall ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s caution “Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person...”<sup>10</sup>

(1 December 1977 to an individual believer)

<sup>10</sup> From Tablets of Abdul Bahá Abbas vol. I, (Chicago: Bahá’i Publishing Society, 1909), p. 45.

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On page 25 of *The Advent of Divine Justice*<sup>11</sup> the beloved Guardian is describing the requirements not only of chastity, but of “a chaste and holy life” - both the adjectives are important. One of the signs of a decadent society, a sign which is very evident in the world today, is an almost frenetic devotion to pleasure and diversion, an insatiable thirst for amusement, a fanatical devotion to games and sport, a reluctance to treat any matter seriously, and a scornful, derisory attitude towards virtue and solid worth. Abandonment of “a frivolous conduct” does not imply that a Bahá’í must be sour-faced or perpetually solemn. Humour, happiness, joy are characteristics of a true Bahá’í life. Frivolity palls and eventually leads to boredom and emptiness, but true happiness and joy and humour that are parts of a balanced life that includes serious thought, compassion and humble servitude to God are characteristics that enrich life and add to its radiance.

Shoghi Effendi’s choice of words was always significant, and each one is important in understanding his guidance. In this particular passage, he does not forbid “trivial” pleasures, but he does warn against “excessive attachment” to them and indicates that they can often be “misdirected”. One is reminded of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s caution that we should not let a pastime become a waste of time.

(8 May 1979 to an individual believer, cited in the compilation, *A Chaste and Holy Life*)

<sup>11</sup> On page 25 in the 1956 U.S. edition; on page 30 in the 1984 U.S. edition.

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Humour too, as you say, is an essential element in preserving a proper balance in this life and in our comprehension of reality.

(23 July 1985 to an individual believer)

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The House of Justice suggests that you may wish to review the use of humour in your news reports to ensure that the appearance of insensitivity may not be conveyed

inadvertently in a report. It was concerned by the account of an auction held at a barn dance hosted by the Local Spiritual Assembly of .... While the intention of the author was clearly to jokingly convey the exuberance and enthusiasm which were manifested on that occasion, care should be exercised to avoid giving offence to those who are sensitive to the historical record of the oppression of women and the denial of their human rights. The House of Justice trusts that you will find a way of conveying these observations to the editors of your newsletter in such a manner that their enthusiasm is not dampened. Indeed, they merit commendation for the overall quality of their work.

(1 July 1988 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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