Carnival and Islam

by David Solway (April 2023)

Réunion de 35 Têtes Diverses, Louis Leopold Boilly, 1825

With some modifications, this essay is intended as the final chapter of a work-in-progress, **Crossing the Jordan: On Judaism, Islam and Related Issues**

> *Allah did not create man so that he could have fun. The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer. An Islamic regime must be serious in every field. There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun or joy in whatever is serious.*—Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini,

radio sermon, 1979

An interesting approach toward understanding the dilemma posed to the secular West by so weighty and systematic a theology as Islam may be modelled from the work of the great Russian cultural and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin who, in *Rabelais and His World*, elaborated the notion of "carnival" as an analytic category. Using his conceptual framework, we could say there is very little "laughter" in Islam, which teaches against "excessive laughter," however so viscous a phenomenon is to be measured. In other words, there is very little in the way of cultural parody (or "carnival")—that which, to quote Bakhtin, "demolishes fear and piety before an object … thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it," and for the puncturing of pomposity and high seriousness.

The razzing of other tribes that we occasionally find in the classical Arab *qasida*, or ode, scarcely qualifies as humor or satire, but as conventional insult and bravado. Authority is not attacked in the *qasida*, whereas laughter (in the Bakhtinian sense) is the sworn enemy of every kind of tyranny and every totalitarian worldview, whether temporal or theological. It punches holes in all the Mercators of the world laid out in dogmatic theologies and ideological systems.

For laughter, as Bakhtin writes, "purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level …" It restores what he calls an "ambivalent wholeness" to the psyche of man and reconfirms the festal, irreverent and material self in the face of a repressive transcendence. Or as Peter Sloterdijk puts it in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, using the word in its special Bakhtinian inflection, "laughter" is the "embodiment of that which has been negated, excluded, humbled, and declared evil. It is the

id asserting itself as the ego."

This is why Salman Rushdie's sprawling and jubilant mock-epic, *The Satanic Verses*, came as an intolerable affront to Islamic worship and earned its author a price on his head. It is the same for Islam as it is for what Bakhtin calls "the high distanced genres" in which, certainly in theory and pervasively in practice, "there is not the slightest gap between [the individual's] authentic essence and its external manifestation," whereas laughter exposes "the disparity between his surface and his center," so that "an unrealized surplus of humanness" may flow into the world to be celebrated.

A primary Western example of such grave, formal genres is the triple-cycle classical Greek tragedy; yet in the attached Satyr Play that brings the sequence to a close, the portentous tympany of Fate and the pretensions of the protagonist are subjected to the domestications of mockery and laughter. The lofty is humanized by the lowly, the unitary self by its inherent plural. Similarly, the medieval Saturnalia and *festa stultorem* reversed the established roles of Christian authority, if only for brief intervals. One thinks, too, of the traditional *Purim Spiel*—the carnival antics celebrating the survival of the Jews related in the *Book of Esther*—with its satiric plays, masked balls and general topsy-turviness making light of potential tragedy.

But Muslim monkeyshine is another matter altogether. Even the kind of mild playfulness we find in Israeli artist Avraham Guy Barchil's illustrations of the grand, esoteric themes of Hebrew Kabbalah through the medium of the comic book may, in the Muslim domain, likely have cost him his freedom or more. Here it is revealing to contrast cultural modalities in the Middle East between the Islamic nations and their irritant neighbor. There is a genuinely funny and limber quality even to overtly ferocious political satire in Jewish humor, such as Caroline Glick's TV-on-Internet *Latma* routines, which could

never be transposed, *mutatis mutandis*, into the cultural protectorate of Islam. But what is most illuminating as a distinguishing mark between these opposed cultural worlds is the Jewish talent for self-deprecation, illustrated and explained in Ruth Wisse's *No Joke*.

In classical Islam, "difference" is anathema and self-and faith-directed levity, an offence. Consider what the effect on the Islamic world would have been had the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*, with the lead character playing the Prophet rather than the Saviour, featured on the marquees. As Ibn Warraq facetiously asked in an article for *City Journal* (vol. 18. no. 1), "can we look forward, someday, to a *Life of Mo*?" *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* would not have fared much better either, though the Holy Hand Grenade might have struck a chord. Or how about Mel Brooks' *History of the World Part I*, with its hilarious skit of Moses dropping one of the tablets, reducing the fifteen commandments to ten, had a similar disaster befallen one of the scrolls of the Koran. (Brooks' *The Producers* comes very close, for all its ribaldry, to tempting the unspeakable.)

The only significant examples of filmic comedy/"satire" from the Islamic world that I am familiar with are from dissident Iranian directors Jafar Panahi and Saman Moghadam. Panahi's *Offside* protests the repressive, rule-oriented mentality of the Islamic Republic via the absurdist allegory of six young girls jailed for trying to crash a soccer game. Moghadam's *Maxx* plays with the notion of mistaken identity in poking genial fun at the regime's hidebound and reactionary nature. But these directors are heavily censored. Many of Panahi's films do not circulate in Iranian theaters and it was reported in *Time*'s Europe Magazine that "the government found 140 'questionable' points" in the screenplay of *Maxx*, many if not most (or all?) of which had to be left on the cutting room floor. This is cutting satire with a vengeance. Still, these films are a world apart from the Jewish self-spoofs like the

movies of Woody Allen or the Charles Grodin vehicle *The Heartbreak Kid* and its Ben Stiller remake.

In Islam, submission to a unified structure of thought and worship is obligatory, fusing the individual with the collective and the inner with the outer in a seamless existential jointing. The discrepancy between surface and center, public and private, is not recognized and the prising open of the suture between the two is taboo. According to Islamic apologist Tariq Ramadan in *Western Muslims and The Future of Islam*, Muslims do not in fact "merge the categories" of the "public and private" spheres of expression or being, but he nevertheless makes it plain that in their relations with the world Muslims must "take[ ] their Islamic frame of reference as a starting point." In reality, the categories do merge. And, as to be expected, while the index of his book lists many words beginning in "hu," including "Huntington, Samuel," there is nothing under the rubric of "humor."

Needless to say, despite Ayatollah Khomeini's famous radio sermon, I am not suggesting that there is no such thing as laughter in the Muslim world, which would be an utterly laughable claim to advance, but rather that humor tends to manifest as a form of social levity common to all peoples or is patently non-subversive. But even the concept or practice of "harmless fun" does not seem to figure prominently in the Islamic mindset or prosper as a social institution. It should come as no surprise that the British theme park, Alston Towers, had to cancel its "National Muslim Fun Day" on September 17, 2006, owing to lack of interest—this notwithstanding the incentive of halal food, prayer areas, gender segregation and the enforcement of appropriate dress codes. British Muslims were obviously not amused. Speaking of harmless fun, what other religious faith in the world today would imprison a schoolteacher and even call for her execution for the crime of allowing her students to name a teddybear after its prophet? Gillian Gibbons might have reflected

whether her Sudanese hosts were capable of the spirit of kindly indulgence associated with certain forms of even non-satiric humor before having exercised her indefeasible naivety.

Philip Hitti informs us in his monumental *History of the Arabs* that Arabic literature "abounds in anecdotes, jokes and remarks which to us today sound obscene," but the drift of his observation clearly points to a tradition that has been for the most part superseded, and is largely innocent of aggressive political intent or connotation. There is a tradition of critique in classical Arabic poetry, going back to two contemporaries of Mohammed, Abu Afak and Asma bint Marwan, who dared criticize the Prophet, but those poets foolhardy enough to adopt the practice usually paid with their careers and sometimes their lives, as did their predecessors. The recent attack on Salman Rushdie that left him critically injured is a case in point.

Naturally, there will always be exceptions to the rule of suppression, in the privacy of the courtyard, so to speak, and even in the media, provided the latter has been politically vetted. Take, for example, the perennial prankster of Arab folk humor, Joha or Juha (Hodja in Turkey, Goha in Egypt), a simpleminded/clever, wise fool figure à la Hershele Ostropolyer, the smart aleck Jewish shtetl matchmaker, or the good soldier Schweik who regularly gets into absurd scrapes but often manages to turn the tables on those who would deceive him. Though poking fun at cultural foibles, what is chiefly missing in these caricatural hijinks are the elements of danger and aggression associated with the trope, the dimension of barbed satiric perforation of the social matrix from which it emerges, of merciless self-debunking and political and religious pastiche. And in those cases where it is even diffidently attempted, the consequences can be chilling. One thinks of Adel Imam, among the Arab world's most celebrated comedians, who was sentenced in February 2012 by an

Islamist-dominated Egyptian court to three months in jail with hard labor for defaming Islam.

True, there have been a number of semi-satirical cartoons in the Arab press attacking the terrorist phenomenon, but these are very much in line with official government policy which recognizes the threat to its own internal stability. It would be unrealistic to expect anything even remotely resembling Jeff Dunham's famous comedy routine Achmed the Dead Terrorist, which punctures terrorist pretensions and beliefs through laughter. Jokes, such as they are, appear to be mainly of the coarse antisemitic variety. They are probably better described as just another weapon in the antisemitic arsenal of Islam. This would explain why probably the most popular non-Muslim comedian in the Islamic world is the French-Cameroonian standup comic Dieudonné M'bala M'bala whose antisemitism is now almost legendary. His routines plainly do not qualify as Bakhtinian laughter.

"What Muslim culture needs," says Ayaan Hirsi Ali in *The Caged Virgin*, "are books, soap operas, poetry, and songs … that satirize religious precepts … Satire is a bitter necessity; it has to happen." Only, *pace* Hirsi Ali, this is highly improbable. The accumulated resistance over the ages to self-criticism and satirical reflection is virtually impenetrable, reinforced by upbringing, education, religious dogmatism, the Koran, the Hadith, the Sunna and *pro forma* violence. Where humor in the trappings of irony and satire[*] may be said to exist in Islam is in the extraordinary individual, but even there it is not always as robustly developed as one could wish. And often, it must be said, what humor we may find is unintentional and should therefore qualify as bathos. *YouTube* has circulated a video clip showing an Iranian professor, Hasan Bolkhari, lecturing on the subtleties of the Tom and Jerry cartoon, proving to an amphitheater of note-taking students that Jerry the mouse in reality represents the clever and manipulative Jew. He always gets the cheese. According to

this luminary, the cartoon was devised by Jewish media moguls to counter the derogatory term “dirty mice” applied to Jews in 19th and 20th century Europe. By rehabilitating the image of the mouse, the Jew was equally shriven of his murine attributes and would be free to continue his nefarious activities under the sign of his endearing “cuteness.”

There is an absurd humor at work here which does not originate in intent but in a kind of ablative displacement. Agency does not reside in the will of the speaker but in the disjunction from reality and common sense. The effect is not so much funny as ridiculous. The notorious Hamas kiddie film starring a Mickey Mouse character called Farfur, promoting armed struggle against Israel, including “martyrdom” operations, does not even qualify as displacement, let alone humor. There are exceptions to the rule, one such being Palestinian-American comedian Ray Hanania, who is genuinely funny. But I would conjecture that his adherence to the Koran and its injunctions is not particularly strong and that his theocratic devotion is tempered by the American side of his character and a Jewish wife. Another such exception may be Birmingham comedian Shazia Mirza, often billed as “the world’s only female Muslim comic,” whose dry humor is intended to prick cultural stereotypes. But as with Hanania, her brand of humor shows her to be influenced by Western norms and expectations and as such is not particularly “Islamic.”

Where such instances as Hirsi Ali advocates occur, they do not constitute an ethos so much as a deviation. The rare satirical comedian or political critic in the Arab world is almost always silenced. This is the case even in the more “liberal” Muslim countries, such as Morocco where the editor of *Nichane* magazine was taken to court in January 2007 for the felony of printing an article entitled “How Moroccans laugh at religion, sex and politics.” The charge was “defamation against Islam and the monarchy” and the sentence was a punitive fine and a two month ban on publication—a rather light getting-off in the

circumstances but still no laughing matter. There are fledgling efforts like the Saudi comedy show *Tash Ma Tash* although, according to reports, it is not only Islamists who are quizzed but "liberal intellectuals" as well; even so, fatwas have been issued to prevent viewers from tuning in.

Turning to the Palestinian "territories," Omayya Joha, a political cartoonist for the *Al-Quds* newspaper in Gaza, has occasionally been critical of the surrounding Arab nations for their indifference toward the Palestinians, but since her work is almost exclusively devoted to the incitement of hatred against Israel, she is allowed to flourish. Similarly, her colleague Baha Boukhari, while suspicious of Hamas, is staunchly pro-Palestinian and something of a culture hero. There is a kind of light, underground humor in Palestinian folklore treating of sexual subjects, as in a book of folk tales called *Speak Bird, Speak Again*, compiled by two Palestinian intellectuals and published in English by the University of California Press, in French by UNESCO, and translated into Arabic, but it was pulled from the shelves of Palestinian schools and libraries by the Hamas government as *haram*, or forbidden by Islam.

Muslim raillery, when practiced in the West, is a different proposition entirely, indulging from time to time in a kind of persiflage against its own. But is it satire? The Muslim comedy team of Preacher Moss, Azeem and Azhar Usman have embarked on what they call the *Allah Made Me Funny* performance tour, which they regard as halal entertainment. Their declared purpose is to make harmless fun of Muslim quirks and habits, thus rehabilitating the public image of Islam as non-threatening and broadly humanistic. What the comics do not wish to acknowledge is that you do not laugh at the Koran—you honor it or you fear it—and that any satire that probes too deeply into the cockpit of Islam will provoke a fatwa. But there is probably no need to worry.

Azhar Usman is an official spokesman for the Council of

Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago and a cofounder of the Wahabbi-inspired Nawawi Foundation. Preacher Moss, a Canadian convert to Islam, is a notorious purveyor of anti-Gay jokes. Azeem, also a convert to Islam, has a background in motivational speaking, widely advertised on the Net. He is, in effect, an excellent salesman for his cause. It is no accident that the group has been approved by CAIR, the Saudi-funded Council for American Islamic Relations. Plainly, *Allah Made Me Funny*, gentling Islam via stand-up comedy routines, is only a mode of ingratiation and the obverse of carnival disruption. It bears no comparison with—to take a very recent example—Sacha Baron Cohen's send-up of antisemitism in the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan,* which, commuted to the Islamic world, would have been taken literally and have earned its perpetrator the inevitable fatwa. The annual "running of the Jew" would not have been understood as satire had the event been billed "the running of the Muslim."

The Canadian Broadcasting Company sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is relevant here. But in a country that chuckled at such dismal, ostensibly satiric productions as *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and the deadpan nonsense of *Corner Gas*, it seems that anything can be funny if the viewers are properly cued. The stated intention of the *Little Mosque*'s creator, Zarqa Nawaz, is to put the "fun back into fundamentalism" and to give people "a sense that Muslims have so many similarities to non-Muslims … It's the same issues, you know, a father and his rebellious teenage daughter … just because you're Muslim your standards may be a little bit different, but they're still the same issues." Well, no, they're not, and the standards are more than "a little bit different," as even a cursory perusal of local and world News should bring home. Muslim daughters often have good reason to fear their fathers for whom rebelliousness is often a capital offence.

Nawaz, who has produced a trilogy of films she calls, awkwardly, "terrordies," gave us something equally unamusing in her mosqueful of prattling pseudo-Muslims who have little in common with their real-world compatriots. The women on the show are cheeky, assertive, coquettish and adept at repartee—Western females in silky chadors lording it over their men and parading the gestures of a dubious emancipation. The clean-shaven, jeans-clad, latte-quaffing, yuppie imam exists nowhere in Islam. The mixed congregation is an anomaly. The bad terrorist jokes are meant to imply that terrorism is only a media bugbear, and the sort of problems which the little community must resolve—whether the fast of Ramadan ends with cucumber sandwiches or goat stew—are offensively disingenuous efforts to minimize the threat of militant Islam. And the fact that many of the sitcom's non-Muslim characters—with the exception of the milquetoast Protestant minister who rents out church space to accommodate the mosque—tend to be rather wooden and doltish adds a layer of propaganda to this bland attempt at cultural laundering. It is a real stretch to suggest that there is fun in fundamentalism. And it must be said that there is not much fun in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. The weird silence one hears beneath the chatter and the "business" is the absence of genuine laughter. Interestingly, there are no Muslim actors among the cast.

The true story involves not some charming little mosque where harmless characters traipse about trying desperately to be droll but, as Salim Mansur, author of Delectable Lie, has written in the *Western Standard*, a situation in which "Canada has received its share of [Saudi] funding for mosques built across the country, where Wahabbi preaching prevails and Muslim dissidents are excluded." The little mosque on the prairie is a flimsy pipedream; closer to the truth of things is the Mega mosque in London, staunchly backed by Muslim jihadists. And in Canada, the real deal is the Khalid Bin Al-Wahid mosque in Toronto, which has ordered its congregants not to acknowledge in any way Western holidays and celebrations

such as Hallowe'en, Christmas, New Year's and the like. According to its website, even common activities, such as watching sports programs, shaking hands with members of the opposite sex, walking dogs, etc., are to be avoided. Political activity is also forbidden except in those cases where community members are able to "exert some influence on the direction of the party so that it will take an Islamic direction" (*National Post*, October 3, 2007).

Admittedly, the proscription against laughter, criticism and the purgative function of carnival is common to all fundamentalisms. For despotic authority of any stripe, but especially for theocratic dispensations, "laughter stands," to quote Walter E. Stephens writing in *Diacritics* (13), "in the same relation to *mundus* or *cosmos* as the Antichrist stands to the *Logos*." Similarly, Charles Baudelaire deposes in *Curiosités esthétiques* that laughter is satanic in its origin and nature, something far below the "source of absolute truth and justice," hence its feral and insurrectionary power. The threat inherent in laughter is ubiquitous and is recognized and feared by credal literalism wherever we may find it.

Obviously, Western society is not immune to the many different forms that fundamentalism can take, from the totalizing dictates of religious faith and political doctrine to the general climate of political correctness in the media and the universities to the standardizing rules we find in the workplace, the school, the government, the various social bureaucracies, everywhere authorities can impose their regulative powers to implement a "universal system." Certainly, as Alain Finkielkraut has pointed out in *The Defeat of the Mind*, the postmodern Left with its multicultural pathology and sanctimonious invocation of identity politics, has become "a celebration of servitude…using threats of high treason to silence expressions of doubt, irony and reason." Like Islam, we also have our forms of cultural repression and dour humorlessness. This is the central theme of Umberto Eco's

carnivalesque novel *The Name of the Rose* in which the monastic agelast, Jorge of Burgos, destroys Aristotle's second book of *Poetics* in praise of laughter. ("Every word of the Philosopher," says Jorge, "overturns the image of God" and laughter frees us "from fear of the Devil," who is necessary as a principle of social control, over both the patrician class and the rabble.)

Nevertheless, in the West the right to dissent, the comic peripety, is a basic principle—though admittedly now under attack. The right to write without censorship is, or was, sacred. The political cartoon, like the theater of dissent and the satirical media, is a veritable institution which, as the Muslim riots of February 2006 protesting the Danish newspaper caricatures of the Prophet have shown, insecure and repressive cultures cannot tolerate. The right of the individual in Western society to take exception to hierarchical structures and to express his nonconformity is at least theoretically countenanced—although the prevalent tendency we have seen among Western editors and Human Rights bodies to cave in to Muslim indignation is worrisome.

Indeed, it is distressing to note the extent to which the dour and humorless nature of the Islamic lifeworld is now surfacing in the West in the form of a grim and puritanical Woke ideology, a violation of the intrinsic, Judeo-Christian creative spirit. But the option, the potentiality, is always open. The Socratic gadfly need not fear the hemlock—though he is always at risk of losing tenure, being fired, having his license to practice his profession revoked, or forced to attend sensitivity training sessions—the fate having awaited celebrated psychologist and author Jordan Peterson if the Ontario College of Psychologists had had its way. However craven our public institutions, however feeble our political will and however compromised our public morality, the freedom to laugh both at oneself and one's superiors, that is, the gift of skeptical inquiry no matter how abrasive, is a bedrock

principle we cannot abandon.

When the feeling of heavy sobriety, absolute belief, collective subscription to a single master-text and devotional solemnity pervade an entire community of believers, a worldwide *umma* numbering between one and two billion human beings, we know we are dealing with a *phenomenon of civilization*, that is, with a people for whom, *on the whole*, the remedial corrosions of satire, the self-deflationary exercise of irony and the humanizing character of transgressive wit and sacrilegious humor have not been, as the evolutionists say, "selected for." Impolitic jokes, ludic inversions of unquestioned observance, derisive critiques of hierarchy, satirical playfulness—an aspect of what Edward de Bono called "lateral thinking"—are not at a premium. Acclaimed British novelist Martin Amis bizarrely feels that Islam, as a total system, "is eerily amenable to satire" but that in Islamism, "with total malignancy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies" (*The Observer*, "The Age of Horrorism," September 10, 2006). But I am not so sure the fashionable distinction between Islam and Islamism is a viable one since, under the aegis of the Koran, violence is unambiguously permitted, irony is certainly frowned upon and satire is starved out of existence.

Albert Brooks' recent film, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, furnishes a variation on the theme. On the one hand, it appears to suggest that humor is an ethnographic construct that is inflected differently in different cultures. But it also strongly implies that irony, which depends on verbal sleight and conceptual misdirection, will not readily be understood in cultures predicated on the lie, that is, in which deception is practiced as a means of survival and is the currency of everyday life. (Ayaan Hirsi Ali: "Lies and evasion play an important part in this culture … ignoring or simply denying what has happened is normal.") Where the lie has

become a standard form of discourse and where almost everything means the opposite of what is said *as a matter of course*, irony cannot thrive. Laughter loses its subtlety and satire is deprived of its sting since it cannot be structurally distinguished from common speech. The armature of dissimulation is too closely shared to admit of clear separation.

This is palpably *more or less* the case in all totalitarian societies whose regimes are dependent on a subdued and uneducated populace. The swelling orthodoxy of left-wing politics and its attendant "long march through the institutions" has laid its dead hand on much of Western culture—although a parallel society of populist organizations, alternative media, widespread dissent, new currencies and economic choice have risen to the challenge. But in Islam, the *religious prepossession* tends to subvert even the possibility of lucid suspicion and adversarial skepticism which allows for ironic flexibility. Where the lie is reconceived as the truth and the truth is monumentalized as sacred and unassailable and incarnated in the Law—in the book of the Lord and not merely in the manifesto of the Leader—there is little room for Pantagruelizing, defined by Rabelais in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as "drinking to your heart's desire and reading the fearsome exploits of Pantagruel" as he proceeds to slit the bellies of a culture's sacred cows. Pantagruelism is the cultural tipping point for any potential Islamic satirist.

As a result, the tendency is for diverse forms of fanaticism, zealotry and blind obeisance to dominate the practice of everyday life as a ruling passion. Or to put it another way, Islam as a religious macrocosm is inhospitable to the challenge of laughter and comedy, and will not readily permit the unity of its ruling cultural discourse to be fractured by the vernacular of doubt, lampoon, farce and caricature—the language of genuine subjectivity and individuation—any more than it will sanction the translation of the Koran from the

classical purity of the original Arabic.Clearing a new and subversive space within the rigid sphere of the Law can only be condemned as a form of heresy or treachery by a bestriding orthodoxy which feels itself threatened.

For as LeRoy LaDurie explains in *Carnival in Romans*, carnival is replete with "symbolic systems" which provide "a comprehensive, dynamic, oppositional description of society," issuing in the "peccant joys" of protest against the ossifications of authority, precedence and rank. Carnival is a restructuring force with its mockery of the Partridge Kingdom mentioned in *Jeremiah 17:11* (e.g., corrupt kings, judges, priests), its overturning of the ascetic values found in formal religious observance, and its dissident representation of "the class (or clan) struggle." Through indulgence in satire, mockery and raucous festivity, carnival discharges the "flow of community…through the interstices of normative structures and ordering hierarchy" via the revolutionary upheaval of Lupercalian laughter.

Carnival, of course, may paradoxically reinforce the dispensations of normative society by allowing for the temporary relieving of social pressures, a way of letting off steam, after which life returns to normal, but it may also in sensitive times erupt in social and political disorder, as LaDurie shows happened in the small French village of Romans. The therapeutic mayhem of carnival, however, is often a prelude to social restoration, public correction and the reaffirmation of our essential humanity.

Thus, it will be opposed by all forms of credal literalness, whether social, political or religious. But in today's volatile, powderkeg world, it is Islam with its billion and a half adherents, its gradual penetration of Western culture through rampant immigration, its stranglehold of the global economy via OPEC, its growing regional militancy and its theocratic retrenchment in scriptural orthodoxy, that stands most in need of redemptive saturnalia—and which it will

continue to resist with the combined force of mosque, madrassa and social *habitus*.

Laughter can be strong medicine, but it must be taken in large doses to be effective, and the gelatological pharmacies are often poorly stocked. And there are always some who feel that medicine is hazardous to one's health. What Jure Gantar in *The Pleasure of Fools* calls "ethical laughter"—an initial, methodological concept—is, as he says, highly problematic and something of an oxymoron owing to its agonistic and unsettling nature, which is why it is reproved by the more abstemious school of moralists and criminalized by dictatorial regimes of whatever kidney. As Gantar concludes, there may be finally something unhealthy or unethical about satirical laughter but, unsparing and rebellious, it may also be a powerful force for the good even as it wounds. The source here is probably in Aristotle's *Poetics* where the philosopher lays it down that comedy is a representation of the people and their visceral uninhibitedness, "an obvious example being the comic mask." With this definition in mind, we might say that satiric laughter is a subset of comic laughter, a kind of verbal flanning, in that it *actively reduces* the sclerosis of high dignity and self-importance to the level of the socially inferior, to the lineaments of the comic mask.

In this sense, satire is comedy with a subversive purpose, launching volleys of laughter in a war for political and intellectual freedom, which is why it is so often contra-indicated. (If there were such a thing as the satiric mask, it would be the entarted face.) For Gantar, the vulnerable cruelty of laughter, in its lancing of the many forms of tyrannical oppression to which we are subject, must neither be co-opted nor smothered by the stolid authority of moral sobriety or the firmans of theocratic rigidity. The free individual cannot flourish in a "humorless limbo" that forbids "marginal and decentered discourses" founded in a "multiplicity of perspectives" and the cautery of ironic

laughter.

It is this “multiplicity of perspectives” that is the defining element in the liberation of the spirit. As the literary critic Wilbur Sanders writes in a beautiful little book entitled *John Donne’s Poetry*, looking at the matter from a subjective perspective, irony implies a “willingness to have one’s feelings observed from many other viewpoints besides one’s own”—precisely what presupposes an inward strength of character as well as helps to create it, and precisely what is missing from any fundamentalist creed.

Ultimately, irony is good for the fitness of the soul: it has iron in it.

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[*] *Methodologically speaking, satire is a literary genre and irony a rhetorical trope, but for the purposes of this essay the two terms are used more or less interchangeably to indicate a habit of mind.*

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David Solway’s latest book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.