



recognition and regard for others.(1)

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

Notes

1. Warren Poland, "The Gift Of Laughter" in The use of humour in psychotherapy, ed. H. Streat (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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