

Trickier than one might suppose is to search for elements of humour and playfulness in the New Testament. Moreover, there always will be somebody annoyed thereof. Just let's remember what is the whole plot of Eco's famous „The Name of the Rose“ about. And what was concerned there was „merely“ an alleged manuscript by the patriarch of all philosophers, by Aristotle.

We will not be probably able to clad Christianity into a framework spun of jokes, how it is in the East Asian Zen, and even the authentic and jocular humanity of the Chasidic Judaism will be probably unattainable for us. All the same, I mean that there are still to be found elements of a gleesome view of the world in the Christian scriptures, but to find and to them and to explain their relative scantiness, we must first ask several questions from the sphere of sociology. Over centuries and millenniums, all religions have been the matter of masters and their disciples. Their standard regime has been such that there is always a master, who himself learned once the holy doctrine from another master or he may have acquired it in other ways, e.g. by a way of divine inspiration, and who is the source of religious teaching for his disciples. (An „independent religion“ is a late achievement of modern ages; it owes its constitution in particular to the Reformation and its – minimally declared so – free attitude towards the Bible, however those most independent in their religious practice used to end up on the stake – as heretics or sorcerers - even then.) If we are thus bound to find traces of humour within this system of religious coordinates, we must look for them solely on the side of masters. (It is again only the already mentioned Ch'an/Zen Buddhism where the feeling of joyful paradoxity permeates the very foundations of the whole „religious culture“ so that even the disciples are – here and there - allowed to make their own jokes – even on behalf of the teacher; but even here the master is always on top of them.

The New Testament doesn't abound with characters of the value of a master: The only eligible ones are Jesus, Peter, Paul and – to some extent – John the Baptist. The stories of the deacons Stephen and Philipp are within the book of Acts limited but to one chapter (in the case of Stephen a considerably long chapter). All the same, any traces of humour can be found only by Jesus. John the Baptist is practically excluded due to his ascetic lifestyle. Peter is portrayed univocally by all the Gospels and by the Acts as a man of solemn purity and simplicity, who only might have been target of jests made by his companions and Jesus himself. (Why did just he, Simon by his own name, get the nickname *Kefas*, which means rock or boulder?). The more could we expect humour with Paul, a man gifted with extraordinary level of intellect, which he knew to use for example when he got into extremely hard and dangerous situation before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin (see Acts 23). But extraordinary level of intellect doesn't simply mean also the sense of humour, and humour was for Paul really something strange. Even when he got during his journeys to ridiculous situations (see the episode in Iconion, people wanted to sacrifice to them mistaking them for gods), he never converted them to laugh and he is never reported (by Luke) to have given rise to any comical situation spontaneously.

But Jesus- Jesus gives us a completely different picture! Take first his lifestyle: That was not exactly life of a venerable rabbi and teacher. Even to the gospel itself, the echo of the shock has permeated, with which people watched that renowned „gluttonous man and winebibber“ (Math 11,19; Luke 7,34), We would be mistaken if we regarded this remark only a defamatory label aimed at him by his opponents. How many various banquets are mentioned in the gospels and how frequently Jesus presents his teaching including his marvellous parables just on occasion of a meal! This „wandering preacher“, who was able to live without home in the harsh climate of Palestine

(Math 8,20 par.) and used to pray outside for hours (see Mark 1,35; Luke 5,16; 6,12; 22,41ff etc.) rendered a large amount of his teachings to his „friends“ in a considerably more agreeable environment of their homes and at a table. We even know that on occasion of one of his very long speeches which he naturally held outdoors he was concerned about the bellies of the present audience (John 6,1-15 par.) What's more: He was never fond of regular work – if any, then that of a farmer, by which you just sow and the the nature takes care of the rest (Mark 4,26ff.). For is it worth a man to take care of his living (Math 6,26 par)? That fits not for the Kingdom of God!

We could go on this way for a long time (Jesus advised children not to care about their parents, to disrespect religious rules, and even moral code deep-rooted within the society – see his attitude to women of „ill repute“). Modern ways of biblical work, incl. so called sociological analysis can outline us a more vivid and less conventional picture of Jesus, than that one we have been used to. But let's come back to the question whether Jesus himself joked with his disciples or if he might have for example make jokes of people coming to him: I think so, and I deem to find enough evidence for it in the gospels.¹ Let's display some of it.

At the very beginning of the Gospel of John there is the episode of Nathanael (John 1,45-50). Nathanael, at that time already himself a teacher of religious law², was brought to Jesus by Philipp, who had already met him, and he had been fascinated by him: „*We have found him, about whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote, Jesus, Joseph's son of Nazareth.*“ Nathanael's response is rather restrained first: From Nazareth? Such a birthplace doesn't foretell anything good. All the intellectual capacity of the Jewish people is concentrated in Jerusalem; or maybe somewhere far off in Alexandria and elsewhere. Outside this natural centre there can be only the half mad adherents of the sect of Essenes, or maybe somewhere at the local courts of Herodian princes in heavily hellenised towns of Kaisareia and Sepphoris there can be one or two very liberal – that is hellenistic - thinking Jewish scholars, who perhaps don't even pursue any public activity. Nonetheless, he can be convinced to see Jesus. Bur he is welcomed by an exclamations, which already hides in itself double meaning: „What a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit!“ Now, just let's image, how we would react in such a situation; we would doubtless rise our vigilance. Exactly such an attitude is displayed by Nathanael: „*Where do you know me from?*“ – „*Before you were called by Philipp, I saw you under the fig tree*“, is Jesus' answer. That is roughly: „I can see you are a teacher.“ Nathanael's following remark is taken by most of the interpreters dead serious: „Master, you are God's son, you are the king of Israel.“ But let's be frank: Is it so, that a man experienced in intellectual debates could be convinced by such a simple argument? I say on the other hand, that Nathanael's statement is to be understood as irony: „Well, I'll surely acknowledge you as a teacher or prophet, if you just can divine what I make my living by.“ He's taken the gauntlet. But Jesus, too, knows his ps and qs and he stays not behind with his response: „*So you believe, because I have told you: I saw you under the fig tree?*“ (i.e. – You don't ask much to render your faith to somebody.) *You*

1 When evaluating them, one must bear in mind that all the gospels were written years after Jesus' death and their final shape was influenced not only by the memories of their author and further handed down material, but to some extent also through the medium of congregation(s) where he was writing and who was he writing for. In general, this meant a milieu with a considerable lower degree of charismatic enthusiasm and anticipating rather calls for ethics and ascetism than any manifestation of unrestrained eschatological enthusiasm.

2 This assumption is derived from the verse 48: „Under a fig tree“ is said to be a functional marker, which stands for a job – a teacher's job in this case particularly; something as we woud say nowadays: „behind the wheel/counter“

are going to see much more.“ And then Jesus suddenly gets earnest and with the following statement steers this light conversation to a true prophetic depth: „*You will see the heaven open and the angels of God to ascend and descend onto the Son of man.*“ This is a true example of Jesus’ style: Amidst light talk, understanding comes unawares, like a lightning from clear skies. Does it not resemble a bit the many times already mentioned Ch’an/Zen? Without doubt was Nathanael won by means of such a conversation much quicker and safer than by a long dispute e.g. about rules to which a true Israelite should adhere.

Similar insight into the souls of people coming to him was shown by Jesus often. Probably the prettiest example thereof is again in the Gospel of John, in the pericope about the Samaritan woman at the well: Weary Jesus takes rest by a well, while the disciples are trying to get something to eat, and his request (to the woman) is really simple: *Give me to drink*. But the woman answers him quite defiantly and tries to involve him into a debate. (The whole passage is too long to be quoted; John, moreover, interweaves it with the subject which is here to be voiced by Jesus, scil. the motif of the water of life, that’s why I have to ask the reader to look up in your Bible the fourth Chapter of John and read it there in full). Jesus at first seemingly does not respond to the woman’s provocation, or he reacts in a way that could have been expected from a standard Jew: *Call your husband*. (However expressed politely, this phrase means nothing else, but :”I am not going to talk to you.” But the woman cannot be that easily rid of: “*I have no husband!*” In this moment I can practically see the gleam in Jesus’ eyes – the weary grey pilgrim by the well is gone; here is again Jesus wide-awake and in his full shape (what is at the end of the pericope observed with wonder by the returning disciples: “Has anyone brought him anything to eat?”). “*But you have had five husbands so far, and that one you have now is not your husband. You’re right.*” This remark changes the whole situation. The woman’s reaction is similar to that of Nathanael, but this time it sounds frankly (The woman probably did not level up with Nathanael’s intellectual qualities.): “*Lord, I can see you’re a prophet...*” And what does an ordinary one do when he(or she) meets occasionally a “scholar”? One will steer the debate to some scholarly subject, so that one shows he/she is not a stupid half wit: “*our forefathers used to worship God on this mountain, but you say, the Jerusalem is the place where God should be worshipped!*” Jesus accepts and refuses the topic at the same time, or, if you like he transforms it quickly to something much more important, and, after some further peripeties, here too, the dialogue results in the enthusiastic joy, which accompanies every act of understanding. Humour is in this pericope finer, it is displayed practically only in the delicate allusion to the woman’s past, so a humour by which you can easily keep a stern face. I bet Jesus had a stern face also in the following scene, which is this time taken from Mark and Matthew (Mt 15,21-28; Mk 7,24-30). But this time it wasn’t a smartly dressed humour, but a deceitful trickery. It comes out best in the Matthean version:

Matthew 15:21-28 ²¹ *And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.* ²² *And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon."* ²³ *But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us."* ²⁴ *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* ²⁵ *But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."* ²⁶ *And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* ²⁷ *She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* ²⁸ *Then Jesus answered her,*

"O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Why does Jesus lay himself dumb and pretends not to hear the woman's supplication? Why does he beat her off with such a rude and derogatory word? He's even called her daughter, her beloved child – a dog..?! What's more: the woman had „worshipped“ him, which means she had esteemed him in a way which is reserved to God! Did she really need so severe a trial of her faith? Why did just she need to strengthen her will so much (see above in a footnote), whereas others who had not had to demonstrate their faith in Jesus and his mission were healed by him unconditionally?

It seems that those to whom is this game addressed are the disciples, who may well have been upset just by their sojourn abroad, were their perceived strange and uncommon habits different to their own. This is of course a mere speculation, but Jesus might have gone on such trips on purpose – he may have prepared thus the disciples to their anticipated mission tasks, by which they themselves had to be the bearers of Jesus' tidings and carry it far beyond the borders of Palestine and the compass of the Elected people. Jesus behaves first in a way, which is stipulated for the Jews by their religious law: the pagan woman is for him practically non-existent.³ He shows his disciples effectively, what an arrogant stance religion without heart and head leads to, so effectively that the disciples themselves cannot bear it and ask Jesus: „Do something, see, how's she screaming!“ But Jesus keeps acting the role of an arrogant, egocentric Jew further; he drives things to the very edge of possibility. He had probably realised that the woman's personality is strong enough to endure such a tension on the thin edge. The evangelist does not inform us about any consequential effects of this episode, he closes it with the reference to the woman's faith, but my opinion is that all the parties involved here experienced a big relief and even the disciples understood finally what role had been Jesus playing.

Jesus knew how to surprise those who had come to him by an unexpected claim („Sell everything you have, come and follow me.“ Or „Let the dead bury the dead“) or by unlooked-for behaviour („Your sins are forgiven“ to the paralysed). But most often were the newcomers welcomed with cheerful kindness, how it is best seen on the event with Zaccheus:

Luke 19:1 ¶And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.

2 And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was ric

3 And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature.

4 And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way.

5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house.

The scene is comical in itself: A short, tiny man scrambling up a tree in order to be able to see

³ A mention of the Book of Ezra, one of the latest Old Testament books should be made here, whose major part is devoted to describing activities of leaders of the people who have just returned from their captivity and who see as their principal task to remove from Jewish men their (legal!) wives from other nations – see Neh 10,30ff., Neh 13,15 ff, and last but not least Es 10!

the famous visitor over people's heads. Jesus just didn't leave this occasion unused when he called at Zaccheus. But let's behold! Even such a spontaneous action can give rise to disapproval; because when you read further, you'll find: 6-7 *And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.*

Of course: not everyone approved of Jesus' spontaneity. He had a lot of opponents, both declared and clandestine; the gospels have preserved us many a dispute he had had with them. One of the methods of polemics is to make the opponent look silly. So the Sadducees came up to Jesus with a ridiculous and absurd case of seven brothers who had been successively married to one woman (Math 22,23 ff par.) Jesus reacts here earnestly, so for once he is beaten in humour by his opponents, but elsewhere, Jesus can be even wryly sarcastic. This is the story of the tribute penny (Math 22,15 ff.Par.), of his sayings in favour of John the Baptist (Math 11,8f) and especially the biting criticism of Luke 7,31ff: *And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!*

But the most emphatic example of such a sharp social criticism can be considered the scene about the tribute for the Temple (Matthew 17:24 ff.)

¶And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute? He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers? Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.

This is a pure sarcasm: This should be a tax submitted to the Temple, to which and to whose religious practice Jesus had – as we know from many biblical sites – a really critical attitude. This is one of the features which line him up together with the Essenes, who made probably also the ambiance where Jesus had come from. Jesus meets the tax-collectors claim with irony: How should we, that is me and my disciples with our lifestyle which makes us reliant on support rendered to us by those who are willing to sustain us, how should we pay the tax? And besides: Our people here, in Galilee are poor. They are just poor fishermen and that is their only way how to make their living; so if someone in Jerusalem thinks that the fish will serve them silver pieces just to augment the Temple hoards in Jerusalem, he may try. When fish may perchance behave like this, then also we, the sons of Another kingdom will be able to pay the Temple tribute.

It's a pity that we don't finish by something as cheerful as the story of Zaccheus was. Jesus' life, too, didn't end up in a harmonious idyll, as we know well. But even the person of the Risen, howsoever estranged from the Earth he might already be, a flashback of his former jesting may be seen, when he answers Peter's question: „Why? Is this your business? Just follow me!“