Dissertation proposal

The role of humor in the transmission of religious traditions.

Humor is one of the most neglected aspects in the study of religious traditions and yet it can be a powerful pedagogical tool. I define humor as the natural attitude toward the incongruous, contradictory and paradoxical: benign and redemptive, humor reveals our own foolishness and it is opposite to satire, which is usually abrasive, disruptive and demeaning of others. My research has proven that humor has been and still is a viable didactical tool in the hands of skillful educators for the following reasons:

1) **Humor is a powerful catalyst of spiritual evolution in the individual**: it implies finding pleasure in the incongruous and the paradoxical, fundamental elements of mystical knowledge, and it provokes the kind of opening necessary for spiritual transformation. It is the ultimate ego debunker. Zen master Kioriku, when approaching death, wrote,

   “Till now I thought
   That death befell
   Only the untalented ones.
   If those with talent
   Must also die
   Surely they make
   Better manure.”

2) **Humor is a natural consequence of true spiritual knowledge**: the creativity necessary to achieve humor is grounded in the unshakable faith and limitless insight of the true spiritual master. Even a fleeting glimpse of the Truth results in the attainment of both cosmic and comic vision. In *A Policy of Kindness*, a brief anthology of H.H. the
fourteenth Dalai Lama, Michael Goodman chose to describe the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people this way:

“Head tilted back and eyes squeezed shut, he burst into a gale of laughter…He has a wonderful, unembarrassed laugh that begins as a deep-throated roar and fades away on a high pitch, as if all his previous thirteen incarnations were joining in with him. That he is able to laugh in the face of adversity after all he has experienced during the past three decades, suggest that he is a man who has found inner peace.”

3) Humor is an antidote for stringent religious views: it entails the acceptance of an alternative. A joke is funny because it defies logical consequence and surprises us with its incongruous finale, the punchline.

“A certain Bektashi dervish was respected for his piety and appearance of virtue. Whenever anyone asked him how he had become so holy, he always answered, “I know what is in the Koran.” One day he had just given this reply to an enquirer in a coffeehouse, when an imbecile asked, “Well, what is in the Koran?” “In the Koran,” said the dervish, “there are two pressed flowers and a letter from my friend Abdullah.” (from Idries Shah’s Wisdom of the Idiots.)

Today more than ever it has become necessary to find methods of reconciliation among world religions. Humor may well be one of the universally shared attitudes that can be used as a ground for meaningful religious dialogue. Humor is the ultimate democratizer.

“Four persons, a Persian, an Arab, a Turk and a Greek were traveling together, and received a present of one dirhem. The Persian said he would buy angur with it, the Arab said he would buy inab, while the Turk and the Greek wanted to buy uzum and astaphil with it. Now all of these words mean one and the same thing, ‘grapes’, but, owning to their ignorance of each other’s language, they fancied they each wanted to buy something different, and accordingly a violent quarrel arose among them. At last a wise man who knew all their languages came up and explained to them that they were all wishing for one and the same thing.” (from E.H.Whinfield’s Teachings of Rumi; The Masnavi)

The ludic dimension of religion has its historical foundation in all traditions. It is most evident in the Hindu theology of Līlā, the joyful sport of the Godhead, but it also appears in the teaching of Zen and Tibetan Buddhists, as well as in the Sufi lore, most notably in the figure of Mulla Nasruddin. (more here)
In a culture that lift comedians to the top of the entertainment charts, the bards of our times and shapers of our myths, this indefinable human attitude must be considered as a tool for transmission of religious truth. Serious scholars may consider only its ridiculous and irreverent aspects, but its power to induce introspection and change are profound. In the Avadhūta Gīta, Dattatreya instructs King Yadu on the wisdom of the natural world. He says, “A wise man should be like the ocean. His surface should be clear and transparent but he should be so deep that no one can gauge his depth.” Spiritual humor is exactly this, a clear and obvious incongruence, a punchline understandable to pundit and idiots alike, but with a significance as profound as the ocean itself and that resists scholarly scrutiny: nothing is more lethal to humor than its explanation.

In a field of study where the incongruous and the paradoxical are the rule rather than the exception, it should not be surprising that humor may be a valuable and appropriate mode for transmission and the evidence of spiritual wisdom.