

Islam and the sense of humor

By Soumy Ana: Jumad al-Awwal 1423 -- July - August 2002

Islam is a religion of moderation and wisdom. What may look prohibited at first may become allowed in certain circumstances. For instance, it is not allowed to talk with non-mahram, except when seeking knowledge or help. It is not allowed to eat non-halal meat, except when there is nothing else to eat around. It is not allowed to write or read licentious poetry but useful poetry that deliver an Islamic message is good.

Same thing for human entertainment.

Joking is permitted in Islam in the condition that it is moderate.

Al Hafeth said, "What is prohibited is exaggerated or continuous joking as it distracts from worship of Allah and being serious about religious matters. This often leads to hard-heartedness, envy and loss of respect. Useful joking, which aims to calm people or entertain or relieve them for a short time, is permissible."

Permission on joking:

The Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam. Abu Hurairah said that the prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, was told, "O Prophet of Allah, you are joking with us." He said, "*I only say what is true.*" (Tirmithi) Another hadith relates that the prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, would nickname Zeinab bint Um Salama by repeatedly calling her '*O Zuweinab*'.

Other Ahadith relate that the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, would play and joke with small children. Thus we see that joking is a Sunnah. Sufyan bin Uyayna was asked, "Is joking prohibited?" He replied, "It is a Sunnah, but the point is that it must be done appropriately."

Many of the scholars agree that. Omar (Radhiallahu anhu) said, "I admire the man who is like a child with his family (playful), and once he leaves them, he is more serious." Thabit ibn Ubaid said, "Zayd ibn Thabit was one of the most humorous men in his home. Outside of his home, he was as serious as any man."

It is also related that Ibn Abbas asked some of his guests to have light and humorous conversation so that they would have a good time and not feel bored. Rabi'a said, "Virtue is made of six parts, three while in town (at the place of your home) and three while on a journey. The first three are reciting the Qur'an, frequently being at the mosque, and spreading the way of Allah to other lands.

The three parts while traveling are spending, showing virtuous behaviour and joking in what Allah has permitted." Ibn Abbas said, "Joking appropriately is permissible, for the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, joked but he only said what was true." Al Khalil bin Ahmad al Fraheedi said, "People would feel imprisoned if they did not joke."

Prohibition of joking:

On the other hand, some of the scholars have prohibited joking and they are supported by some Ahadith. It is related that the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, said, "*Everything has a beginning and hostility begins with joking.*" Ja'far bin Muhammad said, "Beware of joking for it causes embarrassment." Ibrahim al-Nakh'i said, "Joking shows foolishness and arrogance." Imam Ibn Abdul Bar said, "Some of the scholars denounced joking for what it causes of offences, spite and malice between people."

Types of Joking:

According to ibn Hayan, there are two types of joking. The first is preferred and it is defined as, “that which Allah has permitted, which commits no sin and does not lead to separation between people.” The second is the negative, harmful kind: “causing hostilities and sadness, and creating some of the benefits and harms of joking will clarify what is meant. Some of the scholars have said that joking is beneficial in that it entertains, lifts the spirit and lightens the burdens of life, bringing people closer together. In describing this kind of joking, a man wrote, “such humour does not hurt or criticize anyone. It leads a person from sadness to happiness, eases the frown and allows people to relax and be themselves.” Joking defeats its purpose when it separates people, and causes hostilities and envy between them.

Guidelines for Humour:

Joking should not deviate from the truth. The Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, said, *“I only say what is true.”*

Joking should not become consistent in a person’s manner, for seriousness is also a virtue. Muhammad ibn Ar-Rashed said, “The issues of Islam are more serious than to be dealt with jokingly. Smiling, joking, relaxing and laughing are certainly welcome at appropriate times and places. But at times of work, seriousness is called for.

Bad language or reference to improper topics of conversation may not be subject of jokes.

Joking must be at the appropriate time and place. Dr. Adel Shuweikh said, ‘Humour is most welcome after the Fajr prayer. He is supported by what has been related by Sammak bin Harb: ‘I asked Jaber ibn Samra if he spent time with the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, and he said, *‘Yes, the Prophet, sallallahu alayhe wa sallam, would often not leave the mosque after the Fajr prayer until the sun rose. They would be laughing and he would be smiling’* (Muslim). He also said, “Another time for making light was after the Isha prayer. Humour is permitted with family uncles and siblings. It is more preferred if it serves the purpose of advice and guidance, or if it creates friendship and warmth between people.”

Imam Nawawi said, “Joking is prohibited when it is excessive and consistent. It becomes ineffective and causes the heart to harden. It distracts a person from worship of Allah and concern with religious issues.”

Joking differently with different people:

Ath-Thahabi related that Khalaf ibn Salem said, “We were at Yazeed ibn Haroun’s and he made a joke. Ahmad ibn Hanbal cleared his throat, and Yazeed said, ‘Who cleared his throat?’ When he found out it who it had been, he put his hand on his forehead and cried, ‘Why didn’t you tell me Ahmad ibn Hanbal was here so I would not joke?’”

It was said, “Do not joke with children to the extent that they lose respect for you.”

Ibn Hayan said, “Whoever jokes with an inappropriate person will lose that person’s respect, even if what he is saying is true. One should be selective with whom he jokes.”

Ibn al-Muqafa' said, "One should separate his behavior between two groups of people. One group is made up of the public. Here he should be serious and purposeful with every word he speaks. The other group is made up of people who are closer to him. With this group, he should be humorous and caring. Each of these behaviors will be beneficial and productive in the right place."

Examples of jokes from the Sunnah:

In spite of his office of Prophethood, Muhammad was a very pleasant person; he did not take himself too seriously as many religious rulers.

Ibn Umar was asked whether the Prophet's companions laughed and joked. He replied that they did, though faith weighed heavier than a mountain in their hearts

Anas reported that once a man asked Muhammad for an animal to ride. He replied that he would give him the baby of a she-camel to ride on. The man asked what would he do with a she-camel baby because of his weight. Muhammad replied, "Is there any camel which is not born of a she-camel?" (all camels are the babies of a mother camel, even adult camels) He also reported that once the Prophet addressed him as, "O you with two ears," (meaning very obedient). (Tirmizi and Abu Daud).

An old woman came to see the Prophet and asked him to pray for her that she might go to Paradise. He replied, "No old woman will enter Paradise!" She was very grieved and began crying. Muhammad told his companions to tell her that the old woman would go to Paradise but as a young girl.

Auf ibn Malik al-Ashjai reported that he went to God's Messenger at the expedition of Tabuk, when he was sitting in a small tent, and gave a salutation. He resumed it, saying, "Come in." I replied, "The whole of me, God's Messenger?" He replied, "The whole of you," so I went in.

Among the stories related in the books of hadith and sirah is the report that the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) used to joke with the small child of one of the Sahabah, a boy called Abu 'Umayr, who had a small bird he used to play with. One day he saw the child looking sad, so he said, "Why do I see Abu 'Umayr looking sad?" The Sahabah told him, "The nughar [a small bird, like a sparrow - author] which he used to play with has died, O Messenger of Allah." The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) began to gently joke with the child, saying, "O Abu Umayr, what happened to the nughayr?" [Nughayr: diminutive of nughar. - author. In Arabic, this is a play on words, because of the rhyme between the boy's name and that of the bird. - Translator. This story was reported in Hayat al-Sahabah, 3/149]

Imam Ahmad reported from Anas (radhiallahu `anhu) that there was a man from the desert people whose name was Zahir. He used to bring gifts from the desert to the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam), and in return the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) would provide him with whatever he needed when he went out to fight. The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) said, "Zahir is our man of the desert, and we are his town-dwellers." The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) loved him very much, and he (Zahir) was an ugly man. One day the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) came to him whilst he was selling some goods. He embraced him from behind. The man could not see him, so he said, "Let me go! Who is this?" Then he turned around and recognized the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam), so he tried to move closer to him once he knew who it was. The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) started to say, "Who will buy this slave?" Zahir said, "O Messenger of Allah (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam), you will find me unsellable." The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) said, "But in the sight of Allah (subhanahu

wa ta`ala) you are not unsellable," or he said, "But in the sight of Allah (subhanahu wa ta`ala) you are valuable."

An old woman came to the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) and said: "O Messenger of Allah, pray to Allah (subhanahu wa ta`ala) that I will enter Paradise." He said jokingly, "O Mother of So-and-so, no old women will enter Paradise." The old woman went away crying, so the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) said, "Tell her that she will not enter Paradise as an old woman, for Allah (subhanahu wa ta`ala) says: (We have created [their Companions] of special creation, and made them virgin-pure [and undefiled]) (Qur'an 56:35-36)." Reported by al-Tirmidhi, it is hasan because of the existence of corroborating reports.

Ahmad report that 'A'ishah said: "I went out with the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) on a journey. At that time I was a young girl and was quite slender. The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) told the people, 'Go on ahead,' so they went ahead, then he said to me, 'Come, let us have a race.' So I raced with him, and I won. He let the matter rest until I had gained weight. Later, I accompanied him on another journey. He told the people, 'Go on ahead,' so they went ahead. He said to me, 'Come, let us have a race.' So I raced with him, and he won. He began to laugh, and said, 'This is for that.'"

Joking to reform the companions: "Khawwaat Ibn Jubayr Al-Ansaari was sitting with some women from the tribe of Banu Ka`b on the road leading to Makkah listening to their talk. The Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam came across him there and asked him: "O Abu `Abdullaah, what are you doing setting with these ladies?" He replied: 'I lost my camel and came looking for it' (as a false excuse). The Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam left him and went to take care of some affairs. After a while he sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam returned and teased him saying: "O Abu `Abdullaah, has your camel given up running away from you yet?" Khawwaat said: 'I was embarrassed and kept silent, and was avoiding him after that (because the Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam realised that Khawwaat was just trying to justify his sitting with the women), until we went back to Madeenah when he saw me in the mosque while I was praying, so he sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam sat down next to me waiting for me to finish my prayer. Due to this, I prolonged my prayer, he sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam said: "Don't prolong your prayer as I awaiting for you" so I finished my prayer, then he sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam said teasing me again: "O Abu `Abdullaah, has your camel given up running away from you yet?" I was embarrassed and kept silent, so he stood up and left and kept avoiding him until one day he sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam saw me while he was riding his donkey and said: "O Abu `Abdullaah, has your camel given up running away from you yet?" So I replied: I swear by Him Who sent you with the truth, my camel has never run away from me since I became a Muslim' (i.e., confessing to his sin which the Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam was trying to teach him to do by his joke) so the Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam said: "Allaahu Akbar, Allaahu Akbar, O Allaah, guide Abu `Abdullaah. After this, Khawwaat Ibn Jubayr Al-Ansaari became a much better Muslim". (Tabaraani)

"Once, the Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam went to visit Suhayb, may Allaah be pleased with him, when he was sick with an eye ailment. When he entered Suhayb, may Allaah be pleased with him, was eating dates, so the Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam said to him, jokingly: "Are you eating dates while you have a sore eye!" he replied: 'I'm using the other eye to see.' Thereupon, the Prophet sallallaahu `alaihi wa sallam smiled." (Ibn Maajah).

Nicknames:

Any lady who was called Barraah immediately got her name changed to something else, for 'barraah' meant 'good', and the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) explained that if he

did not change that name he would never be able to say 'goodbye', for it hurt him to bid farewell to the Good.

Once Ali was sleeping on the ground and was covered with dust. Muhammad happened to pass that way and said to Ali, "up Abu Turab (father of dust)."

Once Abu Hurairah was playing with a cat when Muhammad came along and said, "Abu Hurairah (father of cats)."

The Prophet's (Allah bless him and give him peace) wives were known as 'the glass vessels'. Anas recorded how he and Umm Sulaym had been in company with the Prophet's (Allah bless him and give him peace) wives once while they were travelling in howdahs, being hurried along by Anjasha's singing.

'Gently, O Anjasha,' cried the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) to the camel-driver. 'Be careful - these camels are carrying delicate glass vessels. Don't break them.' (Muslim 5746).

One day when they were digging the Ditch before the Battle of al-Ahzab the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, and Abu Bakr and Umar stood guard over him keeping the labourers away so that he could sleep in peace. Zayd b. Thabit, who was just sixteen and preparing for his first experience of battle, also fell asleep. Umarah b. Hazm played a practical joke on him, stealing his clothes and tools, and hiding them. Thus Zayd earned the nickname Abu Ruqad (the 'Sleepy One' or 'Father of Dreams').

One of the keenest diggers was the 'little beetle', Amr b. Suraqah (Ju'ayl). One of his companions gave rhythm to his digging with the song: His name he changed, Ju'ayl to Amr, gave the poor man that day his help.' The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) joined in by only shouting the words at the end of each line loudly, making people laugh.

Sahabas jokes

The Sahabah, at the model of the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) were easy-going and enjoyed being together.

In al-Adab al-Mufrad, Bukhari reports from Bakr ibn 'Abdillah who said: "The Companions of the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) used to throw melon-rinds at one another, but when the matter was serious, they were the only true men."

Imam Ahmad reports from from Umm: Salamah (radhiallahu `anha). Abil Bakr (radhiallahu `anhu) went to do business in Busra, and with him were Nu'ayman and Suwaybit ibn Harmalah (radhiallahu `anhuma), both of whom had been present at Badr. Suwaybit was in charge of food on the journey, and Nu'ayman said to him, "Feed me!" Suwaybit said, "Not until Abu Bakr (radhiallahu `anhu) comes." Nu'ayman was a fun-loving man with a sense of humour, so he went to some people who had brought livestock with them, and said, "Will you buy a sturdy Arab slave from me?" They said, "Yes." He said, "He has a big mouth, and he may tell you that he is a free man. If that means that you do not want to take him, then forget the matter, and do not cause trouble for me with him." They said, "No problem, we will buy him." So they bought him for ten young she-camels. Nu'ayman brought the animals back, and told the people: "There he is!" Suwaybit said: "I am a free man!" They said, "He has already told us all about you," and put a rope around his neck and led him away. Then Abu Bakr came, and was told what had happened. He and his companions went and returned the animals and took Suwaybit back. They told the

Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) what had happened, and he and his Sahabah would laugh about the story for a year afterwards.

A Bedouin came to the Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam). He entered the mosque and left his camel in the courtyard. Some of his Companions said to Nu'ayman ibn 'Amr al-Ansari, who was known as al-Nu'ayman: "If you slaughter it, we will eat it, because we want to have some meat, and the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) will pay for it." So al-Nu'ayman slaughtered it. Then the Bedouin came out and saw his saddle, so he shouted, "They have slaughtered my camel, O Muhammad!" The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) came out and asked: "Who did this?" They said, "Al-Nu'ayman." So he went looking for him, and found him at the home of Duba'ah bint al-Zubayr ibn 'Abdul Muttalib (radhiallahu `anha), where he had hidden in a ditch and covered himself with palm branches and leaves. A man pointed to where he was and said, loudly, "I have not seen him, O Messenger of Allah." The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) brought him out of the ditch, and his face was dirty from where the leaves had fallen on him. The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) asked him, "Why did you do that?" Al-Nu'ayman said: "The ones who told you where I was, O Messenger of Allah, are the same ones who told me to do it." The Prophet (sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam) began wiping his face and laughing, then he paid the price of the slaughtered camel. [See Hayat As Sahabah, 3/154, 155]

Amir Ibn Sad (ra) said:

That his father told him that he had seen the Prophet laughing so heartily that his grinders had become visible. The narrator asked his father why it had happened so on the day of the battle of the Trenches. He further (Sad) said, 'There was a man (among the enemy soldiers) who had a shield which he moved this way and that just to save his forehead from the arrows. I took out an arrow and just at the moment when that man raised his head up a little, I shot it at his forehead. The arrow did not miss the man, and the man fell down with his legs raised up. At this the Prophet laughed so heartily that his grinders became visible. On being asked the reason of the Prophet's laughter, he said that he laughed at what he had done. (Tirmidhi, chapter of Shamail p 16)

Rabiah Ibn Uthman (ra)says:

That a certain Bedouin came to the Prophet (pbuh). He seated his she camel outside the holy Mosque and himself went inside to meet the holy Prophet. Some of the companions of the Prophet said to Nuaiman Ibn Amr al Ansari, 'If you slaughter this she camel and satisfy your hunger, the holy Prophet will pay its penalty'. The narrator says that very soon Nuaiman slaughtered the she camel. When the Bedouin came out of the Mosque and saw all this, he began crying out, 'O Muhammad! Some one has slaughtered her.' The holy Prophet came out and asked the people who had done that. The people told him that Nuaiman had done that. Now the Prophet went out in search of him. He found Nuaiman in the house of Dabaah daughter of Zubair Ibn Abd al Muttalib. He had hidden himself in a cell and had put branches and dry barks and leaves of the date tree over his body. Someone cried out that he had not seen him. But this very man pointed to the place where Nuaiman was hiding. The Prophet took him out from there and his face was covered with dust and leaves of the date tree. The Prophet asked him who had asked him to do that. He said, 'O Messenger of Allah! These very men who had told you about my whereabouts, had asked me to do that'. The holy Prophet began removing the leaves and barks from his head and face and remained laughing. The narrator says that later on the Prophet paid the price of the she-camel to that Bedouin.

(Al Istiab Vol III p 575 and Isabah Vol III p 570)

Prophet's (saws) family practical jokes:

When a revelation descended upon the Prophet (pbuh) or when he delivered a sermon, then his condition would be like unto a warner sent to a people who were to be overtaken by Allah's wrath. But when he had finished with all that, then I saw his face, shining more than the faces of others. He laughed more beautifully than others. He was the most beautiful and the handsomest amongst the people

Bazzar and al Haithami Vol IX p 17

Aisha (ra) said:

That she once served Harirah (a type of tonic) to the Prophet (pbuh). She also invited Saudah (ra) but she refused. At this Aisha said, 'Take it or I will smear your face with it'. Still she refused. She then smeared Saudah's face with the caudle. At this the Prophet (pbuh) laughed. The Prophet caught Aisha with his hands and asked Saudah to smear her face with the caudle. When this was done, again he laughed. The Prophet called out, 'O servant of Allah' thinking that Umar (ra) was coming, the Prophet asked them both to wash their faces. Aisha says, 'I always stood in terror of Umar seeing that the Prophet kept in mind his nature'

(Abu Yala and al Haithami Vol IV p 316)

Razinah, a maid servant of the Prophet said:

That once Saudah Yamaniah (ra) came to Aisha (ra) and Hafsa bint Umar (ra) was already there. Saudah looked very beautiful at that time and was wearing a Yamanite shirt and a head gear of a similar cloth. She had two decorative marks near the corners of her eyes; and they were aloe and saffron. Aisha said that she had seen the women decorating their faces in that way. Hafsa said to Aisha, 'O Umm al Mummin! the Prophet will be coming and this Saudah will shine before him'. At this Aisha said to Hafsa, 'Fear Allah'. Hafsa said, 'I am determined to spoil her beauty aids'. At this Aisha asked her what she had planned to do. Saudah was hard of hearing. Hafsa said, 'O Saudah! the one-eyed anti christ has appeared'. Saudah said, 'Is this so?'. After saying this she got terrified and began trembling (on account of fear). She asked her, 'Where should I hide myself?' Hafsa said to her, 'Hide yourself in the yonder tent/ This tent was made of the branches of date trees and the people (way-farers) took shelter in it. Saudah went to the tent and hid herself in it. That tent was full of dirt and filth and was covered with cob-webs. In the mean time the Prophet came, and these two were laughing so much that they could not even speak a single word. The Prophet asked them why they were laughing. But they merely pointed towards the tent and continued laughing. The Prophet went to that tent and there he found Saudah trembling. He asked her what had happened to her. Thereupon she asked him if the one-eyed anti christ had appeared. The Prophet told her that he had not appeared; his appearance was sure. Thereafter the Prophet took Saudah out and began removing the dirt and filth and cobwebs from her body.

(Abu Yala, al Haithami Vol IV p 316 and Tabrani)

Anas (ra) says:

That someone asked him if the Prophet (pbuh) made jovial remarks. Ibn Abbas replied in the affirmative. Then the man asked him to tell him what type of jovial remarks he indulged in. At this Ibn Abbas said, 'Once the Prophet (pbuh) gave a very loose shirt to one of his wives and asked her to wear it and to praise Allah. He further asked her to walk around pulling its ends or skirts as a bride does.'

Ibn Asakir and al Kanz Vol IV p43

Numan ibn Bashir (ra) says:

That Abu Bakr sought permission to enter the Prophet's apartment. In the mean time he heard Aisha speaking in a louder voice than the Prophet (pbuh). When Abu Bakr entered the apartment, he caught Aisha and said, 'Beware! Now on I should never see thee speaking thus'. He wanted to slap her. The Prophet held Abu Bakr by the waist and thus saved Aisha. Abu Bakr went out

angrily. When Abu Bakr had gone, the Prophet said to Aisha, 'Well, how did I save thee from the man'. After a few days absence Abu Bakr again sought permission, and saw that both the Prophet and Aisha were at peace. Then he said, 'Let me enter in your peace as I had entered in your dispute'. The Prophet said, 'We do so, we do so'.

(Al Budayah Vol VI p46)

Abi Malikah (ra) says:

That once Aisha (ra) uttered some humorous words before the Prophet (pbuh). At this Aisha's mother said to the Prophet, 'O Messenger of Allah! Some of the pleasantries of this tribe trace their origin in the tribe of Kinanah'. At this the Prophet said, 'This tribe itself depends on our humour'.

Bukhari, Chapter of Adab (manners) p41

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