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Buddhism and Cartoons in Japan

How Much Parody Can a Religion Bear?

Introduction

Human beings are blessed with the gift of humor. It is not only a basic, but a most enjoyable form of communication. It seems that humankind cultivated it from olden times on and is practicing it everywhere in the world. Humor appears in various kinds, in jokes, songs or pictures. Sometimes they are combined in one way or another. One of the peculiarities of humor is that in forms of irony, parody and satire it may contain criticism. Humor thereby assumes the double character of entertainment and criticism. People articulate jokes just for fun, or they voice dissatisfaction through satirical expressions. Thus, there are jokes which cause all to laugh, and others which exclude some from the same enjoyment. Jokes have the power to unite, and the power to divide. Ridicule, satire and parody can produce what may be called “victims of humour.” (Cf. Wells 1997: 117-121) Are there limits for humorous expressions? And if so, where are the boundaries?

Critical jokes flourish in difficult times, they function as release valve for social pressure. The Yiddish jokes in the ghettos are a well known example. The political jokes during the time of the German Democratic Republic ridiculed sharply the communist government. Recently, sardonic jokes began to thrive among Iraqis in their war torn country.¹ These difficult circumstances are indicators for the causes of creating and communicating this kind of jokes. Quite often it is criticism of powerful authorities by otherwise weak subjects. Such jokes seem to emerge spontaneously when discrepancies are felt between the ideal and the real, between justice and injustice, or between equality and discrimination. On the other hand, however, parody and caricature are frequently used by a social majority in order to curtail or suppress a minority. The recent affair of the Muhammad caricatures printed by a Danish newspaper is one such case. Eventually it led to international political tensions, economic boycotts, and the death of more than a hundred people. This incident gives rise to the following questions: At which point does humor turn into a deadly serious matter? Are there certain rules of humorous expressions, for example, pertaining to the relationship between the agent and the “victim,” the subject of wit, or to its forms?

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1. Cf. “Black humor helps some Iraqis cope with ongoing violence, daily hardships,” *Japan Times* July 19, 2006.

The Danish cartoon incident occasioned the composition of this essay on religion and caricature in Japan. The East Asian context provides the opportunity to compare. How does Buddhism, for example, react to caricature and parody? The present essay treats visual forms of humor, such as cartoons and caricatures, in connection with Japanese Buddhism. It does not treat humor in Japanese religions in general, i.e. folk religion, Shintō, new religions and Christianity.² These topics are very important and certainly deserve proper research. Here, I take up only some examples of cartoons which caricature Buddhist subjects. Even within such framework, this essay does not attempt to provide a comprehensive study, but tries to elaborate only some basic features. What are the themes of humorous depictions related to Buddhism in Japan? How do they arise, and where are their possible limits? Who are the artists of these cartoons, what are their intentions? Which kinds of ridicule are Buddhists willing to endure, and which not?

The following essay is eclectic in choosing some historical cases as well as contemporary ones in order to find a few answers to our questions. I will treat first cartoons from the 12th century, then satirical depictions of a Buddhist monk in the medieval period, a woodblock print of the Edo period, and finally recent examples of cartoons and a commercial poster.

1. *Chōjū giga*: Parody of a Buddhist ceremony

The *Chōjū giga* 鳥獸戯画, or “Cartoons of birds and beasts,” are monochrome hand scrolls painted in ink from the late Heian and early Kamakura periods. (Satō 1969; Tani 1978) They are preserved in Kōzan-ji, North-West of Kyoto. As Schodt (1983: 28) notes, “Picture scrolls like *Chōjūgiga* are among the oldest surviving examples of Japanese narrative comic art.” In the following section, the first of the four scrolls, and the oldest (12th century), will be introduced. It depicts animals impersonating humans.

Hand scrolls are viewed from the right to the left. Thus, the *Chōjū giga* begins on the right with a scene of monkeys and hares enjoying a bath together in a stream. Subsequent scenes (evolving to the left) depict an arrow shooting competition as well as *sumō* wrestling, both between hares and frogs. The second last scene of this scroll first shows some frogs and hares with rosaries in their hand, all seated towards the left. (Fig. 1) Next, a hare and a fox sit by a low table, both wearing Buddhist garments and holding open sūtra scrolls, from which they apparently recite. Behind them, on the top of the scroll and further to the left, a weeping monkey and what seems to be

2. For Japanese humor in general, see Blyth (1963) and Wells (1997). Blyth’s book contains also a number of examples pertaining to religions in Japan, including pictures. For the use of parody in Shintō myth, see Philippi (1969: 84). For humorous depictions in folk religion, see for example the seven deities of luck (*shichi fukijin*). Among them especially Fukurokuju with the extreme long head should be mentioned, and Hōtei (Chin. Putai) with a laughing face and a voluminous belly. (Cf. Ehrich 1991) For Japanese caricatures of Kirishitan (early Christians) and European missionaries, see Elison 1988: 323. 327.

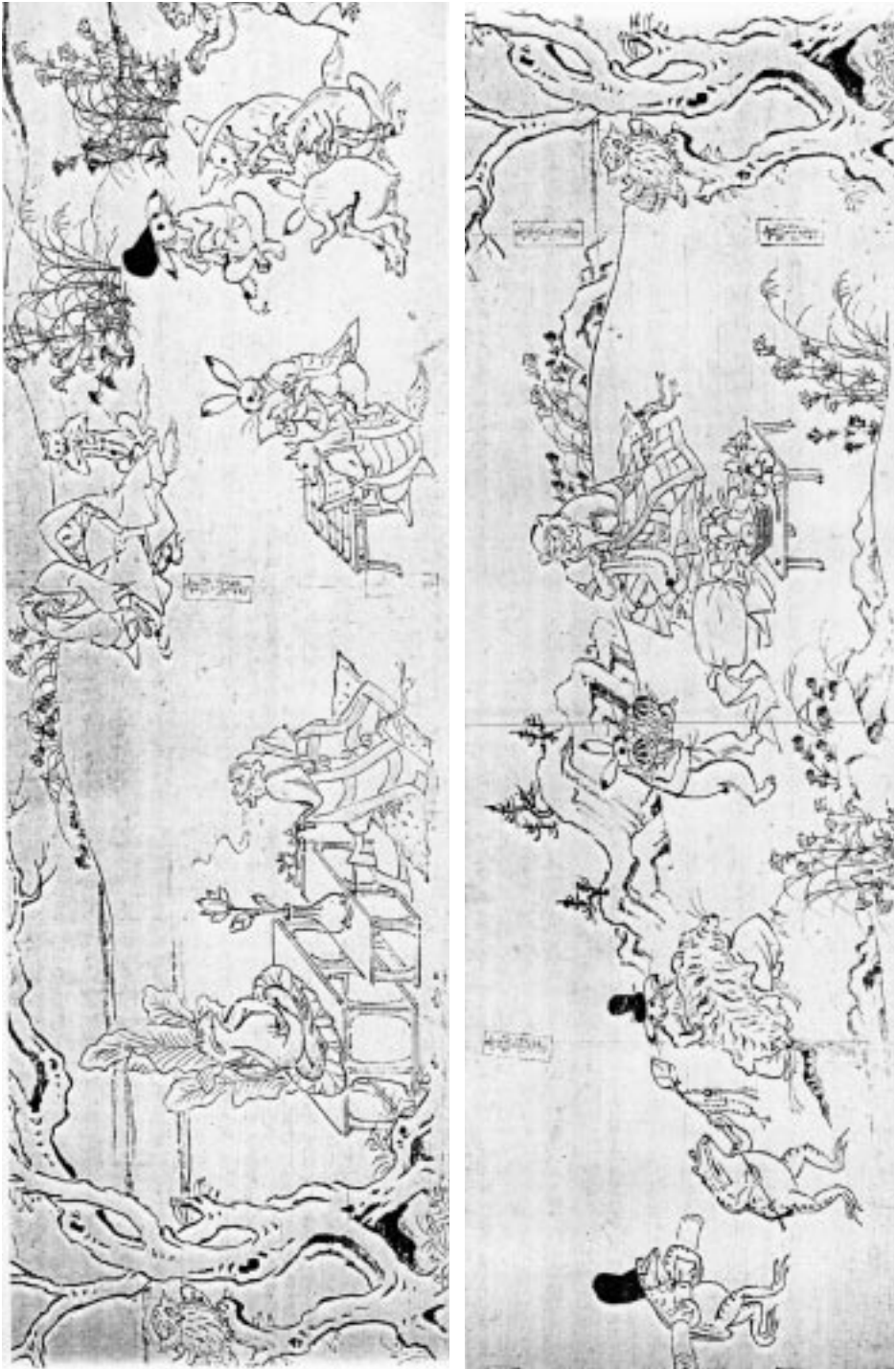


Fig. 1: Final scenes of the first scroll of the *Chōjū giga* (printed with kind permission of Kōzan-ji)

his fox wife are squatting, both clad in clothes and keeping rosaries. Besides them is probably their fox child, also holding a rosary. Finally, further to the left sits a monkey clad in a ceremonial robe in front of a low table with a flower in a vase; a stream of breath emanating from his mouth indicates that he recites the text of a ceremony. The monkey priest's head and a twig in his hand are directed towards a frog enthroned on a platform behind the table with the flower. Huge leaves behind the frog's back form the mandorla. His legs are crossed, the left hand resting on them, while his right is held upright. On the left side, this scene is framed by a big barren tree behind the altar. On a branch sits an owl with eyes wide open, directed not towards this scene, but to the viewer of the scroll! In such a way, this scene slowly unfolds a Buddhist funeral ceremony (*bōe* 法会) centered on the principal Buddhist image, a frog. Modern Japanese explanations call this figure *kaeru honzon* 蛙本尊, the frog principal image (Okudaira 1969: without page), and the monkey performing the ceremony *saru sōjō* 猿僧正, monkey bishop. (Umezū 1978: 9 [English text])

Now, the final scene unfolds behind the huge tree with the owl. Here again a monkey priest in ceremonial garment is seated, this time in front of donations, such as a rice bag and fruits. From the left comes a rabbit carrying a basket with fruits. Behind him, another rabbit holds what seems to be a tiger skin. Finally, two frogs approach from the left end of the scroll, one wearing a (courtier's or a Shintō priest's?) cap and holding a roll of cloth or silk, the other one carries a stick with rosaries. The center of this scene clearly is the monkey priest in ceremonial garment, viewing the donations while moving a rosary with both hands. He is also drawn a bit larger in scale than the other figures. It could be the same monkey priest of the previous funeral scene. Apparently, this scene shows the reverse side of the funeral, the donations (*ofuse* お布施) earned by the ceremony.

What can we make out of these two depictions of a Buddhist funeral ceremony and the receipt of donations performed by animals? An ordinary Buddhist ceremony – actually a sad funeral! – assumes here suddenly a comic coloring through the depiction of animals posing and acting as human beings. The strange composition provokes the viewer's smile, and precisely this seems to be what the owl is eager to see. What is the intent of this kind of satirical depiction? Since the scroll does not contain any explanatory texts, as many Japanese picture scrolls do, modern interpreters can only hypothesize. Hence a number of different explanations have emerged, and until now no interpretation seems to have gained general recognition. (Okudaira 1969: 6 f. 8) In my view, the person of the artist and his background can provide us with a key to understand these pictures. Michael Sullivan (1965: 112) calls the artist “a boisterous wit” and “a master of the Chinese ink line.” According to experts, the creator of this picture scroll was the renowned artist Toba Sōjō Kakuyū 鳥羽僧正覚猷 (1053-1140).³ The pictures’ “high quality of craftsmanship ... suggests that the artists [of the first two scrolls] were experienced in depicting Buddhist subjects.” (Yonemura 1983: 299; cf. Okudaira 1969: 14) Kakuyū was a

3. Another hypothesis is that Kakuyū painted this scroll together with other painter priests. (Okudaira 1969: 10-15; Yonemura 1983: 299)

Tendai monk, trained in esoteric and exoteric Tendai teaching and practice (*kenmitsu* 顕密), who became the personal chaplain of Emperor Toba and also abbot (*zasu* 座主) of Mii-dera (Onjō-ji). (*Nihon bukkyō jinmei jiten hensan iinkai* 1992: 119) Since the late 10th century, within Tendai a split emerged between the Enryaku-ji complex (also called *sanmon* 山門) and nearby Mii-dera (or *jimon* 寺門) which resulted in violent conflicts.⁴ During Kakuyū's time alone, Enryaku-ji monks burned down Mii-dera three times, in 1081, 1121, and 1140. (Repp 2005: 249) These hostilities already make it plausible that one kind of possible response by Mii-dera monks was to caricature weak points of the strong enemy.

With such a historical background in mind, the final scenes of the *Chōjū giga* should be examined again. First, viewing the funeral scene, we observe that the right hand of the frog is held upright. This gesture is known as the mudra of Amida Buddha's welcoming a dying person to the Pure Land which is called *raigō* (or *raikō-in* 来迎印).⁵ Owing to the efforts by Tendai monks such as Genshin (942-1017) and others, places of the *jimon* complex, such as Yokawa, Kurodani and Ōhara, had become the predominant centers for Pure Land teaching and practice. This tradition, associated especially with death and dying, became popular in the last part of the Heian period. Thus, the second last scene of the *Chōjū giga* very likely portrays a Pure Land funeral ceremony. This assumption can be underpinned by the depiction of rosaries, held here even by lay people, which was used when reciting the nembutsu. Further, even though it is documented about hundred years later (1231), there existed an ironical association of the nembutsu recitation with the frogs' croaking, as we know from the *Shōbōgenzō* where Dōgen (1200-1253) criticized the nembutsu movement of the early Kamakura period.⁶

Now, if the second last scene of the *Chōjū giga* represents a caricature of a Pure Land funeral ceremony, what does the last scene depict? It seems to portray the reverse side of funerals, the receipt of lavish donations. During the late Heian period, we observe direct and indirect criticism of worldly tendencies within Tendai. For example, a number of dedicated Buddhist monks left such monasteries and withdrew into mountain temples and hermitages (*tonsei* 遁世 or *inkyō* 隱居) in order to pursue rigid religious life and practice. This included strict adherence to the Buddhist rules, that is, abstaining from worldly benefits and honors. Another example is the *Mappō tōmyō-ki*, a Tendai text of the late Heian period, which tries to counter the criticism of monastic moral decline by arguing that even in the present time of the final dharma (*mappō* 末法) lay people should continue to support temples with donations. (Repp 2005: 188-191)

Hence, by juxtaposing the funeral scene and the scene depicting the receipt of donations, the priest artist very likely voiced his ironical criticism of Buddhist clergy

4. For the beginning of this conflict see also section 2.

5. For similar depictions of a seated Amida Buddha in this gesture (late Heian period) see Okazaki 1977: 108 f.

6. Dōgen writes here: "Endlessly repeating the name of Buddha is like the frogs in the rice fields croaking day and night – it means absolutely nothing." (Nishiyama 1988: 650)

in pursuit of worldly benefits.⁷ What is more, however, is the following aspect of these cartoons. When considering Buddhist cosmology, within the sixfold realm of reincarnations, animals belong to the realm below human beings. Buddhist scriptures always admonish human beings to be aware of their privileged position in this world, namely to hear the dharma, to understand it, and to put it into practice in order to attain ultimate liberation. Animals first have to be reborn as human beings before they can be freed from suffering. Now, when portraying human beings as animals, the artist voices harsh criticism of lay people and (religiously more advanced) monks alike. In reality, he seems to say, they are not human beings, but animals which first have to be reborn as human beings in order then to strive for liberation. What first renders the *Chōjū giga* funny is the humorous representation of priests, other human beings, and even a Buddha, by animals. However, upon closer examination it seems to be rather a biting sarcasm of a rival Buddhist school.

As mentioned above, the lack of texts prevents us from clearly identifying the artist's real intention. Apart from the uncertainties in explaining this scroll, however, two facts concerning the *Chōjū giga* are sure. First, these cartoons of Buddhist practices and practitioners were created by highly skilled artists, who were Buddhist priests themselves. Second, these Buddhist artists ridiculed either adherents and practices of another Buddhist tradition, or a clergy which had become worldly, or both. Such intra-Buddhist ridicule has to be distinguished from criticism voiced from outside. The intra-Buddhist tradition of parody continued in Japanese history, as we shall see in the following section.

2. The *Tengu zōshi*: The transformation of a bishop into a *tengu* and devil

The *Tengu zōshi* 天狗草紙 is a picture scroll from the Kamakura period (1296).⁸ However, unlike the *Chōjū giga*, its subjects of caricatures can be identified with certainty because its pictorial part is accompanied with texts, and some figures in the pictures are identified by captions. In its first five scrolls, the *Tengu zōshi* critically addresses problems of the older Buddhist schools by a twofold technique. On the one hand, in the textual part it first provides the official histories of temples. Then, however, it adds a critical paragraph at the end of each and deplors “that the high priests, boasting of their prestigious heritage, tend to become *tengu* [天狗], i.e. selfish and arrogant.” (Umezu 1978: 2 [English text]) On the other hand, parts of the pictures themselves directly illustrate “the realities of the haughty monks pursuing their egoistical ends, not mentioned in the text.” (Ibid.) It criticizes especially the power struggle between the temple complexes and the employment of the warrior monks.

Umezu (1978: 2) considers the artist to have had a “critical, satirical spirit,” and assumes that he belonged to Tendai. In the text of the scroll centered on Kōfuku-ji,

7. This is also indicated in a previous scene which depicts a hare leading a deer to a (the) monkey priest and giving him the bridle. Monks were not supposed to ride on animals.

8. For pictures and text, see Umezu 1978.

which serves also as preface for the whole set of the *Tengu zōshi*, the author states the theme of his work: "... these (priests of the major temples) all dwell in ego-attachment, harbor arrogance, and consider fame and profit as an important matter. For this reason, they will without fail fall into the realm of *ma* [魔, i.e. the Buddhist devil]." (Wakabayashi 1999: 493) In order to express such bad state of affairs, the *Tengu zōshi* employs the figure of the *tengu* in its depiction of monks. Thereby it attempts "to caricature the Buddhist sects, old and new." (Umezu 1978: 2)

Now, who are *tengu*, and why are they employed to ridicule leading Buddhist individuals and powerful monastic institutions? Wakabayashi (1999: 483) explains the *tengu* as a "demonic creature symbolic of *ma*," the devil in Buddhism. The *Tengu-zōshi* depicts *tengu* in form of human figures with a bird's head, especially conspicuous is the beak. This species is called *karasu tengu*, or crow *tengu*.⁹ The underlying notion of this evil figure is that people, who do not get rid of arrogance and attachments, after death are transformed into *tengu*. Whereas, according to Buddhist cosmology, liberation from the sixfold realm of transmigration (*roku-dō*) still is possible, the realm of *tengu* is believed to be outside of it. (Wakabayashi 1999: 492) This means that a *tengū* is deprived of such possibility. Among the evil deeds of the *tengu* are, for example, to disturb the unity of the Buddhist order. "Tengu were believed to cause damage to religious institutions of all kinds, to imbue people with heretical notions, and to lead them into folly." (Umezu 1978: 11)

The *Tengu zōshi* portrays, among others, also the famous Tendai abbot (*zasu*) Ryōgen 良源 (912-985) as *tengu*. Ryōgen was a powerful figure in his time, but also a controversial one. On the one hand, he strengthened the economic, social and political position of Enryaku-ji, on the other hand he deepened the frictions with Mii-dera (Onjō-ji), which resulted later in a schism between *sanmon* and *jimon* within Tendai, as well as the conflicts with other Buddhist schools. (McMullins 1984 and 1989) In an intriguing study, Haruko Wakabayashi (1999) traces the contradictory perception of this controversial abbot in its historical development. Already before the *Tengu zōshi*, one source, the *Hirasan kojīn reitaku* (1239), lists Ryōgen, among other Tendai bishops, as *tengu* because of his "arrogance and attachment." (Wakabayashi 1999: 492) And the concluding text section of the Enryaku-ji scroll of the *Tengu zōshi* states, as Wakabayashi (1999: 493) summarizes, that "Ryōgen had become the chief of the realm of *ma*, and that all *tengu* therefore are his subjects."

As Wakabayashi (1999: 487) elaborates, Ryōgen was portrayed in Tendai first as a conqueror of evil spirits. Besides his depiction as *tengu*, literary sources of the Kamakura period began to portray him also as *Maō* 魔王, Devil King, which Tendai perceived as protector of Mt. Hiei. (Wakabayashi 1999: 482 f) Still today, the Yokawa

9. In later depictions, *tengu* are portrayed with a red face and a very long nose, as for example the famous one in Kurama. According to Umezu (1978: 1), this new image began to appear in the early 17th century. This change of depiction may be connected with the arrival of Europeans in Japan in the 16th century, who have bigger noses than Asians. Thus, anti-Christian pictures of the 17th century for obvious reasons depicted Christians as *tengu* with long noses.



Fig. 2: Talisman (*ofuda*) of Ryōgen the Abbot (author's collection)



Fig. 3: Talisman (*ofuda*) of Ryōgen the devil (author's collection)

district of Mt. Hiei issues *ofuda* (amulets or talismans) depicting Ryōgen, one as an abbot with two attendants, the other as a vigorous devil with horns. (Fig. 2 and 3) One of his posthumous names was Tsuno Daishi 角大師, Great Teacher Horn, or Horned Grand Teacher. Such depictions and accompanying identifications – as incorporation of evil, or as the one subjugating evil – not only reflect Ryōgen's ambiguous figure, but also the respective camp of those portraying him.

Ryōgen seems not to have been an exception. Wakabayashi (1999: 492) states in general terms: “Notions of *madō* and *tengudō* [realms of evil and of *tengu*] were widely employed to satirize and critique the degeneration of *kenmitsu* institutions [exoteric and esoteric temple complexes] reflected in the privatization of temple lands, monopolization of high ecclesiastic offices by aristocratic families, and frequent conflicts among temples.”

In concluding this section, a comparison with the previous one may be helpful. First, whereas the *Chōjū giga* caricatures certain Buddhist practices and practitioners, probably the Pure Land tradition connected with Enryaku-ji, and combines this with a parody of the desire for donations, the *Tengu zōshi* satirizes various forms of abuse in powerful Buddhist temples and among influential monks. Moreover, the latter charges at once most of the mighty temple complexes of the time, such as Kōfuku-ji and Tōdai-ji in Nara, the Tendai headquarters of Enryaku-ji and Mii-dera, and the Shingon centers of Tōji, Daigo-ji and Mt. Koya.

Second, whereas the former states its criticism at first sight in form of a funny parody, animals impersonating a religious ceremony, the latter directly expresses harsh criticism of decadent monks and temples by sarcasm when employing the

tengu as personification of evil. In terms of Buddhist cosmology, the *Chōjū giga*'s funny portray of people as animals turns out to be a severe criticism because it situates them in a religiously lower state of existence, however, the *Tengu zōshi* descends even further when depicting Buddhist bishops as beings outside the realm of liberation. The sponsor of the *Tengu zōshi* must have been influential enough to challenge these religious powers and not to fear reprisal. What is clear, however, is that both artists do not caricature for the sake of caricature, but that their concern about religious abuse is motivated by Buddhist norms which should be put into practice. In other words, these sarcastic warnings aim at religious reforms.

3. A sketch (*manga*) by Hokusai: A huge elephant and tiny monks

Hokusai 北斎 (1760-1849), one of Japan's most famous woodblock print artists, is best known for his beautiful landscape prints, especially the views of Mt. Fuji. He published also sketchbooks called *manga* in which he collected sketches of diverse kind in no seeming order. (Cf. Keyes 1983: 215) Among his *manga* are humorous pieces depicting human beings in a broad variety of funny postures, gestures, and facial expressions. In Vol. 8 of his sketchbooks, entitled *Hokusai manga* 北斎漫画, Hokusai depicted a huge elephant filling most of two pages facing each other. (Fig. 4) It seems to be an old elephant as its whole body, the wrinkles of its skin and the frayed earlaps indicate. The picture receives its humorous coloring through a



Fig. 4: Cartoon from *Hokusai manga* (Vol. 8)

contrasting technique by depicting eleven small figures touching and groping diverse parts of the elephant's huge body. As their clothes and shaved heads suggest, these little human beings seem to be young monks. One reaches to the tusk, another gropes the trunk, a third sits on the neck, a fourth kneels on top and feels the back of the colossus, while two others try to hold onto the back so as not to slip down. Two monks try to embrace the left fore foot from opposite sides, in vain. One touches the belly from below, while another one measures the left hind foot. The last one hangs on the tail. Each of these seem to be completely immersed in grasping their small part of the colossus. Two details remain to be mentioned: First, nine sticks lie scattered on the ground. The monks apparently are blind, as their closed eyes also indicate. However, one eye in the sketch is depicted open, it is the elephant's. Though a bit twisted, its eye directly looks towards the viewer of this picture! This reminds of the owl in the *Chōjū giga*, as mentioned above. Somehow, I sense an ironical twinkle in the elephant's eye, but I may be wrong.

Hokusai's woodblock print of an elephant being explored by blind people derives from a parable which Śākyamuni Buddha once had told his disciples. In the jungle of opinions, the Buddha said, people are clinging to their views like those being born blind. Once they had touched a small part of a huge elephant, they begin to argue with each other about the shape of the animal. Each claims to have the proper perception. Finally the fight of words ends up in a fist fight. (Oldenberg 1983: 218; the text derives from Udāna VI, 4)

Śākyamuni's ironical parable warns against clinging to partial truths. Now, with this *manga* Hokusai provides somehow a new interpretation of this parable. It is not anymore worldly beings, who are subject to irony, but Buddhist monks, who are supposed to have cut the worldly ties. It seems to me that Hokusai is aiming at the sectarian divisions which characterize Japanese Buddhism. By insisting on their sectarian truths, priests are in danger of not grasping Buddha's whole truth. It should be mentioned also, that Hokusai was a lay follower of the Nichiren school. (Keyes 1983: 215) Whereas in the first two examples above Buddhist "professionals," monks, criticize certain Buddhist groups and individuals, in this case it is a lay Buddhist, who ironically depicts sectarian strife. This shows how lay people were concerned with the state of affairs in contemporary Buddhist establishment. Because of its indirect and humorous expression, this *manga* voices a kind of soft criticism. I do not know, though, which reactions Hokusai provoked by his *manga* among officials of the established Buddhist schools of his time.

4. Cartoons by No-rio

By chance I encountered cartoons by No-rio, a contemporary artist from Northern Japan. When researching Aum Shinrikyō, I discovered one of his cartoons in a Japanese magazine. I was struck because the sketch and accompanying words expressed a crucial problem of the Aum incident more precisely than any scholarly treatise could. This cartoon depicts a yoga practitioner with shaved head and floating above the ground. Next to him stand what seem to be a doctor and a nurse,



Fig. 5: Cartoon by No-rio (printed with kind permission by the artist)

saying “It is more difficult to descend than to float!” (Fig. 5) This comment signifies the important aspect in religion that after extraordinary and elevating religious experiences, the practitioner has to come down to earth, after all. In other words, lofty spiritual experiences have to be verified by, and translated into, mundane life. This dialectic process can be observed, for example, in the religious experiences of Śākyamuni and Jesus. If this does not happen, an enthusiastic and fanatic drive causes a religious movement to “lift up” from secular reality and to end in a sudden and steep crash, as Aum Shinrikyō did.

No-rio, whose real name is Yamanoi Norio, kindly granted permission to reprint this cartoon in my book on the Aum incident, together with two other of his drawings. (Repp 1997: 69, 85, 115) One of the latter depicts a Buddhist priest with shaved head and garments sitting at a desk, busily phoning and operating his computer at the same time. Behind him on the wall hangs a statistical chart, a graph with an ascending zigzag line. In stark contrast, a big Buddha statue is depicted in the background, enthroned in dignified manner directly behind and above the priest’s office. (Fig. 6) In real life, of course, the hall of worship and the temple office are located at separate places. However, by creating such a direct contrast between the noble object of worship and mundane temple business, the artist challenges the viewer to ask what Buddha and business have to do with each other. In other words, the artist expresses his criticism of contemporary established Buddhism in Japan in an ironic way.

In recent conversations with Mr. Yamanoi concerning the Muhammad incident, about which he was well informed, he explained that he saw a major difference between caricatures depicting established institutions of religions and those



Fig. 6: Cartoon by No-rio (printed with kind permission by the artist)

portraying founders of religions. Whereas he had drawn several cartoons satirizing what he called Buddhism in “degeneration” (*daraku* 墮落), he would not do so with the figure of Buddha, because he saw here nothing to criticize. On the contrary, Buddha serves him as a basic norm for scrutinizing abuses in established Buddhism. Here, as in the case of Hokusai, a lay Buddhist criticizes abuses in the Buddhist establishment, be it attachment to sectarian views or to economic profit, in the name of Buddha’s teachings. Mr. Yamanoi is also critical of Buddhism in Thailand and Sri Lanka today because of its active involvement in violent conflicts.

5. Commercial poster of the Daibutsu in Nara

In May 2004, media reported about a local dispute in Nara between vendors catering for tourists, and representatives of the ancient and grand state temple in Nara, the Tōdai-ji. The subject of discord was the sale of a new kind of sweet under the label *Daibutsu-sama no hana-kuso* 大仏さまの鼻くそ, or “Snot from the nose of the revered Great Buddha.”¹⁰ Daibutsu is the principal image of Tōdai-ji. The local company Yamamoto Bussan had produced this sweet made from rice and marketed it with this label as one of its measures to overcome economic recession. Representatives of Tōdai-ji blocked its registration as trademark at the patent office. According to personal information, subsequently the priests were also able to

10. Not only the local media, even Telegraph.co.uk reported about this incident in an article written by Colin Joyce, entitled “‘Buddha’ sweet has sour taste in Japan,” and published May 14, 2004. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/05/14/wjap14.xml& sSheet=/news/2004/05/14/ixworld.html>)



Fig. 7: Commercial poster from Nara (author's collection)

convince most shop owners to remove the sweets from their shelves. When visiting Nara last year (2005), I found one shop still selling the disputed sweets and exhibiting a commercial poster. (Fig. 7) The poster and the label of the sweet depict Buddha with a finger of his left hand boring into his nose.¹¹ Such irreverent depiction is, what temple officials (in Japanese indirect politeness) called *taegatai* 耐え難い, or “difficult to endure.”

This humorous depiction of Buddha was motivated by economic interest. By such strategy the company and shops aimed at catching the customers' curiosity and smiles in order to increase sales in times of economic recession. By now, the power struggle between temple and enterprises seems to be over. However, important for our study is that in this case a clear-cut

demarcation line is drawn for parody that Buddhist representatives cannot endure.

There are other cases of humorous depictions of Buddha or the Bodhisattva Jizō for commercial reasons in Japan. Cute depictions of Jizō, for example, can be found frequently on flyers of restaurants and shops. Recently, I came across a picture of a Buddha with a childish face smiling from ear to ear, accompanied by two similarly sketched attendants, printed for advertisement of Buddhist house altars (*butsudan*) with price reduction at the occasion of the festival for the dead (*obon*). Probably because such depictions are only funny and not irreverent, they do not provoke scorn of Buddhist representatives. Another case seems to be depictions of the devil. In recent times, pictures of the once frightening demon experienced a metamorphosis into a cute and benign figure. The driving force behind this tendency also seems to be commercial interest. (Reider 2003)

11. This shop sold also another sweet with an irreverent label, the *Daibutsu-sama no heso no goma*, or “Sesame from the belly of the Great Buddha.”

Conclusions

This essay presented an eclectic introduction to comic art related to Buddhism in Japan during a period of almost thousand years. It does not attempt to provide an overview of this subject, not to speak of a comprehensive study. The aim is simply to derive some features from these examples. The findings may be divided into four aspects of our theme: first, the forms of humor; second, its agents; third, its themes or subjects, and fourth, its effects on the “victim of humor.”

First, we saw that there are different forms of comical depictions of Buddhist themes. Whereas the cartoons of the *Chōjū giga* are comical through depicting participants in a Buddhist ceremony as animals and through juxtaposing funeral and worldly benefit, the *Tengu zōshi* portrays abuse in monastic complexes and among monks in form of sarcasm or biting humor. Ryōgen’s depiction as a devil or *tengu* contains the ambiguous connotation of the subduer of evil and the sarcastic personification of evil. Quite differently, Hokusai’s *manga* of the monks and the elephant expresses the sectarian strife in Buddhism in form of amiable humor. No-rio’s cartoon of the business-minded monk sitting just under the eyes of the Buddha consists of a contrast between the real and the ideal; it is rather a sobering parody of established, profit oriented temple Buddhism. Finally, the Nara commercial depicts Buddha in a cute design; for Buddhist representatives, however, it is irreverent

Second, who were the agents of humor, parody and satire? The artists of the *Chōjū giga* and probably also of the *Tengu zōshi* were professional monk painters, whereas Hokusai was, and No-rio is, a Buddhist lay person, both highly skilled in their arts. What is common to all these artists is that they were Buddhists themselves, and as such they caricatured Buddhist phenomena. In most cases, their motive was to depict critical issues in comical form in order to signify the necessity to reform. In the case of the poster design in Nara, however, the motive was purely economic, and for the company this interest had priority over religious respect.

Third, the subject of ridicule was in the *Chōjū giga*’s second last scene a certain kind of Buddhist practice differing from the one the artist probably adhered to. In its last scene, as well as in the cases of the *Tengu zōshi*, Hokusai, and No-rio, the topic of satire was religious abuse by Buddhist individuals and institutions. The Nara poster made the Buddha subject to laughter for commercial reasons only. In all other cases, the Buddha or his teachings served as basis or norm for the parody of actual Buddhist practice, representatives, and institutions. The second last scene of the *Chōjū giga* seems to be an exception since it caricatures also a Buddha. This may be the product of criticism by one Buddhist tradition against the popular Amida belief in the late Heian period.

Finally, what were the effects which these cartoons left? It is difficult to estimate. In the case of the *Chōjū giga* and the *Tengu zōshi*, we cannot say. However, the fact that they were preserved over so many centuries indicates that they were much appreciated in certain circles, and very likely not only for their artistic value. The Tendai tradition depicting Ryōgen as a devil on a talisman can be seen also as

an attempt to neutralize the sarcastic criticism against him, or to keep it under control. In the case of Hokusai's *manga*, one can hardly imagine angry reactions against it because of its amiable humor. No-rio's cartoons are normally published in secular media. His depiction of the business-minded monk sitting in his office just under the eyes of the Buddha brings bystanders to laugh, but priests actually running a temple would react with indignation. Finally, even though the Nara commercial with the Buddha boring into his nose is cutely designed, it provoked the anger of the Tōdai-ji representatives since it is irreverent.

The last case may have implications for the previous essays dealing with the Mohammad cartoons. The Nara poster clearly shows that not only extremely provocative depictions, but merely the lack of reverence can hurt religious feelings. It is apparently at this point where humor and parody reach their limit in religious circles. To summarize the present findings: Buddhism, just like other religions, is not deprived of humor and satire. On the contrary, it has a rich and manifold treasure of parody. However, there seem to be certain limits of ridicule in Buddhism, which is not much different from other religions either.¹²

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12. This raises the question concerning the “ethics of humour,” as Wells (1997: 5) called it. I have treated the related problem “ethics of communication in the mass media” in section 3.5 of my article “‘The Caricature of Caricatures’ – Communicational Strategies in the Danish Cartoon Conflict.”

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