

## Introduction

### *Ritual Levity in South Asian Traditions*

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The comic is not a wart on the human soul but a part of the soul.

—Walsh, in *Holy Laughter*

Humans have long been classified as *Homo Sapiens*, *Homo Faber* (Man the Worker), and *Homo Religiosus*. Half a century ago, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1950), Johan Huizinga coined a fourth functional designation: Man the Player. Huizinga's comment, that "ritual grew up in sacred play" (173), furthermore suggests the role and significance of play in rituals. Since the publication of this influential work, some scholars, such as Peter Berger, have called our attention to the religious aspects of playfulness as a human phenomenon, arguing that humor is "a necessary constituent of humanity" that cuts across ethnic, cultural, historical, geographical, temporal—as well as religious—divides (Berger 1997, x).

Despite such recognition and connection between humor and religiosity, the scholarly community has demonstrated only a marginal interest in the ludic dimensions of religious rituals, leading scholars such as Conrad Hyers to bemoan the paucity of literature on the subject. "[F]or all the wealth of material produced on the general subject of religion," he observes, "the amount of attention devoted

to the place of humor in religion, and to the manifold relationships between the sacred and the comic, is almost infinitesimal by comparison" (Hyers 1969c, 4). Ingvild Gilhus attributes this neglect to the Western academy's focus on Christianity. "The separation between religion and the ludicrous," she observes, "has long been inherent in the mainstream of Christian tradition. This is perhaps the main reason why the relationship between religion and laughter is seldom realized and investigated" (Gilhus 1991, 257).

While the Western academy's focus on Christianity might have contributed in some measure to the current lack of interest in the study of religious levity, it is also due—at least in part—to the general tendency among scholars and nonspecialists alike to view ludic expressions and behaviors as no more than superficial and marginal aspects of human life, incongruent with the seriousness and solemnity normally associated with religion. Not surprisingly, therefore, scholars of religion traditionally have overlooked playfulness in ritual—let alone considered it a legitimate interpretive category—except to treat it as an occasional aside in ethnographic encounters and narratives. This perceived estrangement between religion and humor has led many to see them at best as strange bedfellows, if not enemies (Capps 2006b, 413). Commenting on this perceived estrangement, Doris Donnelly suggests that "something has gone wrong with our perception of the alliance between being religious and having a sense of humor" (Donnelly 1992, 386).

More recently, however, a new generation of scholars of religion trained in ethnography has shown an interest in this subject. A tangible sign of this growing interest is the number of panels and sessions focusing on this theme at the annual meetings of professional and scholarly associations. For example, the Midwest American Academy of Religion devoted its 2001 annual meeting to exploring the theme Religion and Humor. The following year, two contributors to this volume organized a panel focused on ritual levity and ritual play in South Asia for the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Toronto. Envisioned as a prelude to this volume and cosponsored by three separate program units of the AAR, seven contributors to this book presented papers on levity and play in South Asian traditions at this well-attended and well-received session. Originating from the Toronto panel, this work is a modest interdisciplinary attempt to fill a void in current scholarship on an important aspect of religious practice.

That said, we hasten to add that this book is not simply about humor. Nor is it about religious jokes or about divine escapades and

tricks. Its limited and specific focus is on the levity and playfulness that religious devotees manifest in structured as well as spontaneous ritual contexts. Our resolve is to offer some preliminary generalizations regarding ritual levity in South Asian traditions and to propose ritual levity and play as a viable hermeneutical tool and a legitimate analytical category for exploring religion in general and of South Asian religions in particular, worthy of further study and scrutiny.

### Ritual Levity: Its Nature and Function

Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines levity as "lightness or gaiety of disposition, conduct, or speech; especially improper or unbecoming gaiety or flippancy; lack of seriousness; frivolity" (1966, 842). A similar definition can be found in the *American College Dictionary*, which describes levity as "lightness of mind, character, or behavior; lack of proper seriousness or earnestness" (1964, 701). These conventional definitions suggest that, in common parlance, levity denotes lightheartedness and playfulness, lacking appropriate seriousness. However, ritual levity—as we understand it—denotes playful ritual actions that are at once lighthearted and serious. This may include and evoke an array of moods, attitudes, and expressions, such as mocking, clowning, play, parody, imitation, jest, laughter, fun, role reversal, and competition. There is a protean quality to ritual levity that makes it difficult to pin down. This very plurality of significations and the inherent elasticity of the concept present scholars of religion with both challenges and opportunities to isolate, decode, and articulate the themes and lessons implicit in ludic expressions.

What constitutes ritual levity and what function it serves in a particular instance will depend on, among others things, its context, its constituency, the intentionality of participants, and the desired and/or anticipated outcomes. As readers will discover, our contributors neither ignore nor dismiss the diversity of associations. In fact, in their efforts to isolate the meaning, significance, and nuances of ludic expressions in their respective case studies, they take refuge in and employ a wide array of concepts and terms. As editors, we have not imposed or proscribed particular definitions or understandings of ritual levity but have let authors articulate their own conceptions of levity drawn from the specific socioreligious contexts of their case studies. As scholars of religion continue to search for fuller and more comprehensive understandings, the wealth of ethnographic data furnished here offers rich fodder for cross-cultural study and comparison.

In proposing ritual levity as a category of analysis for religious practices, we draw on the insights of ritual theorists such as Victor Turner and Tom Driver. Turner developed his theory of ritual based on Arnold Van Gennep's (1960) notion of *limen*, expanding its significance beyond rites of passage to the processes of ritual themselves.<sup>1</sup> For Turner, when people perform rituals, they separate themselves, at least partially, from their traditional roles and statuses and enter into a privileged state of play. "Just as the subjunctive mood of a verb is used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, or possibility, rather than stating actual facts," argues Turner, "so do liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and common-sense systems into their components and 'play' with them in ways never found in nature or in custom" (Turner 1986, 25; quoted in Driver 1998, 159). For Turner, liminality "is a phase particularly conducive to . . . ludic invention" (Turner 1982, 31–32).

Given that play is integral to ritual contexts, ritual participants are afforded an opportunity to engage in lighthearted "play" with symbols and symbol vehicles such as masks and costumes, meanings and words, and creatively to imagine, invent, and introduce new symbols, meanings, and words (Turner 1982, 85). Speaking of various forms of play in tribal and agrarian rituals, where "work and play are hardly distinguishable in many cases" (34), Turner notes that

Huizinga's *ludic* abounds in many kinds of tribal rituals, even in funerary rituals. There is a play of *symbol*-vehicles, leading to the construction of bizarre masks and costumes from elements of mundane life now conjoined in fantastic ways. There is a play of *meanings*, involving the reversal of hierarchical orderings of social values and statuses. There is a play with *words* resulting in the generation of secret initiatory languages, as well as joyful or serious punning. Even the dramatic scenarios which give many rituals their processual armature may be presented as comedic rather than serious or tragic. Riddling and joking may take place, even in the liminal seclusion of initiatory lodges. . . . Liminality is particularly conducive to play, where it is not restricted to games and jokes, but extends to the introduction of new forms of symbolic action, such as sword-games or original masks. (Turner 1982, 85, emphases in original)<sup>2</sup>

Building on Turner's concept of liminality, Tom Driver also highlights the playful dimension of ritual.

If there is any one thing that clearly distinguishes performance in the ritual mode from other kinds of events, it is that the performer assumes roles and relates to what is going on in an “as if” way not appropriate to the workaday world. As Victor Turner insisted, ritual realizes itself in the subjunctive mood. The so-called “sacred space” and “sacred time” of religious rituals are, above all, imaginative constructions, “rules of the game.” . . . The playfulness of rituals, however, does not mean that they are nothing more than play-acting, much less that they cannot be efficacious. . . . In short, rituals are a kind of playful work. . . . We may speak of ritual, then, as work done playfully. Wherever the spirit of play enters in, work starts to become ritualized.” (Driver 1998, 98)

According to Driver, such play and levity, contrary to popular assumptions, are not fleeting or flighty in nature. “However playful, foolish . . . and pretense-ridden liminality may be, there is a substance to it” (Driver 1998, 160).

If one subscribes—as we do—to Turner’s theory of ritual and his interpretation of liminality further expounded by Driver, then ritual levity might well be described—to use Turner’s phrase—as a “liminoid phenomenon,” in that it occurs in borderline spaces and moments, “in a zone between the sacred and the profane” (Hyers 1969a, 23). As such, ritual levity is neither wholly sacred nor simply profane but “sacrafane,” in that it exhibits both sacred and profane traits.<sup>3</sup> Thus it is the liminal character of ritual and the freedom inherent in liminality that provide the space and stimulus for creative imagination, empowering ritual performers to engage in what ordinarily might be considered “improper behavior.” Ritual liminality allows participants to step out of the normal order (divine or human) to challenge, defy, invert, or subvert established conventions, ritual etiquette, and religious protocol, to poke fun at social and religious categories, distinctions, and cultural norms, and to “play” with gods and sacred realities with certain temporary impunity. Levity, therefore, is neither an anomaly nor an aberration but an essential, intrinsic part of ritual that serves multiple—both tangible and intangible—functions.<sup>4</sup>

If “play” is intrinsic to ritual, as several ritual theorists have persuasively argued, then what considerations—religious and otherwise—lead religious practitioners to engage in ritual levity and play? More specifically, what benefits do participants hope to reap by periodic and prescribed excursions into ritual playfulness? And what social role

does ritual levity serve for the average religious practitioner? At the systemic level, what clues does levity reveal about the core values, aspirations, hopes, and traditions of the community sponsoring such play? Quite clearly, religious practitioners resort to levity and play not simply for temporary comic relief but also for the social, religious, and psychological dividends they yield. As a multivalent and polyvalent category, evoking a spectrum of meanings and significances for different constituencies in different settings, ritual levity's function for practitioners will depend on the individual and collective contexts. For example, in a particular instance, social aims might be of foremost importance, while in another instance, psychological and religious considerations might be of greater consequence. While sociologists, psychologists, and pastoral counselors have highlighted the social, psychological, and cathartic advantages of play, historians of religions who acknowledge these social and psychological dimensions will add to them potential religious and transcendental benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Chief among the socioreligious values of ritual levity is the context and platform—both structured and informal—it provides to find relief, albeit temporary, from inbuilt conventions. While ritual levity often softens distinctions and hierarchies among humans, it can narrow the divide between human and divine realms as well. Highlighting the socioreligious function of religious levity, Gilhus thus observes: "In a religious system, one of the functions of the ludicrous is to raise doubt about the hierarchic order of the cosmology, blur the relation between its elements, and bring about the collapse of the established order . . . the ludicrous intervenes in the interaction between cosmos and chaos, to the point that it allows chaos to get the upper hand. The ludicrous creates a chaos which is creative, but short-lived, and whose possibilities are never realized in a new world-order. The ludicrous chaos . . . can be experienced as laughable. . . . The ludicrous appears in myths and rituals, both verbally and non-verbally" (Gilhus 1991, 258). As readers make their way through the various chapters in this book, they will find that Gilhus's observations mostly ring true, yet as some chapters demonstrate, ritual levity in South Asian religious contexts indeed can provide lasting challenges to the earthly and cosmic order, affecting hierarchies within and outside the ritual context.

In spite of these exceptions, we find that the majority of case studies here demonstrate how ritual levity often plays with and indeed defies established religious beliefs and social conventions, yet it does not radically or permanently displace them. Such temporary playful defiance can in fact help reinforce and restore the value and signifi-

cance of the status quo. It is this restorative quality implicit in ritual play that ensures not only its repeated occurrence in institutionally sanctioned arenas but also elicits institutional endorsement for such play. However, the temporary relief ritual levity produces is obviously not its sole value or function.

Also of interest are the ways in which levity and play respond to specifically transcendent concerns. In *Redeeming Laughter*, Peter Berger goes to some length to highlight this dimension that, although involving abstraction, invokes a function of levity that has more permanent religious and therapeutic implications. He maintains:

The comic transcends the reality of ordinary, everyday existence; it posits, however temporarily, a different reality in which the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended. This is, as it were, transcendence in a lower key; it does not in itself have any necessary religious implications. But . . . certain manifestations of the comic suggest that this other reality has redeeming qualities that are not temporary at all, but rather that points to that other world that has always been the object of the religious attitude. In ordinary parlance one speaks of "redeeming laughter." Any joke can provoke such laughter, and it can be redeeming in the sense of making life easier to bear, at least briefly. In the perspective of religious faith, though, there is in this transitory experience an intuition, a signal of true redemption, that is, of a world that has been made whole and in which the miseries of the human condition have been abolished. . . . The experience of the comic presents a world without pain. . . . It is, above all, an abstraction from the tragic dimension of human existence. (Berger 1997, 205, 210)

### Levity in South Asian Religions

Much has been said and written about the rich philosophical, theological, mystical, and mythological traditions of various South Asian religions. Supplementing this scholarly body of work are more recent ethnographically based writings, published primarily in the second half of the twentieth century, on lived and grassroots religious practices. These works have provided important balance to the textual and classical focus that has enriched South Asian scholarship for

decades, if not centuries. Despite the wealth of available literature on South Asian religious traditions—both classical and contemporary ethnographical—the ludic dimensions of religious practices seen from the standpoint of human agents have remained largely overlooked. Almost all available literature on the subject focuses on play, tricks, and escapades instigated by divine entities, collectively termed “*lila*,” enacted for didactic purposes on behalf of humanity (Siegel 1987). Even when *lila* enlists human actors as, for example, in Ramlila, a popular devotional performance tradition in north India in which human devotees reenact, recreate, and retell the deeds and play of the Hindu god Rama, these are essentially plays in the sense of drama and artistic performances—not in the sense of playfulness or levity.

This book therefore marks an intentional departure from the usual focus on divinity-centered play, or what ritual theorist Jonathan Z. Smith refers to in the concluding chapter as the “cosmologized and ontologized notion of *lila* as an explanatory principle” within traditional South Asian scholarship. If *lila* is “top-down humor,” then the ritual levity our contributors explore here might be described as “bottom-up humor” or “grassroots humor,” in which human devotees “play with” established norms, institutions, and figures—both religious and secular. Apart from providing an outlet for transgressive experiments, these grassroots ludic expressions provide valuable clues to participants’ earthly and existential concerns and relationships and to the ambiguities of devotion and religious expression. This grassroots levity, like the practice of making and fulfilling vows (Raj and Harman 2006, 1–13), is a common ritual thread running throughout all the major religious traditions of South Asia, providing a spacious window from which to view worlds of human contingency and belief.

Although this book focuses on human expressions of ritual levity, the gods and sacred realities are not merely passive or silent spectators, nor are they simply the butt of jokes. Deities frequently emerge as active participants in ritual levity, joining their human devotees in “playing with” the inadequacy of conventional norms and institutions. In this sense, ritual play in South Asia has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Indeed, religious practitioners rely on and resort to ritual levity and play—investing much individual and collective energy, emotion, and resources in them—because, as we established earlier, ritual provides one of the most potent outlets for “play,” offering a tangible means for negotiating with these revered sacred figures, realities, institutions, and beliefs.

How might we classify the various ludic expressions prominent in South Asian ritual practices? Given the inherent diversity of South



Asian religious traditions and of their ritual performances, developing a typology of South Asian ritual levity is a daunting task. Nevertheless, based on our analysis of discernible common ludic threads and patterns woven throughout the diverse traditions represented here, we propose a working “functional” (pun intended) typology encompassing six basic types. Before doing so, however, we must offer the following three caveats. First, although each type of ritual levity highlights a distinctive trait or feature, it is not mutually exclusive. For example, transgressive levity that challenges an existing social or religious order often contains, as Turner has pointed out, restorative value that simultaneously works to cement order and convention. Our second caveat is that the proposed functional types apply to ritual participants and not to outsiders viewing the ritual for whom the same playful instance might have a very different—as in ludicrous or debasing—significance. Third, the effects of all categories can either be temporary or permanent, to different degrees.

The six basic types of ritual levity we propose are (1) *vertical levity*, which bridges the gulf between human and divine realms and establishes intimacy between the two, (2) *horizontal levity*, which softens social divides among humans and enhances human relationships and intimacy, (3) *transgressive levity*, which challenges established conventions, hierarchies, and institutions, often through role reversals, (4) *restorative levity*, which restores order, hierarchy, and conventional distinctions, (5) *redemptive levity*, which provides a glimpse into the meta or transcendent dimension of existence and bridges both vertical and horizontal distinctions and hierarchies, and (6) *competitive levity*, which is designed to edge out competition and display contests (religious, professional, and ritual) between rival participants within a religious group or between competing, if not conflicting, traditions. This type of levity also helps mark and reinforce boundaries.

## The Book

Drawing primarily on original ethnographic research, contributors to this book offer a panoply of playful ritual expressions, displaying the spectrum of functional types. The chapters furthermore represent all of the major religious traditions practiced in South Asia—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist—and provide a generous view into the various occasions and venues that engage levity within ritual.

The most widely represented occasion for ritual levity in this book is the annual festival, a ritual context most likely to involve actors

and audience members from multiple religious groups. North Indian festivals include A. Whitney Sanford's description of a raucous Holi celebration in Braj and Rachel McDermott's exploration of humor and spectacle at Kolkata's Durga Puja. In Tamil Nadu William Harman investigates multilayered, multicomunal joking at a traveling festival in Madurai and Selva Raj finds teasing and laughter as well as serious play at a Catholic festival in rural Arulanandapuram. Dealing with somewhat less public terrain are the two chapters exploring levity and joking at ritual gatherings performed exclusively by women: Tracy Pintchman investigates playful humor at an annual ritual performance honoring Krishna and Tulasi in Benaras, and Amy Bard analyzes women's laughter at the Shia Muslim Muharram festival in Pakistan and India. Unearthing play at a women's life-cycle rite, Liz Wilson explores Newari "mock" marriages in Nepal. Finally, three chapters focus more generally on laughter and playfulness in relation to ritual settings: Mathew Schmalz describes the religious play of a Catholic charismatic healer in Delhi, Jonathan Walters reflects on ritual levity in the context of Buddhist Sri Lankan healing practices, and Corinne Dempsey and Sudharshan Durayappah consider rambunctious playfulness at a diaspora Hindu temple in Upstate New York.

To optimize analytical potential, chapters in this volume allow the topic of investigation to speak for itself, in all of its diversity and complexity. In other words, contributors do not frame the issue of levity—or language describing levity—in any particular way except from within the context of ritual performance. Terms commonly used throughout this book, such as levity, play, and laughter, thus derive shades of meaning that shift depending on the context and perspective. In some cases, notions of levity, play, and laughter can accrue very different, if not opposite, values, depending on circumstances or viewpoints.

For example, many of the chapters demonstrate the positive aspects of what we have termed horizontal and vertical levity—practices that invite and welcome intimacy among human participants and between humans and divinity. Theologically speaking, levity, connoting lightness and lightheartedness, can elicit rather straightforward, positive associations as seen in Walters's and Schmalz's respective descriptions of Sri Lankan Buddhist and Catholic charismatic healers. They note how, in similar ways, religious joy or playfulness represent religious aims of transformation and redemption; lightness and levity emerge when released from the weight of worldly entrapments or sin. This is not to say that lightness, within a religious context, is trouble free, as the risk of trivializing religion through levity consistently seems to loom.

McDermott discovers how the Kolkata Durga Puja's incongruous—and, therefore, to some, humorous—display of the Goddess in everything from computers to the Titanic ship raises theological concerns for a vocal minority who consider such spectacle to border on the irreverent. Tracy Pintchman notes how her male research assistant deemed women's ritual levity to be frivolous, interpreting women's laughter as reflecting a lack of commitment to serious ritual work. Pintchman argues that raucous joking in the ritual context is far more complex and far from trivializing for the women themselves. In the end, none of the chapters argues that laughter, for true devotees, diminishes ritual's serious intent. Moreover, levity never manages to belittle divinity. Demonstrated by Sanford's portrayal of Balarama's raucous proclivities, Harman's discussion of Shiva's pranks, or Walter's description of gods who outlandishly possess healers, divinity may be lighthearted but never trivial. Divine levity enacted through ritual and ritual narrative is most often deliberate, with good cause, and sometimes performed at humanity's well-deserved expense. Although gods and goddesses may seem funny, the joke, in the end, is not on them.

A term with multiple, and sometimes boldly contrasting, implications in this collection is "play." Depending on the context, ritual play can refer to a range of activities, from spontaneous revelry to highly scripted performances; it includes "make-believe" play-acting and fiercely competitive play that produces winners and losers. Play can also connote movement or artistic license available within ritual that confounds convention. Representing spontaneous play that defies normative social and religious prescription—described earlier as transgressive levity—is Sanford's vivid description of Holi participants engaging in activities not dreamed of outside of festival time, Dempsey and Durayappah's recounting of instances when liquid ritual materials become grist for nonscripted messy fun, and Raj's description of a ritual on church grounds in which spontaneous teasing breaks out among women at the expense of men. In regular defiance of verbal scripting, charismatic glossolalia, as described by Schmalz, emerges as playful, childlike babble with serious religious implications. Highly orchestrated performance, on the other hand, also can be central to a range of ritual play. Ritual play in this mode is somewhat similar to theatre play, yet it distinguishes itself most fundamentally due to divinity's explicit inclusion as a member and, in some instances, as an active participant. Throughout this book, gods and goddesses are invoked or themselves perform ritual play through possession rites, divine imagery, ritual speech, choreographed movement, and festival fanfare. As Pintchman's and McDermott's chapters demonstrate,

divinity can be made present and engaged, respectively, through simple handcrafted mud figurines or in extraordinary public display.

Ritual events that bring us closest to theater play-acting include a practice that takes place at a Tamil Catholic church, described by Raj, in which lay authorities auction babies to the highest bidder who, everyone knows, always ends up being the parents. The event is more than theater, however, due to the participation of St. Anne, who has blessed the previously childless couple with the child. The ritual encounter is thus ultimately not play-acting but ensures the fulfillment of a promise in return for the saint's favor. Likewise, the Nepalese Newar *ihī* ceremony that enacts a wedding between young girls and a divine spouse is, as described by Wilson, much more than theater acting due to its lasting consequences. Although the "play" of the ceremony for ritual participants involves subtle nuances of levity—witnessed by warmhearted joking to this effect—a sense of serious performance emerges, as Wilson sees it, through the ritual vocabulary of normative wedding rites. On the other end of the play spectrum, distinct from spontaneous unscripted play and theatrical play-acting, is that which we characterized earlier as competitive levity. Herein emerges the decidedly serious side of ritual play, performed with considerable stakes for winners and losers. As demonstrated by the exquisite Durga pandals described by McDermott, playful charismatic healers recounted by Schmalz, and Shiah women's laughter chronicled by Bard, the point of play for some individuals or groups is to distinguish themselves as different from—and better than—other players.

As witnessed by the array of examples in this book, laughter within ritual can build or break human connections and community, depending on the arena and tenor in which ritual levity gets played out. Laughter can enhance or create cooperation among and between groups, or it can deepen division and difference. Particularly in the ritual context that, by nature, resonates with meaning and emotion, laughter can be reassuring in transformative ways, disrupting powerful hierarchies and inviting otherwise impossible inclusivity. While offering a formidable means for connection and the mending of severed ties, laughter in its derisive and divisive modes can sever and break ties as well. This volume as a whole reminds us that while accounts of levity and play often evoke notions of light and lightheartedness, their dark and demeaning side, particularly in socially and theologically loaded ritual settings, must not be ignored. The following chapters take into account the many points along the spectrum, exploring the ritual play of light and dark humor as well as the nuanced shades of grey.

We have divided the chapters in this book into three parts having to do with three main characteristics of levity. Chapters in part 1 explore ritual levity that challenges or reverses—temporarily or permanently—social and religious norms. Part 2 views humor and playfulness ritually expressed by deities themselves, reflected in the practices and perspectives of their devotees, and resulting in greater and lesser degrees of human-divine intimacy and communal cohesion. Part 3 describes ritual levity as providing a platform for playful competition and, in some cases, dissension between competing religious, sectarian, or secular groups. Needless to say, although the three views of levity organizing this book reflect resonant and repeating themes, they do not exhaust available types of ritual levity. Moreover, instances of laughter described in the chapters themselves are always more complex than indicated by the part's title. The "play" or movement within ritual levity is not something one can or would want to neatly pin down; yet for the sake of a modest sense of direction, we must start somewhere.

The book's first part, "Laughing Inside Out: Playful Breaks with Convention," is led by Raj's chapter that features two Tamil Catholic rituals that he labels "Men Who Cook" and "the Baby Auction." Here he highlights how these highly scripted performances—and the non-scripted humor intrinsic to them—help demonstrate the absurdity of gender hierarchies and alleviate the usual distance between the resident saint and her human devotees. Viewed as a totality, these festival rituals offer a moment of comic relief to a community that experiences year-round hardship and isolation; they bind past and present members and allow the saint access to involve herself in human affairs. Sanford's "Don't Take It Badly, It's Holi: Ritual Levity in Balarama's Holi" likewise demonstrates how the Braj celebration—performed with particular gusto compared to other regional Holi events—offers an annual opportunity for participants to whisk away gender and caste hierarchies through raucous playfulness. Sanford argues that this suspension of social comportment helps renew and maintain everyday familial and social bonds as well as affirm important ties between the agricultural cycle and community health. Giving added contour to the event's transgressive nature is the way participants "play" Holi in the spirit of the resident deity, Balarama, whose anti-authoritarian irreverence they celebrate during this festival.

Wilson's exploration of the *thi* wedding ceremony in "Playing the Married Lady: Primary Marriage among the Newars of Nepal" focuses on how this ritual event, often amid good-natured teasing, allows young girls to defy normative wedding tradition by maintaining and

strengthening ties to their natal family. These ties are further enforced after the girls undergo their “secondary” marriage to a human male later in life. The *ihī* ceremony, forever ensuring that the girl will remain an auspicious married woman, even after her human husband passes away, effectively plays with or “mocks” traditional expectations for married and widowed women. Dempsey and Durayappah’s chapter, “The ‘Artful Trick’: Challenging Convention through Play in Upstate New York,” focuses on the prominent theme of laughter and fun that permeates ritual interactions at a Hindu diaspora temple. They argue that the temple’s challenge to caste and gender convention, also a pervasive theme, is further enhanced and supported by ritual levity that binds members to one another as well as to divinity. They juxtapose insider playfulness with the nervous laughter of critical outsiders who might view the temple’s unconventional ritual performances as ludicrous and perhaps even dangerous. Temple practitioners who revel in access to divine power—due to their unique ritual approach—invariably seem to get the last laugh.

Part 2, “Gods and Humans at Play: Religious Humor and Divine Intimacy,” investigates instances in which deities themselves are portrayed as playful or humorous, often inspiring reciprocal playfulness among their devotees in the form of ritual levity. We begin this part with “Friendship, Levity, and Love in a Hindu Women’s Ritual Tradition,” in which Pintchman describes the Benaras Kartik *puja* performed by women whose laughter, lighthearted antics, and occasional bawdy humor reflect the playful behavior they admire in their god Krishna. Pintchman notes how Krishna’s humorous escapades, representing sacred freedom and play existing outside of ordinary time, provide him with a means for forging intimacy with his devoted *gopi* cowherd-esses who live and play in his midst. Devotion to Krishna furthermore draws this community of women to one another in loving friendship. Women who together perform Kartik *puja* become, like Krishna’s *gopis*, bonded as playful, loving devotees and friends, sharing jokes that are not simply a fringe benefit of ritual performance but are indispensable to it. Harman’s chapter, “Laughing until It Hurts . . . Someone Else: The Pain of a Ritual Joke,” discusses ritual levity enacted during Vishnu’s Journey Festival to Madurai, in which devotees reenact his travels to his sister Minakshi’s wedding to Lord Shiva. Alas, he arrives too late and, according to tradition, the snubbed Vishnu takes refuge for a night with a Muslim courtesan. Harman notes how this ritual detail evokes appreciative laughter from Hindus, while Muslims often attempt to ignore it. Festival tradition thus portrays Muslims in a negative light and Vishnu in an only slightly better one. Yet Harman notes how

Shiva, the dominant deity in the region, nonetheless chooses to display self-deprecating behavior—pulling gags or pranks to get devotees to pay attention—in narrative traditions. When viewing these narrative and ritualized festival accounts in light of the social and religious hierarchies they reflect, one can see that laughter is the domain of the dominant, often at the expense of others. Walters, in “Gods’ Play and the Buddha’s Way: Varieties of Ritual Levity in Contemporary Sinhala Practice,” describes the two strands of religiosity engaged by Sinhala Buddhists, involving what he calls a pre-Buddhist Theistic layer and a more conventional Buddhist layer. Based on interviews with Sinhala Buddhist healers, Walters argues that while levity plays a crucial role in the Theistic layer, it is nearly absent in the Buddhist layer. In the Theistic realm, gods are understood to tease and joke when enacting the “play” of possession; they furthermore expect and receive tangible human offerings for their own sense of entertainment and fun. The Buddhist layer, reflecting the fact that the Buddha, unlike the gods, rises above human needs, emphasizes moral discipline and asceticism that, according to strict monastic codes, strictly eschew the trappings and varieties of ritual levity.

Chapters featured in part 3, “Playing to Win: Edging Out the Competition,” lead us to consider instances when ritual levity helps establish religious, social, or political supremacy over opponents. In some cases the competition plays by slightly different rules but ultimately takes part in the same game. In other instances ritual play and laughter distinguish and differentiate between those who play from those who do not, the latter of whom often provide the butt of the joke. McDermott’s “Playing with Durga in Bengal,” recounting the six-day Durga Puja in Kolkata, relates the gaiety and carnivalesque atmosphere that prevails throughout this Bengali megafestival. Elaborately displayed throughout the region are Durga’s images, crafted in *pandal* “homes” and designed to articulate carefully considered themes such as current political events, famous people, and recent movie sets. Amid the nostalgia and a certain level of devotion characterizing the event, the predominant mood surrounding the city’s omnipresent and sometimes outrageous display of the goddess is the spectacle of artistic, social, and political competition. McDermott argues that while outsiders might be tempted to read theological meaning into the dizzying array of Durga *pandals*, it is, for those most deeply invested, all about notoriety and winning. Bard, in “Turning Karbala Inside Out: Humor and Ritual Critique in South Asian Muharram Rites,” investigates laughter surrounding all-women’s *majlis*, or mourning assemblies, during the Sh’i Muslim rite of Muharram. In such instances, women

poke fun at female lay preachers as a form of critique. Critical laughter ranges from inappropriate giggles during the event itself, aimed at incongruous regional or outdated styles, to jokes outside of the ritual context at the expense of someone whose arrogant or “masculine” delivery strikes listeners as comically odd. The celebration that concludes Muharram, ending this somber period on a note of levity, has an even sharper edge. Disdained by many Shiahhs for a variety of reasons, the event raucously reenacts the death of Sunni caliph Umar and, as such, provides potential fodder for sectarian unrest. Viewing Muharram levity as a whole, Bard observes that laughter at difference and incongruity can devolve into intolerance. Schmalz’s “A Catholic Charismatic Healer at Play in North India” concludes this part by describing the life, theology, and practices of Jude, a North Indian Catholic charismatic healer, originally from Kerala. Focusing on Jude’s ideologies and actions, Schmalz characterizes the charismatic movement as one that revels in play—from the freedom of glossolalia as a source for divine messages to the joy of healing that incarnates what it means to be redeemed. Schmalz suggests that the key to the charismatic movement is to play through life, in spite of its troubles, into hope and beyond hope. Jude’s success as a healer is reliant not only on the fact that he plays the charismatic life and ideology well, but that he is recognized by his clientele as one who plays better than the competition.

## Notes

1. Van Gennep (1960) identified *limen* as the crucial second phase in the tripartite structure he outlined for all rites of passage.

2. Turner believes that while play continues to be a constitutive element of ritual in what he calls Oriental religions, such as Hinduism, Taoism, Tantrism, and Buddhism, industrialization has displaced or eliminated this element of play in the religions of the book, giving birth to new forms and forums for play such as theater. He writes: “It would seem that with industrialization, urbanization, spreading literacy, labor migration, specialization, professionalization, [and] bureaucracy, the division of the leisure sphere from the work sphere is the firm’s clock; the former integrity of the orchestrated ritual *gestalt* that once constituted ritual has burst open, and many specialized performative genres have been born from the death of that mighty *opus deorum hominumque*. These genres of industrial leisure would include theater, ballet, opera, film, the novel . . . rock music, carnivals, processions, folk drama, major sports events, and dozens more” (Turner 1982, 86).

3. Selva Raj (playfully) coined this term to illustrate the coexistence and fusion of sacred and profane characteristics of ritual levity.



4. Particularly in small-scale and traditional societies, periodic excursions and engagement in ritual play can be deemed essential for religious vitality, communal well-being, and social cohesion. Ritual thus becomes a symbolic vehicle to help level, however temporarily, vertical and horizontal barriers and boundaries. As Walsh observes, it is “a great leveler of barriers between man and man, and between man and God” (Walsh 1969, 235), a theme richly illustrated by several chapters in this volume. This theme is further corroborated by Lorna Rhodes (1983) in her analysis of the Sri Lankan exorcist ritual. In this particular ritual, participants poke fun at the Buddhist practice of “giving” (dana), which ordinarily entails deferential treatment of monks who receive regular gifts from the laity. However, during the exorcist ritual, the monks are referred to with disrespect, if not contempt. Rhodes discerns in this deliberate deed “the themes of reluctance to give, the absurdity of the body, and the mocking of hierarchy” (Rhodes 1983, 980).

5. On the psychological benefits of comedy, levity, and humor, see Capps (2002, 2006a) and Berger (1997). In a recent essay (2006a, 393–411), Capps maintains that levity helps negotiate and moderate stress. In the final pages of this essay, he writes: “Humor may help a person cope with negative life experiences. . . . [Humor] seems to mitigate anxieties relating to one’s loss of control or inability to determine what happens” (409). In an earlier work, *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* (2002), Capps proposes that people have two primary ways of being religious—through a religion of honor and a religion of hope. And because these two modes of religion do not fully satisfy humanity, he argues that we have developed a third religion, “the religion of humor” which, in his view, is the greatest of the three.

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