

Book review

Pakzad, Soroush. (2012). *Craposyncrasies*. H&S Media.

Devil's Weblog: Satirising Religion in a Totalitarian Theocracy

Soroush Pakzad's *Craposyncrasies* is a collection of satiric pieces published in 2012 by H&S Media Ltd. Its Iranian author has decided to use a penname to secure his (I assume, as the penname is a male one!) anonymity in order to avoid penal consequences. The book consists of rather short chapters, previously published online as blog posts and now collected in a single volume. Alongside its scathing political criticism, *Craposyncrasies* mainly consists of religious satire, targeting not only different faiths, but also the essence of metaphysical conceptualisations and beliefs.

The volume does not spare any religious narrative: God, angels and their domestic lives, Creation, The Fall, Cain's "suicide note", Prophets, their miracles and their relationships to God, Noah and the Flood, Jacob and Joseph, Moses, and the Holy Trinity. Still, the criticism is limited to Semitic religions, while Islamic sacred figures are mostly spared. The object of satire, nonetheless, is not only metaphysics, but rather how human beings conceptualise transcendental entities and how they conceive of their relationship with them. One piece, for instance, through a brilliant parody of Persian mystical literature, satirises how human beings define their rapport to a supernatural, omnipotent Being by begging for petty favours (p. 23). In a similar vein, the book sometimes links religious satire with political satire, as the backdrop of its original production and reception is a totalitarian theocracy where religion determines legislative, judicial and administrative structures. Several pieces, for example, riff on the controversies, rallies and violence that ensued from the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election (pp. 24, 25, 71, 79-80, 103-105, 106-109, 138-142).

But the scope of satire is not merely limited to religion, metaphysics and politics; many other topics, including philosophical and existential questions, are also raised. These include death (pp. 77-78), existential queries (p. 13), egoism (pp. 37-38), literary and mythological recreations (pp. 14, 40, 72, 113, 114), poets (p. 58), academic conventions (pp. 44-46), and hermeneutics (pp. 55-57). In an ethically revisionist chapter, for instance, Pakzad subverts the religious teaching that postulates that human beings are born pure (akin to the notion of *tabula rasa*) in the Islamic tradition (rather than the Christian obsession with the Original Sin). In an existential turn, his revisionary revelation maintains that human beings are totally evil, and that every one of their good deeds erases a mark from their innate blackness (p. 20). Reversing ethical traditions that can also be traced to religious teachings is a way of criticising the idea that ethics should be necessarily bound to religion, and that the exclusion of one should inevitably lead to the exclusion of the other (pp. 20-21).

Pakzad employs a variety of techniques to create his satire. He puts old religious narratives into incongruous modern situations, where prophets use telephones, and God and angels discuss cyberspace and Information Technology. The book features several dramatic monologues in the form of phone conversations, as well as parodies of forms like multiple-choice examinations. Subversive recreations of old narratives constitute a large part of satiric adaptations and appropriations of widely known stories. Although some of the techniques and themes of *Craposyncrasies* might seem universal, a number of chapters also require background and contextual information for full appreciation, as satire frequently does. These might range from political and social to religious and eschatological information. Many chapters presume an acquaintance with the Iranian political scene and politicians, and almost all require a basic acquaintance with different faiths and religious teachings.

Rather than taking populist attitudes to appeal to a larger audience, the book presumes a certain level of intellectual elitism. In spite of that, there is a great diversity of comments posted on the discontinued blog, ranging from predictions of a backlash to apologies. All in all, the book was mostly well received. Roya Sadr (2015: n.p.), a researcher on Persian satire, lauds the work:

Prior to Doozakhrafat [i.e. the Persian title of the book], Persian satirical works that target sacred themes were charged with hostility and hatred (see for example Zabih Mansur's "Me'raj-Nameh" and "Gand-e Badavard" and Sadeq Hedayat's "Tup-e Morvari"); and therefore, Doozakhrafat is unique in this regard and unparalleled in Persian literature.

Despite its innovative approach, one question has troubled me as an avid reader of this volume: What function is it supposed to perform and how much has it achieved? Does it revise conceptualisations about metaphysics and advocate emancipatory and alternative outlooks? Or, does it simply stir aversion in its unsympathetic audience and indifference in the sympathetic reader, who might prefer more philosophical and/or scientific approaches (such as those found in works by Russell, Topitsch, Dawkins and Ibn Warraq) over a humorous and presumably non-serious take? Sadr (2015) contends that "[t]he author aims to criticise anthropomorphic perceptions of the divine by revealing how the limited human fantasies and imagery mediate and construct our understanding of god and religion". Yet, Pakzad tends to attribute metaphysical narratives to psychological disorders and seems to be obsessed with sin and death. This hardly offers an alternative perspective to "anthropomorphic perceptions of the divine".

Risking accusations of falling into the trap of intentional fallacy, I think it is worth quoting Pakzad on how he conceives of his own mission at length from our personal correspondence. He wrote to me:

My criticism is targeted at how theological ontologies are perceived by human subjects, while Mr. Dawkins seems to criticise religion as an entity outside human perceptions. The aim of Mr. Dawkin's [sic] work is to discredit metaphysics, while my criticism aims to further complicate it (Pakzad, personal correspondence).

Similar to Sadr's (2015) understanding, he claims that the target of his satire is not faith or metaphysics but the reductive approach that people take towards them. He added:

I think I can agree more with Wittgenstein's position in *tractatus*¹ [sic], where he suggests that on matters of metaphysics one should remain silent, as if our mode of thought through language is insufficient to absorb the complexities of supernatural phenomena. In general, I should say that personally I believe in a transcendent reality beyond our material world, and thus my criticism of religion would make more sense if it is located not within the literature of atheism, but next to the works of reformers and those who seek alternative metaphysical narratives. To me, the fact that our limited and narrow anthropomorphic perceptions inevitably shape how we see the divine is inherently funny. This social construction of the divine as a bureaucratic organisation with a hierarchical structure and the administrative mindset that we as human subjects project onto the divine is not only tragically humorous but also hurts sophisticated theological thought (Pakzad personal correspondence).

This can better locate *Craposyncrasies* in the rich heritage of Persian satire. Besides the humour encrypted in the most serious of all works in this tradition, i.e. the Quran (see Marzolph 2002; Tamer 2014: 56-58), mystical scepticism—which might sound like a paradox—and even apostasy can be traced back to Persian writers like Khayyam and Hafiz, who were disappointed at or even frustrated with institutional religion. Alongside some fans and apologists, Pakzad claims that his book is not a criticism of religion, but of its false conceptualisations and practices. This is true for some of the chapters. In one example, when a character appeals to the heavens, he declines to beseech the Almighty and insists on imploring Hussein, a Shiite Imam, instead (p. 41). Elsewhere, however, Pakzad attributes the concoction of religion to Satan, rather than God, as a measure that Satan took to secure his own rule (pp. 28-33). This is subversive rather than revisionary: although Pakzad denies the divinity of God and sees religion as a mere attempt by Satan to consolidate his dominion that has gone out of hand after it was further developed as superstition by people, the book still attributes religion to a metaphysical being, namely Satan. And Satan is now confessing his sins to a priest, regretting that he has traded people's rationality for religion and now, lamenting his wrongdoing, he intends to atone for it by restoring judiciousness (also see pp. 234-237 for another instance of the reversal of the God/Satan bipolarity).

Yet another question arises with regard to the postmodern gestures that sometimes resurface through the form and content of the book. As postmodernism is frequently criticised for its political passivism, one might be doubtful about how far a postmodern take on religion and politics in a totalitarian theocracy can be effective toward political and ethical revision and/or subversion. In fact, this can explain why online access to this book is not limited in Iran, while much more benign content is strictly filtered.

Since it challenges God's omnipotence on several occasions, I doubt if *Craposyncrasies* can be considered as a merely revisionary, rather than a subversive, act. In its subversive recalcitrance, the persona at several instances sounds like a Byronic hero or a Nietzschean *Übermensch*. At the same time, in its attempt to persuade people to substitute rationality for religion as an inevitable component of free will, the book seems to promote the neoclassic values of freedom and enlightenment. Instead of dispensing with metaphysics and replacing logic and empiricism, however, it only eliminates the positive side of metaphysical bipolarity and promotes the evil side in its existential and absurd, dark humour. The world of *Craposyncrasies*, in other

¹ See Wittgenstein (2001).

words, features a pathetic and incompetent Deity and a dominant Evil force instead of the traditionally benevolent, wise and omnipotent God.

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