



The Risk[★] of Freedom briefing

Joking apart

Should we be allowed to laugh at anything and everything? Or are there topics where laughter is taboo? Is the Muslim reaction to the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad a legitimate protest against sacrilege or an over-reaction to cartoons that were themselves legitimate protests against sacrilege: the sacrilege of mass murder carried out in the Prophet's name? Those are tough questions, and heated ones.

It is not only in the sphere of religious difference that humour is controversial. The American experience suggests that humour can become controversial in virtually any sphere where people are disposed to think themselves judged or

a risk-averse society is also a joke-free zone

discriminated against. The old tradition of the ethnic joke has been jeopardized by the tendency to see racism wherever there are stereotypes; the equally old tradition of flirtatious banter has been jeopardized by the tendency to discover 'sexual harassment' whenever someone puts his hormones on display. Joking references to another person's accent, lifestyle or tastes are increasingly regarded as provocative, and to joke about size, diet and obesity is to step on a tightrope above a censorious abyss.

We seem to be forgetting that, in its primary form, humour is always kindly meant, and that unkind jokes are precisely failures as jokes, since they elicit only a sneer and never full-hearted laughter. As Francis Buckley reminds us, laughter aims to include, not to exclude. Humour with a butt also has a social function, which is not to deny difference but to reconcile us to it — to show the varieties of human life as comprehensible, amenable and forgivable. The enemy of humour is the puritan, who cannot accept difference in any form. Those who differ from his prescribed norms and habits are anathema, and he looks on them either with revulsion or with pity. The puritan refuses to be the butt of jokes, because he is unable to make them.

There are two sources of puritanism in the modern world. The first is the

fanatical belief system which protects every dogma, every icon and every custom from questioning. Islam has a marked tendency in this direction though, as Safiye Cemek reminds us, it also has its own way of laughing at the fanatics.

The second source of puritanism is precisely the opposite: the complete lack of certainty and ideals in anything and everything, which leads people to adopt an inviolable speech-code forbidding all mention of difference. This is surely what we witness in the American experience, and in the growing dangers experienced by the hearty and the cheerful, as they joke and wink their way about the workplace.

As Christie Davies has reminded us in his great work on the topic (see inside and publications), ethnic humour is not an offence, but an attempt to accommodate the otherness of other groups, and to bestow on them the permission to be other than me. Laughter is a form of acceptance, and by laughing at a stereotype I laugh with the individual whom it caricatures. Hence, as Agnieszka Kolakowska argues, much ethnic humour (Jewish especially) is also a self-satire, a reminder to the group not to take itself too seriously, and above all not to give offence.

It is not only words that offend the puritans. Pictures too can raise their censorious hackles. The cartoons of the Prophet offended not because it is forbidden to portray the Prophet — the Koran says no such thing, and the hadith normally cited has been ignored throughout the history of Islam. The cartoons offended because what they presented was no laughing matter: namely the Prophet endorsing the crimes committed in his name. Does he endorse them or doesn't he? Muslims need to ask this question, and it is better not to make light of it, for fear that Muslims will respond as they have done to date, by taking it too seriously.

Nothing illustrates the interconnection between risk and freedom more vividly than humour. Only free beings laugh, and all laughter involves a risk. There is no such thing as risk-free humour, and a risk-averse society is also a joke-free zone. When humourless censors prowl the world, hoping to catch us red-handed or red-tongued in a crime of laughter, it is important to laugh more loudly, for freedom's sake.

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Our Theme

Humour

Inside

Humour and amity

Christie Davies

A mark of civilization

Agnieszka Kolakowska

The making of the cartoon

Islam and humour

Back cover

Laughing matters

F.H. Buckley

Tall Turkish tales

Safiye Cemek

Publications websites

on-line at:
www.riskoffreedom.com

Cartoons

In 1843 in the early years of *Punch*, the word 'cartoon' was introduced into the English Language in the modern sense of a humorous drawing. The usage arose from a competition to supply the new Houses of Parliament with frescoes illustrating scenes from English history. The large rough designs, or 'cartoons' (in the original sense used in fresco painting) were exhibited. The editor of *Punch* Mark Lemon seized the opportunity to publish his own 'cartoons', the first of which was a biting satire by John leech which bore Lemon's legend 'The poor ask for bread , and the philanthropy of the state accords an exhibition.' The new meaning stuck, and Leech is remembered as the first cartoonist in the modern sense.

Caricatura and Caricature

In 1710, Sarah Duchess of Marlborough, ousted from Royal favour by a rival, wrote to the wit Bubb Doddington: 'Young man, you come from Italy. They tell me of a new invention there called caricatura drawing. Can you find me somebody that will make me a caricature of Lady Masham, describing her covered with many sores and ulcers, that I may send to the Queen to give her a slight idea of her favourite.' This quotation provides one of the first descriptions of the art form in England where it was to become so popular. It is however worth recording a 17th century definition on the subject 'Is not the caricaturist's task exactly the same as the artist's?' Both see the lasting truth beneath the surface of mere outward appearance. Both try to help nature accomplish its plan. The one may strive to visualise the perfect form and to realise it in his work, the other to grasp the perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of personality. A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself.

Summary by kind permission of the Cartoon Museum, London, words by Lionel Lambourne, from '*The Art of Laughter*'.
<http://www.cartooncentre.com/>

Punch

Punch, the magazine of humour and satire, ran from 1841 until its closure in 2002. A very British institution with an international reputation for its witty and irreverent take on the world, it published the work of some of the greatest comic writers (Thackeray, P.G. Wodehouse and P.J. O'Rourke among others) and gave us the cartoon as we know it today. Its political cartoons swayed governments while its social cartoons captured life in the 19th and 20th centuries. The world's finest cartoonists appeared in *Punch*: such great names as Tenniel, E.H. Shepard, Fougasse, and Pont.

See: <http://www.punch.co.uk/>

Humour and amity

Christie Davies

Humour becomes a news item only when it has sparked off a conflict, as with the recent Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Before that we have seen the prosecution of the seaside artist Donald McGill by the indignant, offended and disgusted people of Lincolnshire and the row about the joke involving drowned Chinese cockle pickers told in private by Ann Winterton but maliciously leaked to the press.

However, it is worth noting that the ensuing rows are no different from those that were centred around a serious item, such

and we are pleased to congratulate them, but in our culture self-praise is seen as arrogant and distasteful. The situation is solved by humour which softens pride with self-mockery and attaches affection to admiration. Among peoples both the Jews and the Scots have used self-mocking humour to disarm potential critics. The ability to turn the serious and negative stereotypes held by others into a joke against oneself is a very appealing trait. Hitler hated Jewish jokes, precisely because they seemed to him to blunt and make light of the vile and absurd accusations of an anti-semitic like himself.

Such mocking humour can also be used to bring two or more peoples together by a

self-deprecating humour reduces social distance

as Philip Zec's wartime drawing of a sailor from a torpedoed tanker clinging exhausted to a raft that nearly led Churchill to ban the *Daily Mirror*, James Kirkup's homosexual poem about Jesus that led to a prosecution for blasphemy or Miss Gurpreet Bhatti's dreadful play Behzti that led to the storming of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre by irate Sikhs. There is nothing odd or special about humour as a cause of outrage.

It is important to emphasise that humour can also promote amity or agreement between opposed groups. Perhaps the most effective form of this is self-deprecating humour which reduces social distance, acts as a leveller and disarms criticism. An example of this in a totally different context would be the self-deprecating humour deliberately employed by Nobel prize-winners in their speeches of acceptance when the prize is awarded. They are proud of their success

member of one of them making fun of all of them simultaneously and in the same way. 'The Welsh are the Irish who couldn't swim'. 'A minister a priest and a rabbi were walking down the street....' To say directly that two or more rival groups are related in a positive way sounds unctuous. A joke does it better.

A skilled comedian will not tell a string of jokes at the expense of one group but will rotate the targets so that no one feels picked on nor excluded as being unimportant. We are all in it together. We also laugh together when we laugh at situations that we know are ludicrous for all of us, examples of human weaknesses that we know we have in common. Humour is often, perhaps inevitably, aimed aggressively at human failings and defects. It does not follow that this makes it a divisive force.

Professor Christie Davies is the author of *The Mirth of Nations*, and a sociologist.

The melancholy of the humorist

The melancholy of the clown is emphasized by his grease-paint, which frames his real tired human mouth in an unreal, ever youthful smile. All attempts to exaggerate things into a mockery of themselves have a similar sadness, reminding us that, in our heart of hearts, we are not amused by the spectacle of human folly. Cartoonists are as world-weary in this respect as clowns, and their world-weariness is compounded, W.B. Park suggests, by the struggles of their profession:

'Doctors work on pain, and lawyers cause pain, but no one lives with such a weekly injection of psychogenic discomfort as do we poor tortured creatures submitting cartoons to periodicals, and most particularly to *The New Yorker*.

The idea of acceptance by *The New Yorker* is a narcotic to cartoonists. All over New York City and America there are people out there humped over drawing boards, computers, and kitchen tables, drawing, drawing, drawing. The possibility that one of their creations might someday grace a page of this fabled publication is almost too much to bear.

Rejection from *The New Yorker* is a reward unto itself. People proudly display the impersonal little slips of ivory paper as though they were awards. At parties they brag about the number or rejects they have accumulated. And then each day they fumble glassy-eyed through their mail, hoping against all reason and logic that lightning has struck. Ah, the pain.'

Quotation from 'Rejection: the stuff of life to the New Yorker gag cartoonist.' posted by cartoonist, W.B. Park (www.wbpark.com) in *The New Yorker* cartoon bank (www.cartoonbank.com)

A mark of civilization

Agnieszka Kolakowska

'Ignorant and covetous, by their sanctimony and humbug [they] impose upon the trustful multitude and fare sumptuously themselves.' The description could well apply to today's self-appointed guardians of public morals: self-righteous and totalitarian-souled, humourless and hypocritical, driven by vested interests and the instinct to legislate and control. In fact, it is Huizinga's description of the monks against whom Erasmus railed. In a sense, they represent the sixteenth-century version of political correctness. Erasmus also wrote a satire on Pope Julius II, and got away with it in 16th-century catholic Europe. We, in the 21st century, in a Europe still nominally Christian, or Judeo-Christian, find ourselves abjectly apologising for a few cartoons representing the prophet Muhammad (though we happily toler-

and in the Soviet Union, emerged from prisons. And humour is also an essential part of a free society. Where humour — even offensive humour — cannot flourish, nor can virtue or freedom.

Is there such a thing as an entirely inoffensive joke? It seems hard to deny that most jokes — at least good ones — are offensive to someone; if they weren't, they wouldn't be funny. But if we object to jokes on the grounds that they offend, we should, in order to protect everyone equally from any conceivable offence, ban all humour — jokes about Jews and Muslims and Christians, priests and rabbis, Germans and Belgians, women and homosexuals, people with red hair and people who like sardines. If we did this, our world would not only be gloomy, boring and bleak; it would have lost what little still remains of the Erasmian humanism that lies at the heart of Western civilisation. And such a

anti-semitic when they are not? Possibly. When the people telling them are not Jewish? Again, possibly. It depends on the joke — and of course on the teller. Is the following joke, for instance, anti-semitic? Two Jews are walking along the street and see a sign on a Baptist church offering a hundred dollars to any Jew who converts. One of them, complaining of his poverty, decides to go in. The other, disgusted, waits outside, and when his friend finally emerges, says, 'Well? Did you get the hundred dollars?' To which his friend replies: 'Money, money, money, that's all you people ever think about!' Who knows. And, really, who cares?

Perhaps the only thing to say is that if it is told by an anti-semitic, then it is anti-semitic. But even then we certainly wouldn't want to censor it. It does seem quite useful to know who the anti-semitic are, which is one good reason (among many) for not censoring anti-semitic speech, or 'hate-speech' in general.

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ate all sorts of offences to, and indeed the profanation of, Christian and Jewish religious symbols).

Erasmus naturally comes to mind when we think of the connection between humour and civilisation — civilisation in the broadest sense, understood as the Erasmian humanism of which free conversation is an important element. Humour, too, has always been a vital element in that freedom, and it was one that Erasmus appreciated. It has been an invariable manifestation of the fighting spirit under all oppressive regimes — under communism, under the German occupation, in concentration camps. It has helped people to survive in hopeless circumstances: a friend who survived Auschwitz gives the impression that he did so thanks to his irrepressible black humour; another is a fount of jokes from Buchenwald. Some of the best jokes in communist Poland,

step would testify to our loss of will and loss of faith in the future of that civilisation.

Are Jewish jokes, for example, anti-semitic? (It is important to note that the question does not arise with jokes about Muslims and Islam: Muslims are not a race, and jokes about Islam are not racist jokes, but jokes about a religion. Religion, unlike race, is something one chooses. Admittedly in practice most Muslims have little choice in the matter, and the punishment for apostasy tends to be death, but that is a separate problem.) They make fun of Jews and Judaism, and even of God; but one notable thing about them is that God's own sense of humour often shines through them. This does not seem likely to be the case with Muslim jokes about Islam, if there are any such. The other important thing about Jewish jokes is that they are invented by Jews. Are they

One consequence of the proliferating legislation in the sphere of morals is that in the matter of offensive behaviour we have come to rely on the law, and as a result no longer have anything but the law to restrain us. It is a vicious circle: the more we rely on laws, the less we can rely on courtesy and good manners, for they are no longer virtues to be cultivated.

There is no evidence that the suppression of 'hate-speech' or offensive jokes or comments — about women, minorities, homosexuals, and so on — has done anything to make people nicer to one another, or to cultivate virtue. Humour has always been a weapon against the barbarians — against tyrants and dictators and opponents of liberty. We should not abandon it lightly, for if we give it up, we will already be half-way down the road to barbarism.

Agnieszka Kolakowska is a translator and essayist.

Islam and humour

Various hadiths of the Prophet report him as laughing, or at any rate smiling, and a few joking remarks are attributed to him. But the Koran is relentlessly humourless and authorities remain divided on the place of humour in ordinary life. According to one hadith, the Prophet said 'Everything has a beginning and hostility begins with joking'. Various scholars have taken this as authority for cautioning against humour. According to Ibn Hayan, however, jokes are of two kinds: 'those which Allah has permitted, which commit no sin and which do not divide people from each other', and those that 'create hostility and sadness'. In other words permissible jokes unite people, impermissible jokes divide them. Are there jokes that unite Christians and Muslims, or must laughter always divide them? Here is a Shi'ite joke: a good man, entering Paradise, reproaches Allah: 'Why couldn't you save 'Ali at Karbala? He was the Prophet's grandson!' Allah replies, 'Listen, it's madness down there. I couldn't even save my own son.'

Muslims today are coming up with their own Muslim jokes, in the attempt to defuse tension. Here is one from Zeeshan Abbas on <http://youth.ibn.net.humor.asp>:

A man is taking a walk in Central Park in New York. Suddenly he sees a little girl being attacked by a pit bull dog. He runs over and starts fighting with the dog. He succeeds in killing the dog and saving the girl's life. A policeman who was watching the scene walks over and says: 'You are a hero, tomorrow you can read it in all the newspapers: "Brave New Yorker saves the life of little girl"' The man says: - 'But I am not a New Yorker!' 'Oh, then it will say in newspapers in the morning: "Brave American saves life of little girl"' — the policeman answers. 'But I am not an American!' — says the man. 'Oh, what are you then?' The man says: — 'I am a Saudi!' The next day the newspapers say: 'Islamic extremist kills innocent American dog.'

Laughing matters

F.H. Buckley

The student of American customs will have observed a curious new business ritual. From time to time, people approach a colleague, drop their head, look left and right, and speak softly. This is the sign that a joke is about to be told. Not the sort of thing one wants to advertise, in short.

Few wits congregate at the water cooler, but we may still regret the modern sensitivity to laughter. Apart from the sheer pleasure of the thing, laughter performs two very useful functions, which might in turn explain just why we are hard-wired to find it so delightful.

In most laughter, three persons may be found: wit, listener, butt. The wit laughs at the butt, but does so to an audience which laughs along with him.

Laughter is naturally sociable, and serves as a trust-building device between wit and listener.

Without trust our friendships would become affairs of momentary convenience, on which no plans, no projects for future cooperation, could be formed. But how to pick out a friend or partner in a sea of strangers? The answer is written on our faces, the most public part of our body, where our emotions register for all to see. Facial signals such as laughter reveal one's deepest feelings and permit others to make reliable inferences about one's behaviour. The counterfeit laugh, produced for purely strategic purposes, is a pale imitation. We learn to see

through the politician's bonhomie and the car salesman's coprophagous grin.

Joke-telling is thus a means of sniffing out friends. Sincere friends laugh together in a special way that false friends cannot duplicate. The laughter is open, unreserved and joyful. The emotional cost of hiding enmity is simply too great for false listeners, and the appropriate inference will be made. If you cannot laugh with me, how can I trust you? You say you like me, and share my interests? Then come into my bar and laugh at my jokes. Only then will I trust you. And the more risqué the joke, the stronger the signal of friendship.

The second useful thing laughter does is to reveal the butt's comic inadequacies. We can bear poverty, illness, even shame, but not ridicule, and the strategies we employ to immunize ourselves from it constitute a thick code of conduct that I call the morality of laughter. There are religious, legal and moral codes that condemn the imposition of harm on others, but the morality of laughter is different for it teaches the individual how to extract joy from his own life.

Laughter also polices the dour, modern maladies of machine law, machine scholarship and machine art, of pointless rules, risible theories, and ink blob paintings. Lucky Jim asked what can be done to slow the progress of these pathologies. Sound policy analysis goes only so far. Can anything further be done? As it happens, there is. We can laugh.

F.H. Buckley is author of *The Morality of Laughter* and Associate Dean at George Mason School of Law.

Publications

The Mirth of Nations by Christie Davies, Transaction, 2002. A survey of ethnic jokes and the role they play for communities. Christie 'comprehensively demolishes the received notion that ethnic jokes are inevitably the antechamber to active discrimination.' Anthony Daniels, reviewing the book on the *Telegraph* website.

The Morality of Laughter by F.H. Buckley, University of Michigan Press, 2003. Laughter is described as a civilizing force, a way of building trust, shaping the social environment and an important route to a better life.

Between Social Constraint and the Public Sphere: On Misreading Early-Modern Political Satire by Conal Condrena, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2002. The paper outlines differing understandings of humour, diverging satiric propensities, ritualised satire and taboo. It suggests that to locate satire between oppression and liberty is too limited.

Irony's Edge; The Theory and Politics of Irony by Linda Hutcheon, Routledge, 1994, irony is a complex rhetorical move. It depends on deep and shared levels of understanding. References gathered from contemporary and modern culture. She looks at works such as the novels of Umberto Eco, and the operas of Richard Wagner.

Laughter at the Foot of the Cross by M. A. Screech, Westview Press, 1999. At the foot of the Cross, as Jesus hung in agony, the crowd laughed. Surveys laughter in the context of biblical tradition. See also a historical and theological consideration of the *Ironies of Laughter* by Douglas Jones on the Credenda website. <http://www.credenda.org/issues/16-1thema.php>.

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Tall Turkish tales

Safiye Cemek

The Mullah Nasr Ud-Din (Nasreddin Hoca to us Turks) is supposed to have lived in the 12th or 13th century in Khorasan; however he was born and is buried in many Turkish towns, and one of his graves is a place of pilgrimage at which any pilgrim will burst out laughing. In the door of the monument a big lock is installed, but all the sides lie open. The stories of Nasreddin have been passed by word of mouth around Turkey, Persia and Tajikstan for centuries, shaped by local wisdom and experience into nuggets of surreal humour, whose purpose is to make light of human troubles, and set conflict at a manageable distance. My English friends don't find the stories very funny; I suspect that is because the stories depend on the background of close observation under which a Middle-Eastern Muslim must lead his life, and which creates the need to make one's individuality absurd, in order to protect it.

If you live in a village where everything is treated as common property, you might be soothed by this:

The Hoca's neighbour wanted to borrow his clothes line. Nasreddin said, 'Sorry, I am using it to dry flour'. 'How on earth can you dry flour on a clothes line?' the neighbour cried. The Hoca replied 'It is less difficult than you think when you don't want to lend it.'

I once said to a treacherous English friend: 'You can't borrow my husband, I am using him to dry flour.' She was not amused.

Safiye Cemek is a Turkish writer.

WWW.

The New Yorker, esteemed publisher of the modern cartoonist, carries a good reminder of the development of the Danish cartoon controversy http://www.newyorker.com/printables/talk/060227ta_talk_kramer 'It may be that the myths of a multicultural Europe have been shattered by the Danish cartoons,' writes Jane Kramer, (27 Feb 06).

Ted Cohen author of *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* discusses aspects of humour at <http://pio.tripod.com/humour/theory.html>.

Bonfire of the Pieties by Amir Taheri, *Wall Street Journal*, 8/2/06, gives examples of Islamic humour, historic depictions of the prophet Muhammad and describes the cartoon crisis as an excuse for the Muslim Brotherhood to turn on the 'rage machine'. Piece available on www.benad-rassociates.com/article/19311. Similar perspective in lead piece of Henry Jackson Society (Feb 06) www.henryjackson.org.