
Commentary

RECONCILING FUNNY AND PERMISSIBLE: CAN WE DEVELOP NONVIOLENT HUMOUR?

IVANA MILOJEVIC

In its original historical meaning, a cartoon (from the Italian *cartone*, meaning 'big paper') is a full-size drawing made on paper as a study for a further artwork, such as a painting or tapestry. In modern print media, a cartoon is an illustration, usually humorous in intent. (Wikipedia, 2006)

The recent conflict over the freedom to publish cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad or, alternatively, the freedom to have your community and their views respected by others, touches on perennial themes of what are the boundaries of freedom, if any. As debates for thousands of years by philosophers and ethicists testify, there are no easy answers here. One certain thing is – in a democracy any given freedom requires boundaries and implies responsibility to use the freedom wisely and for the greater common good.

This implies that any freedom - and by implication the boundaries of such freedom - is always negotiated, dependent on consensual agreements of members of a community or society.

Contextualising Humour

In this sense humour is also negotiated. I remember my (male) colleagues at the university where I worked at the time joking over the rapes of women in Bosnia. It is not just Serbs doing it they said, every side involved in the conflict (ie. Bosnian Muslims, Croats, Serbs) was doing it; it just depends who is better in this task! Being the only female in the room, and being a feminist, and having spent painful months reading testimonies of raped women, I simply couldn't find that 'joke' funny. In fact I was insulted and saddened over the lack of compassion exhibited. I felt diminished as a person and as a woman. How they felt about me not joining in and sharing a joke with the blokes I didn't know, but it is possible that they thought I was too serious, not fun to be with, maybe stern and burdened with 'political correctness'.

In fact I do enjoy various forms of humour including political satire – with Judy Horacek being my favourite political as well as feminist cartoonist.

I've seen two of the twelve cartoons that have caused so much stir all over the world. I am not sure what to think of them. All I know is that, sensitised by my experiences of being a woman, influenced by

feminism and yet living in the patriarchal world, I am usually conscious of whether a joke may offend people whose religious worldviews and cultural beliefs I don't share.

Humour may not be just about politics - as with skits by John Clarke and Brian Dawes - but it also *is* politics. In fact, authors of *The Penguin Book of Australian Jokes* Phillip Adams and Patrice Newell argue in their introduction that with the exception of the jokes involving innocent plays on words, almost every genre of jokes circulating in Australia is fundamentally 'an act of verbal aggression against a fear or an enemy, be it defiantly targeted or dimly perceived' (1995, 13). Adams and Newell warn about entering the pages of *Australian Jokes* at own peril, as this will be done with a 'knowing that every time you split your sides you're having a laugh at someone else's expense' (Adams & Newell, 1995, back cover). As summarised brilliantly by Will Rogers (quoted in Loomans and Kolberg, 1993, 14) this approach is that 'everything is funny as long as it is happening to somebody else.'

Verbal Aggression

In this sense, not only is the publication of the Danish cartoons part of verbal aggression, it goes much further than that, argues Johan Galtung (2006):

To publish a caricature of the Prophet, or indeed any visual depiction, is among the most blasphemous acts that can be done to Islam. ... Useful parallels: burning flags; using pictures of the King or Bible pages as toilet paper; tearing the Bible apart, throwing it in a toilet like guards do to the Qur'an in Guantanamo. These are acts of direct violence, using symbols as arms, a declaration of war, and war tends to be two-way traffic. Nobody should be astonished, or hide behind some human right to be surprised if there is counter-violence.

With the previous discussion in mind, how might we, as a global human community, decide on the boundaries of freedom and how do we negotiate what is funny? Is it possible for people to negotiate the boundaries of freedom so that a freedom of one group does not infringe on the freedom of another one? Should these freedoms be negotiated within the boundaries of nation states and cultures or do we need a new global ethics for a global

millennium? Can we develop some sort of a moral compass for humour devoid of bigotry, sexism, ageism, blondeism and homophobia? Can we begin joking and cartooning more and more about 'us' and less and less about 'them'?

Laughing at the Self vs Laughing at the Other

It is bad enough that more than half of Australian schoolchildren in Victoria view Muslims as terrorists, and two out of five agree that Muslims 'are unclean' (Sydney Morning Herald, 5th February, 2006). The continual portrayal of 'the other' as barbaric, violent and strange in western media does nothing to reverse this prejudice. Rather, this orientalism (Edward Said) may directly contribute to both the growing Islamophobia in the west as well as to growing radicalisation of Islam elsewhere. The rise of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, at the expense of Islamic nonviolent liberalism, is associated with 'pride, cultural assertiveness and defiance and a search for authenticity' (Zakaria 2006, 14). Any attack on deeply held values within Islam, and any identification of the whole religion with the violent behaviour of some of its members will do little to help the forces of liberalism within the Islamic world. Instead 'it will feed the fury that helps ...[radical Islam] win adherents' (Zakaria, 2006,15).

Thus, while it would certainly be very unhealthy to live in a humourless society, it is important to realise certain guidelines and boundaries for humour in a contemporary multicultural, global society. In today's society 'to be monocultural is no longer sufficient to be literate' (Galtung, 2006). Rather, some multicultural knowledge and sensitivity is needed not to overstep norms of decent human behaviour, he writes. For humour to be able to dispel misery rather than produce it we need to negotiate and learn from 'the other' what/when/by whom is considered funny.

The Role of the Underlying Worldview

I strongly believe that the publication of these cartoons in Danish *Jyllands-Posten* was very little about the 'ongoing debate on freedom of expression that we cherish so highly', as argued by the editors. Or, that this issue 'pits the strictures of Islam/Muslim sensitivities' (Zakaria and Roy, 2006, 13) against 'Western freedom of expression/liberty' (Zakaria and Roy, 2006,16).

The actions of editors of newspapers that published the cartoons went 'beyond valid norms for public space' argues Johan Galtung (2006): 'They broke into Muslim private space; like a thief into a private home ... claiming freedom to move as a human right'.

If the underlying worldview is the desire to negotiate - to work things out - with 'the other' you become sensitive about what you can say, when and where about such group. You are also careful about what

type of behaviours you choose to engage in, preferring those that don't reaffirm various forms of direct, structural, cultural, epistemological and ecological violence.

Nonviolent Communication and Humour

It is indeed worth considering what would humour be like in a society in which cultures of peace, compassion and nonviolent communication are firmly embedded? I believe that humour in such a global peaceful, transcultural, 'independent and sustainable but yet interconnected, interdependent and interrelated world' (Elise Boulding, 1990) would be based on the following principles:

1. People own up to their own 'stuff'. There is an awareness of one's own agenda, underlying worldview, assumptions, perceptions, fears, beliefs about self and others.
2. There is an awareness and an understanding of what kind of actions may have certain (violence promoting) consequences. Thus, by choosing to engage in actions that may be offensive, you also accept the risk that such offence may cause you and 'your own' group distress further down the track, through the retaliatory actions of 'the other'.
3. There is an overall understanding that your speech can be part of the problem or part of the solution. That is, that your speech can be expression of verbal aggression or an expression of desire to negotiate and 'work things out'.
4. There is an acknowledging that absolute freedom does not exist, and that each right also carries responsibilities.
5. Humour becomes a means of reducing inflated individual and collective Ego, thus you engage in laughing at self and your own group more often than in laughing at her/him/them. You also do the later, if you must, in a safe space - verbally, with 'your own', removed from the eyes and ears of her/him/them.
6. Reducing your own Ego also means that you don't identify so much with certain dogmatic principles and rules that help define your own individual and collective identity. That is, you take offence against yourself and your own group as lightly as possible. Or, at the very least, you practice how not to exaggerate events out of proportion. You certainly don't over-generalise - making 'all of them' accountable for the actions of some of their members. You don't buy into the paranoid worldview in which 'all of them' are inherently against you and everything you stand for and hold dear. You become honest about what type of grievances you are really expressing, at any given moment. And, most importantly of all, you don't respond to one type of (ie. epistemological, cultural) violence with an even more intense one (ie. physical,

direct violence).

7. Humour becomes a means of destabilising centres of oppressive political, cultural, epistemological, economic and military power – and hopefully a means that can help create a world without institutionalised violence and social injustice. Apparently, the Muslim world is full of Mullah jokes, and as far as I know, portraying Mullahs is not seen as out of bounds by the majority of Muslims. Such a simple editorial intervention could have spared many grievances and the intense escalation of violence and still enable expression of the ‘freedom to speak’, to express true feelings. ‘A better education for a Danish cultural editor... and the spiral of violence would not have been unleashed’ (Galtung, 2006).

8. There is a consultation with local groups, and various minorities (ethnic, religious, gender) in terms of the boundaries of free speech. Many Australian academics these days have come to accept research *with* Indigenous people as far superior than research *about* Indigenous people. Many projects do not take off the ground until local Indigenous communities are consulted. Certainly, Australian society is nowhere near a preferred vision wherein non-Indigenous and Indigenous people or ‘ethnic’ and mainstream Anglo-Celtic communities work in partnerships and wherein racism is the thing of the past. Still, such examples – relatively newly formed cultural ‘sensitivities’ show that there are other ways of doing things, and there always are alternative ways of communicating non-violently. So, instead of being ‘long on general principles [such as freedom of speech] and short on human sensitivity [not to insult and offend]’ (Galtung, 2006), you do your best to learn from the other:

Imagine you question the norm against the visual depiction of the Prophet. Something new stimulates curiosity, not animosity. So you ask a Muslim, tell me more, I want to know why. You learn. And understand that freedom of speech is not a license to insult (Galtung, 2006)

9. You manage to differentiate between different humour styles, e.g. between a ‘Joy Master’, ‘Joke Maker’, ‘Fun Meister’ and ‘Life Mocker’ (Loomans and Kolberg, 1993, 15). According to these authors the Joy Master has mostly positive qualities, is inspiring, inclusive, warm hearted, innocent, humanising and healing; the Life Mocker has mostly negative qualities, and is cynical, sarcastic, exclusive, cold hearted, worldly and dehumanising; the positive sides of a Joke Maker (e.g. wordplay, teaching stories, parody, instructive, insightful) and Fun Meister (slapstick, clowning, naive, imitative, entertaining) are to be balanced with their negative qualities (JM: insulting, biting, satiric, stereotyping, destructive; FM: ridiculing, dark humour, tragedy and suffering, hurtful,

degrading).

10. There is an awareness that ‘humour brings insight and tolerance’ while irony (as well as sarcasm, stereotyping, ridiculing, etc.) brings a ‘deep and less friendly understanding’ (Agnes Repplier, quoted in Loomans and Kolberg, 1993, 13).

11. Principles of nonviolent communication are practiced in general, through the interrelation between empathic listening and honest expression, both inclusive of observations, awareness of feelings, and nonviolent expression of needs and requests (The Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2006).

12. There is an understanding of the fundamental difference between multicultural humour (e.g. *Goodness Gracious Me* series) and racist and orientalist bigotry and stereotyping that tries to pass as funny.

13. Most importantly, nonviolent humour creators and users consciously choose not to portray/see any form of violence as funny nor to use violence as a form of public mass entertainment.

These principles represent a framework whereby humour can be used to create new depths of mutual understanding and compassion between people. We are all in this world together and the emerging nonviolent communication methods need to reflect that. Our shared human condition and the difficulties we all face as we go about our daily lives provide us with endless material for laughing at all of us, at all of ours expense.

In the recent case the main issue is what was the spirit behind the humour? As argued by Roy:

The affair is not so much a matter of what is permissible in Islam as it is about discrimination. Representing the prophet’s face, per se, antagonized them far less than his portrayal as a terrorist... If the cartoons had portrayed the prophet doing good works, the proscription against representation would have been muted – if noted at all. (Roy, 2006, 16-17)

Unfortunately, in this instance, dozens of people have been killed. And that – by any indicators and within any context - isn’t funny at all.

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Author

Ivana Milojevic
Adjunct Researcher
The University of the Sunshine Coast
ivanam@uq.edu.au
www.metafuture.org

Road Worker

His teachers relentlessly predicted he'd be doing this-
sweeping the road or rubbish bins. Became a

self-fulfilling prophecy, and at sixteen anyone
of them who'd put money on their words – won

on a certainty. Got his first 'tatt' with his first pay;
now has his back covered. With so much else

exposed. Stacked his XR Saturday night:
uninsured; along with a D.U.I. The traffic

signals he took out will cost the earth; he digs
in now – soft red clay from the grass verge where

the road is being widened. An eerie flag in a winter
landscape dressed in an orange luminous council vest;

though a blurred figure at the back of an afternoon
vista losing focus in the interstices of wind and rain.

**-JEFF GUESS
GAWLER, S.A.**

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