

## **New conservatism of Western progressives is killing humour**

By Bill Leak, The Australian, 11 June 2016

I told a joke at a dinner party in 1978 and no one laughed. I knew it was a good joke because I'd laughed until my tonsils showed when I first heard it and everyone I'd gone on to tell it to had done the same.

But not this mob. Their constipated faces suggested a belly laugh ready to emerge, but they seemed determined not to let it as they squirmed in their chairs, grimaced and flapped their hands in disgust.

My host, an intimidatingly intellectual Marxist academic lecturing not in art but in "visual communication", launched into a vicious but eloquent tirade of abuse, excoriating me for having told a joke that was racist and sexist, and therefore unworthy of being told in his exalted company.

While I didn't know it then, I'd been belted by someone wielding the weapon now known as political correctness. They were opening salvos in a war on humour itself that has forged a strange alliance between supposed Western progressive thinkers and the anti-progress force of Islam.

Political correctness has been thriving in the Islamic world since the seventh century. Not even the smuggest, most self-righteous social justice warrior in Australia today could hold a candle to Mohammed, who made the anti-guy David Morrison look like Rodney Rude. Mohammed occasionally smiled but would never display his tonsils, though one of his disciples once did report excitedly that he "indeed saw the Messenger of Allah laugh till his front teeth were exposed".

He also advised his followers not to laugh because "laughing too much deadens the heart" and warned them off joking by saying: "A man may say something to make his companions laugh, and he will fall into Hell as far as the Pleiades because of it." In other words, the reward for anyone telling jokes and making his mates laugh was to spend eternity burning in the fires of hell.

If you want to crack a gag at an Islamist open mic night you've got to make sure you stick within the guidelines as laid down in the Koran and Hadith. And that means "for humour to be in accordance with Islam, the joke should not insult anyone, should not frighten anyone, should be within the limits of Islamic tolerance, should tell the truth, should not be offensive, should not contain un-Islamic material or promote immorality or indecency".

Sound familiar?

If you substitute PC for Islam in that set of rules you've got the rules governing humour as laid down by the progressive Left in the democracies of the modern world. Right there, in a nutshell. Except you'd have to leave out the one that demands you tell the truth because the primary purpose of PC is the avoidance of it.

As human beings, we are hardwired to a need for transcendent, sublime experience. We need access to a higher level of consciousness that provides us with an escape from the mundane realities of everyday life in a way that's more enduring and more rewarding than, say, a night out on the eccies. So what is it about the sublime that postmodernist progressives find so objectionable? You don't deconstruct a joke before laughing at it; when you get it, you experience it. And you don't read or analyse a work of art; you experience that, too.

Both, at their best, give you access to the sublime.

But by demanding of art that it must have a literal meaning, postmodernism has demeaned and suffocated art by reducing it to the level of illustration, and the whole idea of art as a means of accessing the transcendent has gone right out the door. Visitors to galleries are now required to read the artist's statement first before plunging into the work itself for fear of not knowing how to navigate their way around it, not understanding its meaning and walking away baffled. But there's no artist's statement next to Picasso's *Guernica*, Beethoven didn't write a list of instructions for people to read before listening to his symphonies and you didn't need a degree in philosophy to find Groucho Marx funny. He just was.

So, with access to the sublime through art now denied and Christianity discredited, environmentalism has emerged to fill the higher power vacuum and become the religion of choice for everyone who claims not to have one. It is every bit as oppressive as Christianity used to be and Islam still is, its high priests preach just as much fire and brimstone from their pulpits, and its devotees are every bit as dull. Its influence is so pervasive that our post-religion, atheistic society has not only become a deeply religious one, it's on the verge of transforming into a theocracy.

If you're found guilty of heresy against the new religion its perpetually offended and outraged adherents respond with the same sort of savagery that once drove Christians to burn witches and now drives Islamists to acts of mass murder. And you're kidding yourself if you don't believe they wouldn't happily make the transition from metaphorical lynching on social media to actual lynching if given the chance.

Prudishness used to be the prerogative of the straitlaced conservative who attended church and was derided as a Bible-basher. Today, virtue signalling and censoriousness are fashionable so it has become the prerogative of the hipster. And with the sanctimonious hordes lying in wait, armed to the teeth with Twitter and Facebook accounts and ready to ambush anyone who transgresses the unwritten laws of the new puritanism, the cartoonist's job gets harder every day.

The trick has always been to look at a serious issue, exaggerate it to the point of absurdity and draw what you see when you get there. But the trick doesn't work in these strange times when the more ridiculous an issue is, the more seriously it's taken. And if you're starting at the point of absurdity, where do you go from there? What's the point in pointing out the absurdity inherent in something that's obviously absurd and, more important, why isn't everyone already laughing?

Why didn't everyone just burst out laughing when, for example, someone suggested the dark arts of penis tucking and breast binding be taught to little children as part of the school curriculum? If we, as a society, weren't losing our sense of the absurd, no one, let alone government ministers in the federal parliament, would have been able to keep a straight face when they heard that one. It would have been even more difficult to suppress a chuckle when that same person went on to explain that teaching little kids cross-dressing techniques would stop them being nasty and calling each other names and that no one would find it silly if the whole exercise were to be disguised as an anti-bullying program.

I mean, give me a break. In their relentless quest to transform society into the dismal utopia of their dreams, not even the innocence of childhood is safe from attack by the authoritarian barbarians of the new left intelligentsia. And because the progressive fundamentalists now are trying to dictate what's permissible when it comes to cracking jokes, just like the barbarians of fundamentalist Islam, cartoonists have found themselves on the frontline.

The keyboard warriors of the humourless Left could learn a thing or two from that old prankster, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who said: "Allah did not create man so that he could have fun. The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer. An Islamic regime must be serious in every field. There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humour in Islam. There is no fun in Islam." And he wasn't joking.

In 1989 he issued a fatwa on Salman Rushdie for writing a book. Sixteen years later a group of cartoonists in Denmark proved you no longer had to go to the

trouble of writing a whole book to put your life, and the lives of others, in danger; drawing a cartoon would do the trick.

Two hundred people died in riots that swept across the world because a single page full of cartoons was published in a Danish newspaper.

Ten years later, 12 people were shot dead in the office of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, five of whom were cartoonists.

Two days later I drew an innocuous cartoon in response to this atrocity and woke up the next morning with a roaring fatwa. Officers in the counter-terrorist unit were picking up instructions to “fellow mujaheddin” in Australia from some wannabe gangsta of Islamic State to hunt me down and kill me for having offended the delicate sensitivities of adherents of a religion that imposed restrictions on humour.

Like the big brains in our human heads, our sense of humour is something that has taken a long time to evolve and we’ve developed it for very good reasons. By laughing at the things we fear most, humour enables us to rise above them. Our ability to recognise and laugh at the absurd provides us with a mechanism for keeping things in perspective without which we’d all go insane. Just as our sense of smell tells us a prawn has gone off and we’d better not eat it, our sense of humour tells us something’s absurd and we’d better not take it seriously. But unlike the smell of the rotten prawn that makes us reel back in disgust, the sudden impact of a front-on crash between the serious and the absurd makes us burst into laughter — a visceral, cathartic explosion of enjoyment not even the dourest intellectual would describe as unpleasant.

And what sort of dour intellectual would want to deny any other human being such simple but transcendent moments of pure joy? It would have to be someone who, through some perversion of the evolutionary process, had arrived at a stage where a conscious effort to suppress the urge to laugh at something funny was no longer required. This person would have achieved a state of humourlessness Mohammed himself would have admired and the likes of my academic mates back in 1978 could only dream of. Someone like - Rebecca Shaw, for example.

Tim Blair wrote a hilarious column on May 9 in which he argued that if the man previously known as Bruce Jenner can now call himself Caitlyn and be considered a woman and a white woman named Rachel Dolezal can now be considered a black woman because that’s what she says she is, then it’s unfair that Belle Gibson isn’t allowed to be considered a cancer survivor just because she has never had cancer.

In a blistering response, Shaw, who identifies as a humorist — “one of Australia’s leading satirists”, no less — and writes hysterical columns that appear on the SBS website, went to great pains to explain why Blair’s column wasn’t funny. Among other damning insights, Shaw claimed Blair failed to amuse because he was “a writer making comparisons between two completely unrelated things” — a view that would have surprised most thinkers who have tried to understand why some things make us laugh, including Arthur Koestler, who believed “humour results when two different frames of reference are set up and a collision is engineered between them”.

For most of us reading Blair’s column no explanation of why it was funny was needed; it just was. And certainly for anyone reading Shaw’s musings, no explanation of why they weren’t funny was needed either; they just weren’t. The thing that does require an explanation is how someone like Shaw can be considered a satirist. She and the legions of others who stormed in to provide her with back-up spend their time looking for things to be offended by, instead of amused by, and then getting angry about them instead of laughing at them.

Satire is an offensive weapon and when you fire it off someone, somewhere, will claim their feelings have been hurt. That’s their business. If they choose to be the collateral damage in a humour assault, it’s hardly the fault of the person who launched it.

You can’t keep loading up the cannon and blasting away if you’re going to waste time worrying about people who prefer to be offended than amused.

The cartoonist’s task has always been to reveal uncomfortable truths in a humorous way. People will pause to reflect on something, no matter how confronting it is, if they’re able to laugh at it first.

As a white, cisgendered Aussie male of a certain age, I could identify as a member of a persecuted minority myself and luxuriate in self-pity while being perpetually offended. Instead I find myself not only disillusioned but also frankly amazed that the contagion of political correctness could ever have spread to our shores.

Our legendary larrikin streak was one of our greatest national assets and, if it were still in good shape, would have made us immune to it.

We used to be instinctively anti-authoritarian and cynical, which made it almost impossible to offend us, and was the reason Australia became a breeding ground for great cartoonists. But it’s not any more because, instead of manning the barricades against this plague, our cartoonists, with a few honourable exceptions, rushed to embrace it. They abandoned a proud,

national tradition of iconoclasm, wit and invective, and defected, en masse, to the purse-lipped prohibitionists and wowsers of the green-left intelligentsia.

It's no wonder that so few of them have drawn a cartoon that was surprising, provocative or funny since. And how could they? As George Orwell said: "You cannot be really funny if your main aim is to flatter the comfortable classes." When he wrote that in 1941 the people who made up the "comfortable classes" weren't the sort of climate change miserabilists with dietary requirements and ironic beards that comprise the establishment today. And you'd think the last people on earth who'd want to become part of a crowd like that would be Australian cartoonists.

But they do. They want to be cool, they want to be popular; liked on Facebook, followed on Twitter. So at a time when their duty to offend has never been more pressing, they go out of their way to appease the offenderati by making their cartoons as inoffensive, as insipid, as possible.

Islamists have declared war on our civilisation and the best our politically correct politicians can do is assure us that if we all delete the word Islam from our vocabularies the threat, along with the word, will somehow just magically disappear. And our cartoonists, whose job it is to ridicule politicians when they spout nonsense like that, are letting them get away with it. Well, they shouldn't.

You may not be able to ride your pushbike without a helmet, you may have to look at close-ups of corpses while you're outside in the rain having a smoke, and old Nanny State may have assumed the right to tell you when it's time to stop drinking and go home to bed, but here in the Lucky Country you can still find a space where it's safe to tell a joke and people like me can still make a living out of poking fun at people in power.

It was hard enough to find somebody who hadn't already heard the joke I told at that disastrous dinner party and now, after it has been circulating for nearly 40 more years, it's almost impossible. But my mate Ramin, who comes from Tehran and knows a thing or two about what it's like to live in a country where you can be thrown into jail and flogged for dancing, hadn't heard it until I told it to him a week ago. I hadn't even reached the final word of the punchline, "And why do you ask, Two Dogs ...", when he threw his head back and laughed until his tonsils showed.

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