

## **On Humor and Its Not-So-Funny Consequences**

**By Norm R. Allen Jr.**

Many people believe that humor is always harmless and could not possibly have any negative consequences. Whenever anyone disagrees with this simplistic view, they are dismissed as lacking a sense of humor, killjoys, etc.

However, anyone who has had just a single course in humor studies understands that there are different kinds of humor that appeal to different kinds of people. Some kinds of humor are rooted in meanness, cynicism and misanthropy.

The worst kinds of humor are racist, sexist, and homophobic. Some of these jokes are not even funny, and seem to be indulged in primarily for shock value and generating feelings of discomfort. These include jokes about rape, sexual abuse, the Holocaust, etc.

Those that consider all forms of humor to be harmless – rather than merely tasteless – do not understand that humor has often been part of the arsenal that oppressors have used to intimidate people and to keep people down. Perhaps nowhere is this fact more clear than in the history of racist humor directed against Black people.

In the 1980s, director and producer Marlon Riggs came out with the Emmy Award-winning film *Ethnic Notions*. The film was narrated by Esther Rolle, best known as the character Florida Evans, the mother on the 1970s classic sitcom “Good Times.”

The film, in part, showed how, from the Civil War through the civil rights movement, White media and popular culture used humor to perpetuate stereotypes and caricatures of Black people through books, poetry, cartoons, film, advertisements, children’s stories, comedic routines with Whites and Blacks in blackface, etc. This onslaught fostered not only White supremacy but Black self-hatred. Blacks were depicted as lazy, stupid, ugly, highly sexed, etc. During minstrel shows, the stereotype of the happy, singing, dancing, laughing Black slave was popularized. These images no doubt influenced laws and public policy throughout the U.S.

There has also been racist humor focusing upon Jews, Chinese, Japanese, and other groups. Shortly after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, many Black stand-up comedians made bigoted jokes about the idea that all Arabs and Muslims are terrorists.

Cruel, hurtful jokes about Gay men have long been popular throughout the world. Many comedians foster the stereotype that all Gay men are effeminate. Some comedians are completely over the top. For example, not long ago, Tracy Morgan joked that he would stab his son if he found out that he was Gay. (He later apologized for the joke.)

Sexist jokes often make women feel uncomfortable and afraid. Such jokes often create or exacerbate a hostile work environment for women. Some men not only tell sexist jokes, but wear t-shirts or display posters or artwork with sexist jokes.

Many times, members of historically oppressed groups are driven by self-hatred and greed to stereotype their own people in the name of humor. For example, many Black stand-up comedians make

fun of or denigrate dark-skinned Black people with thick lips and other pronounced African features. They will make jokes about alleged Black incompetence, undependability and other stereotypes.

This is not to say that *racial* or *sexual* humor do not have their place. One can make fun of very real differences among the races without being cruel or without promoting stereotypes. There are clear differences in cultures, interests, musical tastes, food preferences, sports preferences, etc. among different races. Such differences can be recognized and joked about without resorting to thinly disguised racial attacks. Similarly, sex is a natural part of life and can be joked about without using humor as a weapon to objectify women or make them feel uncomfortable, especially if such humor is presented under the right circumstances and at appropriate places and times.

What makes it difficult to fight against harmful kinds of humor is the fact that, whenever such humor presents itself, some insufferable, bigoted loudmouth will inevitably appear to whine about alleged political correctness, or PC. Indeed, the perfect preemptive strike against those that respect “the Other” is wrapped in an attack on this alleged threat. Tired complaints about alleged “PC run amok” have become de rigueur among bigots everywhere over the past few decades.

However, despite the damage that humor can do, censorship is not the answer. People must always have the right to express themselves. Still, as someone once noted, “just because you have the right to do it, doesn’t mean it’s *right* to do it.” Bigots need to do away with the idea that freedom to be bigoted means they have a corresponding right to be free from criticism, boycotts, or other legal and moral forms of retaliatory behavior. The victims of bigoted humor also have rights.

Contrary to what many people believe, just because a joke is funny or elicits much laughter does not necessarily make it o.k. The disturbing paradox is that humor often has very serious – even-tragic - consequences, and is often part of the way oppressors keep people down.