

TO JOKE OR NOT TO JOKE: A DIPLOMATIC DILEMMA IN THE AGE OF INTERNET

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During an interfaith banquet, a Catholic priest told a Rabbi: “When are you going to give up your antiquated customs and eat some of this delicious ham?” The Rabbi replied: “At your wedding, Father.”

I will later argue that it might equally well have been an Imam or even an Ayatollah to have made that gagging retort, instead of a Rabbi. Indeed, in a short while, I will refer to the Arabic comic strip *Mâjid* and its jokeful verbal and visual narrative of the travels to the East and to the West of a boy from Abu Dhabi, called *Kaslân Jiddan*. There is in it a quite amusing exchange between the Arab boy and an American boy travelling on the same plane about the eating of pork.¹

However, I will leave further acquaintance with the delightful *Kaslân* to a bit later and stick for the moment to the Rabbi. This is because so-called “Jewish jokes” happen to be the most discussed sub-species of so-called “ethnic jokes”. Soon I shall try to persuade you that neither ethnic humour, in general, nor Jewish humour, in particular, exists; but both these nonentities, or false figments of the nineteenth-century ultra-nationalist imagination (as I believe them to be) are essential, basic ingredients of the first part of my talk.

However, before I get more entangled in the ambush filled approaches to the beginning of my talk, allow me to present you as briefly as possible with an apology for the topic signified by the title I have given the talk. I guessed, rightly or wrongly, that the reason why I was invited to give this talk is because, some years ago, I committed the minor crime of publishing a small book on the philosophy of language. It is called *Peopled Silence*,² and begins with a joke. Somebody says: “Time flies”—to which somebody else replies: “I can’t. They’re too fast.” Unfortunately, most students fail to get the point of the joke; and so they always ask me, “Why on earth did you begin your book with this joke?”

I reply: “It’s not *this* joke that was important, but *a* joke; any joke really would have done. It’s simply that I think that jokes are the paradigmatic example of language. The playful use of language is the most

illuminating of all its many and various uses, because the most singular aspect of language—namely its creativity—is most manifest in wit and humour—in jokes.”

Following that same line of thought, I want to suggest that the paradigmatic instance of diplomatic language is the diplomatic joke. Hence, a contribution towards its definition, however sketchy, seemed to be an apt opening gambit, if not the aptest at least for a philosopher trespassing on this semi-foreign domain, with which to spark off a seminar on language and diplomacy.

Since I cannot allow myself to develop the argument with the full panoply of my favourite baroque style, I will syncopate it into three inevitably abrupt specifications of the diplomatic joke.

In the first instance, I want to describe and denounce the type of joke that is inspired by the belief that humour is national in character and hence that the authentic diplomatic joke will be a flaunting of the national temperament and genius as a sort of emblem of superiority.

For contrast with this first type of joke, I will present a second type inspired by the contrary belief that the better kind of joke is always an implicit acknowledgement of the common humanity of the others; hence that the specific linguistic skill which the diplomat has to master is that of cross-cultural communication, on the ground that humour is universal and jokes are translatable (except for the admittedly important purely verbal ones) into any of the world's five thousand languages.

I will argue however that this second kind of joke was effective only before the age of the Internet. That kind of joke could do its work in the past because it played against a background of seriousness as Gilles Lipovetski has said.³ A ceaseless patter of joking has become the first requisite demanded not only of journalists, disk-jockeys, talkshow stars and all those whose profession involves chattering and gossiping, but also of smart politicians and humble preachers, of severe academics and Nobel prize-winning authors. In this context a third kind of joking pattern is, I suggest, slowly but necessarily emerging; it is not joking of the flippant kind which, as has also been aptly said by Lipovetski's ilk, paved the way for the death of the twentieth century in the midst and out of a surfeit of regurgitated laughter.

The third type of diplomatic joke I propose to look at is the joke that is the expression of what a compatriot has called “lateral thinking”.

Historians of joking—such as Georges Minois⁴ or Keith Cameron⁵ are almost all agreed that the idea that there are national brands of humour is hardly any older than the nineteenth century. In fact, the idea is probably a parasite of the nineteenth century brand of nationalism.

Take, for instance, so-called English humour. Before the nineteenth century, there certainly does not appear to be anything very peculiar about it. Even as late as the eighteenth century, the humour of Dryden or Swift is the same biting politico-social satire of their continental counterparts.

It is really only in the first issue of *Punch*, in 1841, that the claim is made by this prototypical English humorous review that it will not seek to provoke rude and vulgar laughter as by implication similar reviews did on the continent, but only gentle smiles. Indeed, for over more than a century, it supplied only jokes suitable to polite and plush Victorian salons and to the reading rooms of exclusive London clubs. The butt of its jokes was never the British government or the British aristocracy but for the most part the Pope and Bismarck—as well as inevitably Albert, the Prince Consort; alas he always struck Englishman as very un-English. Yet the very name, *Punch*, is derived from the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* and refers to a funny character who has transcended all national frontiers.

The amusingly eccentric style, both quaint and quietly analytic, which later came to be identified as typically English, did not exist before Charles Dickens: he was its unique creator. But, at the very same time that Dickens was concocting the new brew, Lord Byron was producing comic poetry with the same verve and broadsword swipe, as well as rapiers-like wit, as his French and other continental European contemporary counterparts.

In fact, English humour is omni-comprehensive. Any kind of joke corresponding to any of the established national stereotypes—the impertinent, ribald digs of the French, the ponderous noisy jibes of the Germans and so on, any example whatsoever of these clichés can be easily illustrated from the repertoire of the great English writers who wrote in the long century from Charles Lamb to Aubrey Beardsley.

Likewise, the so-called “rire gaulois”, the Gallic jeer, is a typically modern myth, also created in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was only then that the great art historian Viollet Le-Duc projected it back, in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture Française*, of 1844, onto the gothic gargoyles of the thirteenth century; and it was only later that others took

it further back onto the Gallic tribes who opposed the Roman Legions of Julius Caesar. These late nineteenth century French humorists comically pictured the Roman military on the model of the plodding Teutonic soldiers who had actually defeated the French in 1870. The Gallic jokes are evidently a kind of avenging compensation. They are not entirely self-flattering but they serve precisely to mark out differences between one nation and all others in the climate and spirit of nineteenth century nationalism.

At a recent party (as no doubt at many others before) one guest approached another.

“Are you Jewish?” he asked in as polite a tone as he could manage.

“No,” the other replied, “I just *look* cunning.”

Several Jewish theorists of humour—just to mention the names of a few, Shelley Berman, Milton Berle, Dan Ben-Amos and Elliot Oring⁶ have denied before me that there is any such thing as the Jewish joke. There exists a plethora of books, both collections and critical analysis, of the genre; but in fact, whenever I examined a proposed definition of it, I invariably found: it did not work. It is indeed difficult to find any trait or set of traits that applies to the Marx Brothers, Jerry Lewis, Danny Kaye, Woody Allen, Roberto Benigni and all other Jewish film comedians, and only to them—let alone if the circle is extended beyond the cinema to cover all species of Jewish jesters.

I think, however, that the debate about Jewish humour is particularly relevant to my topic precisely because of its general applicability to humour in general. For instance, it has been claimed by Henry D. Spalding that a characteristic of Jewish humour is that it is primarily self-derogatory, almost masochistic, and because of this highly visible self-bashing no compunction is then felt by Jews about joking about adversaries.⁷

In reply to this claim, Martin Grotjahn has argued that the self-derogation is merely an instance of the general rule that attack is the best defence. Grotjahn wrote: “One can almost see how a witty Jewish man carefully and cautiously takes a sharp dagger out of his enemy’s hands, sharpens it so that it can split a hair in mid-air, polishes it until it shines brightly, stabs himself with it, then returns it gallantly to the anti-Semite with the silent reproach: Now see whether you can do it half as well.”⁸

To which Christie Davies replied: Grotjahn’s “is a vivid but misleading image, for the point of getting hold of the dagger is not only to

demonstrate superior dexterity but to switch daggers, so that an innocuous rather than a potentially envenomed weapon is used. This is a tactic that both frustrated and infuriated anti-semites, who see Jewish humour as humanising those whom they wish to demonise and as making a people whom they seek to represent as a malign threat appear comically harmless.”⁹

I think that Spalding, Grotjahn and Davies have here provided us with some insights into the strategy of diplomatic joking in general, but with nothing specific about Jewish joking. Indeed, Ofia Nevo in 1991 conducted an empirical comparative research study which led him to the conclusion that: “there is no evidence that Jews in Israel laugh at themselves more than Arabs do, and there is some evidence to the contrary.”¹⁰

There is certainly a great deal of evidence about the power of jokes in Arab countries. But is there a specifically Arab type of joke? In the nineteen nineties in Algeria, at the height of the Fundamentalist period, satirical journals such as *El Manchur* and *Baroud* continued to appear, with jokes which are not only admirably courageous but which also survive well in translation. For instance, Aziz Chouaki published a funny short story; in it a State is depicted in which anything funny is forbidden and the spirit of laughter is shut up in a sort of Pandora’s box. But a group of jokers form a kind of holy Order and dedicate their lives to rescue the spirit of laughter from its encapsulation. This goal is achieved in a funnier manner than the salvation of the book in *Fahrenheit 451*. The point of the short story is not just that the right to joke is worth being defended but also that it can only be defended by joking. For this popular Arab writer at least, it is both end and means.¹¹

It is, however, the Arab comic strips that raise in its intricate complexity but also with most clarity—the question: do we have here a strain of humour that is specifically Arab and is this merely the expression of Arab nationalism? Or are jokes universal in significance and the expression of the common humanity of the human species?

The joint authors of a comprehensive book on the subject published in 1994 wrote: “Arab comic strips! To most in the West their reality is so unsuspected that the phrase itself almost rings like an oxymoron. Yet Arab comic strips are a flourishing genre with an enormous readership and a political and ideological range extending from Leftist and other secular modernist to Islamic religious perspectives.”¹²

No doubt, from the point of view of the Maltese reader, the most fascinating are the Juhâ anecdotes, since Juhâ is none other than our Gahan, the philosopher-fool. He first appeared in the pages of the *Mâjid* magazine in 1987, in a modernised form: his donkey replaced by a motorcycle and his turban by a motorcycle helmet.

But perhaps the most interesting to look at from our present point of view are the travels of Kaslân Jiddan also published in the *Mâjid* magazine.¹³ Kaslân is represented as a naughty boy who gets into comic scrapes by trying to play the adult but the scrapes are different in kind when Kaslân travels in Asia (India and Japan) on the one hand, and when he travels in the Western world (the United Kingdom and the United States) on the other. In Asia, everything is exotic and foreign; it is mainly the differences in dress and cuisine that land him often in farcical trouble. In the West, on the contrary, he regularly discovers an Arab presence hidden within the alien looking exterior. At the very beginning he meets an American boy on the plane, who asks him whether everyone in Abu Dhabi, where Kaslân comes from, rides camels; to which Kaslân replies that camels in his home country are only used for racing. Yes there are stereotypes which first have to be punctured; but after that the two boys soon find that their cultural heritage is sufficiently common for deep reciprocal understanding to be possible.

This discovery of reciprocity is rendered with brilliant visual wit. The speech balloons are placed not above the child who speaks the words in the balloon, but above the other child, so that the tails of the balloons are forced to cross over the heads of the speakers. It is a subtle, visual sign of the relationship, which is going to develop between the two children.

In Asia, which Kaslân sees as totally foreign, the comedy is only physical and farcical, since it seems possible for an Arab boy to communicate in Asian ways of life only at that level; but, in the West, the humorous exchanges are subtle and sophisticated—it is wit rather than tumble-down play. The authors of the survey consider that Kaslân, as depicted in *Mâjid*, has not yet attained a universal perspective; his point of view is specifically Arab. They do not note that the comic strip at the same time implies that the level of the shareable joking not only reveals the level of possible life sharing, but can itself serve as a pivot for rising from a lower to a higher level.

It was only fairly recently that anthropologists began to take a professional interest both in the diversity and in the universality of joking practices, focussing naturally on the description and analysis of institutionalised or ceremonial joking occasions.¹⁴

Not being an anthropologist myself, but having had an early vocation to become a circus clown, I have read widely in this literature and I am bold enough to hazard a summary of the result in about one hundred words.

It is clear that the institutionalised joking is programmed to take place in connection with some critical transaction that is likely to require—before, during or after—a cooling of tempers and a bolstering of spirits.

The occasions with which the bringing into play of deliberate laughter provoking devices is associated most frequently are the generation or loss of life. Thus, on the one hand, quasi-joking has polysemic relations with eroticism and sexuality, as very notably registered by Claude Levi-Strauss with regard to the Nambikwaras of Brazil and also by hordes of other anthropologists all over the world. On the other hand, joking has been found associated with the practices accompanying death, to my knowledge, in Sardinia, Madagascar and Mexico, among the Eskimos and elsewhere. Of course, marriage and death are both occasions very prone to give rise to negotiations and conflicts concerning both property and power. The need of pacifying spirits by means of jokes is precisely most compelling on such occasions.

Secondly, anthropological fieldwork has established that in small scale, isolated communities in remote pockets of Indonesia, Indochina, China, Amazonia, and Tunisia, institutionalised joking accompanies the accomplishment of some central, everyday but symbolically and conflictually pregnant tasks, like fishing for men and weaving for women. In more complex and easily accessible societies, ceremonial joking is rather the mark reserved for extraordinary circumstances. In such contexts, there are codes, sometimes very elaborate, to be followed. In a few extreme cases, joking is only allowed in secret, as seems to have been the case in the Heian period in Japan.

Thirdly, in Japan and China and other Far Eastern cultures, joking can be part of a religious or philosophic discipline, as in *tch'an* or *zen* Buddhism.¹⁵ Logically, because of the rule of the conjunction of opposites, joking has also been used to signify the contrary of supreme

detachment from earthly affairs; for instance, extreme jocularity is said to have been used ceremoniously to express hostile, occasionally cannibalistic, intent towards the different/others in some islands of Melanesia.

Although the national practices which social anthropologists have analysed may look very different from each other, it is quite plain that institutionalised joking generally arises out of the combination of two features in a consequential human situation: first, it is conflict saturated; secondly, there is something which has actually or potentially gone awry and it is deemed both possible and necessary to prevent the effects from becoming excessively painful.

Cultural anthropologists have focussed most attention on the role of ritual clowns.¹⁶ These enigmatic figures are often linked with the tragicomic deity generically referred to as “the Trickster”.

The ritual clown clearly has the function of reducing the tension generated by encounters with the divine in sacred ceremonies, but more than that he is expected to break taboos and flout conventional wisdom under cover of joking. Sacred ceremonies are normally held on the occasion of the most problematic transactions of human life precisely to palliate their conflictual or destructive dimensions and to enhance their creative and fulfilling potentiality.

Obviously, modern man, both before and after the advent of the global village, has remained just as much in need of liberating humour as the so-called “primitive” tribesman. Probably, the disappearance of the Trickster from Western society created the vacuum that the retailers of the national or ethnic joke sought to fill. Thus, the mantle of the ritual clown may have fallen, in the age of the Nation-State, often upon the perhaps unsuspecting shoulders of the serious, professional diplomat in the field of international negotiation.

The second archetype of the diplomatic joke inevitably arose as the converse form of the national or ethnic jest. Joking has an obvious role in the art of conversation and achieves a high degree of importance especially at times and places when and where conversation is highly valued and formalised as for instance in 18th century Europe or present day Arab coffee-shops. The joke is the most adroit manner to get conversation flowing if, per chance, it has been blocked by some breach of etiquette.

Even more importantly, for the diplomat, a certain kind of joke was rightly perceived to be the best, if not the only way, to generate an awareness of the intimate bonds uniting all members of the human species beyond the barriers of all culturally-generated divisions.

Any joke, as is well-known, works on the basis of shared assumptions and shared presuppositions. For example, when I was a philosophy student at Oxford, I was president of the Voltaire Society, (that was, in itself, a kind of joke, given my vocation as a Catholic priest). Its motto was if Voltaire had not existed it would have been necessary to invent him. The humour of that statement is obviously enhanced if you know that Voltaire had said: "If God did not exist, it would have been necessary to invent him." Much has to go unsaid if a joke is to work. That is why, when jokes work, they give rise to a feeling of complicity between the teller and the listener. Both become aware of the huge amount of shared beliefs and understanding that there is, rather inexplicably, more or less, between all human beings.

The second type of diplomatic joke is essentially conceived as a device for inducing awareness of the deep unity, beneath the more apparent diversity of the human race. Because of this diversity, it is not surprising that there are as many as five thousand languages in use in the world today. Each of them by virtue of its peculiar differences from every other enables humankind to express some nuance of human existence or thought that would otherwise be inexpressible. That is why when any language dies out—and alas the rate of mortality among languages is rising—it is a loss to the whole of humanity.

But it is surprising that the five thousand extant languages all have the same basic grammatical structure. This deep similarity is perhaps the clearest proof of the unity of the human race as emerges from the work of the Italo-American geneticist, Cavalli-Sforza.¹⁷ It is because of this structural similarity between all languages that most jokes are translatable. It is only those jokes—such as puns—which depend on the oddities of a particular language (and admittedly they are not few) which are not easily translated.

The strength of the structural similarity between all languages can today be more easily illustrated than in the past by the very mistakes committed by computers when they are used for translation. The mistakes are the unintended jokes which human beings extract from their

machines. For instance, a computer gave—the whisky is good but the meat is bad—as its English rendering of the original Greek of the gospel phrase “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Thus the computer acknowledges the universality which the second type of diplomatic joke was supposed to uniquely augment. Thus the more optimistic among the diplomats addicted to the second type of joke could nourish a dream which, after the coming of the computer, perhaps a little paradoxically, we now tend to regard as utopian. When all mankind becomes able to share a joke together, they surmised, it will be the fulfilment of mankind’s most desperate hope. It will be tangible proof that we are all sufficiently alike to be able to live in peace together.

Even if it is just two people who laugh at the same joke, it is a sure sign that they have established contact with each other at a deep level. That is, in any case, a most difficult and important human achievement. The fact that they have both been tickled within by the same joke reassures them that they share a common humanity. Had they not so been, they would have had some reason for concern.¹⁸

Unfortunately, even before the coming of the computer, developments had begun to occur which generated a cynical attitude towards this dream and second type jokes.

It has been said that joking—from the dadaists to Monty Python—became the opium of the twentieth century. Compulsive joking began as a kind of occasional nervous tick with the First World War and developed into a chronic and uncontrollable mania in the Second. It was at first the soft drug that enabled the Western World to survive the shame and ignominy of its history in the first half of those hundred agonising years. Then joking spread like an epidemic and soon had penetrated everywhere. After 1945, following the experience of genocide and nuclear bombing, the existentialist philosophers succeeded in convincing most of us that existence was absurd; their adversaries, the logical positivists, told us that metaphysics especially of the existentialist kind, was nonsense; and, finally, there came the post-modernists. With the ironic voice of Umberto Eco’s William of Baskerville, they assured us that: “Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laughable, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth.”¹⁹ The twentieth century—let me say it again for repetition’s sake—died of an overdose of laughter.

Now in the twenty-first century a human being jokes as he/she breathes. Joking has been injected into the lifeblood of what could be called the farcical society as it has been called the electronic age. On all occasions dress is optional, but to wear a smile is compulsory. Whether you are attending a session of parliament or a lecture at the university of the third age, you are expected to participate in a universally standardised, mass media modelled, utterly inane joke-exchange encounter. It is a planetary phenomenon. The all-pervasiveness of would be jocularity has become one of the most conspicuous aspects of the globalisation that climaxed after the unexpected fall of the Berlin wall.

Could it be otherwise, once both philosophers and men and women in the street have come to believe that there is nothing, absolutely nothing that deserves to be taken seriously?

Jokes are needed to camouflage the total take over of life by Insignificance. In the empire of meaninglessness, no one knows where one is going; so what can be done except laugh about it? One covers it up as best one can by joyless, forced jokes, like those of children in the dark.

We have lost hold of every certainty. We can only pretend to be cool and soft and adepts with Vattimo of *il pensiero debole*. We can only giggle and snigger at anything and everything, just to hear the click and cluck of our own voice, to exorcise our fears and our inner emptiness with a chuckle. But that is the end of genuine joking since if nothing is to be taken seriously then equally nothing can be taken jokingly.

Even irony ceased to be a suitable garb for diplomatic joking. As Minois has written: "the problem is that at the end of the twentieth century, there occurred a generalisation and a democratisation of the ironic spirit. Now irony has splendid qualities when it is handled by a sceptical elite who watch the world turn on its axis with finicky eyes in their ample hours of leisure. The elite can afford to be ironical as long as the masses continue to work at the machines. But disaster comes if the masses abandon long-cherished values and wax ironic as well. That is what is beginning to happen today and no doubt what will happen increasingly, as the boundary between the real and the virtual becomes increasingly fudged. The ironic spirit becomes all the more necessary, all the more virtual our environment becomes. He who is not ironic vis-à-vis Internet will be devoured by Internet."²⁰

“The twentieth century was killed by a spasm of joking. The twenty-first century will kill joking by its spasms.”

Is this a joke, or a serious prediction? ... I want to suggest as the third step in my argument that this question is badly formulated. It presupposes that something is either a joke or it is serious, with no other alternative.

On the contrary, the great Renaissance thinker, Nicholas of Cusa spoke of “serious joking”, not as of a contradiction in terms, as the decadent logic of the Cartesian age held, but on the contrary as the key to creative thought.

“The serious joke” is, I think, the form which the diplomatic joke will take in the twenty-first century if it is not only to survive but also to proudly contribute to the birth of a surprising, new and sustainable world for future generations.

If I am anywhere near right, the serious joke has three identification marks.

In the first place, it shows things in a new perspective, it shifts frames of reference and places things in a new gestalt. As Edward de Bono puts it, it causes perceptions and conceptions which were set up in one pattern to be reconfigured into another different pattern. That is its inbuilt goal.

Secondly, in order to accomplish this goal, it uses as a rule a characteristic means. It takes you to an apparently unreasonable point from which the main road along which you have been travelling does not appear to be the only one. A joke is the best device to get you on the side track from where you can see that there are other ways of getting about than just the contraries forward or backward, or right and left. Joking involves glimpsing the improbable and using upside down logic.

Thirdly, the serious diplomatic joke will sound on first hearing as if it were a mistake. In fact, the laughter produced by it will only be, *because from the established, conventional standpoint*, it sounds mistaken. But, on allowing its echo to reverberate in the mind, it will turn out to be not a real mistake and its pain just that which always accompanies any defamiliarisation process just as it always accompanies childbirth, and quickly turns into sudden pleasures and excitement. Of course, even genuine mistakes, or involuntary jokes, have often been a usual source of creative solutions to problems long believed to be intractable or even the existence of which had long remained unsuspected.

There is just one further point I wish to make about serious joking—the sustainable form of diplomatic joking calling for development in the age of the Internet. The point is to stress the difference between argument and joking or between the dialectic and the creative approaches to discussion and negotiation.

The structure of an argument is the confrontation of contraries aimed at making a choice between opposite ways. A serious joke, on the other hand, is a provocation to both parties displaying the possibility of adapting an as yet unexplored angle of approach. It aims not at the victory or defeat of either side, not a compromise, which means some sacrifice by both sides, not consensus, which is only agreement at the low level of the highest common ground, but at a situation where something is gained by both sides. Serious joking is the prime tool of the mediator who does not conceive of his role as neutral or passive, but as a promoter of win-win conclusions.

Actually, serious joking is most effective not so much when it is used as a problem—solving technique, as when it has become so much of an ingrained style that it works preventively. Most conflicts in whatever sphere of life arise out of over sharp divisions and rigid polarisations which our habitual ways of thinking generate. Thinking in the binary system—yes or no, one or zero—which has been admirably used to produce computers—needs the constant corrective of the authentic diplomatic joke.

Another aspect of the contrast between dialectic and creativity, or between standard arguing and serious joking is that when a serious joke falls flat (as I told you at the beginning of this talk, the joke with which I began *Peopled Silence* habitually did) the consequences are not as bad as when an argument fails to convince. For instance, if you have not been convinced by my arguments today, it follows that either you or I are not as clever as our hosts thought that we were, and that is a dismal and very discouraging conclusion but if you just did not find my quoted or coined jokes to be amusing, it is sad, but nevertheless we have manifested at least the desire to share a laterally angled point of view. You would still be smiling as a result, although with a different meaning perhaps than the kind of smiling which I had intended to provoke.

By this time, I can sense your uneasiness about my getting to the end of the track along which I have been steadily jogging and I will end by trying to anticipate question-time. Can I exemplify what I have been

presenting in a manner which may have sounded too much like an obscure and exotic recipe? I think the best I can do now is to quote a favourite example of Edward de Bono's—which is, in fact, a narrative of a practical joke in illustration of lateral thinking: “The ticket inspector came into the train compartment. The young man began to search frantically for his ticket: top pockets, trouser pockets, coat on the rack, brief case and everywhere. After a while the inspector took pity on him and extracted the ticket from the young man's mouth where it had been all along. When the inspector had left, another passenger asked the young man if he felt foolish. ‘Not at all,’ said the young man ‘I was chewing the date off the ticket’.”²¹

That, I suggest, is the joking path to be followed by any diplomat who wants to escape from the tidal wave of pseudo-jocularly which has inundated us: the fate of the media showmen adequately represented by Edward de Bono's ticket inspector.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips, Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 171; Cfr. Erwin Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Philadelphia: 1956).
- 2 P. Serracino-Inglott, *Peopled Silence* (Malta: Malta University Press, 1995).
- 3 Gilles Lipovetski, *L'Ere du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Folio, 1993).
- 4 George Minois, *Histoire du Rire et de la Derision* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).
- 5 Keith Cameron (ed.), *Humour and History* (Oxford: 1993).
- 6 Berman and Berle quoted by Charles Gruer, *The Game of Humor* (New Brunswick (USA): Transaction, 1997), 92-3; Dan Ben-Amos, “The Myth of Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* 32, 2, 112-131; Elliot Oring,

- Jokes and their Relations* (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1992).
- 7 Henry D. Spalding, *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Humor* (New York: Jonathan David, 1967), xv-xvi.
- 8 Martin Grotjahn has written *Beyond Laughter* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1957); but the quotation is from William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York: Harper, 1981), 85.
- 9 Christie Davies, "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4 (1991), 189-209.
- 10 Ofra Nevo, "What's in a Jewish Joke?" *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* (1991), 251-260.
- 11 Cfr. C. Chaulet-Achour, "Humour et societe dans l'Algerie actuelle," *Humoresques* 7 (Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1996), 141-2.
12. Op. cit., 1.
13. Ibid., 169-173.
- 14 Cfr. M.L. Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Precursors include: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships," *Africa* 13 (1940), 195-210; R.E. Moreau, "Joking Relations in Tanganyika," *Africa* 14 (1944), 386-400; G. Bateson, "The Position of Humour in Human Communication," *Cybernetics* (New York: 1953), 1-47; Mary Douglas, "Jokes," *Implicit Meanings* (London: 1975), 94-114; F. Ceccarelli, *Sorriso e riso. Saggio di antropologia biosociale* (Torino: 1988).
- 15 Cfr. R.B. Finnstad, "The Smile of the Buddha," *The Eclipse of Symbolism* (New York: Columbia, 1970), 52-66; C. Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (London: 1974); A. Theodoridis, P. Noster and J. Ries

(eds.), *Humour, Travail et science en Orient* (Louvain: 1988). 16 Cfr. Laura Makarius, "Le mythe du Trickster," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 175 (1969); J. Cazeneuve, *Les Dieux dansent a Cibola* (Paris: 1957); J. Westcott, "The Yoruba Trickster," *Africa* 32, 336-65; L. Hieb, *The Hopi Clown Ritual* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: 1979); G. Mazzoleni, *I Buffoni sacri d'America e il ridere secondo cultura* (Rome: 1979); D. Handelman, "The Ritual Clown," *Anthropos* 76, 321 ff.

- 17 Luca and Francesco Cavalli-Sforza, *Qui Sommes Nous? Une histoire de la diversité humaine* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).
- 18 This argument is mainly derived from Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Cohen is one of the very few theorists of joking who without going very deep devotes a chapter of his book to discuss, when and by-whom-to-whom it is appropriate to tell jokes. His first conclusion is that "joking is almost always out of place when it is a kind of avoidance" (e.g. joking about death or racism in order to avoid taking them seriously). He next observes: "When Mark Twain said 'Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand,' he neglected to note that some things should remain standing." Finally, about ethnic jokes, he dismisses those in which the characters are Poles or Irish or Sikhs or Iowans just as an alternative way of saying that they are generically inept, in favour of those in which it really matters that the character is Polish (i.e. he is addicted to marvellously intricate subtleness and indirections of logic) or Irish (i.e. he is exceedingly addicted to literature). The latter kind of joke, unlike the former requires genuine knowledge for their approach.
- 19 Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (London: 1980), 491; also id., *Reflections on the Name of the Rose* (London: 1985); id., "Pirandello Ridens," *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana: 1990), 163-173 (for Eco's comments on the philosophy of laughter); and Karl-Joseph Huschel, *Laughter* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1994) for an excellent discussion of postmodernist theories of humour.

20 Op. cit., 525; Cfr W. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (London: 1974); V. Jaankelevitch, *L'ironie* (Paris: Champs-Flammarion, 1964); C. Lemert, "General Social Theory, Irony and Postmodernism," *Postmodernism and Social Theory*, eds. S. Seidman and D.G. Wagner (Oxford: 1992); C.I. Glikberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature* (The Hague: 1969).

21 Edward de Bono, *DeBono's Thinking Course Revised* (London: BBC Books, 1997), 52-3.

