



# Getting to grips with comedy – as a Christian

In this piece, Paul Kerensa considers who determines the acceptable limits of comedy and whether there is an expectation that you have to be edgy to be funny and successful. There will always be a market for this darker side of comedy, but there is also a growing demand for clean, family friendly acts.



## Paul Kerensa

Paul Kerensa is an award-winning comedian and a British Comedy Award nominated writer. He started stand-up in 2002, when he won ITV's *Take The Mike* Award in 2002. Since then he has become a regular at the UK's biggest venues. He writes for various sitcoms, including BBC hits *Not Going Out*, *After You've Gone* and *Miranda*. Visit his website [www.paulkerensa.com](http://www.paulkerensa.com)

*'Once we accept our limits, we go beyond them.'*  
(Albert Einstein)

*'No no, no no no no, no no no no, no no there's no limit.'*  
(2 Unlimited)

'Here's one for you.' An expression that, depending on the speaker, can fill the listener with anticipation and glee, at knowing an hilarious joke is coming their way ... or dread, at the prospect of having to pretend to find a crude/racist/sexist/unfunny joke funny, and letting loose that fake laugh you've been practising around this person for years. I find after gigs, if someone from the audience comes offering a joke, nine times out of ten it's of the latter category and is shockingly offensive. Not just 'wouldn't tell that in church' offensive, but 'would expect Bernard Manning to blush at that one' offensive. It's a bold move to try and find a laugh in genocide, but I've heard people try.

It seems that those who harbour the most racist, sexist senses of humour are also the keenest to share it with others. How generous. Now I'm no prude (something mostly said by people who then are prudes, so okay, maybe I am a bit – I saw *The Crying Game* and thought, ooh, she has an outie), and I'm well aware that they say 'Comedy is tragedy plus time.' Nowadays, thanks to websites like sickopedia, or late-night TV panel shows that often aren't late-night enough, the 'time' part of that equation is getting increasingly low. I know people on Twitter who find out their news not by checking the news websites, but by reading about a tragedy in joke

form in someone's 'tweet', then having to follow it up on the BBC News website to see if it's true.

This is not to say that I have never laughed at an inappropriate joke, nor indeed that I have never made an inappropriate joke. There is a time and a place and certainly an audience for them, but there is a sense that today crude jokes are pervading all times and all places, and not all audiences want that. Since more and more comedians decided they wanted to push boundaries, is there any boundary left to push?

I should say that I'm not an edgy comedian. Comedy reviewers have felt the need to remind me of this, providing such backhanded compliments like, 'Proving you don't have to be edgy to be funny' (*Metro*) or 'The unconfontational manner of Dave Gorman ... One of the most unthreatening onstage presences around' (*Chortle*). I'm intrigued how these all use negatives to describe what I do. I'm being defined by not being confrontational, not being dark, not being crude. So what they're really saying is that confrontational, edgy comedians are the norm.

In a way, they're right. Still in open-spot clubs today, as ten years ago when I started stand-up, the vast majority of comedians reference sex in their acts. Paedophiles are commonly used in jokes, as are 'taboos' of religion, drugs and pornography. These comedians are trying to make a name for themselves by saying the unsayable. The trouble is that once everyone is saying it, it's not that unsayable. It's pretty sayable. So is the new 'edgy' to be not edgy?

In many respects, I think it is. As limits are pushed more and more in comedy, there's no clear designation of where the line is. For comics like Frankie Boyle, there is no line (the line is a dot to him, to invoke a line from *Friends*). Jimmy Carr too revels in his jokes about rape, faux misogyny, a constant ribbing of fat people, etc. For him, all comedy needs a victim, and goshdarnit he's going to say all the things you really shouldn't – jokes you want to repeat in the office on Monday but are not sure if you should.

I can't recall the last time I saw a comic and thought, 'Wow, I can't believe they went *there*,' largely because everyone's already gone *there* before. Perhaps this is why there is a growing trend for quick, dark humour about recent topical events. Some wannabe jesters are thinking, 'Maybe I won't be the first to make a joke about alcoholism, but I will be the first to make a joke about *this* celebrity's alcoholism.'

The internet is perhaps a more taboo-free zone than the comedy circuit, or jokes that do the rounds in pubs, because online there are no national taboos. In the UK, for instance, race is a big taboo, but sex isn't any more. Most comedians will talk about sex in their act, but the very few who tackle race had better do it very carefully – you can feel the audience take a deep breath in if a white comedian mentions keywords like 'Muslim' or 'Pakistani'. In America though, race isn't a taboo, but sex is. US comics aren't nearly as filthy as us Brits are about bedroom habits, but they are more than happy to attempt crass Mexican impersonations, and even use the word 'towelhead' when talking about Middle Eastern immigrants. I've been in American comedy clubs, and felt very uncomfortable while the audience were howling around me at such jokes, but came away refreshed that I don't know all about the comedians' sex lives.

The audience and the culture will largely dictate then what's acceptable. In the 1970s, society had different boundaries with regard to equality of gender, race and sexuality, so the comedians reflected that. Acts such as Bernard Manning, Stan Boardman, and even family favourites like Roy Walker and Jim Bowen, could get away with jokes then that would get you booed out of town now. And yes with our twenty-first century mindset, we can look back and judge them harshly, but I think they were only as extreme as their audiences let them be. Those laughing were just as much a part of it as the acts were, as it encouraged a culture where these things can be said.

As society's prejudices changed, so did the jokes. But it goes to show that much as it may seem that comedy is without boundaries today, we do have some – the Pakistani and Irish jokes of yore are no more. We know it makes people uncomfortable, and it's racist and horrible. So now it's Polish jokes. Oh, and jokes about Scottish people being tight, and Welsh people and their sheep, and French people smelling, and Germans ... I could go on. Oh, and gingers.

As a ginger man, I feel I can make jokes about ginger people – it always comes from an 'Aren't we always getting a hard time' standpoint. But I still hear so many non-gingers making jokes at our expense, everything from how we're all ugly to how we should be drowned as children. But will there ever be a ginger uprising? Will the government step in with a law against 'incitement to hair-colour-based hatred'? Not with Harriet Harman calling Danny Alexander a 'ginger rodent', and not unless the SNP ever get into Downing Street.

So there will continue to be boundaries, reflecting the mood of the nation, and comedians will continue to try to push them. It does mean that a good way to stand out at the moment is to try *not* be edgy. There is, I think, a voracious appetite among the general public for comedy that can be enjoyed by everyone from the eight year old in the family to the great-grandmother.

### as limits are pushed more and more in comedy, there's no clear designation of where the line is

The stand-up comedy world is so big in the UK now that the days are gone when it wouldn't be for everyone. Ten years ago, most people could probably only name five or so comics: Jack Dee, Eddie Izzard, Jo Brand, etc. Nowadays thanks to the proliferation of panel games and the revival of TV stand-up shows like *Live At The Apollo*, it's not a question of 'Do you like comedy?'; rather it's 'What sort of comedy do you like?'. If you don't like Frankie Boyle, you might like Michael McIntyre, or there's Russell Howard if you want something more youth-friendly, or Mark Watson if you like something offbeat, or *QI* if you want to learn something, or *Top Gear* if you want to hear jokes about Mexicans.

Therefore if the darker side of comedy isn't your thing, there is hope! Just as you may not like to watch it, others don't like to make it. So just as on TV you'll find more family-friendly fare, on the live circuit there are clean comedians either buried within regular comedy nights (look out for acts such as James Sherwood and Steve Best – not Christian, but clean, and proper funny), or there are clean comedy shows, ranging from Comedy4Kids in London, which encourages children of all ages to try stand-up, to the stand-up comedy nights in churches and the like put on by Tony Vino, Andy Kind and myself. These shows tour festivals such as Spring Harvest and Greenbelt, as well as secular venues up and down the country, and prove that there is just as much appetite for clean comedy as there is for the ruder kind.

I've heard some people argue that comedy needs a victim – that comedy without its rude factor is like Amanda Holden without *The X Factor*: it doesn't work. I don't agree that comedy needs to be rude, but I do agree that generally it needs a victim – even clean comedy. The question is, is the victim fair game? As Woody Allen pointed out, 'Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.'

For many cleaner acts, the victim is the joke-teller – either the self-deprecating ‘I’m so rubbish’ approach, or the observational ‘Have you ever noticed when you do this, that or the other’ approach, where we’re all the victim. These ‘victims’ are clearly fair game – the joke-teller and the audience. We’re all in on the laugh. Celebrities are often thought to be fair game, because they’re in the public arena. So jokes about Jordan, the public generally find to be fine. Jokes about Jordan’s disabled child: the public generally find to be not fine. Frankie Boyle, take note.

I say ‘the public’ because it’s not for me to decide which topics are allowed or not. Comedy is subjective, so it’s up to the joke-teller, and up to the audience whether or not they tolerate it. So listen up, comedygoer, TV-watcher and humour consumer. You can like what you want to like. If a TV programme offends you, don’t watch that, watch something you do like. It sounds obvious but the amount of people who deliberately watch something they don’t like, just to be offended, is quite astounding. There will be clean comedy in this country so long as people watch it.

I’ve shared a bill a couple of times with Aussie shock comic Jim Jefferies. He’s got his fans, he’s not for everyone, and he does like to take his material to the extreme. At both shows, he got the biggest reaction of the night. There were gasps, hollers and howls. There were some ‘Ha ha ha’s but a lot more ‘Whoa’s. The general feel in the room was one of ‘I can’t believe he said that.’ There were also walkouts. It wasn’t for those people, and that’s fine. They won’t see him again, and his fans will.

There will always be comedians wanting to push the limits of what’s acceptable, and there will be an audience for that. As these boundaries shift, the middle-ground shifts with it. So do vote with your feet. The business of comedy is, like all free-market economies, a democratic one. So if you prefer your comedy clean, do watch and support clean comedy. If nothing else, it’ll give the edgier comedians something to react against.

It’s true that you can’t please all the people all the time. So if my above attempts at humour – making ginger people, *Top Gear* and Amanda Holden, the victim of the joke – causes offence. Apologies. Just be glad Frankie Boyle didn’t write this.

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