

THE ALTERNATIVE

May 2007
Vol. xxxiv No. 4

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the theme of irony, that special kind of humor that is especially appropriate these days. Humor, especially ironic humor, has always been chancy and easily misunderstood. Television and the Internet have dramatically changed how people hear attempts at humor. Ironic humor usually requires an insider group and outsiders. Insiders poking fun at their group or one of their own is fair game. But outsiders making fun of the same group, especially if it is a vulnerable group, can be unfair. The vulnerable group making fun of powerful outsiders is appropriate. As G.B. Shaw said, if you are going to tell the truth to powerful people you had better make them laugh.

Frank Rich, a New York Times columnist, made a surprisingly lame defense of Don Imus by saying that television's South Park gets a free pass from the bigotry police. A letter to the Times pointed out that "South Park uses bigotry to make fun of bigotry. Imus' bigotry had no irony. It invites us to sneer at victims. It's raw, the bar stool variety, with the only humor being our attempt to laugh away the discomfort it causes." Some people may think that the cartoon characters in South Park go too far at times, but to compare Imus and South Park is particularly obtuse, the kind of thinking that Frank Rich routinely ridicules.

In this issue there are four items. The first is an essay by Gabriel Moran on irony, which is itself laced with ironic statements. The second item is a parable on the New Testament by a Jewish professor of New Testament studies in a Christian seminary. The third item is a selection of verses from *Obliviously on He Sails*, Calvin Trillin's playful scream at the current administration. The last item consists of excerpts from one of the great Christian classics of the twentieth century. In *The Screwtape Letters*, written during WWII, the devil Screwtape gives advice to his nephew on how to tempt human beings away from God and their better selves.

Contributions and correspondence to:

Alternative Religious Education, Inc.

Box 1405, Montauk, NY 11954

gm1405@aol.com ; back copies on line at: www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran

IRONY: FRIEND OR FOE?

By Gabriel Moran

In 2001 there was a slight mishap in New York City. The month was September and I believe it was around the eleventh of the month. Two ugly buildings that had defaced the city's skyline were destroyed. The two buildings had been given the pretentious name of the World Trade Center. However, New Yorkers had first called them David and Nelson in reference to the Rockefeller brothers who had built the towers when there was already excess office space in lower Manhattan.

Almost three thousand people were killed when two airplanes hit the buildings; the faulty construction of the buildings did the rest. The loss of life was tragic, about the same number as are killed each month in Iraq (an unofficial estimate since the U.S. government has said it is not interested in counting the Iraqi dead) but less than the number slaughtered on U.S. highways each month. This particular incident got much attention; a documentary film said it was the most photographed event in the history of the world. It is important to stay number one.

For five or six days after this incident there was unusual activity in Washington D.C. There appeared to be actual thinking (they had had an incident of their own). Although the man said to be president of the United States took a while to get going, he made a good speech on Friday of that week at the National Cathedral. But one line of his speech should have caused concern. He said: "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."

If someone were responsible to history, the last thing he or she would promise to do is "rid the world of evil." Only someone who claimed a divine mandate would set out on that mission. Religious leaders went to the White House and one of them told Mr. Bush that his leadership was part of God's plan. Bush responded: "I accept the responsibility." Far worse than Bush's delusion on that occasion was this "religious leader" feeding him such idolatrous claims.

During that week several pleading questions were asked, such as Mr. Bush's "why do they hate us?" If he had wanted to know, there were answers readily available (World's main supplier of arms? Chief economic bully? A government that refuses to sign international treaties?) Fortunately, all such useless speculation ended within the week when the United States declared war. War on whom? On terror - or is it terrorism - or perhaps terrorists. In any case, why bother with niceties of language, evil had to be eliminated.

A war on terror/terrorism was to include any country that harbors terrorists. That would logically include the United States which perhaps explains much of the government's subsequent activity. The first country in the crosshairs was Afghanistan which couldn't offer much resistance except with the arms that the United States had supplied them to fight the Soviet Union (the enemy of my enemy, etc). The U. S. was apparently looking for one man to be appointed to the role of "as bad as Hitler" (a role formerly occupied by Kadafi, Ortega, Fidel, and countless others). Mr. Bin Laden had disappeared into a cave (though apparently with his t.v. equipment for sending tapes to Al Jazeera). Another country besides Afghanistan was needed; as Calvin Trillin explained: "Osama's split and Wall Street's sagging/ It's time to get that puppy wagging."

The next country chosen for U.S. benevolence was Iraq. Since Iran was a more dangerous country, Jon Stewart wondered whether we went to war with Iraq because somebody got the q and the n mixed up. Richard Clarke, who was in charge of "intelligence" and security, was also puzzled. Clarke reports that at a meeting in 2001 Rumsfeld said that the reason for fighting Iraq was that they offered better targets. Clarke says he looked for a sign that Rumsfeld was kidding (Rumsfeld was a great kidder). As it turned out, the good targets did not guarantee victory. Keith Obermann reminds his listeners every evening: it is now more than one thousand four hundred days since the proclamation "mission accomplished."

Cheney, Rumsfeld and the boys had been planning this war for decades; George junior was recruited so as to finish "my Dad's" unfinished business. Rumsfeld took one for the team last November but Cheney has increasingly sounded like "Baghdad Bob," the hapless Iraqi communication minister who kept giving out positive updates as the U.S. rolled toward Baghdad unopposed. History may yet prove Bob more prescient than Dick, or at least less delusional, about the final outcome.

During the week after the plane incidents, a peculiar idea infected the literary world, namely, that we should all stop being ironic and start being serious. Earnest essays appeared, such as Roger Rosenblatt's in *Time*: "The Age of Irony Comes to an End." At the end of the week, *The New York Times* summed up the discussion: "The most common pronouncements so far have been that an epoch defined by irony and cynicism has finally come to an end. 'It's the end of the age of irony,' said Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair*. It is hard to know exactly what the end of that age might entail – will reruns of *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* cease to be funny? But Mr. Carter speaks with a special authority. He is often credited with helping to usher in the era of irony as one of the founders of the magazine *Spy*...."

I wrote in a letter to the *Times* (one of my many unpublished letters): “The announcement that irony will or should disappear is wrong and dangerous. The article equates cynicism and irony, two very different things. Although the term irony has been overused and misused recently, it has a fairly consistent 2400 year history. Far from not being serious, irony is a form of humor that allows people to cope with the deadly serious. This meaning of irony was elaborated by Socrates in response to people about to kill him. Irony means saying one thing while playfully suggesting that the hearer should consider that the opposite might be true. It is a reminder that earnest people who would dictate how everyone should live are mad. New York City has always been an ironic place; neither *Seinfeld* nor *Vanity Fair* invented this characteristic of the city. Waves of immigrants have added their own contribution to the pool of irony already here. It is a way of surviving from day to day in a place beyond anyone’s control. We have never been more in need of irony so as not to end up as humorless and robotic as our mad bombers.”

I hope that all the people who solemnly pronounced the death of irony in 2001 are properly embarrassed today. But I fear that since 2001 the flood of earnest lies by government officials has led to a reaction of cynicism instead of irony. Much of today’s humor seems crude, vicious and mean-spirited, that is, too similar to the government’s own actions. Irony requires skill, balance and serious attention to accuracy as the basis of the humor.

Very little serious debate has occurred in the press, on television or in universities but that has not been because of an excess of ironic humor. The *Sunday Times* recently reported that almost the only place on television for discussion of serious books is Comedy Central’s ironic *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. The *Times* wasn’t trying to be ironic, merely reporting the news. But the *Times* was surely aware of the irony that many older people have discovered along with the young that a “fake news show” is the best guide on television for getting knowledge of the government and the country.

LAST JUDGMENT

By Amy-Jill Levine

After a long and happy life, I find myself at the pearly gates (a sight of great joy; the word for “pearl” in Greek is, by the way, margarita). Standing there is St. Peter. This truly is heaven, for finally my academic questions will receive answers. I immediately begin the questions that have been plaguing me for half a century. “Can you speak Greek? Where did you go when you wandered off in the

middle of Acts? How was the incident between you and Paul in Antioch resolved? What happened to your wife?"

Peter looks at me with some bemusement and states, "Look, lady, I've got a whole line of saved people to process. Pick up your harp and slippers here, and get the wings and halo at the next table. We'll talk after dinner."

As I float off, I hear, behind me, a man trying to gain Peter's attention. He has located a "red letter Bible," which is a text in which the words of Jesus are printed in red letters. This is heaven, and all sorts of sacred art and Scriptures, from the Bhagavad Gita to the Qur'an, are easily available (missing, however, was the Reader's Digest Condensed Version). The fellow has his Bible open to John 14, and he is frenetically pointing at verse 6: "Jesus says here, in red letters, that he is the way. I've seen this woman on television (actually she's thinner in person). She's not a Christian; she's not baptized – she shouldn't be here."

"Oy," says Peter, "another one – wait here." He returns a few minutes later with a man about five foot three with dark hair and eyes. I notice immediately that he has holes in his wrists, for when the empire executes an individual, the circumstances of that death cannot be forgotten. "What is it my son?" he asks. The man, obviously nonplussed, sputters, "I don't mean to be rude, but didn't you say that no one comes to the Father except through you?"

"Well," responds Jesus, "John does have me saying this." (Waiting in line a few other biblical scholars who overhear this conversation sigh at Jesus' phrasing; a number of them remain convinced that Jesus said no such thing. They'll have to make the inquiry on their own time.) "But if you flip back to the Gospel of Matthew, which does come first in the canon, you'll notice in chapter 25, at the judgment of the sheep and the goats, that I am not interested in those who say 'Lord, Lord,' but in those who do their best to live a righteous life: feeding the hungry, visiting people in prison..."

Becoming almost apoplectic, the man interrupts, "But, but, that's works righteousness. You're saying she's earned her way into heaven?" "No," replies Jesus. "I am not saying that at all. I am saying that I am the way, not you, not your church, not your reading of John's Gospel, and not the claim of any individual Christian or any particular congregation. I am making the determination, and it is by my grace that anyone gets in, including you. Do you want to argue? The last thing I recall seeing, before picking up my heavenly accessories, is Jesus handing the poor man a Kleenex to help get the log out of his eye.

OBLIVIOUSLY ON HE SAILS
By Calvin Trillin

Within the Sissy Hawk Brigade –
A band of Vietnam evaders.
All puffed up now as tough crusaders.
Yes, now as then, they love inciting
A war that others will be fighting.

The Senate Democrats sat mum,
Like doves afraid to coo.
So history will soon record
This war as their war too.

At least there's no Bush eulogy
On why they had to die.
It's better that they're put to rest
Without another lie.

By night our missiles rain on them,
By day we drop them bread.
They should be grateful for the food –
Unless, of course, they're dead.

So Rudy is the person of the year
We join the world in offering a cheer.
At certain times, it now must be conceded,
A paranoid control freak is just what's needed.

Because they pay too much in taxes –
To feed the poor and fight the axis –
The rich are truly discommoded,
It spoils the fun of being loaded.
So we should tax the poor instead –
A tax on alms, or day-old bread.

A public school whose students don't test well
Would lose its funds unless its score improves.
If cutting funds won't help the kids advance
We could prohibit lunch, or take their shoes.

DEVILISH WISDOM

By C.S. Lewis

Of course a war is entertaining. But what permanent good does it do us unless we make use of it for bringing souls to Our Father Below? When I see the temporal suffering of humans who finally escape us, I feel as if I had been allowed to taste the first course of a rich banquet and then denied the rest. The Enemy, true to his barbarous methods of warfare, allows us to see the short misery of His favorites only to tantalize and torment us – to mock the incessant hunger which, during this present phase of the great conflict, His blockade is admittedly imposing.

We may hope for a great deal of cruelty and unchastity. But, if we are not careful, we shall see thousands turning in this tribulation to the Enemy, while tens of thousands who do not go so far as that will nevertheless have their attention diverted from themselves to values and causes which they believe to be higher than the self. I know that the Enemy disapproves many of these causes. But that is where He is so unfair. He often makes prizes of humans who have given their lives for causes He thinks bad on the monstrously sophisticated ground that the humans thought they were good and were following the best they knew.

First, you allowed the patient to read a book he really enjoyed, because he enjoyed it and not in order to make clever remarks about it to his new friends. Second, you allowed him to go down to the old mill and have tea there – a walk through country he really likes, and taken alone. In other words you allow him two real positive pleasures. Were you so ignorant as not to see the danger of this?

The characteristics of Pains and Pleasures are that they are unmistakably real, and therefore, as far as they go, give the man who feels them a touchstone of reality. How can you have failed to see that a real pleasure was the last thing you ought to have let him meet? Didn't you foresee that it would just kill by contrast all the trumpery which you have been so laboriously teaching him to value? As a preliminary to detaching him from the Enemy, you wanted to detach him from himself, and had made some progress in doing so. Now, all that is undone.

Of course I know that the Enemy also wants to detach men from themselves, but in a different way. Remember always, that He really likes the little vermin, and sets an absurd value on the distinctiveness of every one of them. When he talks of their losing their selves, He only mean abandoning the clamor of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality and boasts (I am afraid sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than

ever. The deepest likings and impulses of any man are the raw material, the starting point, with which the Enemy has furnished him. To get him away from those is therefore always a point gained. I have known a human defended from strong temptations to social ambition by a still stronger taste for tripe and onions.

The Enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another. The Enemy wants him in the end to be so free from any bias in his own favor that he can rejoice in his own talents as frankly and gratefully as in his neighbor's talents – or in a sunrise, an elephant, or a waterfall.

He wants each man to be able to recognize all creatures (even himself) as glorious and excellent things. He wants to kill their animal self-love as soon as possible, but it is His long-term policy, I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love – a charity and gratitude for all selves, including their own; when they have really learned to love their neighbors as themselves, they will be allowed to love themselves as their neighbors. For we must never forget what is the most repellent and inexplicable trait in our Enemy; He really loves the hairless bipeds He has created and always gives back to them with His right hand what he has taken away with His left.

We produce a sense of ownership not only by pride but by confusion. We teach them not to notice the different senses of the possessive pronoun – the finely graded differences that run from “my boots” through “my dog”, “my servant,” “my father,” “my country,” and “my God.” They can be taught to reduce all these senses to that of “my boots,” the my of ownership. We have taught men to say “my God” in a sense not really different from “my boots,” meaning the God on whom I have a claim for my distinguished services and who I exploit from the pulpit – the God I have a corner in.

And all the time the joke is that the word “Mine” in its fully possessive sense cannot be uttered by a human being about anything. In the long run either Our Father or the Enemy will say “Mine” of each thing that exists, and specially of each man. They will find out in the end to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies belong – certainly not to them, whatever happens. At present the Enemy says “Mine” of everything on the pedantic, legalistic ground that He made it. Our Father hopes in the end to say “Mine” of all things on the more realistic and dynamic ground of conquest.