

## Christian humor: not an oxymoron

Heidi Schlumpf | Dec. 9, 2013

Column

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Quick: Name your favorite Catholic comedian or humorist. Can't think of one? There's a reason for that.

Religious humor can be tricky. Either it's saccharine and not that funny, or it's hilarious but borderline or even blatantly offensive. Yet if Stephen Colbert (my favorite Catholic comedian) has demonstrated anything, it's that humor can be the best way to get across your message -- even a religious one.

Unfortunately, good religious humor can be rare, though *NCR*'s own Pat Marrin's "[Francis, the comic strip](#) [1]" and my friend [Jana Riess' Twible](#) [2], in which she creates daily Onion-like tweets of Scripture, are exceptions.

Another favorite funny-bone tickler, also distributed via social media, is "Coffee With Jesus," a daily online comic strip and now book (InterVarsity Press), written by David Wilkie.

Wilkie is an Orlando, Fla.-based advertising copywriter and all-around artist who creates, with his wife and via various media, under the banner of a company called "[Radio Free Babylon](#) [3]." He also grew up Catholic.

The comic is irreverent yet insightful, attracting more than 40,000 followers on Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus, including a variety of churches and congregations. It features Jesus conversing with a recurring cast of characters, including:

- "Kevin," a divorced church growth consultant who frequents Christian dating sites;
- "Lisa," a stay-at-home mom who loves Jesus and country clubs, not necessarily in that order;
- "Joe," a collar-wearing pastor whose denomination is intentionally vague;
- And others, including Satan, complete with cheesy mustache.

Each character, including Jesus, is depicted in '50s-era clip art, sipping a cup of joe. The comic is supposed to illustrate what conversations with Jesus -- or prayer -- look like. The Jesus in "Coffee With Jesus" speaks in snappy, slightly sarcastic retorts with an undercurrent of caring and love.

Wilkie says he decided to make Jesus human by putting him in a suit and giving him a cup of coffee. He "absolutely" thinks the real Jesus had a sense of humor.

"I think a line like 'You can strain at a gnat but swallow a camel' got a huge laugh when it was originally delivered: 'Ha ha, Jesus, you nailed them!'" says Wilkie.

He elaborates on his "Jesus as funny" theory in a strip titled "Dead serious," in which "Carl" asks Jesus if he had a sense of humor back in biblical times.

"Nope. Walked around dead serious, somber," Jesus responds. "Once in a while I could muster a weak smile when kids came up to me. Or puppies."

"Bummer," says Carl. "I'd always thought you were fully human as well as being fully God ... Wait. You're playing with me, aren't you, J-Man?"

"Gotcha!" Jesus says. "So, a Catholic and a Baptist walk into a bar ... stop me if you've heard this one."

Wilkie himself is a pretty funny guy, and he believes humor can reveal deeper truths. But he also recognizes the potential for Christian humor to be considered offensive.

"You don't have to look too far to find faith groups that have zero tolerance of comics about their founder," he says. "And anytime you're putting words in Jesus' mouth, people are going to take offense. Some people regard it as blasphemy."

Especially when Jesus is critical of showy religious services at megachurches or Christians who think the Republican Party speaks for God. In fact, "Coffee With Jesus" began in 2011, when Wilkie became frustrated with the religious right's grip on the public discussion of Christianity.

"I wanted to remind people that Jesus didn't have a vote in this election," he says. "Jesus is not a Republican, he's not a Democrat, he's not even an American!"

Wilkie says he doesn't identify with either political party, nor does he have a religious affiliation beyond "Christian."

Divorced and remarried, with five children between them, Wilkie and his wife have not yet settled on a church, in part because he finds nearly all lacking in some way. His daily religious practice involves a 45-minute prayer walk followed by a half hour of listening to online preaching from an evangelical pastor from Ohio.

Wilkie grew up "everywhere and nowhere" as the son of a West Point graduate and an Italian Catholic mother from New York. His childhood experience of Catholicism in the 1960s and '70s had little emphasis on personal prayer or a relationship with God. "You went to church, you went to confession, you took Communion and you're good," he recalls. "I used to say growing up Catholic is a good basis for someday knowing Jesus."

His own conversion happened at 16, when he realized that Jesus died for him. Although he no longer considers himself Catholic, his mother still is. She initially thought the "Coffee With Jesus" strips were too irreverent, but now enjoys and follows them, he says.

Wilkie doesn't want the strip to be about him (his name is not on them), yet he admits that "every silly character in that strip is me," he says. "I am selfish Carol, vain Lisa, proud Ann and self-righteous Kevin. But I believe that when we bring those things to God, he's going to put us in our place."

His goal, he says, "is to make people laugh and think -- sometimes simultaneously."

He also makes some people mad, as evidenced by the vitriol in the comments on the "Coffee With Jesus" social media sites. A recent strip in which Jesus claims to like the new pope got heavy "like" and "share" traffic, but also lots of references to heresy and the anti-Christ.

Wilkie, for the most part, avoids the comments. But every once in a while an atheist or nonbeliever will say, "If this is Jesus, he's pretty cool."

The Jesus of "Coffee With Jesus" would probably smile at that.

[Heidi Schlumpf can be found at Facebook and on Twitter, where you can "like" and "follow" her.]

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