

Perspective Digest

Volume 4 | Number 1

Article 9

1-1-1999

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Miss Manners

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Judith (1999) "Clergy Or Comedians?," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol4/iss1/9>

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CLERGY OR COMEDIANS?

A Gentle Word From the Pews

Religious services and ceremonies never strike Miss Manners as being as funny as they may be cracked up to be.

She feels terrible not to be rolling in the naves while a revered member of the clergy is hard at work trying to lighten things up. As anyone in the public eye can point out, it's easy to criticize but devastatingly difficult to be out there, giving one's all and not getting laughs.

Yet a surprising number of religious leaders work away at this. They crack jokes and do comedy routines. They offer themselves as the butt of their own stories and their families as comic supporting characters. They use off-color language and risqué innuendo. They show off their familiarity with vulgar culture. They employ the nightclub trick of neutralizing bad reac-

tions by satirizing how their listeners must feel: "I know you're all waiting for this to be over so you can get out on the golf course."

But the results are not that amusing.

One might ask, with justified indignation, how Miss Manners has the nerve to expect people who have devoted their lives to theological, moral and social problems to meet the performance standard of professional comedians.

That would only drive her to ask: Then why are any of them trying?

Alas, she knows the answer.

Like everyone with a message to deliver—whether its content is commercial, political, educational or

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spiritual—the clergy is aware of how the public reacts. Contemporary wisdom says that the modern sensibility is characterized by a short attention span, a lack of institutional loyalty that sends people running elsewhere when they are dissatisfied, a bad reaction to heavy subject matter and an insatiable appetite for entertainment.

To reach such people, which is their calling, certain members of the clergy conclude that they should pattern themselves after those who do so successfully. In the interests of spreading the word of God and the habit of worship, they turn themselves into entertainers and the services they offer into entertainment.

Advertising and its subsidiary, media entertainment, grab attention through bursts of shock and humor. What is wrong with using these techniques to sell something infinitely more important than dry goods?

What indeed? Miss Manners is hardly the one to take issue with the premise that humor makes people listen. She acknowledges that one cannot minister to people unless they show up and pay attention. Nor can one be of much help if one is unfamiliar with the culture of the day and unable to talk with people in terms they understand.

She also shares the theological approval of simplicity and joy, although she has trouble when these are interpreted to mean coarseness

or silliness.

And she certainly knows the low standard of conduct with which the clergy has to deal—congregations who come dressed for the gymnasium, conduct business on their cell phones during the service, allow their children to run wild and make a mockery of tradition by turning ceremonial occasions, especially weddings, into extravaganzas.

And still she thinks there should be a major distinction between a religious service and a television comedy.

Yes, they both need to reach people. But only one of them has an obligation to make people aware that not everything in life should be treated lightly. There is a dramatic need to demonstrate alternatives, such as dignity, reverence, solemnity, taste and restraint—which a lot of people have grown up without ever encountering—and to require it in return.

This [alternative] might be more appealing than they imagine. For one thing, the public craves novelty. For another, they might find that their congregations are there for serious reasons, anyway, not for the entertainment, which is better elsewhere.

The clergy, who often complain of the influence of television, should be offering an alternative, not an imitation. And a bad imitation at that. Its only saving grace is that it is not as bad as the professional entertainment industry is when it tries to preach. □