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	<p><b>CARTOONS and CHRISTIANS:  DO CARTOONS HAVE A PLACE IN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE?</b></p> <p><b>GRAHAM ENGLISH</b></p>
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## **Abstract**

*Michel de Certeau, a French Jesuit who died in 1986, describes the mystical as 'a reaction against the appropriation of truth by the clerics'. The mystical, he said favours the illuminations of the illiterate, the experience of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child'. Cartoonists are sometimes wise fools whose task it is to 'put down the mighty from their thrones'. Occasionally they might also 'exalt those of low degree'. This article suggests that cartoons have a valuable place in religious discourse.*

## **Introduction**

People draw cartoons for lots of reasons. It is partly because they can but also because drawing is the best way to say what they have to say. Picasso said once when asked to explain a painting, 'I would not have needed to draw it if I could have said it.'

Cartoons can be just to amuse. They can be to preserve the status quo. The best ones do more than that. When the English dramatist Peter Barnes died, Michael Billington, his obituarist in *The*

*Guardian* commented, 'running through all his work was a passionate belief that a joke can be an instrument of change rather than a diversion from reality' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, July 21, 2004). Cartoons can be instruments of change. They invite us to see the universe in a different way. Like all metaphors their job is to disorient us and maybe reorient us if they are good enough. I am interested in whether cartoons can reorient us religiously. Do cartoons serve any religious purpose or in any way contribute to people's religious experience?

### **Cartoons and caricatures**

The world encyclopedia of cartoons, edited by Maurice Horn in 1980, notes that 'cartoon' is a hard word to define. Horn believes that this difficulty in arriving at a definition is a good thing. It frees the cartoon from literalism and slavish representation and allows it freedom of expression at its simplest and most direct.

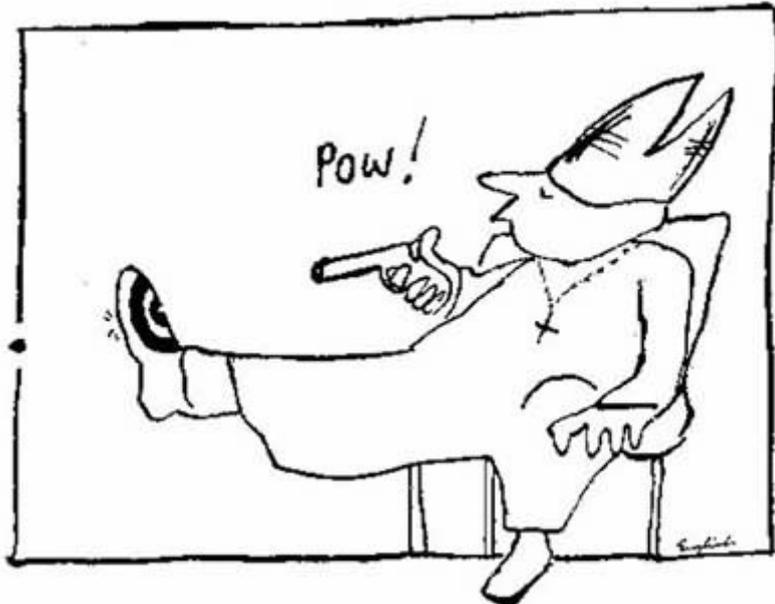


As a working definition Horn says that any drawing that encapsulates a complete thought can be called a cartoon. A cartoon is simply a way humans have invented to express an idea through one drawing, however crude.

Comics, as in Boofhead or Peanuts are also cartoons. They are cartoon strips. Tom and Jerry, Mickey Mouse and the wonderful Shrek are animated cartoons. Technology has given the original one drawing room to move. But I want to limit myself to the one drawing cartoon with one idea, although many of the best one drawing cartoons contain lots of ideas, because I am most interested in them and I have limited space.

I would add to Horn's working definition of a cartoon that there is usually some satire or irony involved. Satire is a criticism of human folly by mocking, chiding, ridicule or scorn. I have added the bit about satire because as I look at cartoons I notice that almost without exception the good cartoons are about the human condition and they have bite (it's why Shrek is a great cartoon and Mickey Mouse no longer is. He has become a mouse in a cage rather than one on the loose).

A cartoon is a drawing that comments on some aspect of the human condition with ridicule, scorn, irony, sarcasm, invective, compassion, wit or humour, sometimes with a mixture of these and sometimes with only one. Their mood can be savage and hateful as the anti-Semitic German cartoons were leading up to the Holocaust, wry as most of the wonderful James Thurber cartoons are, gentle as in *Peanuts*, propagandist as the Reformation cartoons of both Catholics and Reformers are, didactic as many cartoons on Christian websites these days are; the range is wide.



Cartoons can tell the truth or part of it, or lie, they can enlighten, disgust or infuriate, they can brighten your day, cast you into gloom, have no effect on you at all, or they can confuse you as you wonder what the person who drew them was trying to say. On occasion they can get you imprisoned, excommunicated or killed if you are the cartoonist. In some societies being caught in possession of particular cartoons can have the same dire results.

As well as in the wider world cartoons also play a part in religion because religion, being a human construct and activity is as prone to folly and corruption as everything else that we do. I will limit the discussion here to cartoons about Christianity where they and folly have a long history.

**Where they came from**



## THE POPE AS AN ASS PLAYING BAGPIPES

If you go to Google and feed in 'Christian cartoons' you will find several sites that claim that Martin Luther invented cartoons in western culture. Even on non-religious cartoon sites those recounting the history of cartooning often begin with the Reformation, with Luther particularly and claim that he invented the caricature both as a teaching tool and as a method of propaganda first against Rome and the popes then against other Protestants who disagreed with him.

Luther did not invent the term 'caricature'. The Carracci brothers, Agostino and Annibale, probably did that in late sixteenth century Italy. It comes from their 'ritrattini carici' or 'loaded portraits'. Caricatura, they say is the art of following nature's disfigurements in an attempt to arrive at *la perfetta difformita*, 'the perfect deformity' (Horn,

1980). That is not a bad description of many of the best cartoons. They see some human folly and exaggerate it so that we can see it even more. Have you noticed how, after a while, those who are regularly caricatured like Bob Hawke or John Howard begin to look more like their caricatures than they look like themselves?

But there is a case for starting with Luther. His life coincided with the rise of popular printing so his use of cartoons was the first to have wide coverage. He was a populist. He had several talented cartoonists among his disciples, Lucas Cranach the Elder being the best known. And he was an inventive propagandist. When I am asked to draw cartoons for some article I find that some written texts sparkle with potential pictures. They invite a drawing. Others, despite their being good articles do not readily provide me with anything to draw. Luther's talent for the written word, for colour, sarcasm, invective and scatology are a cartoonist's paradise. I can imagine Cranach

rubbing his hands as the next sheaf of Luther's manuscript came in for illustration.

Luther certainly gave cartoons a push along as a means of teaching his ideas and of attacking his enemies. And the Catholics and other enemies caricatured Luther and other Reformers in turn. Cartoons were different after Luther.

But cartoons in Christianity go further back than that.

There is a *graffito* (*graffito*, plural *graffiti*, the Italian word meaning scribbling or scratchings) from the first century after Christ, found on the Palatine Hill in Rome that satirizes the emerging Christian doctrines. It shows a man worshipping a figure on a cross. The figure has the body of a man and the head of a donkey and the caption in Greek reads, 'Alexamenos worshipping his god' (Horn, 1980).



Here we have a cartoonist using the cross in a drawing long before the Christians were prepared to use it in their iconography. And as some cartoons do the cartoonist says more than he knows, at once illustrating 1 Corinthians 22-23, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles', and warning future cartoonists that what they make fun of today might well become the basis of European culture for a couple of thousand years.

By the sixth century, monks copying sacred texts often strayed into the margins to make fun of or otherwise comment on their religious superiors, other monks, and the world around them or to express their longings for things they had vowed to renounce. One Irish monk left in the margin of a text he was copying this plaintive verse:

All are keen

*To know who'll sleep with blond Aideen.*

*All Aideen herself will own*

*Is that she will not sleep alone (Cahill, 1995).*

Clearly a vow of celibacy doth not a willing celibate make!

Some of the illustrations that the monks painted in bibles and psalters do more than comment on or illustrate the text. In medieval cathedrals dignitaries and others were honoured by having their likenesses carved as the faces of saints and angels but satirically minded stonemasons and painters also mocked unpopular bishops, foremen and others, by putting their likenesses on gargoyles, devils and on the damned. Michelangelo was not above mocking popes even in the Sistine chapel. The sculptors and illustrators were doing in pictures what medieval mystery plays did to biblical figures, the clergy and contemporary life in their plays.

By the twelfth century Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), a dour man at the best of times who founded the monastery of Citeaux in a swamp so that the brothers would have no worldly distractions, felt that comic sculptures in churches had gone so far that he condemned the practice. Certainly some of the medieval church sculptures would not get past many bishops today or past the *Australian Society for the Family*.

### **Religion and cartoons now**

The Reformation cartoons are an example of cartoons used by religious people to enliven religion or as part of a religious debate. If we want to use cartoons as a criticism of religion we have a precedent. Of course during the Reformation, as in Hitler's Germany cartoons could be judged seditious at a time when sedition could lead to a drawn out, violent death. As Archbishop Cranmer was being burnt at the stake he thrust his hand into the fire first

because it had been the instrument of his recantations. I don't know of any cartoonists doing the same but I can imagine how hard it would be to draw a seditious cartoon if I knew that I might end up at the stake or on the chopping block. It adds a frisson to your work knowing that it could lead to your death but it is a thrill I think I could live without.

What of religious cartoons today? Do cartoons have a lively place in religious discourse now?

In a conversation I had years ago with Jenny Coopes, the cartoonist for the Sun Herald she commented that cartoonists are space fillers. 'The editor will come along', she said, 'and say that there are parts of the paper that need filling and ask if I can think of anything to put in the spaces.' Cartoonists are also 'lighteners', as in, 'This page looks a bit heavy. Can you lighten it up a bit?' Clearly some people do not take cartoons seriously. Or think they are there only to charm or amuse. Some do take them seriously of course.

Sometimes cartoons are the reason people buy a particular paper or magazine. On the days when the *Sydney Morning Herald* has nothing in it worth reading Moir is always worth a look and is often very good. Moir often gives me hope on a day that has little else hopeful in it.

I have always started the paper with the cartoons. When I was a small child, and my parents bought the *Daily Telegraph* daily, I thought the back page with the comics, Joe Palooka, Bluey and Curly and Boofhead was the front. I was surprised to find out the front was the page with the headlines.

Some cartoonists help change history. The early Leunig, in the now defunct *Nation Review* in the 1970s helped change my history, if no one else's because he taught me to see the world differently and helped me realise that drawing does not have to be tidy to be very good. James Thurber did the same thing in the 1930s in *The New Yorker* but I did not discover him until much later. I am not sure how much further than that a cartoonist can go in changing the world. Kierkegaard says that cartoonists do not change societies; they just show them how sick they are. There were some very good cartoonists in Hitler's Germany during the 1930s but they did not stop the horror.

Maybe changing societies is asking too much of cartoons and Kierkegaard is right. But if they stopped a few people from being evil, or as evil as they might have been maybe that is enough. If they helped a few people laugh amidst the

horror they contributed something. There were also some clever and biting cartoonists around the Reformation. Woodcuts of the pope as the Whore of Babylon, and of lascivious monks and wicked nuns still seem powerful to me. Some cartoonists have resurrected Reformation images during the sexual abuse scandals of the last few years in the USA and I shall say more of them below.

In Australia religious cartoons, like religious discourse generally, have a fairly small market, and some of the market is taken up by coy or 'smile a while but don't be disturbed' kinds of cartoons. In Catholicism there was an American series of cartoons called '*O'Malley's Two Little Nuns*' that were syndicated and used in Catholic papers all over the English-speaking world. They were in the same vein as Bing Crosby, Barry Fitzgerald and Ingrid Bergman in *Going My Way*. They reassured Catholics that everything was okay with the world, hoped that Protestants would think Catholics harmless, and portrayed nuns as charming if sometimes devious children.

Sometimes these kinds of cartoons ventured into Catholic comic books. In the 1950s when Superman, The Phantom, Archie and Veronica and all of those titles were being criticized by reading teachers and clergy alike for the deleterious effects they were having on the young there was a small Catholic comic book called *Topix*. It had more in common with Spencer Tracy in *Father Flanagan of Boystown* than with *Going My Way*. It was meant to enthuse young Catholics. It ran through a few issues but failed to put any dint in Superman or Prince Valiant so it disappeared. The kind of drawings it fostered still turn up in the Catholic monthly *The Annals*.

In the 1950s some more spiky cartoons of monks and nuns appeared in books like *Cracks in the cloister*. The eccentricities of religious life and the men and women who populate it formed the content of these cartoons. But like *O'Malley's nuns* these cartoons were benign in their intentions and not intended to draw attention to the need for reform or to critique texts or church practice in any significant way. They made gentle enough fun of the status quo. A few years later Derrick Nimmo was playing a camp monk in an English television show, *Oh Brother!* and there was a similar program *All Gas and Gaiters*, its name giving the game away. They were High Anglicanism's answer to *Going My Way*. There was no sign of Anthony Trollope's Obadiah Slope or Mrs Proudie in these shows, or in the cartoons either to prod consciences or to undermine cant or anomalies.

In Australia the *Bulletin* magazine occasionally published cartoons on religion. Cardinal Moran in Sydney around Federation or Archbishop Mannix in Melbourne around conscription and communism, and Mr Santamaria attracted political cartoons. Wowsers too were fair game and they were often depicted as Methodists or one of the other dissenting Christian congregations. While the *Bulletin* tended towards anti-Catholicism it was inclined to like bluff, rosy-faced Irish priests who were obviously not members of the *Pioneer Total Abstinence Association*, and John O'Brien, the alter ego of Father Patrick Hartigan, who made gentle fun of his own flock found space in their pages for his verse. Hartigan could draw a bit and might have made a fair cartoonist had he had the outlet or the inclination or the desire to stir more.

Christians of various kinds have been the subject of political cartoons about funding for private schools and other overtly political issues. Fred Nile has been the subject of cartoons often because he is a politician with conservative views as much as because he is religious. Sometimes doctrine or church politics get a cartoon in the metropolitan dailies. In the late 1960s Larry Pickering had a cartoon in the *Canberra Times* of a group of old cardinals saying something like, 'Well we all agree. We are against a married clergy.' A younger cardinal in the group looks startled. In Sydney the Jensens, the Anglican Archbishop Peter and his brother Philip plus members of their families, get what might be called verbal cartoons from Mike Carlton in the *Sydney Morning Herald* but internal church politics does not usually provide enough energy for a cartoonist or enough interest in most readers of the daily press to be worth drawing. Unless the internal church politics involves moving a priest out of the country when he is facing sex charges. Then it might.

O'Malley's nuns with their childlike sisters might have offended some of the nuns but generally they were cheerfully read by Catholics. *Oh Brother* and *All Gas and Gaiters* too might have annoyed serious Anglicans, especially the evangelical ones, but they hardly had anything serious to contribute except so far as good, clean fun fit for family viewing has a serious role in our lives.

If you go to Christian websites you will find lots of cartoons that are evangelical versions of the Two Little Nuns. There are others that are used to teach the Bible or other things Christian. In 1968 Robert L Short wrote a book, *The Parables of Peanuts*, that used Charles M Schultz's cartoons to illustrate Christian theology and that examined what might have been

Schultz's aims in drawing the cartoons. Schultz in that phase of his career reassured many Christians. In an obituary for him by a Christian writer it said that in later life Schulz strayed into the New Age and lost his original goodness. Maybe Schultz was just drawing what he saw both when Christians thought him Christian and when they judged him New Age. Maybe Schultz became more interesting as he got older.

I am more interested in cartoons that annoy Christians or that invite them to see the universe in a different way. Michael Leunig does that to me.

Since becoming well known in the early 1970s Michael Leunig has several times fallen foul of religious leaders, and of feminists and others as I believe cartoonists are bound to do. Reassuring is not the main role of cartoonists. Leunig's Christmas cartoon in the mid 1970s showing the nativities not only of Jesus but of other animals drew the ire of the then Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne. Of course bishops have a right to speak publicly and on topics at which they are expert. Otherwise they may draw the satirizing skills of the cartoonist!

I searched an American cartoon site, [cagle.slate.com/news](http://cagle.slate.com/news), on the 12th of July and looked for a heading 'religious cartoons'. The next prompt was 'pedophile priests'. The cartoons were mostly from the United States, a few were from Europe and one was from Singapore, they featured heavily the former archbishop of Boston Cardinal Bernard Law and apart from one cartoon they were all strongly critical. Some were sad as much as angry. A few were wry but they were mostly just hostile. I am glad I am not a priest in Boston, indeed in the USA as the cartoonists in the main depict them all as defilers of youth. The vitriol of some of the Reformation cartoons would have been at home here. Some of the US cartoonists know their Reformation cartoons in fact. Their use of a bishop's mitre as a shark or a crocodile's jaw is straight from the Reformation. Some of them also know their Bible as their drawings of wolves in bishop's clothing testifies.

### **Drawing cartoons**

If I can be autobiographical for a moment: Paul Ricoeur speaks of interpretations of texts as 'letting a field of previously unconsidered possibilities appear to us'. I believe that this is a good description of what

good cartoons do. I want to illustrate this by speaking of my own experience drawing cartoons.

I began cartooning because I found mental arithmetic boring. It was in 1953, I was in year four at an inadequate Catholic school in country New South Wales and I began drawing in the margins of my mental arithmetic textbook in an attempt to find some 'previously unconsidered possibilities'. My teacher, Brother Dally was not amused and I spent the whole of one playtime and lunch sitting at my desk attempting to erase what he called 'Scribble'. I found that comment offered is not easily retracted, my attempts at erasure were not very successful, and that commentators, for that is one of the things cartoonists are, are not always valued by those on whom they commentate. Years after in the Picasso Museum in Barcelona I saw some of Picasso's school books with 'Scribble' in the margins and realised that in that small aspect at least I was part of a great tradition.

I also realized at the time I drew on my mental arithmetic book that drawing is not highly valued unless it is neat and unless it meets the criteria of what the viewer thinks is 'reality'. I went through school unacknowledged for any prowess at drawing. My attempts at colouring in geometric designs on cheap pastel paper, which is what art lessons largely consisted of then, were dismissed because, 'you are untidy and you always go outside the lines.'

My cartooning might have been stillborn but for three things. First, as a young adult I realized that I was being conned by many religious institutions and professional religious people. Much of what I had been taught was true religion was really just true power play, sanctimoniousness, or cant.

In the early 1970s there was a Catholic journal in the United States called *The Critic*. It has since disappeared. The Critic was at its peak about the time of the Second Vatican Council and it set out to make fun of much of the Catholic devotional practice that my generation had grown up with. I have none of its cartoons now but some of it was very good and it was akin to the university papers of those days, like *Honi Soit*, *Tharunka* and others in which repressed young people with new found freedom fired broad shots at everything they felt, or guessed might have repressed them.

Second, I discovered there is this child in me, an Emperor's New Clothes kind of child, who wants to draw in the margins as he did in mental arithmetic all those years ago.

Third, I saw that Michael Leunig draws outside the lines and is untidy, and he is a good cartoonist. The young monk who wrote about the blond Aideen in the Irish monastery all those years ago might be one of my, and Leunig's ancestors (as indeed might be the blond Aideen!).

I heard the children's author Morris Gleitzman say in an interview on the ABC that there is a small boy in him who makes up the bum jokes and an adult on the outside who gets the punctuation and the spelling right. I know what he means. In my case the adult makes sure the ink is not spilt, and occasionally censors the observations the small boy makes. Of course the adult does not always win these censorship arguments and then I get roused on for being irreverent (it was 'bold' when there was only the little boy). Actually I did not discover this little boy in me until I was an adult. He was always there but I had tried to keep him in check after I was fifteen until I discovered Michael Leunig. His early cartoons emboldened me to let the little boy out again.



What those early Leunig cartoons showed me was that I could make something of my inability to draw within the lines and that, despite the displeasure of others I have occasionally to be bold.

I said earlier that cartoons are satirical. But they can be more than that. The Gleitzman quote touches on this. I

do not think most cartoons are high art, though Daumier was a cartoonist and a good painter and Goya might fairly be called a great cartoonist as well as a great painter. Matisse says that creation begins with vision:

To see is itself a creative operation, requiring an effort. Everything that we see in our daily life is more or less distorted by acquired habits. The effort needed to see things without distortion takes something very like courage; and this courage is essential to the artist, who has to look at everything as though he saw it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child (Flam, 1973, p149).

Picasso said, 'The truth; that's a lie!' (Ashton, 1972, p21) and I suggest he meant roughly the same thing as Matisse. We are inclined to see what we think is there, what we know is there. The cartoonist, seeing things as she or he did as a child, if the cartoon is good enough, shows us that we are seeing a lie.

For the cartoonist, at least for this cartoonist, the action of letting a field of previously unconsidered possibilities appear to me begins in a number of different ways. It might start with a, 'I wonder what would happen if I drew that?' or, 'if I illustrate that caption?' Sometimes the cartoon just appears and I think, 'Oh I didn't know I thought that', or 'I didn't know I imagined that.'

Not everything I imagine is by choice. I believe that pens and paper, like stone for a sculptor or paint and canvas for a painter, have a life of their own. Wood because it has grain in it, stone because it has crystals or faults or is just plain hard often makes the sculptor take it into account. Paper and ink do that too as do lines. They invite you to do something other than you thought you were going to do. Now and then I see someone else's cartoon and think, 'Gee, I wish I had drawn that.' Oddly I sometimes see one of my own and think 'Gee, I wish I had drawn that', because I know it thought of itself. It sprang into being and I was just the hand holding the pen.

**On giving offence.**

Maurice Horn says that any drawing that encapsulates a complete thought can be called a cartoon. A problem with encapsulating one thought in a drawing is that it is hard to be subtle in one thought or in one small drawing. Usually you can give only part of the truth as you see it or how you are feeling now. By the time the cartoon appears somewhere you might not feel like that or think what you thought then. You might not always feel or believe it when you draw it but it is a good cartoon. It is like having a child you do not like. Your dislike is not a reason to terminate it.



I was once the resident cartoonist at a religious conference. My role was to sit and observe whatever went on then to draw some cartoons and via an overhead projector to sum up each days events (or my observations of them!) in a fifteen-minute interlude late in the day. This led to one conference observer angrily labeling me a cynic and to another, a well know Catholic lawyer, saying he felt sorry for the bishops after he saw my cartoons. But I am not a cynic. I deeply love the universe. And as my namesake Graham Greene has Monsignor Quixote say, 'Bugger the bishops!'

On another occasion after some of my cartoons were published in an early number of *Women-Church Journal*, a Catholic sister wrote to me and informed me that St Thomas More said that the devil is the devil precisely because he is irreverent. 'You are irreverent,' she finished the letter before signing off, 'Yours in Jesus Christ.'

This raises the question of giving offence. Cartoons offend some religious people. Should someone, even a cartoonist give offence to religious people

who all presume they are in good faith? Are religious folk 'fair game'? What about the biblical injunction, 'Judge not and you shall not be judged'?

I have thought a lot about offending people, being as I am a nine on the enneagram who tries to cope by forgetting himself and strenuously seeking to belong. I have decided that there are some who are good hearted and treasure their beliefs. I try not to offend them. Then there are some who are out looking to be offended. To them I'd say, 'Be my guest!' Of course there are some so thick skinned nothing offends them. They make my guardian angel weep.

I was asked lately what about going too far? I don't know where 'too far' is. I usually know I am there when I get there, but not always. I do not know what effect cartoons will have on others. I do not let cartoons go into the wide world unless I am content with them and think they can stand unaided. After that they are on their own. Some I really like no one else seems to. Some I am content with but nothing more than that, and others find something in them.

## Conclusion

The Catholic Church is not into fun at the moment. There are many people in leadership positions who take themselves very seriously. A lot of Christianity is not into seeing its own folly or corruption. So it needs cartoons.

Michel de Certeau, the French religious thinker who died in 1986, describes the mystical as 'a reaction against the appropriation of truth by the clerics.' The mystical, he said favours the illuminations of the illiterate, the experience of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child.'

By cleric de Certeau means that group of people who presume they have the truth and try to impose it on everyone else (which in Catholicism has often been the chief failing of clerics). He is claiming that every time that happens, in the Church or in the wider society God talks through an illiterate nobody like Bernadette Soubirous, a fool like John Vianney, a whole group regarded as unimportant (women for example), or the silence of children.

I am not a mystic. Michael Leunig might be. I suggest that when we look at the best cartoons, Moir, Leunig, Thurber, Coopes, Wilcox and the others they often take the role of the fool in de Certeau's sense and they have a serious role to play in religion.

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