



## A Ministry of Satire

*(Author's note: This interview with satirist Becky Garrison launches what I'm calling my "God's Gutsy Gals" series, in which I'll introduce women in non-pastoral leadership roles who dare to speak those hard but essential truths that don't make you popular but do make you a catalyst for real change. Stay tuned!)*

Webster defines satire as "holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn" or using "trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm to expose and discredit vice or folly." Becky Garrison makes a living doing just that. The job of Christian satire, she says, quoting *Wittenburg Door* Senior Editor Robert Darden, is "to hold a mirror before the church. We're the little boy who shouts, 'Yo! People! The emperor is buck nekkid!' Our primary goal is to point out—in a humorous way—hypocrisy and idol worship among those who call themselves 'religious,' but who really seem to be interested in furthering their own ends."

I met Garrison recently and asked her a few questions about what she calls her "ministry of satire."

### Why did you become a satirist?

**Becky Garrison:** In 1993 the Episcopal Church decided I was unordainable. At the same time, I realized I was too passionate and got too involved to make a career out of social work. So I explored other ways I could use my MDiv/MSW degree, such as chaplaincy, teaching, or writing. The only place that kept saying "yes" was *The Wittenburg Door*, the nation's only religious satire magazine. After I had been writing for them for a few years, I realized that, in fact, bucking the church is in my genes

—I'm a descendant of the Rev. Roger Williams, the first American pioneer for the separation of church and state, a champion of religious tolerance, and the founder of the state of Rhode Island. And my late father, Rev. Karl Claudius Garrison Jr., was a radical professor/priest who was involved in the civil rights movement back in the '50s.

**You published a flurry of books in the last two years: *The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail* (Thomas Nelson, 2007); *Rising from the Ashes* (Seabury Books, 2007); and *Red and Blue God, Black and Blue Church* (Jossey-Bass, 2006). How is writing books different from writing for the *Door*?**

**BG:** It's easy to stand on the sidelines and protest those religious leaders who seek the spotlight when you're working for a cutting-edge alternative rag like the *Door*. But what do you do when you publish books and the spotlight shifts to you? Do you use whatever power and influence have been given to you to open up more tables so more people can be included, or do you form your own kingdom replete with a moat to keep out all the undesirables? It's a phenomenon I call "missional myopia," where one's mission/ministry becomes the focus, rather than building up the entire kingdom. A major telltale sign is the constant use of "I" language when talking about one's ministry in lieu of more inclusive "we" language. One reason I penned *Rising from the Ashes* is that I wanted to promote some of the many voices that I felt had something to say and needed a platform. I use Brian McLaren and Phyllis Tickle as my mentors and two examples of internationally known authors who use their influence to help give others a voice.

**How do you approach each new project?**

**BG:** Before I go after a target, I get down on my knees and pray real hard

to make sure that I am focusing on satirizing someone's sins and not slamming their soul. Also, I only go after those who are using religion for their own personal means—in other words, I target the leaders of the church, not the person in the pews. But sometimes when you skewer a sacred cow, its followers can moo quite loudly. I'm sorry they are ticked off at me for smashing their idol, but it's not healthy for anyone to engage in idol worship.

**How do you see what you do as a ministry?**

**BG:** Just as the court jester keeps the king honest, the religious satirist tries to keep the Christian church honest. I've heard it said that in hard times like these we need mystics to give us hope and satirists to keep us grounded. Sometimes laughing at our own foibles can help deflate a very tense situation and make us all a bit more human and humble.

**What made you write *The New Atheist Crusaders*?**

**BG:** Thomas Nelson asked if I would do it. At first, it didn't seem to fit in with my mission to target the Christian church, but then I got to thinking, and it hit me that the New Atheists are every bit as odious and obnoxious as the religious right targets I had been satirizing for years. They both have established a meta-narrative that they feel the rest of us should follow hook, line, and sinker—and those who dare to differ are damned. And I also cited those instances where we as the body of Christ have given the atheists plenty of fodder. ■

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