

Some funnies get serious: The 'Rev. Sloan' on evil

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

Garry Trudeau's long-running *Doonesbury* comic strip rarely spares the rod—or sharp pen—when satirizing presidents, cigarette companies and hardened conservatives. But he showed a soft spot with stronger-than-usual religious touches in his first newspaper strips dealing with the September 11 atrocities and their aftermath.

Doonesbury sometimes is so critical of Republican figures or strikes such a stinging note on social issues that some newspapers drop the strip temporarily, or permanently. That editorial practice arose last spring when some papers cut Johnny Hart's *B.C.* Eastertime strip for, critics said, implying that Christianity was the replacement for Judaism. Hart, an evangelical Christian, has been known for creating cartoons that make doctrinal points.

Not so with Trudeau, although his Rev. Scot Sloan appears periodically in his strips. Sloan's a liberal priest who was once a social activist, but more often now appears as socially faddish and materialistic. But in his October 4, 5 and 6 comic strips, Trudeau has Sloan counsel Boopsie, the consistently shallow aspiring actress, about her crisis of faith in the face of suffering and evil. A few words from the clergyman, and she agrees, adding, "I know that to get through this, I'll eventually have to invite him back into my life. Him, and Oprah, and lots of Mint Milanos." Sloan reassures: "I'm sure he'd be okay with that."

A spokesman for Trudeau at Universal Press Syndicate (UPS), based in Kansas City, Missouri, said no negative reactions have been heard to the strip for being too specifically Christian. "Garry said that Boopsie's words were a little stronger than usual, than she might have said in other situations," said Alan McDermott, a senior editor at UPS. But Trudeau said that Boopsie has been pictured in church before and that her words fit in this scene.

A strip in the following week featured Mike Doonesbury nervously fretting on an airplane as he sits next to a male passenger wearing a Muslim head covering. He later calms down by talking with the passenger, who turns out to be a Palm Pilot salesman from Tacoma, Washington.

By early October, a few other popular comic strips also addressed the post-September 11 concerns in America—a reflection of the four-week lag between creation of the cartoons and publication, said cartoon historian Robert C. Harvey of Champaign, Illinois. (The delay between comic strip creation and publication caused some readers to think a couple of “9 Chickweed Lane” cartoons drawn in August were misguided or a heavy allusion to the tragedy, he said.)

Among strips alluding to terrorist attacks, New York City’s demolished World Trade Center was memorialized in Wiley’s *Non Sequitur* strip by a man who raked leaves into two tall towers. And Rob Armstrong’s *Jump Start* has the Cobb family reviewing photos they took on a trip to New York, including the Twin Towers. “Wish you were here,” thinks Marcy Cobb. Another *Non Sequitur* shows a dog and cat watching smoke and fire rise from a distant city as the dog says, “Explain to me again why they call us beasts.”

“Clearly, we’re ready to laugh again, albeit not too robustly,” Harvey commented. Author of four books on cartooning, Harvey reports on news in the field on his Web site, www.rcharvey.com.

The dour youngster Huey in *The Boondocks* on October 9 observed that the president has said the nation has to get back to normal. But Huey added that “normal” for him is criticizing President Bush. “So not criticizing Bush would kinda be like letting the terrorists win, right?” he says. A friend replies, “I’m going to remind you of this conversation when we’re exiled to Cuba.”

Generally the nation’s editorial cartoonists have avoided making jokes about Bush. The president “is no longer regarded as a legitimate target,” said Harvey. “But the Taliban and Osama bin Laden have been gleefully subjected to venomous assault. And some of it, thankfully, is even highly comedic.” Those same political cartoonists, by the nature of their parodistic calling, will upset some readers when dealing with religious symbols and ideas. But some comic strip creators tend to draw heavier fire when they get too daring on the “funnies” pages.

Yet the first strips appearing in October have tended more to identify with the sense of mourning, confusion and dread. The October 12 *Non Sequitur* had the precocious daughter telling her father she couldn't sleep. "I keep wondering, since every religion preaches peace, and the leaders of every country say they're devoted to their faith, then why do we have wars?" The father, unable to think of an answer, lets his child get in bed with him, as he phones: "Hi, Mom . . . Yes, I know it's late, but we have a question to ask . . ."

By contrast, the clergyman in *Doonesbury* had offered a piece of theodicy on October 6 to his worried parishioner. "Boopsie, God doesn't condone suffering and loss any more than he causes it, as Falwell claimed . . . God hates suffering. So much that he allowed his only son to suffer and die, to show how much more powerful love is than evil."

Asked what he thought of the advice, theologian John Cobb of Claremont, California, said that it is religious rhetoric that is difficult "to unpack." The first part—that God hates suffering and does not cause it—has the "strength of good teaching." As for the Rev. Sloan's Christology, Cobb said, "I think I could figure out a way to have it make sense, but it is suggestive rather than theological as it stands."

But all things considered, Cobb said, "I think it's great [for a comic strip] to treat that subject."