

# Satire and the Christian

by: Ronald L. Dart

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I was reading Ann Coulter's column not long ago and trying to find out, or decide for myself, I guess, exactly who she is. She's been described as a bomb thrower. I think of her as the Maureen Dowd of the Right. And, she seems to specialize in saying absolutely outrageous things. I try not to be too cynical, but every one of those outrageous things is like money in the bank for her. They just sell more books and more columns. And, I suspect, the bodyguard she now takes around with her everywhere she goes is a tax deductible expense. But, as I thought it over, I realized Ann Coulter is a political satirist, that is she writes political satire. And like most writers and speakers of that genre, she makes a lot of enemies. Once I figured that out, I went online to see what I could find out about satire and satirical writers. And, you know, the absolutely most up-to-date, and easiest place to find stuff you want to know is the Internet. There's this marvelous little site called *Wikipedia*. It is an online encyclopedia that's updated almost every day. So I went there to see what I would find. One site had up-to-date information on satire, the history of satire, modern satire, and they listed everyone that I could think of, except one. They didn't list Ann Coulter. It would not be true to say she was just ignored by that site because there was a very significant article elsewhere in which she was described as, "an American best-selling author, columnist, and conservative political commentator," which, I concluded, explains a lot. Because the fact is, she is a political commentator *and* a satirist, and many people have a hard time understanding the difference.

Satire is a very old literary form. Roman historian, Pliny, tells of a 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. satirist whose poems were so cruel that the objects of these poems hanged themselves. Now that's taking literature entirely too seriously. You'd probably need to be a student of literature to recognize many of the early examples, but the name of Jonathan Swift is one you might know. The 18<sup>th</sup> century satirist, Jonathan Swift, is considered the greatest English language writer of satire. For instance, his book, *A Modest Proposal*, suggests that poor parents be encouraged to sell their own children as food. Now, it's a terrible idea, but what Swift was doing was creating a moral fiction. He was creating a world in which parents don't take care of what we all know is parents'

responsibility—protecting their children from harm. What he was after in this particular discourse was to attack indifference to the plight of the desperately poor.

An enormous amount of satire addresses social issues. Satirists look at what's going on, they see the absurdity of it, and they take it as far as it can possibly go to illustrate how stupid, how evil, how wicked, how far off the mark some people are in the way they look at the world. Other recognizable names in the history of satire are Ben Franklin, Aldus Huxley, and George Orwell. Take *1984*. I'm not sure everyone really understands when they read *1984* or see the movie that it is intended to be satire, because we tend to think of satire as being funny. Not necessarily. That isn't what it's all about.

Charlie Chaplin's movie, *The Great Dictator*, back in 1940, was a satire on Adolf Hitler and his Nazi army. I was living in England in the 1960s and I experienced the satire boom with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, John Cleese of the Monty Python gang, David Frost and his incredible show, *That Was The Week That Was*, which kept us all in stitches every week because we wanted to see the latest political satire. Satire continues to be a popular form of social commentary. There's an increasing perception that satire must be funny. That has not always been true. And even now, it's not always true. What some people don't understand and don't grasp about satire is that, because it combines anger and humor, it can be profoundly disturbing. Because it is essentially ironic or sarcastic, it's often completely misunderstood. The word *sarcasm*, by the way, comes from the Greek and it means "to bite, to chew the flesh." The common response to satire, of people who don't get it, is revolution. They make accusations: "Well, that's in bad taste," or "That's just not funny." That came from *Wikipedia* and, I thought, that is exactly the kind of response that Ann Coulter provokes from people. But the truth is, what she's driving at isn't necessarily intended to be funny. It's intended to chew the flesh, which is what Jonathan Swift was trying to do with *A Modest Proposal*, but, at the time of its publication, many people thought it was a serious recommendation of cannibalism. And, of course, that is bad taste.

Satire is stealthy criticism. Satire accomplishes nothing, by the way, unless it has that element of truth in it; for if it is not true, it doesn't bite. If it's not true, if it's off the wall, it might be funny, but it's not satire. It's not satire unless it bites. Ann Coulter? Well, Ann Coulter bites. I think her adversaries should be grateful that she often goes too far because it gives them an excuse for dismissing her. But you would miss the point entirely if you think she has gone too far. Because in satire that's all but impossible. Why am I bringing up Ann Coulter again? The reason is because of a

column of hers that appeared between Passover and Easter of 2007. I thought it might be worthwhile to consider if there was any bite, or if it was all bark.

Once she got past some rather obscure satirical references to Leftists' ideas of what makes a good war, she had this to say, "On this week, let us remember the message of Passover that freedom doesn't come easy. Moses had to grab Jews by the scruff of their necks and drag them to the desert for 40 years to get a generation capable of living in freedom. And even then the Jews were complaining about it being too drafty. The first stiff-necked generation didn't even want to leave Egyptian captivity. Once free, they complained about the food, which apparently compared unfavorably to the food back in Egypt." That's a very breezy style, but she is spot-on with the story of the Exodus.

I had just been observing a few days before, in a sermon of my own, that the Israelites were caught flatfooted by the Egyptians after the death of the Egyptian firstborn. I don't know how well that is grasped by many people, but the original Israelis, the Israelites, were actually kind of ambivalent about this idea of leaving Egypt. They were tired of being slaves, they didn't like the way they had been treated in Egypt, but I don't know if they expected the result of the final plague before the Exodus. After the firstborn of all Egypt had died—had been killed—at midnight that night, we're told that they baked unleavened cakes of the dough they brought with them as they left (Exodus 12). Their bread was not leavened because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not delay. They hadn't prepared any food. Did they really think, after that night, that they would be on the march out of Egypt within 24 hours? I don't think so. Because if they had known that night—the great night when the death angel passed through Egypt and took the firstborn—that the Egyptians would be right behind them, pushing them, hands at their backs, even dumping treasure on them, saying, "Now, get out! Leave! Go away!" and not allowing them to stay another day, wouldn't they have prepared food? Of course they would have. They didn't know they were going to leave. I don't know what they expected to happen. God had told them. But, we already know, don't we, that people don't always get it when God tells them something? You would think, if they had grasped what was coming, they would have had food for the road all ready.

Now, once they were told, "You're free!"—not only "you're free," but "get out,"—how do you suppose they felt? I think they felt bewildered. They may have thought they would have several days to plan and pack, to organize and think about it, to hem and haw. I think they were also excited. Freedom is heady stuff. And I think

they were a little bit afraid, leaving the only home they had ever known for a vague destination and a life about which they knew nothing. If they had any inkling of what lay in store for them, they might well have preferred the certainty of slavery to the uncertainty of the desert and of warfare. But in balance, I think they were happy and excited and apprehensive and still glad to be going. They had little idea, though, of the hardship that lay ahead, and little idea that they would have to fight for their inheritance. Most of them were just not prepared to pay the price.

Back to the Exodus according to Ann Coulter: “Even in the desert the Jews would not stop with the golden calves. God nearly let the whole lot of them perish in the desert, he was so angry about their idolatrous ways. Only when he had a new generation, born in freedom, that didn't complain about the food, did he lead them to the promised land. For you liberals who are still reading, this is all extensively covered in a book known as the ‘Bible.’” If you are a liberal, you were probably annoyed by that last sentence. If you are a conservative, you were probably amused by that last sentence. But, the thing that caught my attention is this idea: “a new generation, born in freedom.” I know it’s a strain for some folks, but sometimes you really do need to think about what you read. Ms. Coulter borrows an old phrase from an even older idea and yanks it firmly into focus. Sometimes you have to wait for a new generation that doesn’t carry the baggage of the past. It was true of the Israelites who, when faced with the prospect of having to fight for their inheritance, begged off and wanted to go back to Egypt. They wanted to kill Moses, appoint a new leader, and head back to Egypt. It seems never to have occurred to them that the Egyptians didn’t want them back, and might not allow them back. They were in bad odor with the Egyptians. Remember? The Egyptians drove them out; they didn’t allow them to stay. They had had plenty of anything the Israelites had to offer. The Israelites said to Moses, who had brought them there, “You brought us out here to kill us and our children in the desert.”

God replied that those children whom they thought would die in the desert would live to see the promised land. They wouldn’t. They were going to grow old and die in the desert and only when this generation—this faithless, weak-willed, lily-livered generation—grew old and died, would the generation that had been born in freedom see the promised land. Think about that. . . every one of those Israelites that came out of Egypt had been born in slavery. Now another generation entirely would fight for the promised land and would live in it. Sometimes when a people cannot shake off their past, their generation has to die off to make room for a new generation that

doesn't carry the baggage. I have seen this to be true of religion, of societal groups, of nations. It's clear as crystal for one group, for African-Americans. We are only now seeing a new generation that doesn't remember Jim Crowe and segregation, and isn't still fighting that war. Do you realize we have an African-American woman as Secretary of State? And, we have an African-American man who might even win the Democratic nomination for president of these United States. Given time, we may see a new generation who are no longer African, just as the Italian-Americans who have ceased to be Italian. As people and new generations come, there are some things in our past we would do well to remember, and there are some we would do well to forget.

I mentioned that Ann Coulter was writing between Passover and Easter, and I almost missed the significance of what she said next. Sometimes you have to be quick, or satire will slip right pass you. She said, "Also this week, we celebrate a fast-track to freedom that doesn't require 40 years in the desert, but as I recall, the suggestion that we convert Muslims to Christianity was shot down early on in this war." I said this some time ago, and sooner or later someone is going to get it: The real solution to Islam is that they be converted to Christianity. The Muslims in this country are a vast mission field and Christians need to get to work on it. What Ann Coulter is talking about when she says, "the fast track to freedom that doesn't require 40 years in a desert," is Easter. She's talking about the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of Christ, about Christianity. A fast track to freedom. Christians need to be working on the Muslims. Islam is not a religion of peace, it is a religion of submission. Did you realize that? Islam means *submission*. Only when you come to understand that, will you understand why Muslims worldwide don't stand up and scream against terrorism, why they don't fight against it, why they don't subvert, why they aren't running to the police and the authorities about every terrorist they know in their midst. Do you know why? Because it's a dominance/submission faith and it removes the backbone from its people. When you see Imams making a big deal about the fact that they were banned from an airplane, these are the dominant ones. The people in their congregations are the submissive ones, and they simply cannot stand up against the dominant ones without a lot of help from somewhere. I don't know who is going to try to help them in this way if Christian people won't.

Ann Coulter when on to say, "If you want a shorter rebuilding process, then we're going to have to wage less humane wars." Oh man, that hurts to hear, but it's true. That's why it hurts. "If you want a shorter rebuilding process, then we're going to have to wage less humane wars. The enemy—as well as innocent civilians—must be bombed into quivering terror. Otherwise, we displace aggression; we don't destroy it." One shudders to think about it, but the next generation needs to look more carefully at the way World War II ended in Germany and in Japan. Nobody knows how many people were killed in that war. The most conservative estimates run in excess of 30 million and I don't know if that includes the concentration camps. You've got to get your mind around that.

We worry ourselves sick over 1000 people killed. We worry ourselves sick, and we go to war over 3000 that were killed in the World Trade Center, In World War II, *30 million* people died. And, the thing that makes one turn gray is the realization that World War II need never had taken place at all. All that was required was a little backbone on the part of the British, American, and European people. But the Europeans and the British, in particular, had been so demoralized by World War I, they were willing to pay almost anything to keep from having to do it again. So, they appeased Hitler. When he began to violate treaty obligations from the previous war, no one did anything. When he marched his soldiers across the Rhine, no one did anything. And, if they had resisted at that point, Hitler's army would have probably killed him and the whole history of Europe would have gone down a different road. But, because they were not willing to fight one small battle which they would have easily won, the English, the Europeans, and the rest of us had to fight another World War. The lesson from this is as clear as crystal: if you don't oppose evil now, you will only have to face it later when it is stronger and you are weaker, and the price is immeasurably higher.

Back to Ann Coulter: "Americans are weaker for having seen that kind of carnage in World War II. Recall that the Worst Generation was raised by the Greatest Generation. That tells you how awful war is. The Greatest Generation was so exhausted by the war, it didn't have the spine to stand up to pot-smoking, draft-dodging hippies occupying administration buildings. But enough about Bill Clinton. If we're going to have humane wars, they are going to have to take a little bit longer. That wouldn't be so bad, except that it gives fifth columnists more time to demoralize Americans and convince them that we are losing a war in the paramount struggle of our time." Is she right about that? "The paramount struggle of our time"? Yes, I think so. There was a time when I was certain that nuclear weapons would be used again in war. They haven't been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We've had them all this time and no one used one. There was a time then after that, that I was certain they would not be used again because, after all, mutually assured destruction seemed to make it impossible for either of the great powers to ever do that.

Now? All bets are off. I think nuclear weapons will be used. Exactly when and how is hard to say. It's kind of shocking to realize, though, that one nuclear weapon fired by Iran into the state of Israel would destroy well over half the population of that country. Nuclear weapons will not be the end of the world, but they will mark the end of the world as we know it and love it. There's no reason, frankly, to think that we in this country have any hope of finding the backbone to stand up against the dangers that face us. We're just not going to do it. This would require a more brutal approach than anyone in this country is willing to take, the way we are now. And what is sad is that we are just repeating another endless cycle of history. We were not willing to take the necessary steps to stop Hitler when we could have. It may have been humanitarianism, it may have been exhaustion, or both, that kept us from doing that. After the invasion of Poland, after Dunkirk, after the Battle of Britain and the destruction and the blitz of London, after Pearl Harbor, after the grinding war in the Pacific, we didn't want any more armistice at the end of that war. We wanted to put an end to the cycle. We wanted unconditional surrender. We were willing to bomb Germany to rubble, to firebomb the city of Dresden, to use the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and, when the Japanese didn't surrender quickly enough, on Nagasaki. I once heard that when Harry Truman was asked if he agonized over the decision to use the bomb on Hiroshima, he responded, "Hell, no! [he snapped his fingers] I made it just like that." Times change, values change, people change.

How is a Christian supposed to think about that? I think the first thing is to consider the Bible sitting there on the coffee table gathering dust as one book, not two. The Bible is a book about one God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And we need to be careful when we read the Old Testament not to read our culture, our times, our values back into it. Many people don't like the God of the Old Testament very much. He's too judgmental, too harsh, too violent, too bloody. I suppose the most important thing I can say about that is: God does not need you and me apologizing for him.

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This article was transcribed with minor editing from a message given by  
Ronald L. Dart titled: "Satire and the Christian" (07SAC) 4/5/07

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