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Faith and the Funny Pages

By JOHN LELAND
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NEWSPAPER readers around the country this month opened their comics sections to see a character preaching the Gospel.

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Kevin Frank, distributed by King Features, 2006

THE WORD IN BUBBLES The Christian comic strip "Heaven's Love Thrift Shop" now appears in 15 newspapers.

"The Bible tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," the character says, shouting into a cellphone in a crowded place. "But the good news is that the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ His son!"

His friend looks at him. "That's not even a working phone, is it?" he says.

"No," the talker admits, "but it's a great way to share my faith!"

The strip, called "Heaven's Love Thrift Shop," made its debut in 15 American newspapers this month, with quotations from Scripture and characters talking about

their faith. Though other comics occasionally address religious themes, mainstream newspapers and syndicates have largely avoided strips that make religion so central.

"Religion has always been a bit of a taboo subject, because you're writing a strip for the largest mass audience," said Brian Walker, a cartoonist who has also written several books about the history of comics. "In a conventional strip, you're afraid that if you even mention a Christian holiday, people are going to complain that you don't mention Muslim holidays."

Because of the religious content in "Heaven's Love Thrift Shop," several papers have run it in the news pages rather than with other comics.

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Kevin Frank, the strip's author, said his goal was "very simplistic, to remind people that there is a God and God loves them." To this end, he said, he planned to avoid "hot-button political issues, because even among people of faith those are divisive."

The strip comes from King Features Syndicate, the largest distributor of daily comic strips in the United States. "It's new ground in terms of syndication," said Jay Kennedy, the company's editor in chief, who said that King had carried only one religious strip, now defunct, in his memory.

Popular cartoons like "Peanuts" or "The Family Circus" have long run occasional religious references, especially around Christmas and Easter. In the 1990's, Johnny Hart, creator of the popular "B.C." strip, began introducing overt Christian themes in occasional strips, with controversial results. Some newspapers opted not to run the religious strips, and Jewish and Muslim groups called for apologies from Mr. Hart for strips they considered insensitive, including one in which a menorah is transformed into a cross, which some took to signal that Christianity had extinguished Judaism.

"The mere mention of Jesus on a comic page made editors wince!" Mr. Hart wrote in an e-mail message. "His name, as in the movies today, was like a cuss word. How dare you use that name on a comic page?"

Guy Gilchrist, who writes a strip called "Your Angels Speak," said that since Sept. 11, syndicators had become more open to religious comics. In the late 1990's, none would handle his strip. Then in November 2001, United Features called to see if he was still writing it.

Like Mr. Frank, Mr. Gilchrist said he tried to avoid being preachy or alienating people who did not share his faith. "I am a Christian and occasionally I will quote from the New Testament," Mr. Gilchrist said. "But I want the angels to be accessible. Hopefully people that are afraid of organized religion or questions of faith can find this and possibly consider that there is a God or a higher power."

Mr. Frank, who calls his strip a ministry, said he took satisfaction in placing Christian messages in secular newspapers. "It's sneaky," he said. "People in papers are bending over backwards not to portray the beliefs of people of faith, so I feel great to be breaking into that."

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