

So a Baptist says to a Unitarian ...

By RAY WADDLE
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Garrison Keillor has a pretty good thing going on in "A Prairie Home Companion." All he has to do is say "Lutheran" and he gets a laugh. He says "Unitarian" and gets a bigger laugh.

These words are not in themselves laughable. But over the national airwaves, it's different.

Keillor knows that in the congregational setting of his secular radio show, the lingo of church life has a strange charm. Comic memories accrue and detonate with each new reference to "Corinthians" or "Episcopalians" in the tales of the show's stoical, church-going Minnesota characters.

A phrase like "covered dish supper" is a gold mine, a renewable national resource. Such is Keillor's shrewd magic.

There's a reason for this: The words of Middle American religious life just aren't heard much on the public airwaves. The jarring little titillation at hearing the word "Baptist" on the News from Lake Wobegon is like a trespass on the guarded compound of public rhetoric.

It's the unwritten etiquette of church-state separation, a tradition of reluctance to talk about religion, other people's religion, on the air. So the words sound exotic. They carry voltage, a slightly scandalous vibe.

Mainstream religion's absence from the mass media in spiritually minded America never ceases to be peculiar. The paradox gets discussed from time to time at earnest seminars.

At the end of the day, though, the taboo remains so forceful that a tall man with a radio show can appear to be breaking the rules and get a weekly chuckle just by saying "Presbyterian."

It gives Keillor a virtual monopoly on the religious humor market for a national audience.

Television and movies don't offer much competition. When organized religion gets a mention at all, it's usually reduced to clergy clichés: the Rev. Milquetoast Harmless Bumbler and the Rev. Southern-Accent Bad-Guy Evangelist.

Neither of them has anything to do with the lives of 100 million mainstream believers in this country.

Serious television air time is reserved for cops, lawyers, surgeons, the occasional coroner, cowboy and nurses' aide — seldom a minister, priest or rabbi.

Scriptwriters just don't get much practice using Catholic or Protestant terminology. It's not easy to tune to



Contributed photo

Garrison Keillor brings a comic, Middle American religious message to the radio airwaves.

the music behind a phrase like Council of Nicea.

Religion, even the mainstream sort, is considered too scary, too divisive, to warrant much of a dignified prime-time life. Nearly 30 years after "M*A*S*H" the lovably ineffectual Father Mulcahy remains a Mount Rushmore figure, an enduring cliché of prime-time clergy decorum.

When the taboo is occasionally challenged, the results can be swift and brutal: cancellation. Remember the 1997 ABC show "Nothing Sacred," a drama about an inner-city Catholic parish? Dead within weeks.

Maybe it's best this way, this curious absence of mainstream religious life on TV and in movies. More than ever, the big entertainment conglomerates are driven by nervous laughter: the fouler the jokes, the more debt the network is probably carrying — the more desperate the need to please in cartoonish ways. There's little inclination to dignify the daily life of faith.

So there's another reason Garrison Keillor succeeds with religious laughs: His listeners trust him, his context, his skill. The audience senses his complicated respect for the humble foibles of his Wobegon citizens, their modest pleasures and boring vacation plans.

Keillor's weekly stories weave a theology of human limitation and bittersweetness at time's passing. He brings a gentle lack of judgment, the community feeling of old radio.

Keillor is located somewhere between mass media and the real world. His stories are seasoned with real life, the life of weekly worship in unglamorous neighborhoods, long-term marriages and sweet moments of wonder.