

## Religion in the News: April 2003

by Mister Thorne

5 May 2003

### Religion in the News: April 2003

April was chock full of stories of Religion in the News. The pope bashed Protestants; he took a swipe at a particular Methodist. Protestants bashed Muslims, and Muslims protested the appearance of a Protestant at the Pentagon; they protested the appointment of a Jew (i.e., a member of the Jewish Community) to the United States Institute of Peace. In Iraq, Muslims cheered and then jeered and then cheered U.S. soldiers, some of whom had to become Protestants if they wanted to bathe. Some Muslims killed some ministers in a mosque, while some Protestants prepared their armies for a spiritual assault on Islam.

### The Pope on Communing with Protestants

On 17 April, the pope issued a missive on Holy Communion (his [Encyclical on the Eucharist](#)), a rite that he termed 'cosmic' and 'a great mystery.' In his missive, the pope promised immortality to those who participate in the rite (provided they first confess their sins). He claimed that the bread eaten during the rite is "a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death."

Speaking about his missive, the pope expressed his concern for "those of Protestant faith" for whom "the Eucharist is only a symbol." He cautioned Catholics against having communion with Protestants, who treated it "as if it were simply a fraternal banquet." He advised that Catholics should not participate in the rite in Protestant churches, and that Protestants should not be allowed to do it in Catholic churches.

**Note:** Prime Minister Tony Blair, a Protestant, is married to a Catholic. The couple used to take Communion together, but in 1996, he received a letter from a Catholic cardinal asking him to stop.

The Pope also expressed hope that his missive would "help to banish the dark clouds of unacceptable doctrine and practice," such as offering 'eternal salvation' to those who "obstinately persist in manifest grave sin" (e.g., those who get divorced and then remarry).

### The Pope on Ideal Rulers

On 30 April, the pope spoke to a crowd of some 20,000 people gathered in Saint Peter's Square. His topic was the ideal political ruler.

He told the crowd that the ideal ruler's actions should be governed by "moral integrity" and a "commitment against injustice," that such a ruler needs "wisdom that helps to understand and judge well; innocence which is purity of heart and of life; and, finally, the integrity of conscience that does not tolerate evil." He said the ideal ruler surrounds himself with "people of integrity," and avoids "contact with anyone who practices deceit."

Was he talking about our president, who, as governor of Texas, presided over the execution of 152 people, who poked fun at the clemency request of the born-again Karla Faye Tucker before she was executed? Was he talking about our man who launched what the pope called an unjust war against Iraq, who tried repeatedly to kill Saddam Hussein (despite that commandment against killing others)? Was he talking about our man whose spokesman, the venerable Ari Fleischer, would certainly never, ever deceive anyone (and violate that commandment against being untruthful)?

Don't know. He didn't say.

## **We Believe the Same Thing; We Just Can't Agree On It**

Before the war, there was so much debate among theologians and ministers, professors and politicians, conservatives and liberals: all those who claim to be Christians. Casting aside their Savior's commandment to love one another, many seriously asked, "could this be a Just War?" They debated. And they came up with all sorts of rationales for concluding that their god actually thought this war could be a good thing indeed.

Now, the range of opinions is limited when the domain is restricted to members of the U.S. military, to those who have sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States, who have sworn an oath to god to do whatever their superiors tell them to do. It is further restricted when it comes to military chaplains.

A snapshot of their opinions:

"I tell soldiers we are privileged to be god's representatives, to control evil in the world," explains Lieutenant Colonel Gerry Fox, a Protestant chaplain at the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos, California. Fox explains that he doesn't get this from anything attributed to Jesus, but from Paul's letter to the Romans, in which Paul tells the faithful that it is their duty to do whatever the government says. Still, it's good to know he's controlling evil in the world.

"God looks at the intent of the heart," explains Colonel John South, another Protestant chaplain in the U.S. army reserve. Of course. But then why is the pope – who strongly protested against this war – so out of touch with this simple fact?

And what is a Catholic chaplain to do: agree with the pope's reasoning, or the president's? Lieutenant Colonel Bill Metzdorf, a Catholic chaplain, says it is clear: "we should never, ever be involved in a war."

"You don't go into the military to make war, but to defend peace," advises chaplain and Colonel Bill Thompson. "It is never right to kill, but some circumstances make it unavoidable." He didn't say whether he thought war against Iraq was one of those circumstances.

Well . . . whether chaplains listen to Jesus or to Paul, they've got work to do. Knight-Ridder reported that a U.S. army chaplain in Iraq used a water shortage to gain unwilling converts. The chaplain had a 500-gallon pool of water under his control and, if soldiers wanted to bathe, they could, but only if they agreed to do it as part of a religious ceremony. "It's simple," the chaplain told a Knight-Ridder reporter. "They want water. I have it, as long as they agree to get baptized."

On 24 April, the UPI reported that the army's office of the Chief of Chaplains had investigated the matter and concluded it was just so much bull twat. Fact is: that unit had tens of thousands of gallons of water, and the chaplain controlled just a tiny bit of it.

## **You Can Kill Them, But Don't Offend Them**

On 7 April, the Rutherford Institute, an organization with a mission "to provide legal services in the defense of religious and civil liberties," announced that it intended to file a complaint against the U.S. Postal Service. Why? Because USPS regulations prohibit sending "any matter containing religious materials contrary to the Islamic faith" to U.S. troops in the Middle East.

Last month, Jack Moody of Lenoir, North Carolina contacted the local post office. He was sending a package to his son, Daniel, stationed in Kuwait. Moody wanted details on how to send the package, which would contain some religious materials, including Christian comic books (Daniel is 21). The clerk at the post office told Moody he could not send his son such materials. She cited a regulation that prohibits the mailing of obscene articles, pornographic materials, pork or pork by-products, and Christian comic books to troops stationed in the Middle East.

The regulation, which dates back to the first Gulf war, accounts for Customs regulations, explained a USPS spokesman. He explained that mail sent to another country must first go through Customs; he said that Kuwait enforces strict regulations on the import of religious materials and pornography. Why tie up the mail with stuff that's going to be confiscated before it gets to where it's going?

Moody was shocked. "I just couldn't believe it. That's why I had the lady read it back to me twice," said Moody. He got to making hay over the regulation, and then the news reached the folks at the Rutherford Institute. They went into action, claiming the regulation violated the senior Moody's "free speech, religious and equal protection rights" guaranteed by the first and fifth amendments to the Constitution and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

On 11 April, the Institute issued a press release confirming that it had filed the complaint. "Our troops need all the support they can get right now," said John Whitehead, president and founder of the Institute. "And to deny them religious materials because it might offend some intolerant despot is unthinkable."

In response, the USPS changed the regulation, which now applies only to bulk mailings (e.g., don't mail 30,000 Bibles to the troops).

## **Jesus Goes to Baghdad**

Like a modern-day Junipero Serra, Franklin Graham prepares his army of Christians for a secondary invasion of Iraq. Equipped with drinking water for up to 20,000 people, materials to build temporary homes for 4,000 families, and medical kits to care for up to 100,000 people, Graham says his army of 25,000 volunteers staging in Jordan only intends to assist the poor people of Iraq.

Critics say that Graham has another agenda, that he and his army are out to convert the Iraqis from Islam, "a very evil and wicked religion," according to Graham. Their evidence? There's plenty of it. They point to Graham's earlier activities in the region.

In 1982, accompanying the Israeli army into Lebanon, he preached the good word to Muslims. In early 1991, after the first Gulf War, after then President Bush egged the Kurds and Shias into overthrowing Saddam's government, Graham commented, "What a time to preach the gospel to these people! They're eager to listen to anything we have to say." In addition, Graham's army – Samaritan's Purse – bills itself as an, "organization with a single-minded commitment to evangelism through aid relief."

Before the 1991 war, Graham's army sent some 30,000 copies of the New Testament, written in Arabic, to U.S. troops in Arabia. This, despite the fact that it is a capital crime in Arabia to possess a copy of the Bible. General Schwarzkopf – concerned that the Saudis would see this not only as an affront, but as contrary to their agreements with the U.S. – ordered his chaplain to round up the illicit Bibles. When confronted by the sympathetic chaplain, Graham is reported to have said, "I appreciate what you say but I am also under orders, from the King of Kings and Lord of Lords." And then Schwarzkopf's chaplain ignored the general's order. He ignored that oath to god he took when he joined the military.

Also in the region is the TV evangelist Charles Stanley – head of In Touch ministries and a board member of the National Religious Broadcasters Association – who said in a sermon before the invasion of Iraq that, "God approves of war." Stanley says he plans to broadcast his sermons in Arabic to the Iraqis. Let's just hope they don't take too seriously his advice about divine approval for armed conflict.

## Jesus Goes to Washington

Graham was also in the news because he was invited to speak at Good Friday services at the Pentagon. That did not sit well with some of the non-Christians who work there: Muslims, in particular, who protested to the top brass (to no avail). It seems the Muslim employees, ever so sensitive to any criticism of their religion, took exception to Graham's recent comment that, "The true god is the god of the Bible, not the Koran."

During his talk, Graham told the audience, "There is no other way to god except through Christ . . . Jesus Christ is alive because he is risen, and friends, he's coming back, and I believe he's coming back soon."

The Muslims in the audience didn't seem to appreciate Graham's evangelizing. Graham asked for a photo opportunity with the Pentagon's Muslim employees. They refused.

## Jesus Gets a New Name

Last year, Graham (whose real name is William Franklin Graham III) published his latest book: *The Name*. In it, he wrote that Christianity and Islam are, "as different as lightness and darkness." Referring to the attacks on the World Trade Center, he wrote, "Those who have attacked America invoke their god's name, Allah."

Perhaps Graham is not hip to the fact that, 'Allah' is not the name of a god; it is Arabic for 'god.'

A press release claims the book explores the "importance of the name Jesus." Curious. While there is no solid evidence for the existence of a Jesus of Nazareth, there is plenty of evidence that – if he existed – his mother named him Yeshua, not Jesus.

The name 'Yeshua' means, *one who is like Yahweh*, Yahweh being a deity of the ancient Semites (and the deity of modern-day Jews and Muslims). 'Yeshua' was a common name among Jews before the Julian calendar was brand new.

Perhaps Graham is not hip to the etymology of 'Jesus.' It's a Hellenized version of 'Yeshua' and was concocted when the New Testament was first published (in Greek).

## Jesus Hunted in Baghdad

Graham has certainly got more moxie than that Salman Rushdie. When an Ayatollah advises his followers to kill Rushdie, the author goes and hides. But when an Ayatollah gives the same advice about Graham, the evangelist doesn't miss a beat. He goes preaching in the Muslim minister's backyard. What the heck? He's got a real god on his side, and the Ayatollah doesn't.

Last October, an Ayatollah (and not just any old Ayatollah, but a personal representative of Iran's Supreme Leader) said, "in our opinion, to kill these three [Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham, and Jerry Falwell] is necessary."

What's the beef? Seems the Ayatollah wasn't too hip on what these three Protestants had to say about his religion after the attacks on the World Trade Center. You might recall that after the attacks, Robertson said Islam was a religion of violence, Graham said the religion was evil and wicked, and Falwell called the founder of Islam a terrorist. Actually, before he learned that Muslims carried out the attack, Falwell blamed it on homosexuals and the ACLU. The guy's a genius.

## Two Unsuspecting Martyrs; Maybe More

On 10 April, two ministers of the Shia branch of Islam were killed by a mob in the Imam Ali mosque in An Najaf, Iraq. One of the ministers, Haidar Kadar, was a member of Saddam's Ministry of Religious Affairs. He was also Guardian of the Shrine of Imam Ali, a site considered sacred by Shias (see Commentary). And he was despised by Shias, who saw him as one of Saddam's henchmen. The other was Abdul Majid al-Khoei, who had just returned to Iraq from his exile in London.

The U.S. and the U.K. had great hopes for al-Khoei. He would unite the Shias (the largest religious group in Iraq) and gain their support in the coalition's attempt to fashion a secular, pro-Western, government. He favored a secular government in Iraq, and he would be a counterweight to the fundamentalist Shia ministers who were aching to fashion the sort of theocracy that the infamous Ayatollah Khomeini brought to Iran in 1979, the same year Saddam assumed power in Iraq.

Al-Khoei was to hold a meeting in the mosque that evening with other Shia ministers. The meeting was intended to be a "showcase of reconciliation" among various factions of Shias. The U.S. military flew two helicopters full of Arab journalists to report on the meeting, but the journalists arrived shortly after the killings, and reports of what happened were sketchy, at best.

Some observers said a mob that supported another minister – Muqtada al-Sadr, the 22-year-old son of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr who was assassinated by Saddam's government in 1999 – denounced Kadar as an animal and threatened to kill him. One report has it that al-Khoei tried to calm the crowd, telling them that "This is sacrilege. We are all Shia, and you must respect the Imam's shrine."

Other reports held that al-Khoei tried to defend Kadar, that he drew a gun and fired several warning shots in the air. Others say that al-Khoei fired on the crowd and wounded several people. Then the crowd attacked them both and hacked them with swords.

Al-Khoei's nephew said that four others were killed along with al-Khoei and Kadar. He said, "About 100 people entered the mosque and killed six people. . . . Khoei was shot at five times, then dragged off out of the mosque where he was stabbed to death with knives and swords."

Yet another report held that al-Khoei was in the mosque meeting with 24 other Shia ministers. A crowd gathered in the mosque's courtyard, and someone in the crowd remarked that the despised Kadar was inside. The crowd attacked, and the 25 ministers hid in a small room. Someone in the crowd shot through the door to the room and the bullet hit al-Khoei in the hand, removing four of his fingers. Then the crowd kicked the door in and dragged al-Khoei and Kadar out, beating them and stabbing them and then hacking their bodies with swords.

Each of the 25 ministers had a satellite phone from the U.S. army. They were told to push a button on the phone if there was any trouble, and help would be right on the way. In an interview two days after the killings, one of the ministers said, "We had our Thuraya phones and were frantically pushing the buttons for more than an hour, but no one came to help us."

The U.S. military is forbidden from entering the mosque.

On 13 April, also in An Najaf, a group of armed Shia surrounded the home of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and gave him this edict: get out of town within 48 hours, or die. The supreme spiritual leader of the approximately 170 million (worldwide) Shias, Sistani had issued an edict on 3 April advising Shias not to interfere with coalition forces entering the city. The men who surrounded his home were said to be members of Jimaat-e-Sadr-Thani, a group devoted to Muqtada al-Sadr. This was the same group that many believe killed al-Khoei and Kadar at the mosque. The speculation is that al-Sadr is positioning himself to become the next Grand Ayatollah, and that he's killing his competition.

## An Najaf: Legends, Facts, and Rumors

An Najaf, Iraq: This city gets its name from an old legend. The legend holds that there had been a mountain where the city now sits. One of Noah's sons refused to enter Noah's ark on time. He wanted to sit atop the mountain to see where the waters that would cover the earth would come from. While he was watching for water, the mountain crumbled, and he drowned. After the flood passed, a river appeared at the site. A few years later, it dried up. And that's how the city got its name, which means, 'the dried river.'

Legend also has it that Abraham – the great grand daddy of the Semitic religions – had come to the town with his son. The people of the town wanted them to stay, to make An Najaf their home. Abraham agreed, provided that he could buy a certain plot of land for farming. His son protested. He felt the plot would not be good farmland. But Abraham assured him that there would come a time when the land would be home to a tomb, a shrine from which 70,000 people would enter Paradise.

This city contains the Imam Ali mosque. Legend has it that buried in a tomb in the mosque is Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib: the Son of the Ka'aba, the Martyr of the Mihrab, the Commander of the Faithful, the Door of the Greatest Prophet's Knowledge.

An Najaf is the spiritual center of the Shia branch of Islam (see the Commentary). It is a town of with mosques and tombs and religious schools. It is, to Shias, more significant than the Vatican is to Roman Catholics.

An Najaf is home to fact and rumor as well as legend:

**Fact:** After the U.S. army and allied forces drove the Iraqi army out of Kuwait in 1991, then President Bush encouraged the Shias to rise up against Saddam. And they did, particularly in An Najaf.

**Fact:** Iranian-based Shia fighters entered Iraq to support uprising against Saddam.

**Rumor:** It was the movement of those Iranian fighters that caused then President Bush to withdraw all support for the uprising he encouraged.

**Rumor:** In 1991, al-Khoei was sent by his father – Grand Ayatollah Abul Qasim al-Khoei – to find out when the allied forces would come to assist the uprising; when he reached French forces, he was told that General Schwarzkopf, commander of the allied forces, would come to meet him. Schwarzkopf never showed up.

**Fact:** Al-Khoei fled to London where he lived until his recent return to Iraq.

**Rumor:** After the 1991 uprising, Saddam's security agents regularly searched, harassed, and arrested Shia worshipers in An Najaf. Shia ministers and scholars were harassed, assaulted, and arrested at and near the city's theological schools and mosques. Tens of thousands of Shia were told that they were Persian, not Arabian, and were deported to Iran.

**Fact and rumor:** Even before the 1991 uprising, Saddam's government did much to eliminate the Mirjaiyat, the Shia religious leadership in An Najaf:

- Ayatollah Qasim Shubar was arrested in 1979 and never seen again;
- Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr and his sister were executed in 1980;
- Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Qazwini was arrested in 1980 and never seen again;
- Sayyid Mehdi al-Hakim, the eldest son Grand Ayatollah Mohsin al-Hakim was killed in 1981;
- Ayatollah Abul Sahib al-Hakim and 16 members of his family were killed in 1983;
- Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad Taqi al-Jawahary was arrested in the mid-80s and never seen again.

**Fact and rumor:** After the 1991 uprising, things just got worse:

- Ayatollahs Ala'ad-din Bahr al-Aloom and Aiz ad-Din Bahr al-Aloom and over a dozen members of their family were arrested by security agents in 1991 and have not been seen since;
- Grand Ayatollah Abul Qasim al-Khoei, age 93 and the senior Shia clergyman, died under house arrest in 1992 after intensive interrogation;
- Over 100 of al-Khoei's associates have not been seen since their arrest in 1992;
- Taghi, al-Khoei's brother was assassinated in 1994;
- Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Murtada al-Borojourni, age 69, was killed in 1998;
- Grand Ayatollah Murtadha Ali Mohammad al-Borojourni and two of his followers were shot and killed near the Imam Ali Mosque in 1998;
- Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Mirza Ali al-Gharawi, age 68, and his son were killed in 1998;
- Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, age 66, was killed in 1999 along with two of his sons in downtown An Najaf; they were killed shortly after al-Sadr led morning prayers despite a government order that he not lead prayer; after his death, tens of thousands of Shias gathered to protest, and government security forces – using automatic weapons and armored vehicles – killed hundreds of them; later, hundreds more were arrested;
- Since al-Sadr's death, security forces have conducted mortar and artillery attacks against cities and villages dominated by Shias; security forces have regularly used automatic weapons and hand grenades against protestors; tens of thousands have been imprisoned, and many have been executed.

**Fact:** on 3 April, the U.S. army entered An Najaf and saw the first signs of popular approval for what it was doing. But as troops approached the Imam Ali mosque, cheers turned to jeers, and the crowd blocked the army's advance. An army of Infidels could liberate the town from that brutal, Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein, but it could not approach this holy site. After a tense standoff, the army backed away, and the crowd had a whole new reason to rejoice.

**Fact:** on 3 April, al-Khoei arrived in An Najaf. He organized a committee to maintain order, to prevent looting, and to prevent personal vendettas like those that occurred during the 1991 uprising.

**Rumor:** Al-Khoei arrived in Iraq with \$3 million from the U.S. government, and handed out money to Shias in An Najaf to win their favor. He had said that Shias there had become so poor that they would follow anyone with money: "All you have to do is mention the name of the Imam Ali and say: 'Here is the money and here is heaven' and they will be with you. . . . Money and Islam and heaven is a powerful combination!"

**Fact:** On 24 and 25 April, a contingent of several hundred teen-aged men threw stones at U.S. Marines patrolling An Najaf. The Marines were told that the youths mistook them for British soldiers, that the locals have grievances against the British dating back to colonial times.

## A Pilgrimage Renewed

Not far from An Najaf is another city held sacred by Shias: Karbala. Karbala hit the evening news on 1 April. There were reports that, on the evening of 31 March, a car full of Iraqi civilians, including women and children, was fired on by the U.S. 3rd Infantry. Initial reports held that the soldiers fired several warning shots, but the car kept coming. Then they shot at the car's engine, hoping to disable it. That failed, and fearing the worst (another suicide attack), the soldiers finally opened up on the car, killing 10 of its 15 passengers.

Those initial reports were broadcast repeatedly; they testified to the U.S. military's concern for 'innocent life.' But later and more accurate reports never made it to the evening news. It turns out that no warning shots were fired and, even though the order was given, no attempt was made to disable the car. Without the warning shots, the civilians could have no idea that their dash to safety was perceived as a threat.

Speaking about the incident, Sergeant Mario Manzano, 26, a U.S. army medic said, "It was the most horrible thing I've ever seen, and I hope I never see it again." He said a woman wounded in the incident sat in the car holding the mangled bodies of two of her children. It was a tragedy, but certainly not Karbala's first.

Karbala is, to Shias, something of what Jerusalem is to Roman Catholics (see Commentary). It is the place where Imam al-Hussein, son of Imam Ali, died in a battle for control of Islam in 680 AD. He lost the battle. His army of 72 was no match for the thousands in the opposing army. At the end of the battle, he was beheaded.

The martyrdom of al-Hussein is celebrated by Shias on 23 April. And this year it was celebrated in a big way. Estimates are that up to two million pilgrims made their way to Karbala this year. This is significant because, since he came to power in 1977, the Baath party severely restricted the Ashura pilgrimage. That year, government troops reportedly killed thousands of Shia who had made their way to Karbala to honor al-Hussein.

This year, the evening news showed images of the mass of pilgrims walking to Karbala. It showed images of men slashing their heads with swords, chanting and thumping their chests, crawling on their bellies into the Imam al-Hussein mosque. Despite the somber occasion the pilgrimage marks, the evening news showed the joyous faces of Shia pilgrims free, once again, to practice their faith.

It did not show images of U.S. soldiers firing on a car full of women and children dashing to safety.

## **Bellowing Over Pipes**

On 1 April, President Bush nominated Daniel Pipes to the board of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Congress created the Institute in 1984 to promote international peace and the peaceful resolution of conflicts among nations and peoples. Exactly what the Institute does is not clear. "It is a think tank that you hear about only occasionally and even then not much," says a top official at another Washington think tank. He adds, "They don't seem to do that much, and seem, even more than most think tanks, to be a holding place for government people who are between jobs."

Members of the board of USIP are nominated by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, and there is some controversy surrounding Pipes' nomination. Pipes is the director of the Middle East Forum, a conservative think tank that says it "works to define and promote American interests in the Middle East." Pipes, who holds a doctorate in history from Harvard, is widely considered an expert on the history and the politics of the Middle East. He has authored nearly a dozen books on the politics of that area.

Pipes is a good writer; he knows how to use words the way a good warrior knows how to use weapons. He's also a columnist for the New York Post and the Jerusalem Post, and he usually writes about what he calls militant, or fundamentalist Islam, the sort practiced by Osama bin Laden and his cronies. He distinguishes militant Islam from the religion of Islam. To Pipes, militant Islam is an ideology, not a religion, and it is an ideology akin to Nazism, just another form of fascism.

His columns are not well received by many adherents to, and proponents of, Islam. For instance, on 25 March, Pipes' column in the New York Post, titled Murder in the 101st Airborne, discussed the incredible action of Hasan Karim Akbar, a sergeant in the 101st Airborne Division. Akbar – an African-American convert to Islam – had attacked his division command in Kuwait with several hand grenades. Pipes wrote that Akbar's action, "fits into a sustained pattern of political violence by American Muslims." In his column from 25 October of last year that discussed the arrest of John Allen Muhammad, one of the Washington, D.C.-area snipers and another African-American convert to Islam, Pipes wrote that Muhammad's actions fit, "into a well-established tradition of American blacks who convert to Islam turning against their country."

Long before the attacks on the World Trade Center, Pipes was writing about the growing threat of militant Islam. He claims the goal of the militants is, "the construction of a totalitarian, theocratic state," not just here in the U.S., but throughout the West. Pipes has repeatedly said that Islamic extremists in the U.S. want to replace the Constitution with the Koran. His evidence for such a bold claim? It comes from a statement attributed to Omar Ahmad, chairman of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), a group that claims it was, "established to promote a positive image of Islam and Muslims in America."

There is controversy about the statement attributed to Ahmad. On 4 July 1998, the San Ramon Valley Herald ran a story about a speech Ahmad gave in Fremont, California, home to a large number of Muslim immigrants. The story quoted Ahmad as telling his audience that they had a responsibility to spread their faith among non-Muslims, to those who are "on the wrong side." The story also quoted him as saying that, "Islam isn't in America to be equal to any other faith, but to become dominant."

The statement that Pipes drew particular attention to was this: "The Koran, the Muslim book of scripture, should be the highest authority in America, and Islam the only accepted religion on Earth." The implication is that CAIR's chairman would like to replace the Constitution with the Koran.

Now, almost five years later, CAIR disputes that Ahmad ever made such a statement. On 29 April, it issued a press release in which Nihad Awad, CAIR's executive director, says, "Our board chairman did not say the Koran should be the highest authority in America."

Why would CAIR, an opponent of Pipes for many years now, wait so long to douse the very powder that Pipes has used to fire off so many shots against militant Islam?

CAIR strongly opposes Pipes' nomination to USIP. In a letter to President Bush urging that the nomination be withdrawn, Awad wrote that, "Pipes' bigoted views have been instrumental in widening the divide between faiths and cultures." And Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for CAIR, said Pipes' nomination just went to show that the war on terrorism "is really a war on Islam."

"Pipes is the premier Muslim basher," says Hooper. "I hate to use that term, but for him it really fits. It's basically his job to smear an entire community and to create fear, apprehension and suspicion toward a religious minority in the United States for his own political, and apparently religious, agenda." Pipes is Jewish.

Last year, Pipes started a group called Campus Watch that claims it "reviews and critiques Middle East studies in North America with an aim to improving them." In effect, the group collects complaints against professors and academic institutions biased in favor of Islam and Muslims (much as CAIR collects complaints about those that are biased against Islam and Muslims).

It's not just Muslims and proponents of Islam that don't think highly of Pipes' nomination. Ted Galen Carpenter, a vice president of the Cato Institute, a liberal, foreign-policy think tank, said, "He is perhaps the most extreme hawk that you could find . . . This is really a barometer of the neo-conservative mood of this administration." Senator Diane Feinstein (Democrat – California), who sits on the committee that will consider Pipes' nomination, said the hearings are likely to be contentious.

Many think that Pipes is just a well-educated bigot. On 19 April, the Washington Post ran an editorial about Pipes' nomination and noted that many Muslims felt it was a "cruel joke." The editorial took Pipes to task for his 25 March column in which he repeated this advice: "There is no escaping the unfortunate fact that Muslim government employees in law enforcement, the military and the diplomatic corps need to be watched for connections to terrorism, as do Muslim chaplains in prisons and the armed forces. Muslim visitors and immigrants must undergo additional background checks. Mosques require a scrutiny beyond that applied to churches and temples." The editorial concluded that Pipes has a "disturbing hostility to contemporary Muslims."

Pipes recently commented on the brouhaha regarding his nomination: "My view is that militant Islam is the problem, and moderate Islam is the answer."

Is Pipes the Muslim basher that Hooper claims he is? A careful reading of his columns indicates that Pipes doesn't seem to care one bit whether someone follows Muhammad or Jesus or Siddhartha or Zarathushtra, or whether someone believes in Yahweh or Ahura Mazda or a nameless god or a family of gods. His concern seems to be behavior. He seems to be approving the behavior of those who make life better for themselves, their neighbors, and their children, and disapproving the behavior of those who are making life more miserable for themselves and others. He seems to distinguish between those who are moving forward, or, like the Palestinians, going backwards and blaming their miserable lot on someone else (e.g., Israel and the U.S.), rather than taking full responsibility for their own behavior. (Ever seen Palestinians demonstrate against Hamas?)

Perhaps Pipes' writings simply reveal what we all feel: to fight for a noble cause is a good thing; to make others suffer for some stupid, senseless cause is a bad thing. But that leaves us with the debate as to which cause is noble, and which is senseless.

In some sense, Osama bin Laden is just like George Washington: a revolutionary warrior. But George Washington was nothing like bin Laden: a small-minded, selfish man who delights in bringing suffering to innocent people.

One thing's for sure: Pipes is no diplomat, and he suffers an inability, or a reluctance, to mince words. (Call a spade a spade, and the Queen of Hearts might just call you a bigot.) Who knows? Maybe he's a literary version of Madonna: someone who feels that shock and awe is a good way to get attention.

## **Commentary**

In the past month, there have been so many news reports that mention the Sunnis and the Shias in Iraq and Iran. What is Sunni? What is Shia? The news reports don't say. And why not? Newspaper editors say they don't have the space to explain everything; just think of the Sunnis and the Shias like the Catholics and the Protestants (as in Northern Ireland) and you're all set. Hardly so.

Like Christianity, Islam is divided into various sects. And, like Christians, Muslims are united in a common belief. They are divided by the details, the events, the different interpretations of ambiguous and contradictory scriptures, and the never-ending pull of religious leaders vying for power and influence.

Among Christians, there are Catholics and Protestants; there are Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. Similarly, among Muslims, there are Sunnis and Shias; there are Ismailis, Yazidis, and Zaydis. The major division among Muslims is between Shia and Sunni, and this division, in some ways, parallels the division between Protestant and Catholic.

In Christianity, the big split between the orthodox (Catholics) and the reformed (Protestants) occurred during the Reformation of the 16th century. While this split occurred a century and a half after the time of Jesus, the split among the Muslims started right after the death of Muhammad. Right away, the question had to be addressed: who would be Muhammad's successor: the caliph? Who would lead the Muslim community: the ummah? Muhammad had managed to unite disparate Arab tribes under the banner of Islam, and a caliph would be needed to rule over them and maintain the faith.

A leading candidate was Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first man to convert to Islam. Ali was related to Muhammad ibn Abdillah – founder of Islam – in two ways. First, he was the son of Abu Talib, Muhammad's uncle and the man who raised Muhammad. Second, he was Muhammad's son in law, the husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima.

Ali was a close associate of Muhammad's. The two battled the Infidels (whoever wouldn't convert to Islam) together on many occasions. According to the Shias, Muhammad wanted Ali to be caliph. He made this clear on a number of occasions, as when he said, "I am the City of Knowledge and Ali is its Gate." He indicated this when he said, "Whoever I have authority over, Ali also has authority over." Yet, Muhammad never bothered to say how his followers should pick his successor, or subsequent caliphs.

After Muhammad died a meeting was hastily called, and Abu Bakr was elected caliph by a small group of his associates. Missing from the group were any of the members of Muhammad's immediate family. Also missing were many of Muhammad's closest followers. Hence, the election of Abu Bakr was illegitimate, according to the Shias.

According to the Sunnis, the Shias are mistaken about what happened and why. To them, Abu Bakr was rightfully elected caliph. He was Muhammad's closest friend. He fought alongside Muhammad in many battles and protected him from his many enemies. Like Ali, he was also related to the Prophet by marriage. His daughter, Aisha, was one of Muhammad's nine wives.

To the Sunnis, Muhammad made it clear that Abu, who was a good bit older than the youthful Ali, should succeed him. And they have their evidence. Muhammad used to lead the daily prayers in the Prophet's mosque in Medina. When he was old and became ill, he asked Abu to lead the prayers. One day, Abu was absent, and another of the prophet's faithful companions was leading the prayer. Muhammad objected: "No one but he [Abu] should lead prayers. He is the fittest person for this high office." As the Sunnis see it, Muhammad clearly elected Abu to succeed him.

The election of Abu as the first caliph marks the beginning of the split between the Shias and the Sunnis, but it would be almost 50 years before the signal event that made the split complete. That event was the Battle of Karbala.

The Sunnis considered the caliph a temporal leader, not a divine ruler. The Sunnis figured that Muhammad could not have a divine successor. The Shia saw it otherwise. To them, there has always been, and there always will be an Imam, the religious leader of the faithful. Adam was the first Imam; Abraham was Imam; Moses was Imam. The Imam is sinless and infallible; he is chosen by god and has secret knowledge of god (he knows the "Greatest Name of God"). It is through the divinely elected Imam that god reveals the mystical truths of the universe.

Even though Ali did not become caliph right away (he did become the fourth caliph in 656 AD after the third caliph was assented by the son of the first caliph), he became Imam to the Shia upon Muhammad's death. When Ali was killed in 661 AD, his oldest son, Hassan, became Imam. And when Hassan was killed eight years later, his brother Hussein became Imam. Each Imam succeeding Muhammad was a blood relative of the prophet.

In 680 AD, Yazid became caliph when his father, Muawiyah, died. Muawiyah, who had battled against Ali for the caliphate, made an arrangement with Ali's sons, Hassan and Hussein. The arrangement was that either one of them could become caliph when Muawiyah died. The Shias hold that Muawiyah reneged on the arrangement, and declared his son, Yazid, his successor.

The Shias' memory of history is that Yazid was a corrupt ruler, a drunkard, and a womanizer. No way could he lead the ummah, the community of the faithful. He was no relation to Muhammad, and was a Muslim only in name, not in thought or in action. Hussein, Ali's only remaining son, was ready to fight for the position that was rightfully his.

The story, according to the Shias, is that Yazid demanded that Hussein declare his loyalty to him. Hussein's reply was, "A man like me can never give allegiance to a man like you." There would be a battle for the caliphate.

Hussein received a request from the Shias in Kufa, the town between Karbala and Najaf that his father, Imam Ali, had made his headquarters. They requested he fight Yazid for the sake of Islam, and they said they would join him in a battle against the wicked Yazid. Hussein sent his cousin, Muslim bin Aqee, to Kufa to see if the Kufans were sincere. Muslim reported that they were, and that thousands of them swore their allegiance to Hussein.

Unfortunately, Yazid had learned that Muslim was in Kufa. He sent word to his governor there. The governor had Muslim killed, and he told the people that anyone who supported Hussein would die. He announced that, "By way of punishment, such people will be hanged, their families put to the sword, and their property confiscated. If anyone has helped to him [Hussein] up to now, no harm will come to him as long as the support is withdrawn immediately."

On his way to Kufa, Hussein was accompanied by his family and a small contingent of followers. Before they reached Kufa, word reached Hussein that Muslim had been killed, and that the Kufans would not support him. Hussein announced this to his group, and he advised that, "Our supporters have withdrawn their support from us. Whoever wishes to leave us and go his own way should do so." After that, his group dwindled, and only 72 faithful fighters remained.

The group set camp along the Euphrates river. Hussein asked the name of the town, and one of the locals said it was called Karbala. The Shia legend has it that, on hearing this, Hussein remarked, "Surely this is the plain where my Holy Grandfather has prophesied that I, with my faithful companions, shall lay slain after suffering three days of hunger and thirst. We will not move from here – we have reached our destination."

Then, Hussein is said to have taken his brother, Abbas, around the place, pointing out the very spots where each of them would soon die on the Day of Ashura. The legend holds that Hussein bought the land where he and his group were camped, and then gave it back to the people of Karbala as a gift. Then he addressed the men of the town: "On the tenth of this month you will see our dead bodies lying on this plain with our heads severed and taken away. Please bury us, and when our devotees come to visit our graves, treat them with honour and point out to them the places of our burial."

Next, he addressed the women of the town: "If your husbands, fearing Yazid, do not bury us, then please encourage them to do so or do it yourselves." Finally, he addressed the children of the town: "If your parents, fearing Yazid, do not bury us then, by way of playing, bring some earth and throw it on our bodies to hide them."

Then Yazid's army appeared: a contingent of 5,000, including many of the Kufans who had sworn their allegiance to Hussein. They blocked the group's access to the river, cutting them off from water. Their commander demanded that Hussein surrender and swear his allegiance to Yazid. Hussein refused. He tried to persuade his foes to let him and his followers go.

The evening before the battle, on the Night of Ashura, Hussein addressed his followers: "I am not aware of any companions more faithful and honest than my companions, and any relatives more righteous and kind than my relatives. May Allah grant you all a good reward. I think the day of our fighting with this army has arrived. I permit you all to go away, because the enemies are after me only. You are free to depart without any restriction and can take advantage of the darkness of night." The legend holds that no one left.

The battle began the next morning, after the morning prayers. It went on all day, the combatants pausing only at prayer time. In the afternoon, all the men in his group, except Hussein, had been killed. Hussein continued to fight. At some point, his wife brought him their six-month-old child who was dying of thirst. The Imam held the child in his arms and asked his foes for water for the baby. In response, one of Yazid's men fired an arrow, killing the baby.

The lop-sided battle continued until, finally, Hussein was killed. All that were left of his group were some old men, women, and children. Yazid's army beheaded all the men who had fought against them. Then they trampled the bodies of the dead; they rounded up the women and children and marched them through the desert to Kufa for a parade, and then onto to Damascus for viewing by Yazid. Mounted on their spears were the heads of Hussein and his loyal fighters.

Of course, the Sunni believe a much different story. They believe that the women and children were treated well after the battle, and that Yazid's army simply put down a rebellion by an envious rival.

It is the Battle of Karbala that the Shias commemorated in such a big way last month. It is the pivotal event in their history. It is not just the significance of that battle and the role of the Imam that separate the Shias and the Sunnis. It is also their belief of what is to come.

One might ask, if there always was, and will always be, an Imam, then who is he now? That would be the hidden Imam: Muhammad al Mahdi. Shias are divided into a number of different sects, the largest of which is called the Twelvers. The Twelvers believe there were twelve Imams and that the last, Imam Mahdi, was born in 873 AD. He still lives, but he cannot be seen again until god rules it is time to prepare the faithful for Judgement Day.

The Twelvers believe that Imam Mahdi will, one day, return to lead the forces of righteousness against the forces of evil in a final, apocalyptic battle. Imam Mahdi will rule the world for several years, and all the people of the world will live in harmony. Then, Jesus will return, along with all the other Imams, and all the believers will be able to enter Paradise.

When Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, many Shias believed that he was Imam Mahdi. Rather than dissuade them from their belief, he assumed the title of Imam. Events since 1979 would suggest that Imam Mahdi he was not.

---

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Mister Thorne is an unemployed technical writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. For information about him, visit [www.misterthorne.org](http://www.misterthorne.org). To contact him, send e-mail to [mrthorne@mindspring.com](mailto:mrthorne@mindspring.com).