

Religion in the News

by Mister Thorne

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August was a busy month for religion in the news. As always, there was lively debate about religion and our public schools. There was talk of intelligent design, and of putting warning labels on textbooks. There was talk of a school district and its state-mandated program to convert students to Islam. A federal court refused to stop a public university from trying to convert its freshmen class to Islam. And there was more: two Jehovah's Witnesses had their heads chopped off, a woman was sentenced to death for having a baby, and a man was sentenced to prison for having consensual sex with his wife.

Off with Their Heads

The Philippines is the only Christian nation in all of Asia. Over 90% of the population is Christian, mostly Roman Catholic; about 5% of the population is Muslim. And there is conflict.

A Muslim extremist group, Abu Sayyaf, whose name means *bearers of the sword* of Islam, is linked to bin Laden's al Qaeda, according to the U.S. government. The group has been fighting to establish an independent Muslim state.

The group is notorious for kidnapping people to support its operations. Some victims are traded for ransom. Others become slaves. And some of the women who have fallen prey to it have been forced to marry its members. It's an unsavory group, and it has a stronghold on the lawless island of Jolo. On 20 August, the group struck again. It abducted eight people, six of whom are Jehovah's Witnesses. The two others – both Muslims – were released.

The group was traveling in a mini-bus when they were abducted at gun point. Relatives say the group was distributing Avon cosmetics to local sales people. They say the group was conducting business, rather than proselytizing.

But something was bound to go wrong. The brother of one the victims had a premonition which, to his great dismay, turned true. His brother and the one other man in the group of six Witnesses had their heads cut off. Two days later, their heads were found in the Jolo public market. The heads were left in ice boxes, with notes saying that the men were killed because they were infidels. The notes also urged Muslims to kill Christians and Jews. The fate of the four remaining hostages – all women – is unknown.

Stoned

Amina Lawal, a 30-year-old woman living in Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria, lost her appeal. She was sentenced to death by a lower court, and then on 19 August, an Islamic high court upheld her sentence. Her crime? She is an unwed mother. Her punishment? To be buried up to her shoulders and then stoned to death by her relatives: an *honor killing*. She dishonored her family by having sex outside of marriage, and by stoning her to death, her family will reclaim its honor. In a merciful gesture, the court determined that the sentence would not be carried out until Lawal has finished breast-feeding her baby.

Consensual Sex

Tom Greene used to have a great sex life. But not any longer. On 27 August, Greene was sentenced to prison for having sex with the youngest of his five wives. She was 13 years old when they married. Actually, Greene has been in prison for over a year. Last year, he was sentenced by a Utah court to five years in prison for polygamy and child neglect. Greene is a Mormon and has, so far, fathered 33 children.

Public Schools Preaching Islam

Since the destruction of the World Trade Center, the public has been wondering: “Why do they hate us so?” To find an answer, we’ve been studying the Koran, the high holy book of Islam.

Each year, the University of North Carolina requires its freshman class to read a specific book, to write an essay about it, and to discuss it during orientation week. This year, UNC selected “Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations” a book that considers 35 sections from the Koran. Muslims consider these sections, or Suras, to be the earliest revelations from Allah to the prophet Muhammad.

Unfortunately, none of the passages refer to holy war against infidels. And that has left conservative Christians furious. They see the book as portraying Islam in a good light, rather than objectively. And they conclude that UNC has an agenda: to promote Islam.

When the Family Policy Network (FPN), a conservative Christian organization, learned about the reading requirement, it began advertising that it wanted to hear from UNC freshmen who would be willing to enter a lawsuit to eliminate the reading requirement. And it found some.

FPN filed suit in federal court on their behalf. The suit claims that requiring them to read the book violates their first amendment rights. FPN president Joe Glover claims that the book is “a one-sided presentation of Islam that entirely leaves out Suras 4, 5 and 9,” passages that contain exhortations to kill infidels. According to Glover, “anybody who has read this book and this book alone is still going to be ignorant about why people are killing other people in the name of Allah.”

On 19 August, UNC freshmen attended two-hour discussion groups on the book. FPN had asked the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to bar the discussions, but the appeal was denied. The lawsuit is still pending.

On the other side of the country, the Thomas More Foundation, another organization that actively promotes Christianity, is suing a public school district for indoctrinating students with Islam. Richard Thompson, chief counsel for the Foundation, appeared on Bill O’Reilly’s show to discuss the suit.

California requires 7th graders to learn about Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions. It seems the Byron Union School District took the requirement a bit too seriously. For three weeks, it had students adopt Islamic names, wear traditional Muslim clothes, play a game of jihad, and recite Muslim prayers.

Like the case with UNC, Thomas More went fishing for someone who would be willing to enter a lawsuit, and it found some parents of students in the district who were willing to do so. The suit claims that the course violated their first amendment rights.

According to Thompson, “the Byron Union School District crossed way over the constitutional line when it coerced impressionable 12-year-olds to engage in particular religious rituals and worship, simulated or not.” Expressing his incredulity, Thompson remarked, “This is unbelievable. While public schools prohibit Christian students from reading the Bible, praying, displaying the Ten Commandments, and even mentioning the word “God,” students in California are being indoctrinated into the religion of Islam.”

But Peggy Green, superintendent of the school district, disagreed with Thompson’s characterization of the course. “We are not teaching religion,” she said. “We’re teaching world history. We teach about all major religions, and this unit in question was just one of many. The allegations in the lawsuit don’t accurately reflect what was going on in the classroom.”

Thompson feels strongly about the persecution of Christians. Regarding a school in Maine that would not let a third-grade student wear a shirt that had *Jesus Christ* emblazoned on it he remarked, “unfortunately, Christians across this country are being discriminated against, and the public school system has been a primary culprit.”

On the Intelligent Design of Warning Labels for Textbooks

The school board of Cobb County, Georgia met and decided that science textbooks need warning labels, the same sort of labels that are attached to science textbooks in Alabama. The labels warn students that evolution, or Darwinism as they call it down south, is *just a theory*.

On the evening of 22 August, just one day after the ACLU filed a federal lawsuit to have the warning labels removed, the board met again and decided that science teachers should discuss the notion of Intelligent Design (ID) when teaching Darwinism.

And what is Intelligent Design? It's a bit like Creationism, but not quite. While Creationism holds that the universe was created in a few days a few thousand years ago, ID is a bit more accommodating. The earth might be as old as scientists claim it is, but living things don't evolve. No, they're too complex for that. Even simple life forms like bacteria are so complex that it's obvious they were intentionally created by some intelligent designer.

A similar debate about teaching ID is underway in Ohio, promoted by the Discovery Institute and the Intelligent Design Network, two organizations that say teaching evolution in public schools is just a slick way to promote atheism. Their opponents say that teaching ID is just a slick way to promote theism.

But students should be able to figure it out. After all, science textbooks typically start out with a discussion of what is science, what is the scientific method, what is a hypothesis, and what is a theory.

Commentary

Back in 1925, John Scopes was convicted for teaching evolution in a public school. He was charged with violating the Butler Act, which made it illegal to "teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible." The Act was finally repealed in 1967. But the impetus for it, the desire to use public schools to promote Christianity, remains.

Scopes got off lightly. He was fined \$1 for his crime. But his good fortune was a matter of timing. Had he lived long ago when the Catholic church was the prime authority, he might well have been executed for his heresy.

Recall the story of Giordano Bruno, a philosopher and former priest who speculated that the universe was infinite, and so it had no center. The Inquisition looked into the matter and called Bruno to account. They spent eight years trying to get Bruno to change his tune. But he refused, even after eight weeks of daily torture, and so he was given his auto-da-fé: he was burned alive.

Or consider Galileo, who escaped a similar fate. He wrote a book that advocated the Copernican theory that the sun, and not the earth, is the center of the universe. In the end, threatened with torture, he escaped Bruno's fate by publicly cursing Copernicus and his blasphemous theory.

Well, believe it or not, most scientists are like most other people in this respect: they're believers. They go to church, they pray to their god, they ask for forgiveness, or they offer their confession. They're not a bunch of atheists. And they don't contend that there's nothing beyond or behind reality.

Science is science, not religion. If the invisible hand of some intelligent creator rules the universe, so be it. But that is not the province of science, which concerns itself with understanding what we can observe.

Sure, Darwin's theory of natural selection has its problems. The proponents of Intelligent Design find great delight in those things that Darwinism cannot explain, or that seem to defy Darwin's theory. But that's how scientific theories are. For instance, the Theory of Relativity recently took another blow. Scientists found that one of the axioms of the theory – that the speed of light is constant – may be wrong. Should we therefore abandon the theory? And if we do, then what do we use in its place? Ancient scriptures written by people who thought the planets were gods?

Is Darwinism atheism as the proponents of ID claim? To answer that, consider what Darwin had to say: "The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble to us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic." No, Darwinism is neither atheism nor agnosticism. It's an application of the scientific method to some of life's most persistent questions.

But I understand this: if Rome was still the power it once was, then I might be called to account for this essay alone. Fortunately for me, science has made any literal understanding of ancient scriptures about the gods and the heavens appear foolish. It has removed the church's fangs. Let us pray that they don't grow back.