

Religion in the News: December 2002

by Mister Thorne

1 January 2003

December was an interesting month for religion in the news. A woman in Tennessee proved that prayer does not work. An Archbishop apologized to a man who shot a priest. A woman had her head chopped off because she was not dressed properly. Two guys dressed like women showed up at church and caught everyone's attention. And PBS aired a controversial documentary about a man who claimed to be human.

Prayer is Futile

15-year-old Jessica Crank was terminally ill. She was suffering from a rare form of bone cancer. One symptom of her illness was all too obvious. A nurse described it as a tumor the size of a basketball protruding from her shoulder.

Jessica's mother did the best she could for her daughter. Jacqueline Crank prayed and prayed and prayed for her daughter to get well. But the girl didn't, and the 41-year-old mother didn't bother to seek medical treatment until it was far too late.

According to the Bible, mere mortals can perform great miracles, just like Jesus. All they need is faith, and Jessica's mother had great gobs of it. And she wasn't alone. At Jessica's funeral, Ariel Ben Sherman, the girl's 'spiritual father' and her mother's 68-year-old lover, led the congregation of his New Life Ministries in a prayer to resurrect Jessica. Unfortunately, that prayer was just as futile as all the others that had come before it. Jessica remained dead.

Tennessee is one of 38 states that allow parents to use prayer and faith healing to treat their children's illnesses rather than seek medical attention. But poor Jessica was dead, and the state charged the mother and Sherman with felony child neglect. It turns out that the prosecutor in the case was about as effective as prayer. Charges against Sherman were dismissed, and on 20 December, the judge reduced the charge against Jessica's mother to a misdemeanor. He said there was barely enough evidence to support even the reduced charge.

The Touch of a God

Dontee Stokes admitted to shooting the priest. This was the priest who had baptized Stokes, who had known Stokes his whole life, who had been like a father to the fatherless Stokes, who introduced the young man as his son. And this was the priest who, in 1993, sodomized Stokes when he was 17 years old.

This May, the 26-year-old Stokes saw the priest in front of his home and called out to him, but the priest pretended to not notice Stokes, or to not know him. And that's when something incredible happened. Stokes had an out-of-body experience. He watched his body from above as the .357 Magnum in its hand went off. The priest got it three times, in a hand and a hip.

On 10 December, the trial against Stokes began. He was charged with attempted murder. He testified as to how the priest began molesting him in 1990 when he was 14, and how this continued until 1993 when the priest sodomized him. After that, Stokes confided in a therapist who reported the crime to police. A police lieutenant believed the boy's claim and wanted to investigate, but he was thwarted by Baltimore prosecutors. During the trial, the lieutenant testified that a prosecutor told him, "I don't understand the problem. He [the priest] has been doing this for a long time. Just sit on it."

When Stokes' claim of abuse reached Baltimore's Archbishop, the priest was sent away for three months of evaluation and therapy. After that, he returned to his parish and resumed his duties as pastor. But five years later, someone else spoke up and said that, when he was a young man, he had had a lengthy sexual affair with the priest. The priest admitted the affair and was suspended by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1998.

Stokes testified that he did not intend any harm to the priest. He just happened to be driving by his home and he just happened to have the gun with him at the time. The shooting would not have happened at all, except that God intervened. After the jury reached its not-guilty verdict, Stokes noted that, “the reason he was shot is that God put his hand on me.”

The jury bought the out-of-body excuse. Said one juror after the verdict was announced, “we all have experienced out-of-body times in our lives.” Said another, “we believed it was an out-of-body experience, of course. I don’t think his [Stokes’] intention was to hurt him [the priest] at all.”

Though acquitted of attempted murder, Stokes was found guilty of three gun-related charges. In a deal worked out between Stokes’ attorney and prosecutors, he is to be sentenced to 18 months of home detention and three years of probation. The priest is yet to be tried for any of his crimes.

To some, a notable moment during the trial occurred when Cardinal Keeler, the Archbishop of Baltimore, took the stand. Finally breaking his silence on the sexual abuse of young boys by perverted priests, Keeler apologized to Stokes for having waited too long to take appropriate action against the priest.

The Risks of not Dressing Properly

Several months ago, a large banner was hung at the main entrance of a Government Degree College in Kashmir. It set a deadline of 19 December for women in Muslim-dominated Kashmir to adopt Purdah, the Islamic dress code for women. It threatened “dire consequences” for failure to follow the dress code. That banner was removed, but posters with the same message began appearing just a few days before the deadline. The posters also notified Hindu women to wear a bindi, the red dot placed on the forehead.

Though a tenet of Islam, Purdah is not popular with many Muslim women in certain sections of Kashmir. In the urban areas, it is largely ignored, and that does not sit well with the Muslim fundamentalists, disdainful of western ways, who are fighting for an independent, Muslim Kashmir.

When the deadline arrived, three women – two students and a teacher – were shot to death for not following the dress code. The students were abducted from their homes, and the teacher was snatched from a wedding at a relative’s home. Later that day, another woman was beheaded for not dressing properly.

It’s widely believed that a small, relatively obscure group called Lashkar-e-Jabbar put up the banner and the posters. Last year, this group tried to enforce Purdah. It took to throwing acid on the faces of schoolgirls who ignored the dress code. But this tactic backfired on them. It angered most Muslims and set them in opposition to the fundamentalists.

The Risks of Dressing Properly

There are not very many Christians in Pakistan. The percentage of Christians there is about the same as the percentage of Muslims in the U.S. They are a small minority in a country where over 95% of the population is Muslim. Like Muslims living in the U.S., Christians in Pakistan tend to live in their own neighborhoods where they have their own places of worship.

Since Pakistan gave its support to the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, there have been a number of attacks on Christians in Pakistan. Several dozen people have been killed and more than 100 wounded. To prevent any attacks during Christmas celebrations, the police were organized to guard the churches. Yet, at one small, Presbyterian church in the town of Chianwala, the officer assigned to guard the church failed to show up on Christmas day.

Who did show up were two people dressed in burqas, garments worn by Muslim women practicing Purdah that cover almost the entire body, including the face. They tossed two hand grenades into the church during Christmas services. Three young girls were killed and 16 others were wounded. Witnesses said the attackers sped away on motorcycles.

The attack was widely condemned by Muslims. "Those who kill Christians serve the cause of enemies of Islam," said a spokesman for a militant Islamic group. Four people were arrested on suspicion that they were involved. Chief among them was an Islamic cleric who called on his followers to kill Christians just days before the bombing. The cleric reportedly told his followers, "it is the duty of every good Muslim to kill Christians . . . you should attack Christians and not even have food until you have seen their dead bodies."

In earlier news:

- On 29 September 2002, a bomb exploded outside a church in a small village in Pakistan. At the time the bomb went off, thousands of Christians were marching in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, to protest the shooting deaths of seven Christian charity workers the previous week. Five days later, two men on a motorcycle threw a grenade into a Christian hospital in Bannu, Pakistan, about 30 miles from the border with Afghanistan.
- On 17 March 2002, a man threw six grenades into the Protestant International Church in Islamabad, Pakistan during services. Four members of the congregation were killed and 40 were injured. The attacker, who was wearing a belt full of explosives, blew himself up after the attack.
- On 28 October 2001, 16 people were killed when four masked gunmen stormed a Catholic church in Behawalpur, Pakistan during a Protestant service and opened fire on the congregation of about 100. The attack lasted about five minutes. Four of the dead were children under 12. Also killed was a Muslim police officer who was guarding the church. The gunmen escaped as they had arrived: on motorcycles.

I'm Only Human

Around Christmas, some TV stations show those documentaries that prove that the stories in the Bible are really true. Leonard Nimoy narrates as viewers are shown how an old piece of wood on a mountain proves that Noah really did build his fabled ark, or how modern science can show that Jesus really did walk on water. But PBS is different. It decided to air a just-as-credible documentary – *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet* – that depicts the life and the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abdillah, the founder of Islam. And that really irked some conservative Christians.

Their beef is that the documentary shows Muhammad in a positive light, rather than an objective one. Rather than discuss Muhammad's exhortations for his followers to kill Jews and Christians if those "People of the Book" can't be converted or subjugated, the film talks about sections of the Koran that suggest all humans are equal, that it is the duty of all Muslims to be kind to the misguided infidels. The film doesn't discuss Muhammad's very interesting sex life (had he lived in the U.S. in modern times, he would be guilty of statutory rape and polygamy), and his paranoia about nudity; rather, it glorifies his struggle to eliminate paganism, and it emphasizes his humble insistence that he was not a god, just a human.

Robert Spencer of the Free Congress Foundation and author of *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith* complains that the documentary, "is nothing more than misleading propoganda." It presents without question some of the fantastic myths of Muhammad's life, it ignores Islam's oppression of women, its hatred of Jews, and its glorification of the likes of Osama bin Laden. It's a very biased view of Islam.

Just wait until Mr. Spencer gets a look at those documentaries about the Bible narrated by Leonard Nimoy.

Commentary

Who could be proud of the color of his eyes? Is blue better than brown? Is hazel best? Suppose the world were such that blue-eyed people felt superior to brown-eyed people, that people with light-brown eyes felt superior to those with dark-brown eyes, and they all felt superior to people with hazel eyes. What kind of world would that be?

It would be much like the world we find ourselves in. Muslims don't choose to be Muslims; Christians don't choose to be Christians; Jews don't choose Judaism over other religions. With very few exceptions today, we pick our religion like we pick our eye color: we inherit it.

Despite this inheritance, Muslims believe that only those who subscribe to Muhammad will go to heaven. Christians believe the only way to heaven is through Jesus. How can these two imperial factions coexist in the close quarters of the modern world, each proclaiming that the other is going to hell? How can they live together in this world if their points of congruence are little more than the ancient beliefs that heaven is a fabulous place to spend eternity, hell is just the opposite, and the Monogod that gave rise to everything in existence is the ultimate judge of who gets to spend eternity where?

Christians and Muslims have been at it a long time. Muslims wage their jihad against the infidels on one side, and Christians wage their just war against the infidels on the other side. Both lay claim to some holy land. In the name of the Monogod, they slaughter each other and spill blood on the land that they hope to liberate. And they do it for centuries: 13 so far. They start with swords and then rifles. Now they use jetliners and guided bombs. They use whatever they have. They always have words.

Pat Robertson says that Muhammad was some wild-eyed fanatic who instructed his followers to kill Christians and Jews, infidels who are nothing but swine. A Muslim cleric vindicates the evangelist when he tells his followers that it is their duty to kill Christians and Jews who are nothing but swine. Franklin Graham says Islam is an evil and wicked religion and an imam gives credence to that claim when he reminds young men that it is their duty to kill Christians and Jews (the swine) and that suicide bombers are each rewarded with 72 virgins. Jerry Falwell says that Muhammad was just a terrorist, and some mullah reminds his followers of Muhammad's glorious victory over the Jews at Medina, how 800 men were beheaded, and how the women and children became slaves. A glorious victory for the Monogod.

The poverty of blindness doesn't care what color your eyes are. The president prepares the people for war. He reminds them that North America is a sacred gift from the Monogod, that it looks over them and is on their side. Chaplains quote ancient scriptures to reassure the warriors of a modern crusade that they are saving the world and ridding it of evil. Through death and destruction, they are making it a better place. Of course, this is in good accord with the Sermon on the Mount (and that can be explained with a sermon on Sunday).

To an objective observer, in this case, one who doesn't subscribe to the Monogod, it seems like the blind men describing the elephant, each claiming to know the only true truth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mister Thorne is an unemployed technical writer living in the Bay Area. For information about him, visit www.misterthorne.org. To contact him, send e-mail to mrthorne@mindspring.com.