

Religion in the News: February 2003

by Mister Thorne

9 March 2003

Religion in the News

February was a short month for religion in the news. Muslims made their annual migration to Mecca. In Mina, they stoned the devil and the devil got its revenge. A U.S. court found that the Pledge of Allegiance is still unconstitutional. In jail, privileges for Presbyterians were brought to an end. In India, Hindus went on the rampage against a dead saint. In England, the Jedis took fourth place, coming in just behind the Hindus, and just ahead of the Jews. Jet-setter Salmon Rushdie wrote a letter to a child unborn, poked fun at religion, and irritated the U.N. General Secretary; his death sentence was renewed. The Bush administration continued its theological tight-wire act high above the secular land below, advancing beliefs and causes not held by long-dead saints.

The Devil Gets its Revenge

Throwing rocks at powerful, supernatural beings like Satan is a dangerous thing to do. On 11 February, the danger was made obvious as 14 people died in Mina, Saudi Arabia after a large crowd gathered there to throw rocks at the devil.

Each year, Muslims from all over the world make their pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca, the birthplace of the founder of Islam, and site of the Cube. The Cube is a small building near the center of the Haram mosque. According to legend, the Cube (the Ka'bah in Arabic) is the oldest house of worship on earth. Legend has it that it was erected by the very first man – Adam – and that it was rebuilt many years later by Abraham and one of his sons. It is toward this Cube that Muslims around the world pray five times each day.

Mounted on a wall of the Cube is a stone that looks like black glass. It is called the Black Stone, and it has its legends. One legend holds that the stone was sent to Adam from Paradise above. It was brilliant white, and it was to be a part of the first house of worship on Earth, modeled after Al-baitul Ma'moor, the house of worship used by the angels. Another legend holds that an angel gave the stone to Abraham to install in the Cube. Yet another legend holds that the founder of Islam settled a dispute about the stone. This was some time before he had the revelations that would inspire him to reestablish the one true religion – the religion of Abraham: Islam.

The Cube had been destroyed by fire and was rebuilt. There was an argument as to which tribe would have the honor of installing the Black Stone in the rebuilt Cube. To settle the argument, it was agreed that the first person who entered the courtyard around the Cube would be the judge. That turned out to be Muhammad ibn 'Abdullaah, and he came up with a plan. He set the stone in the center of a blanket lying on the ground. He asked each tribe to elect one of its people. The elected gathered around the blanket, lifted it, and carried the stone to the wall. Then, Muhammad took the stone and mounted it himself.

One of the first rituals performed each year by the millions of Muslims who make their pilgrimage to Mecca is to walk around the Cube seven times while chanting a prayer: "Labbayka Allahumma Labbayk," which means "Here I am at your service, God; Here I am!" As they go around the Cube, they touch the stone or kiss it. Legend has it that the stone, originally a brilliant white, turned black as it absorbed the sins of those who touched or kissed it.

The last ritual of the Hajj is the ceremonial Stoning of Satan. It takes place in Mina, a small village east of Mecca. The pilgrims throw seven small stones at each of three pillars representing the devil and the temptations it offers. This year, as in years past, the number of people exceeded the amount of space available for them, and 14 were trampled to death. In 1994, 270 died in this fashion; in 1998, 180 died, and in 2001, 35 died.

A Pledge Against the Constitution

On 28 February, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals reaffirmed its ruling from last June that the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional since it promotes a specific religious belief: that there is one god and one god only. It said that it would not reconsider its ruling as the U.S. Justice Department requested. Last December, the court turned down a similar request by the U.S. Senate.

The ruling stems from a lawsuit filed by an Atheist against the U.S. Congress. He claims that the Pledge violates his daughter's First Amendment rights, since it subjects her to listening to the official belief in one god, over and over again, each and every school day.

As it did last June, the court quickly stayed its ruling. The Elk Grove School District in California (where the Atheist's daughter attended school) plans to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court.

The End of Privileges for Presbyterians

The Orange County jail in Florida had a policy of giving inmates time off for attending religious services. An inmate could have his sentenced reduced up to six days per month. But there was a hitch: while the program was open to all, the only services offered were Christian. This irritated some inmates – Muslims, Atheists, and Jews – who voiced their opposition to the preferential program. To avoid a lawsuit, the jail dropped the program on 1 February. So now Presbyterians have to serve as much of their sentences as anyone else.

Rushdie's Death Sentence Renewed

On 6 February, Salmon Rushdie read a Dr. Seuss-style poem he wrote to an audience near the University of South Florida. The poem poked fun at the way in which the 2000 presidential election was settled.

And they count, and they count, and they count, count, count.

They probably end up with a quite wrong amount.

On a more serious note, Rushdie read from a letter that the United Nations commissioned him to write to the six-billionth child born into this crowded world. His letter asked that child to "imagine there is no heaven." The tone and the content of the letter infuriated U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Rushdie continues his policy of infuriating those who believe in a "heaven with at least one god in residence." Speaking to this audience about the letter, Rushdie said armies still march into battle "as always, with God on their side." He said there was a disturbing trend going on throughout the world today: religion was becoming more and more important, rather than less so.

The government of Iran has not forgotten about Rushdie's blasphemous novel: *The Satanic Verses*. On Valentine's Day, on the 14th anniversary of the death sentence pronounced on Rushdie for writing that book, the sentence was renewed. The reward for whoever kills Rushdie was increased to \$3 million.

Hindus Beat Jedis: 10 to 7

The results from the latest census conducted in the U.K., the first census to ask people about their religious affiliation, were announced on 13 February. It turns out that almost three out of every four identify themselves as Christian. The second largest religion in the U.K. is Islam, accounting for slightly more than three out of every 100 people. In third place was Hinduism, accounting for one out of every 100 people.

And in fourth place? The Jedi Knights. It turns out that the U.K. has more Jedi Knights (seven out of every 1,000) than Sikhs (six out of every 1,000), Jews (five out of every 1,000), or Buddhists (three out of every 1,000). Almost 15% claimed that they had no religion, far outnumbering those who belong to any religion other than Christianity.

The number of people reporting that they are Jedis may have been influenced by a campaign promoted by Star Wars devotees to get the religion classified as an officially recognized religion. The census showed that the Jedis were heavily concentrated in towns with universities and colleges.

Hindus Rampage Against a Dead Saint

The 14th of February is Saint Valentine's Day, a holiday that honors a priest who was beheaded by order of Emperor Claudius II. Valentine's crime? He was performing marriages in violation of the emperor's decree. The emperor figured that he was losing soldiers to marriage, as young men preferred the company of their new wives to warring with the Goths. The emperor issued a decree: no more marriages of potential soldiers until after the war. Valentine ignored the decree, and that cost him his life.

The holiday has become popular in India, but this has infuriated fundamentalist Hindus. They see it as an assault by a foreign religion and a foreign culture on their religion and their culture. They claim that the holiday promotes promiscuity. So, in the past few years, they've taken to attacking shops that sell Valentine's Day cards, to holding public burnings of those cards, and to attacking young couples holding hands. The attacks were moderated this year for two reasons: a heavy police presence to discourage attacks, and the growing belief that Valentine was really an Indian, and that Valentine's Day is really based on a traditional Indian festival.

Leaning on Dead Saints

In his State of the Union address last month, the president hinted at the Catholic concept of a Just War. Speaking of a war with Iraq, he said, "If war is forced upon us, we will fight in a just cause and by just means, sparing in every way we can, the innocent."

The president was leaning on a concept put forward by Saint Augustine over 1,500 years ago and refined by Saint Thomas 800 years later. But that puts the president at odds with the Pope, who says that the long-anticipated war would not be just and would be another "defeat for humanity." The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote a letter to the president that concluded, "We respectfully urge you to step back from the brink of war." The president's own church disagrees with the president's understanding. According to the General Secretary of the United Methodist Church, "It is inconceivable that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior and the Prince of Peace, would support this proposed attack."

Commentary

I'm doing something that I rarely do. It's Sunday morning, and rather than watch "Meet the Press," I'm listening to a preacher, one of those TV evangelists. The topic of his sermon this morning is this: *Does God Approve of War?* Interesting. On "Meet the Press," they're going to be talking about the long-awaited war against Iraq. Will France veto a Security Council resolution to go to war? Will Russia join with France? What will Security Council members like Angola and Cameroon do? Will the U.S. get nine votes? Will Turkey hold out for more money? So much speculation. I've had my fill of it for now. Might as well listen to the preacher.

I'm soon reminded of the peculiar style of televangelists, of preachers in general. They hold a Bible, and they say, "now, turn to page 327 and read this one sentence; next turn to page 836 and read one paragraph; then, turn to page 64 and read one more sentence." To me, this is a bizarre way to read an anthology of short stories, poems, and letters. If I read just one sentence from a chapter of a story, do I know its context? Do I know what the author really meant? Most likely, no. Why, using this technique you could make Hitler seem like a saint; you could make George Washington seem like a Nazi; you could make Abraham Lincoln seem like a spokesman for the KKK.

I'm listening to this preacher and I'm wondering what verses he's going to select to make the point that God is opposed to war. Does God approve of war? Everyone knows the answer to that. Right? Wrong! The preacher is saying that God does approve of war, that – in particular – God favors the sort of war that the U.S. is poised to wage against Iraq. The preacher says there's all sorts of evidence to support this.

The preacher starts with Ecclesiastes 3.8: *there is a time for peace and a time for war*. That's it; one line from a poem written by who knows who, and the preacher concludes that God favors war. His audience appears puzzled. This is not what they're used to hearing from this preacher. They're used to hearing the preacher say that God is loving and good and cares for all and that everyone must be good to everyone else.

Today's sermon is different. "Let's turn to Romans 13," he says. He flips through his bible and finds the passage, and he reads it to his audience: *Obey the government, for God is the one who put it there. All governments have been placed in power by God*. According to the preacher, the bottom line to Romans 13 is this: if the government decides to go to war, it's the duty of the citizens to fight that war, to assist the effort in any way they can. Vietnam comes to mind.

He says our leaders are selected by God. So, why vote? He says all governments have been placed in power by God. Saddam Hussein comes to mind. Was he selected by God? Should his troops do what he says they should do? Or should they heed those little pamphlets we've been dropping on them, telling them to ignore Saddam's orders, telling them that if they follow orders to use ABC weapons, they'll be tried as war criminals? Which God-ordained leader should they listen to, Saddam or Bush? What in the world is one to do when leaders disagree? The preacher doesn't say.

The preacher says Romans 13 is "crystal clear." It says to obey the government. The preacher reads on: *Whoever opposes the existing authority opposes what God has ordered, and anyone who does so will bring judgement on himself*.

The Revolutionary War comes to mind. If I understand the preacher correctly, the Founding Fathers of the US of A went against God when they went against the King, the existing authority. They should have just gone along with the taxation without representation system. There it is, crystal clear, in Romans 13: *Pay your taxes, because the authorities are working for God*. It says nothing about fair representation, nothing about revolution. Did the Founders go against God's word when they revolted against the King? The preacher doesn't say.

The preacher says that, "the government will avenge those who would destroy us." He says that there are those who would like to convert America from its godly ways, that there is considerable evidence that God is not going to allow that to happen. He says that the devil would just love to mess with America because Americans are good, but God will not allow anything bad to happen to us. The audience applauds. Osama bin Laden springs to mind.

“Now, let’s turn to Deuteronomy 20. Here, God is preparing his people to take the promised land. And in verse one, God says, ‘you are to go to war unafraid. If any of you are fearful, go home. We don’t need you here.’ Now listen, in verse ten, God says, ‘before you attack a town, offer the people there terms of peace. If they accept peace, then make them your slaves. If they won’t accept peace, then kill every man among them. Plunder the town; take the women and children and all the spoils of war.’ Now listen. These instructions apply only to the towns far away. As for the towns nearby, destroy everything and kill everyone, including the women and the children. If you don’t, they will teach you their ways and how to worship their gods, and that would be a sin. I want you to annihilate all those now living in the promised land. Does God favor war? Yes he does, and we see here that God even favors preemptive war. He didn’t tell the Israelites to wait for those pagan people in the promised land to act. He told the Israelites to act first. So, no, God is not opposed to preemptive war.

“Now, you might ask, how can God be a loving god if he favors war? But don’t question God. God favors war. If he did not, he wouldn’t have bothered to offer clear details on how to wage war. Listen. God says first of all to offer terms of peace. Give your enemies the opportunity to surrender, and that is exactly what we have done. We told Saddam over and over again, give up your weapons of mass destruction, and we will leave you in peace. That’s what God wants us to do. Does God favor war? Yes he does.

The preacher continues flipping through the Old Testament – a sentence here, a paragraph there – all the while making the point that God is not opposed to war, that God favors war. He refers to Deuteronomy. Let me see. Deuteronomy 11 says that we must obey all of God’s laws, and Deuteronomy 28 says that if we don’t, we’re doomed. To obey these laws means never eating barbecue ribs or shrimp cocktail (Deuteronomy 14). It means never appealing a legal sentence (Deuteronomy 17). If the U.S. is a Christian nation, why does it have appeals courts, particularly as God’s law calls for the execution of anyone who appeals a sentence (Deuteronomy 17.12)? If God favors polygamy (Deuteronomy 21), then why do we have laws against it? If God favors slavery (Exodus 21), then why did we abolish the practice? If God is opposed to astrology (Deuteronomy 18), why do we have horoscopes in the newspapers? Are we doomed to be conquered by some other nation (Deuteronomy 28.49) for that? Are we doomed because an idol stands above every church? What would this preacher say about all of this? What would he say about rape? Deuteronomy 22 says that if a young man wants to marry a woman, all he has to do is rape her and pay her father \$50. So why is rape illegal? Would he say that adulterers and homosexuals and astrologers should be executed (Leviticus 20)? What would he say?

Now the preacher is ready to talk about Jesus, to get everyone straight on the prophet’s teachings. He raises a question. “Now, someone might ask, how can you justify war in light of what Jesus said? Well, let’s see what Jesus said.” He tells the audience to turn to Luke 6.27: *love your enemies*. The audience is familiar with the Sermon on the Mount. It’s very famous and widely quoted. “*If someone slaps you on one cheek, let him hit the other one as well. If someone steals your coat, give him the shirt off your back. Do for others what you want them to do for you. Love your enemies and do good things for them.*”

The preacher says that, no matter how familiar they are with this sermon, his audience has not understood it. The preacher says that the sermon doesn’t mean to be nice to tyrants like Saddam. “It doesn’t mean to do good things for *him*. Jesus isn’t talking about foreigners in this sermon. He’s talking about how you should treat your neighbors, not how you should treat wicked foreigners. God does not want us to sacrifice our nation to monsters like Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden,” he says. “Does God want us to just stand by while these men do their evil deeds? No, he does not. He wants us to preserve our freedom and our way of life for our children. And that’s the responsibility of the president and those in authority, just as it says in Romans. God says it is the responsibility of our leaders to destroy those who would destroy us. You cannot understand the Bible and then say that God is against war. Nowhere in these holy scriptures does it say that God opposes war. Nowhere.

“What we have to ask is this: what are we to do when the nation goes to war? Let’s turn to Numbers 32,” he says. He explains that the Israelites have been commanded by God to wage war, to destroy the inhabitants of the promised land: men, women, and children. He explains how the leaders of two out of twelve tribes don’t want to wage war. They’d rather sit it out. They’d prefer not to do what God has said they must do. Moses is incredulous when he learns of this. He asks, ‘shall your brothers go to war, and shall you just sit here? Are you trying to discourage your brothers? If you fail to fight, then you have gone against the will of God; you have sinned, and you will pay dearly for it.’”

The preacher says the meaning is clear. “You can’t sit out a war. God despises peace protestors and those cowardly, spineless conscientious objectors. They sap the will of the warriors, just as they did during the Vietnam war. No! When the government calls you to war, it is your duty to go to war. To refuse to go is to violate God’s law. It’s as simple as that.” And Deuteronomy 20?

“When I think about why we are free today, I think about all those young men who died for this country. Let me ask you this. How can you justify protest marches against war? What I would say to those who oppose war is this. The only reason you have the freedom to protest is because so many godly men died for your freedom.” The audience erupts in applause. “What are you going to say to your children, years from now, when this nation is in havoc, occupied by some army that demands we honor their pagan gods? What are you going to say when your children ask, ‘what did you do to protect us?’ Are you going to say you simply protested the war because you had the foolish belief that God does not approve of war? Think, think, think. Think, first of all, that it is a violation of the word of God to refuse to defend your country.”

The sermon has come to its end. Now the preacher directs his audience’s attention to the president, whom he calls a godly man. Why? Because the president begins each day by reading the Bible, on his knees before Almighty God. And then the preacher leads his audience in a prayer for the president. He concludes by saying, “And we support the president in this righteous and just cause. Amen.”

Just Cause? Just War? Even saints can’t agree on such a thing. Saints Augustine and Thomas developed a formula that would allow Christians to practice war. Other saints offered their lives for their belief that warfare is incompatible with the teachings of Jesus. In 295 AD, Saint Maximilian was executed for refusing to join the Roman army. “I cannot serve in the military; I cannot do wrong; I am a Christian,” he said. In 298 AD, Saint Marcellus, a centurion who converted to Christianity, was executed after he said he would no longer fight, that he would serve only Jesus Christ. Saint Martin of Tours, an officer in the Roman army who converted to Christianity, offered his life before a battle that was set to occur between the Romans and the invading Teutons. He said, “I am a soldier of Christ; it is unlawful for me to fight.”

A complex theological issue? As Tertullian put it, “When Christ disarmed Peter in the garden, he disarmed all Christians.” Or as Cyprian put it, “Christians are not allowed to kill.” Or, as Lactantius put it, “It can never be lawful for a righteous man to go to war, since his warfare is righteousness itself.”

These were men who – quite unlike our president – consciously chose their religion. And they chose to heed the teachings of its prophet, even when that meant their lives.

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