

## Religion in the News: March 2003

by Mister Thorne  
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March was a very busy month for those hell-bent on getting some ancient laws of a deceased kingdom posted in public buildings throughout the U.S. It was a busy month for public schools confronted with a deadline for certifying that they weren't denying students certain, inalienable rights. A professor used his Transcranial Magnetic Stimulator to get a devout Atheist to experience God. Two Nobel laureates – celebrating the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the structure of DNA – took the opportunity to belittle belief and proclaim a cure for stupidity.

### A Cure for Stupidity

Fifty years ago, James Watson and Francis Crick figured it out: the structure of DNA. They published their findings, and were awarded a Nobel prize for their work. Not bad!

Like most scientists, neither Crick nor Watson believe in a monolithic god. Unlike most scientists (many of whom “are not only narrow-minded and dull but also just stupid,” according to Watson), these two are colorful. As a researcher at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts, Watson carried and used a side arm: a loaded water pistol. “I generally restricted its aim to a pretty girl from the South taking invertebrate lab work too seriously.” Watson – whose mother was a devoted Roman Catholic – turned against religion at an early age. At the beginning of World War II, says Watson, “I came to the conclusion that the church was just a bunch of fascists that supported Franco.”

Crick's opposition to religion led him to resign his fellowship at Churchill College in Cambridge. The college was going to build a chapel on campus, and Crick objected. Winston Churchill wrote to Crick in an attempt to get him to reconsider. Crick wrote back that the college should build a brothel instead. “My hope is that eventually it will be possible to build permanent accommodation within the college, to house a carefully chosen selection of young ladies in the charge of a suitable Madam . . . .”

In his book *Astonishing Hypothesis*, Crick argued that the human soul is not what believers think it is. “You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cell and their associated molecules.”

Recently, the London Telegraph interviewed Crick and Watson. Watson told the paper that religious explanations of reality are just “myths from the past.” He said, “Every time you understand something, religion becomes less likely.” Crick added, “The God hypothesis is rather discredited.” He said his disdain for religion was one of the prime motives for the work leading to the sensational discovery in 1953.

In the interview, Crick points out that claims made on behalf of religion have proved false. He points to an Archbishop who, in 1654, carefully calculated that the world came into existence on Saturday, October 9, 4004 BC and that Adam and Eve were evicted on Monday, 10 November that same year. “It's astonishing to me that people continue to accept religious claims,” said Crick. “People like myself get along perfectly well with no religious views.” He said the burden of proof for the existence of gods should be on those who say they exist; he says it is not the burden of non-believers to prove that the gods don't exist.

Maybe science will finally conquer our talent for putting too much stock in myth. Watson recently said that stupidity is a disease and – with advances in genetic engineering – it can be cured!

## Revelations from the Transcranial Magnetic Stimulator

Another colorful scientist is neuroscience professor Michael Persinger. He has developed a theory – the Tectonic Strain Theory – to explain the appearance of UFOs. According to the theory, UFOs are the result of stresses in the earth’s crust. “Beneath the earth’s surface seethe massive geophysical forces,” says Persinger. “Around the time of an earthquake particularly, the tremendous seismic pressure on rock crystals produces powerful local electrical fields, measuring several thousand volts per meter, more than enough to produce balls or columns of light.” The interpretation of the light is cultural. In a primitive culture, it could be seen as the creatures described in the first chapter of Ezekiel. In our culture, it’s space ships.

Persinger found that most all accounts of mysterious lights in the sky reported from 1820 to 1926 were linked to seismic activity. A large number of UFO sightings in Manitoba, Canada in 1975 coincided with an earthquake. A rash of sightings in Missouri in 1973 and 1974 coincided with earthquakes in the region, Persinger found.

Persinger, author of *Neuropsychological Base of God Beliefs*, has spent decades studying the effects of electromagnetic fields on the brain. And he’s developed the Transcranial Magnetic Stimulator, a motorcycle helmet with a bunch of solenoids mounted on it. A test subject puts the helmet on, and then electrical currents applied to the solenoids create an electromagnetic field that stimulates the brain. The result? Mystical visions.

According to Persinger, the Stimulator demonstrates the effects of temporal lobe epilepsy – a neurological disorder caused by electrical discharges in the brain. As he understands it, visions of supernatural spirits are just the result of a brain gone haywire. And it turns out that some people are more susceptible to his Stimulator than others. In March, the BBC had Richard Dawkins, a devout Atheist who calls religion a “virus of the mind,” don the Stimulator. The result? Dawkins reported nothing more than a tingling sensation. Persinger noted that Dawkins scored low on a psychological test to measure temporal lobe sensitivity.

## Thou Shalt Defy the Court

Archaic English renderings of ancient, Jewish laws: they’re all the rage, in some quarters. Efforts to post them in public buildings, especially public-school classrooms: they’re very fashionable these days, in some quarters.

Take, for instance, Alabama. On 11 March, Alabama’s House of Representatives passed a bill authorizing a change to the state constitution. The change would allow the display of the Ten Commandments on all state property, including public schools. The bill was passed 89 to 0. If passed by the state senate, a referendum would be put to the voters in 2004. Another house bill would *require* the Ten Commandments to be posted in every public school. This all comes after a federal judge ordered the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court to remove a large, granite monument engraved with the Ten Commandments that he snuck into the state judicial building in the middle of the night. (See [Religion in the News: November 2002](#) for the story.)

Or consider Elkhart county in Indiana. County commissioners there approved the display of the Ten Commandments in the County Office Building. The Indiana Civil Liberties Union suggested a lawsuit would be the result. Then a group of citizens said they would pay to defend the commissioners if the ICLU acted. Last year, the ICLU won a suit against the city of Elkhart, which had placed a monument bearing the Ten Commandments in front of city hall. The granite monument was removed last year after it was ruled unconstitutional.

Or consider Rutherford county in Tennessee. The county commission posted the Ten Commandments in the county courthouse last April. The ACLU of Tennessee filed suit and, last June, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction ordering their removal. But on 5 March, the judge stayed his ruling. Why? Because of Liberty Counsel. The religious civil liberties group is representing the county pro bono. It argued that their removal should await a decision by a higher court in a very similar case in Kentucky. There, three counties have appealed a federal court ruling that they remove the Ten Commandments from public buildings.

Or consider Rhea county in Tennessee, site of the famed Scopes trial. Last year, a federal judge ordered the Ten Commandments removed from public buildings in neighboring Hamilton County. The order comes from a suit brought by the ACLU of Tennessee. After losing the suit, the county removed three plaques bearing the Ten Commandments from public buildings. To pay its legal costs, it sold them at auction.

One of the plaques went to June Griffin, a citizen of Rhea county. After learning that hers was the winning bid, Griffin exclaimed, "Praise God. Praise God." She said her plaque would be posted in a public building in Rhea county. And she insisted that the county has the right to post the Ten Commandments in public buildings. Aware of the ACLU's track record of success in the courts, she warned against any further legal action to rid the public of displays of ancient laws. "We will defend them, but it won't be with lawyers," she said. On 21 March, Griffin appeared at a meeting of county commissioners. The commission expected her to bring the plaque to the meeting. Instead, she brought a framed 1040 tax form and said she had posted the plaque in an undisclosed public building. The commissioners declined her invite to play Hide and Seek.

## **OK, Kids; All Together Now**

On 28 February, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld its decision that leading public school students in a pledge endorsing an official religious belief is unconstitutional. Since then, many have been awaiting an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. Others are acting, not waiting.

Consider Indiana. On 20 March, the Indiana Senate passed legislation to provide "insurance" for school teachers who want to lead students in the Pledge of Allegiance. The bill's author, State Senator Johnny Nugent, said some teachers are now afraid they'll be sued if they lead their students in the Pledge. According to Nugent, the bill, which says that teachers 'may' lead students in the Pledge, "is like an insurance policy." He figures that teachers will feel less threatened by the ACLU, and the likes of it, once the bill becomes law.

The original bill would have *required* teachers to lead students in the Pledge. It would also have required that the new national slogan, "In God We Trust," which endorses the controversial belief, be posted in every public school classroom in Indiana. But the bill had no chance of passing in its original form, and so 'must' became 'may.'

Consider Colorado. On 25 March, a senate committee approved a bill requiring that "In God We Trust" be posted in all public buildings and public-school classrooms. The bill provides that any taxpayer can file suit if he or she finds a public building lacking the motto. Earlier this year, the Colorado legislature passed a law requiring legislators to recite the Pledge when they meet, and bills were introduced in Utah and Texas requiring public-school students to recite the Pledge. (See [Religion in the News: January 2003](#) for details.)

Consider the Elk Grove School District in California. That's the district where the daughter of Michael Newdow (the atheist who brought his suit regarding the Pledge of Allegiance) attended school and was (claims Newdow) subject to the daily drone of a pledge that endorses the controversial – yet official – proposition that there is one god and one god only. On 3 March, the school district said it was preparing an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Moves to demolish the 9th Circuit Court were revived on 6 March when Senator Lisa Murkowski (Republican – Alaska) introduced a bill to divide the circuit in two. Referring to the court's decision in *Newdow v. U.S. Congress*, Murkowski said, "The recent history of the 9th Circuit suggests a judicial activism that is close to the fringe of legal reasoning." As evidence of the court's "illnesses," she added that, "In 1997, 27 of the 28 cases brought to the Supreme Court [from the 9th Circuit] were reversed – two-thirds by a unanimous vote." She didn't bother to mention that during that same term, five other circuit courts had *all* their rulings reversed.

### **Insuring Inalienable Rights for School Kids**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted in 1965 and signed into law by President Johnson. It offered federal funds to schools, particularly those in high-poverty areas. Since then, the act has been continuously renewed and revised. When President Bush signed a revision of it on 8 January 2001, it was renamed the *No Child Left Behind Act*. A year later, he claimed it was, "the most meaningful education reform probably ever."

One part of the revised act called for federal guidelines on "constitutionally protected prayer in public schools." Those guidelines were issued by the U.S. Department of Education on 7 February 2003 and schools were given until 15 March to certify that they were not depriving students and teachers of their constitutional right to pray if and when they feel like it. Schools that fail to make the certification stand to lose their share of federal funds, which amount to a whopping 1.5% of a typical school's budget. Not surprisingly, many schools didn't bother.

### **Pandora's Box at the Schoolhouse Door**

The president's guidelines on praying at school say nothing about bricks. They remind schools that the "First Amendment requires public school officials to be neutral in their treatment of religion, showing neither favoritism toward nor hostility against religious expression such as prayer." What about bricks, bricks with Christian crosses inscribed in them? The guidelines aren't completely clear about them, but John Demmon claims that removing them from a school is a hostile act.

Demmon is one of eight plaintiffs, represented by the Rutherford Institute, suing the Loudon County Public School System in Virginia because the principal of Potomac Falls High School removed six bricks, each engraved with a cross, from a walkway at the school. Back in 2001, a fund-raiser was held. Parents paid \$50 each for a brick for the walkway. For \$5 more, they could have a brick engraved. They were offered 23 different symbols that could be engraved on a brick, one of which was a cross. Six bricks engraved with crosses became part of the walkway.

Earlier this year, those six bricks were removed after the parents of one student complained about the religious symbols on school grounds. But John Demmon had paid \$55 for an engraved brick, and on 25 March, he became party to a lawsuit to get the bricks put back in the walkway.

At a school board meeting, Demmon said, "It's a shame that it's taken a lawsuit for us to have a thoughtful discussion." School board member John Andrews said he was concerned about the "over-sterilization of our society." The bricks should be put back. But Harry Holsinger, another board member, said the imprint of a cross on school property was a clear violation of the Constitution. He said that putting the bricks back would open Pandora's box, that the school might also have to tolerate bricks bearing Nazi swastikas and who-knows-what.

## Commentary

Let's see. You're a conservative. You're running for president. You say you believe in things like a smaller government and less regulation, tax relief and school vouchers and local control of public schools. The crowds cheer, and you become president. Being ever so conscious of the 10th amendment to the Constitution and the fact that public education is the responsibility of the states, what do you do? If you're Ronald W. Reagan, you try to get rid of the Department of Education. But if you're George W. Bush, you increase the department's budget. You make a move to federalize public education. You push for a nation-wide program to test public school students. You order that public schools certify they are not restricting the religious liberties of their students, and you threaten to withhold federal funds from schools that don't obey.

If you're Ronald W. Reagan, you promote an amendment to the Constitution that allows prayer in public schools. In your State of the Union address (1983) you proclaim that, "God should never have been expelled from America's classrooms in the first place." If you're George W. Bush, you take a more pragmatic approach. You offer public schools a shield against the legal tactics of the ACLU. You look forward to a return to the good old days.

There is a myth about the good old days. In 1950, the federal government spent a whopping \$155,000 on public education. The Ten Commandments were displayed in classrooms. There was bible study. Teachers led students in prayer. Times were good, according to a myth that ignores the fact that only one-third of all high school students graduated.

In 1954, the U.S. Congress made it official: the U.S. is one nation under God. In 1957, it became a nation under a satellite put into space by some godless communists. A year later, President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) which provided federal funding to public schools to promote education in mathematics and science. The federal government became involved in the public school curriculum.

In 1965, Christians were racing Atheists to the moon. President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Washington D.C. began its destructive intrusion into public education. Public schools began their slide into mediocrity.

Twenty years later, the Reagan administration determined that public education was so degraded that we were a nation at risk, that if some other nation had done to our educational system what Washington had done to it, then we would be justified in going to war with that nation. Since ESEA was enacted, public education had gone down the tubes, and conservatives were demanding school vouchers so they could get their kids out of failing, desegregated public schools devoid of prayer.

The correlation was clear. Today's public school students can't compete with those from Lithuania on a test of mathematics, or with Slovenia on a test of physics. We continually hear the anecdotes: only a small fraction of our students can locate a particular country on a map, or name the Secretary of Education, or say for sure what planet they're on. But when teachers were allowed to lead students in prayer, when the Ten Commandments were posted in classrooms, the students were better educated. They knew what planet they were on. They could name the capital of each state and each president of the U.S. And they were well-behaved. Compare a typical school kid from 1950 to one today, and it seems like evolution gone backward, little humans becoming more like monkeys rather than less so.

As a candidate for president, George W. Bush gave a speech in Gorham, New Hampshire outlining his thoughts on public education. As in all his speeches on education, he referred to "the soft bigotry of low expectations." He offered his cure: mandatory, annual, nation-wide testing of public school students, and for schools where students don't do well, an end to federal funds.

He called for federal funding of character education, and said, “I want to make the case for moral education. Our children must be educated in reading and writing, but also in right and wrong.” A goal of his education plan was, “clear instruction in right and wrong.” He introduced some of the key elements of the guidelines on constitutionally protected prayer in public schools. He added, “it is good and hopeful when young men and women ask themselves, ‘what would Jesus do?’”

Let’s not forget that it was the administration of the morally disabled William J. Clinton that wrote the guidelines on constitutionally protected prayer in public schools. But it is the administration of George W. Bush that threatens an end to federal funds to schools that ignore them, that restrict the religious liberties of students and teachers.

What will be the consequence? What will happen when a school is confronted with a big lawsuit from the ACLU for promoting a particular religious belief, and – in the same instance – an end to its federal funding, some tiny fraction of its budget, if it settles with the ACLU?

Will moral education give us back those good students from 1950? Let’s see. Both William J. Clinton and George W. Bush have daughters. Let’s assume that Clinton raised his daughter without clear instruction in right and wrong, and that Bush raised his daughters with such instruction. Let’s see. Chelsea Clinton goes to Stanford University, gets a degree in history, and then goes on to Oxford for her Master’s degree. When she’s done, she starts working as a consultant and she gets a six-figure salary. Not bad. But while she’s at Oxford, it’s reported that she got so drunk at a night club one evening that her boyfriend had to help her home. She was 22-years-old when that happened.

In the meantime, Jenna Bush goes to the University of Texas in Austin. Her boyfriend, a student at Texas Christian University gets busted for being drunk and rowdy, and the Secret Service gets him out of jail. (How’s that for your tax dollars at work?) Then 19-year-old Jenna gets busted for using a fake ID to buy booze. The judge fines her \$600, suspends her license for 30 days, and gives her 36 hours of community service. A week later, she attends a party featuring female strippers. Her twin sister Barbara gets less coverage, attends Yale, and – despite being underage – drinks and smokes pot.

Of course, this simplistic comparison ignores the influence of the girls’ mothers: Laura and Hillary. Let’s see. Hillary says it takes the entire village to raise a child. Laura’s not into that. Asked whether she talked to her daughters about drinking, Laura says, “We talked about it, but I’m not going to tell you what I said to my girls.” (Now, how’s that for advice?)

It’s all so fascinating. It seems that whether you’re a moral nitwit like Clinton, or an evangelist like Bush, your kids may wind with their fair share of youthful indiscretions. But your kids are special. They get to be chauffeured around by the Secret Service. What about the kids in Podunk, the one’s whose parents can’t afford secret service protection? According to the No Child Left Behind Act, if those kids don’t do well in school, the school loses its federal funding. (How’s that for a cure?)

Interestingly, the president’s brother, the governor of Florida, tried the same sort of thing a few years ago. He decided to give the state’s funding for failing, public schools to parents so they could send their kids to private schools. The ACLU, along with the NAACP and several others, filed suit against the state, and the judge ruled in their favor. He said state law requires the state to support public schools, not abandon them. But it doesn’t matter. The governor is responsible for schools; the president is not.

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