

## Religion in the News: November 2002

by Mister Thorne  
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November was a busy month for religion in the news. From Iran, there was news about a professor who was sentenced to death for stating the obvious, about the demands of college students for basic civil rights, and about conservatives having some fun at the students' expense. From Nigeria, there was news about a beauty pageant and the deadly religious riots that drove it out of the country. Here in the U.S., there was much news about the Ten Commandments. In Africa, there is a war over them.

### On Free Speech and Blasphemy

In November, Iranians experimented with the concept of free speech, and they did it in a big way. Those hoping for reform – for freedom of speech and separation of church and state – protested by the thousands for the release of Hashem Aghajari, a popular history professor who is in jail awaiting his execution. Those wanting to maintain the clergy's domination of the country protested by the thousands in favor of executing Aghajari. And then the demonstrations turned into street fights, with the conservative militia attacking the students. In response, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, threatened to use military force to settle the dispute between the reformers and the conservatives. He also accused the U.S. of instigating the dispute.

Professor Aghajari's crime? In June, he gave a speech in which he challenged the belief that Muslim clerics are infallible in their interpretation of the Koran. In response, Muslim fundamentalists took to the street in protest, and then an Iranian court put Aghajari on trial. He was not present to hear the accusations against him nor to defend himself, and there was no jury. On 6 November, Aghajari was convicted of blasphemy. He was sentenced to death. And that's what sparked the pro-reformers' protests.

In a daring move to become a martyr and a catalyst for the popular reformist movement, Aghajari – like a modern Muslim version of Socrates – told his lawyer not to appeal the death sentence. But the Supreme Leader, fearing what might happen if the professor becomes a martyr, ordered the sentence appealed whether Aghajari likes it or not. If the death sentence is overturned, which seems most likely, Aghajari still faces punishment; in addition to death, he was sentenced to 74 lashes with a whip, exile for eight years, and a ban on teaching for 10 years.

### The Beauties and the Beasts

A planeload of beauty queens arrived in Abuja, Nigeria on 11 November to take part in a series of events leading up to the Miss World beauty pageant that was to be held there on 7 December. The 82 contestants, including Rebecca Revels from the U.S., were greeted by a contingent of government ministers, one of whom told them, "you have no fears in this country. Your safety is guaranteed. And I assure you, no Nigerian has been stoned or will be stoned . . . relax and enjoy yourselves."

The government had high hopes for the beauty pageant. It would be the most prestigious event ever held in Nigeria. It would garner international attention that would spark tourism, and that would bolster the country's economy. It would erase the image of Nigeria as a country ruled by inept politicians and corrupt generals, a place where civil rights violations are commonplace. In the end, instead of wanting to visit Nigeria, potential tourists were left thinking it a very dangerous destination.

The first sign of trouble came when Anima Lawal, a single, 31-year-old mother of three, was sentenced to be stoned to death by an Islamic court. Her crime? Having sex outside of marriage. Rather than the beauty pageant grabbing headlines, the death sentence shocked the western world.

After Lawal's fate made headlines, many of the contestants said they would not attend the beauty pageant. Threatened with the prospect of a beauty pageant without beauties, Dubem Onyia, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, issued a statement that said, "no person shall be condemned to death by stoning in Nigeria." The government assured all that it would not allow the execution to happen. After that, all but five of the contestants resumed their plans to participate in the event.

Echoing the strongly held feelings of many of the contestants, Katherine Manalo, Miss Philippines, noted, "there are lots of problems in this world and Amina Lawal is only one of them."

Quite right. In addition to Lawal, four other Nigerians await stoning deaths for their crimes of sex.

### **Judge Orders the Law Removed from the Courthouse**

On 18 November, a federal judge ruled that a state judge had violated the very foundation of U.S. law: the Constitution of the United States. He gave the judge 30 days to correct the violation.

Back in July, the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, along with a group of evangelical Christians, snuck into the state judicial building in the middle of the night and installed in the building's rotunda one 5,280-pound chunk of granite engraved with the Ten Commandments. The next day, the judge held a ceremony and unveiled the monument – designed by him – to an adoring public. Since then, people have been coming by the bus load to ogle the thing and to pray before it.

Three Montgomery attorneys who frequent the courthouse filed a lawsuit to have the rock removed. They claim the monument is offensive and its installation in a public building violates the First Amendment.

During the trial, the chief justice claimed that the Judeo-Christian god reigns over the state and that the state owes allegiance to this god. He said that other gods, "do not allow for freedom of conscience" and that, "Americans would not have such freedom if another god were placed over the church and state." He said that other faiths, such as Buddhism and Islam, are creeds, not religions; only Christianity is a religion. He said that Alabama's constitution required him to put the monument in the judicial building. He asked why a monument in front of a federal courthouse that depicts Themis, the Greek goddess of justice, was not on trial. And he said that the foundation of U.S. law is Yahweh, not the Constitution of the United States.

Will the chief justice remove the rock as ordered? The judge says, "no!" In 1995, when he was a circuit court judge, he defied a court order to remove a plaque from his courtroom. On it were the Ten Commandments. It was that act of defiance that propelled him to local prominence.

### **"Chester County is not the Congress of the United States"**

So proclaims congressman Joe Pitts, a republican who represents the 16th congressional district in Pennsylvania. Pitts wants a plaque engraved with the Ten Commandments to remain posted in the Chester County courthouse just as it has since 1920. This, despite a court order that it be removed.

Like the chief justice in Alabama, the congressman claims that the Ten Commandments are the foundation of our law. He says that posting the commandments in public places is not the same thing as passing a law, that the commandments do not constitute a church, and that Chester County is not the Congress. Hence, posting the commandments in the courthouse can hardly be considered a violation of the First Amendment, according to Pitts.

Pitts made headlines in November when he cancelled a speech at a religious conference. He cancelled after he was told that one of the organizers of the conference wrote an essay that advocates stoning disobedient children. The essay was written by the Reverend William Einwechter and is titled *Stoning Disobedient Children*. It discusses one paragraph in a chapter of the book of Deuteronomy (De. 21:18-21). Einwechter says many interpret this paragraph to mean that if you cannot get a son to behave, no matter how hard you try, then you should have him stoned to death.

The essay does not advocate the stoning of children. Not at all. It says that parents can't just take matters into their own hands when it comes to getting rid of a bad seed. It concludes that, "only the state has the authority to execute those who are worthy of it."

## Commentary

The Ten Commandments made big news in November. In addition to the cases involving the chief justice in Alabama, and the courthouse in Chester County, there were these other developments:

- On 19 November, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a federal court's decision that eight, 800-pound granite monuments engraved with the Ten Commandments must be removed from the grounds of four public high schools in Ohio.
- A 2,500-pound granite monument engraved with the Ten Commandments that stood in front of City Hall in Mishawaka, Indiana for 43 years was rededicated at a church. The city decided to move the monument rather than fight a lawsuit that was filed on 2 November.
- Officials in Wayne County, Indiana decided to remove the Ten Commandments monument from in front of the county courthouse. The county decided to move the monument rather than wage an expensive legal fight.

All of this seems very tame compared to a dispute about the Ten Commandments that's been going on in Uganda for the past 15 years. There, a rebel group called the *Lord's Resistance Army* has been fighting government soldiers. The group, led by one Joseph Kony, wants to take control of the country and install a new government that rules according to the Ten Commandments.

The group is brutal. Since 1987, it has abducted over 10,000 children, some of them as young as 11. The boys become soldiers. Their training – which begins as soon as they are snatched – includes killing other boys. Sometimes, they are forced to attack their own villages and kill their relatives. The young girls are also trained to fight. Those who have become young women also function as sex slaves for the army's commanders.

Punishments are severe. If a rule is broken, a limb might be amputated. If someone is caught trying to escape, the others are made to kill the escapee. And crimes are many. Kony has ordered local villagers not to ride bicycles. A girl who escaped from the group said she saw a villager being punished for riding his bicycle. Soldiers cut off both his feet and forced his wife to eat one of them. Earlier this year, it was reported that the group came across a funeral ceremony, and forced the funeral party to cook the deceased and eat the body.

Two years ago, another religious group in Uganda, the *Church of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God*, made headlines when hundreds of its members committed mass suicide in their church. It was the biggest mass suicide since Jonestown, when 914 people died.

While the war in Uganda is between armies, the conflict in Nigeria is between religions: between Islam and Christianity. And it's ugly. After evening prayers on a Friday during Ramadan – after hearing the mullahs condemn the beauty pageant as a disgusting parade of nudity – Muslims went on a rampage. Witnesses said the crowd dragged people from their cars. Motorists who couldn't recite the Koran were stabbed or beaten to death. Some bodies were burned in the street while others were thrown down wells. One eye witness reported seeing a crowd take a tire, put it around a man's neck, soak it with gasoline, and set it on fire. Thousands of people fled their homes in one city as a mob of Muslims set fire to churches and homes in Christian neighborhoods. Christians retaliated by burning Muslim neighborhoods.

Such riots are not new to Nigeria. They began almost three years ago when some predominantly Muslim states adopted Islamic law which calls for such punishments as stoning adulterers and amputating the hands of thieves. Thousands died in the riots that ensued.

If the Miss World pageant was the fuel for the latest round of riots, the spark that ignited it was a newspaper article that joked that the founder of Islam would have enjoyed the pageant, that he might have selected a wife from among the contestants. The suggestion enraged Muslims, who were already worked up about the immoral and decadent beauty pageant taking place during Ramadan.

After the newspaper apologized for the statement and said it was due to a computer glitch, Muslims took to the street, attacked one of the newspaper's offices, and then it was on. The riots continued for days and left over 200 dead, over 1,000 injured, and some 12,000 homeless. The person who wrote the article, Isioma Daniel, was detained for "exceeding the bounds of responsible journalism." She was released, and then an Islamic death sentence was imposed on her for insulting a prophet. With satisfaction, the deputy governor of one state said, "just like the blasphemous Indian writer Salman Rushdie, the blood of Isioma Daniel can be shed." Muslims were urged to find Daniel and kill her.

What a contrast! In the U.S., we squabble about posting religious laws in public places, and then we settle our squabble in court. In some other places, squabbles about religious laws are aren't settled at all.

Islam is a peaceful religion? Not if it calls for death when consenting adults have sex, or when a professor states the obvious. Not if its infallible leaders call its faithful followers to kill a blasphemous writer for writing – for writing anything at all.

There's nothing peaceful about that. Nothing.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Mister Thorne is a technical writer looking for work in the 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).