

Religion in the News: November 2003

by Mister Thorne

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November was another exciting month for religion in the news. A Muslim was jailed for life for following ancient laws in a modern nation. A judge was convicted for upholding his oath to a god. Kids had fun watching the dead smoking cigarettes, playing guitar, and dancing with delight. The faithful started to get ready for the end of the world. Genetic engineering gave rise to new sorts of creatures and evolution led to the death of a bunch of high school students. As usual, there was great excitement about where to post the first ten laws of an ancient tribe of Asians. Once again, a common pocket watch was used to prove the existence of a one-and-only god, but whether it's a one-piece god or a three-piece god is still unknown.

Happy Holy Days

The last holiday in October blended right into the first holiday in November: All Saints' Eve (Halloween) became All Saints' Day. Then there was a day for kids to have fun playing with dead friends and relatives. There was a day to get ready and a day to give thanks.

All Saints' Day

And what is All Saints' Day? It's a day for the faithful to honor the saints. So, what's a saint? Today, it's a Catholic (a dead Catholic) who was very pious, someone who held to the Calculus of Catholicism (someone who was faithful) and who managed at least two miracles. But, almost 2,000 years ago, saints were simpler.

In the early days of Christianity, the Romans didn't bother the Christians. They considered them a sect of the Jews and so they were allowed to practice their own religion and believe in their one god. But the Jews (according to the Roman Catholic church) had it in for the Christians, their heretical beliefs, and their practice of evangelizing. So, the *chiefs of the Jewish religion* (according to the Roman Catholic church) appealed to the Romans to put an end to the Christians. The Romans obliged with an official policy of *Christiani non sint*: Let there be no Christians. They began persecuting the Christians as Atheists for their refusal to honor the Roman gods.

Comes a century of time during which these Atheists are persecuted by the Romans for their religious beliefs. Here's how it works. If someone is accused of being a Christian, that person is brought to trial and asked to deny Christ, to demonstrate a belief in the official gods. Those who refuse are executed. They become known as the martyrs (those who would rather die than deny).

Later, the martyrs became known as saints, and it became a tradition for the faithful to honor them. The tradition was to visit the site where a saint was executed, and to do it on anniversary of the saint's death. But, after some time, there got to be so many saints and – in some cases, so many were killed in the same place on the same day – that it became impractical to honor each saint separately.

What to do? The answer was to set aside one day to honor all the saints. Today, it is known as All Saints' Day and it occurs on the first of November. It follows what we now call Halloween, originally known as All Souls' Eve.

All Souls' Day

The day after All Saints' Day is All Souls' Day: a day for the faithful to pray for the suffering souls in purgatory. On this day, the faithful – those who hold to the Calculus of Catholicism the way others hold to the Calculus of Logic – pray for those suffering souls. The holiday was started over 1,000 years ago by an official, canonized saint: St Odilio.

Before he was known as St Odilio, he was Odilio, the Abbot of Cluny. Legend holds that a pilgrim had just returned from the Holy Land, and he told the Abbot this story. While he was sailing back to France, a storm left him stranded on an island that was inhabited by a hermit. The hermit was kind enough to show the pilgrim around the island. He showed him a spot covered with rocks. From under the rocks, the pilgrim could hear a crowd of souls, and they were all crying and screaming for forgiveness and an end to endless suffering. The pilgrim was astounded. He'd found the border to purgatory. But there was more. The hermit told the pilgrim that he heard the demons complaining amongst themselves about the prayers of the faithful. They were complaining that when the faithful prayed for these suffering souls, it relieved their suffering.

The Abbot bought the pilgrim's story. He called for a day for all the faithful to pray for all the souls in purgatory. Right away, All Souls' Day became a hit. Just as there had been no one day for all the faithful to honor all the saints prior to All Saints' Day, there had been no one day to pray for the suffering souls in purgatory. But now, with all the faithful praying for them all at once, the effect of prayer was magnified and the souls in purgatory were given a strong dose of relief. (Of course the demons on the hermit's island weren't too happy about this, but who cares?)

The Calculus of Catholicism holds that the more you pray for a suffering soul, the more relief it gets. When All Souls' Day got underway, some people were too busy to spend their time praying for their dead relatives. Rather than let their souls suffer, they would get beggars to pray on their behalf. How? By offering them food. It's said that this is how the Halloween tradition of begging for candy began.

Today, throughout France, All Souls' Day is a day to visit the graves of friends and relatives, to bring them flowers, and to offer food to the poor along the way to the cemetery. In Mexico, it's the Day of the Dead.

The Day of the Dead

As much as Celtic tradition gave rise to Halloween, Aztec tradition gave rise to this Mexican holiday. The Day of the Dead is – to many Mexicans – what Memorial Day is to the Yanks. It's a time for people to get together, cook up a feast, and honor the dead. It's a day to think of those who've moved on, to remember the good things they did, and what they accomplished in this life. It's a day to celebrate and have fun.

Note: as used here, a Yank is a native of the U.S. who speaks English, knows the Pledge of Allegiance by heart, and stands for the national anthem.

In small towns throughout southern Mexico, the living make hand-crafted, light-hearted skeletons of the dead. The skeletons are crafted in the image of the dead when they were living. Suppose someone played guitar in this life. His skeleton is mounted upright, holding a guitar. The people honoring his life play his favorite guitar music and dance before his skeleton, just as if he were playing for them now. Those honoring the life of someone who smoked and died of lung cancer bring packs of cigarettes for the skeleton to smoke. It's a festive occasion, a time to mock death, to shake off the fear of it.

Over the past several years, a team of scientists has gathered blood samples from people all around the world. Their research indicates that all people really are – as Joseph Lieberman contends – related by blood. They've created a map of the blood samples, and it turns out to have the shape of a tree: one trunk that branches into finer branches. The implication, some say, is that every one of us has a common ancestor, a single person who lived 50,000 years ago in Africa. Can that explain the reason why the Aztecs and the Celts (so far removed from one another) wound up honoring their dead at the same time and in similar fashion?

Advent

The end of November saw the first day of Advent. During this nearly month-long observance, the faithful prepare for Christmas. They're encouraged to spend the time getting ready for death, preparing for the second coming of Christ and for end of this world.

Thanksgiving

Yanks across the U.S. (and many scattered about the world) celebrated the uniquely Yankee tradition of Thanksgiving.

Those who attended public school before *under God* was added to the Pledge of Allegiance were taught that Thanksgiving was started by the Pilgrims: those people who took the Mayflower to Massachusetts in search of religious freedom. Textbooks used to tell the story of how the Pilgrims were literally starving to death during their first Winter in their New World. In the Spring, the friendly Indians came along and showed them how to grow enough food to survive the next Winter. To thank the Indians for their help, the Pilgrims invited them to a feast in the Fall.

Before *under God* was added to the Pledge, school children were taught that the Pilgrims were good people. They were Protestants, and they were being persecuted by Catholics back in England, and so they set off for the New World to escape the evils of the Old One. They arrived in the dead of Winter, after a hard journey.

In the Spring, they came to realize that one more Winter in this place, and they'd all be dead if they didn't figure out how to farm this land. They'd be out of food. As they were building their settlement at Plymouth, as they were thinking hard about food, the Pilgrims were amazed to see one of the natives – a fellow named Samoset – walk right into the settlement and greet them in English!

He'd learned English from explorers and traders he'd met along the coast over the past so many years. But his English wasn't all that good, and so Samoset went to fetch another native who could speak it much better. That was a fellow named Squanto.

Squanto turned out to be the Pilgrims' Saviour. They'd been so worried about how they were going to grow enough food just to survive the fair season, much less stock up for the Winter. Squanto taught them what they needed to know: how to tap maple trees; how to grow corn; how to use fish for fertilizer. He showed them around this unfamiliar New World.

Fantastic! When the next winter was well on its way, the Pilgrims had plenty of food. In fact, they had more than they could store. They asked Squanto to invite his friends to come and celebrate with them. That was the first Thanksgiving celebration, and that's why we celebrate Thanksgiving to this day: to give thanks for having food to spare. That's what those old textbooks said.

Ever since *under God* was added to the Pledge, Thanksgiving has been under attack. There are those who claim those old textbooks had it all wrong. The Pilgrims didn't thank the Indians for their help, they slaughtered them.

"Wait a minute!" say some, some who learned from those old textbooks. "Fact is, Squanto's real name was Tisquantum, and some Old World sailors came along and snatched him up, the way you snatch a leaf from a tree. They took him back to their world and sold him as a slave, and then some Catholic priests did this forced-religious-conversion thing to the poor guy. After that, some explorer took him back to his world, but only so he could be an interpreter.

“Yes, that explorer freed Tisquantum, but everyone else in his tribe was dead by then. They all died of smallpox imported from Europe. So, poor Tisquantum, he had to go live with this other tribe: Samoset’s tribe. And those Pilgrims would certainly have not made it were it not for Tisquantum and his willingness to help them, to help them despite how he’d been mistreated by folks who looked an awful lot like these Pilgrims.

“And did you know that the very first official Thanksgiving Day proclamation honored the massacre of a whole tribe of Indians? And if that’s what happened, then that’s what should be in the history books in our schools. There’s no need to whitewash how the U.S. got its start.”

Of course, both the old textbooks and the new ones discuss the reasons the Pilgrims came here to begin with: to escape religious persecution. But the new textbooks say that as soon as the Pilgrims got here, they implemented their own system of religious persecution: burning witches and such.

The old textbooks didn’t talk about that too much. They were meant to help instill patriotism, and an abiding belief in the Postulate of the Puritans: Holy Scripture is the foundation of church and nation. This *was* a nation under God, and there are many who would like to see it become that again.

It’s OK; It’s Not OK; It Might be OK; Who Knows?

There are those who would like to see many things put back in their places, including Christmas, which belongs in the public square and the public school. Just ask Andrea Skoros.

Ms. Skoros is one of the faithful. She’s a friendly, outgoing sort, and when she speaks, you know she’s from a place where most people don’t drive *cahs*; they drink *cawfee*. She’s much involved in community affairs, and she’s a member of the Catholic League, an organization that “defends the rights of Catholics.” She lives in Queens, and her two young boys – both bound to become full-fledged Catholics – attend a public elementary school.

A year ago, Ms. Skoros is wondering why her two boys are bringing home crepe-paper menorahs they made at school. She contacts the school: why are my boys making menorahs at school? To help explain, the school sends Ms. Skoros a copy of the school’s policy on holiday displays, based on school district guidelines. According to the guidelines, *secular* holiday symbols like menorahs and crescent moons with stars are OK. But *religious* symbols like nativity scenes are not OK. And then it hits her: the school is discriminating against Christians!

In short order, Ms. Skoros is talking to Robert Muise, a lawyer for the Thomas More Law Center, a legal organization that defends “the religious freedom of Christians.” Muise prepares a lawsuit naming Ms. Skoros and her two sons as plaintiffs. The suit claims that this unconstitutional policy effecting New York City’s 1,200 public schools, “promotes the Jewish and Islamic faiths” while it disapproves of Christianity. It demands an end to the ban on nativity scenes.

On 14 November, a federal judge sitting in Brooklyn heard arguments in the case. He’s yet to issue his ruling, but he’s expected to issue a ruling very soon on a separate motion, a motion asking for a temporary order prohibiting the schools from prohibiting nativity scenes.

But . . . why all the fuss?

Enter William Donohue, president of the Catholic League which has its headquarters in Manhattan. Two years ago, he heard of a similar incident at another public school in New York. He heard that Fran Levy, principal of the Thomas Jefferson Magnet School in Queens, ordered a Christmas tree removed from the school because the three-foot-tall tree was too large. It was much larger than the menorah and the crescent moon with star displayed next to it.

And why was Levy concerned about the tree being too large? Because the guidelines on holiday displays advised, “In order to ensure that holiday displays do not appear to promote or celebrate any single religion or holiday, any symbol or decoration which is used must be displayed simultaneously with other symbols or decorations *reflecting different beliefs or customs.*” Levy, it seems, took that to mean that the decorations should be of similar size.

Levy also sent a memo to her teachers suggesting that they bring in decorations reflecting Jewish and Muslim beliefs, and that they find symbols of an aspiring but secular holiday: Kwanzaa. Levy, it seems, was looking for decorations reflecting different beliefs and customs to put alongside the Christmas decorations. But one of her teachers was astonished that the memo didn’t suggest decorations reflecting Christian beliefs, and so she called the Catholic League.

The Catholic League didn’t like the idea of limiting Christmas trees to those the size of a candle holder. And it didn’t like the idea that teachers were being encouraged to bring in symbols of other religions for Christmas. Donohue complained to school officials. He wanted the Christmas tree put back up, and he wanted a nativity scene to be displayed at the school. The chancellor of the city’s schools advised him that there could be no nativity scene. Chad Vignola, counsel to the chancellor, told Donohue that the Supreme Court decided such scenes were *religious* rather than *secular*. He said the tree could go back up, but that a nativity scene was not allowed.

Nativity scenes aren’t allowed? What the heck is this?

It’s how many understand the Supreme Court’s ruling in the case of *Allegheny v. ACLU* ([492 U.S. 573](#)), decided in 1989. This was a case about whether it was OK to display a nativity scene in a county courthouse, and whether it was OK to display a Christmas tree and a giant menorah in a city park. The Supreme Court ruled the nativity scene was *not* OK since it contained a patently Christian message: *Glory to God for the birth of Jesus Christ*. The problem, said the court, was that the nativity scene violated the Establishment Clause, which “prohibits government from appearing to take a position on questions of religious belief.” The government could acknowledge Christmas, but it could not express an, “impermissible allegiance to Christian beliefs.” At the same time, the court said that Christmas trees and menorahs displayed together on public property were OK. Vignola wrote the guidelines on holiday displays to jive with this Supreme Court ruling.

Donohue was steamed about the nativity scene. “I don’t know why we live in a country where people are so damn uptight that they can’t stand the thought of seeing the Baby Jesus,” he said. “If you don’t like it, look away.” Donohue decided to fight the city on the ban on nativity scenes. He “pledged to find a plaintiff to arrange a lawsuit” to get the policy changed. And along comes Ms. Skoros.

We’re still waiting to see what the judge in Brooklyn decides, but if he decides the school district is right, then expect the Catholic League to fight on. “You can’t have Baby Jesus,” complains Donohue, “but you can have a condom on a cucumber,” referring to sex-education programs in the city’s public schools. “Political correctness has run crazy in this country. I hope this goes to the Supreme Court and teaches some of these religious bigots a lesson.”

This case could reach the Supreme Court, which has twice ruled on the constitutionality of nativity scenes. In addition to the 1989 decision in *Allegheny*, the court ruled in 1984 that it was OK to use public funds to include a nativity scene as part of a city’s holiday display. That case was *Lynch v. Donnelley* ([465 U.S. 668](#)) and the court found that the city of Pawtucket, Rhode Island had a secular purpose for including the nativity scene. Consider what the court had to say:

“The display is sponsored by the city to celebrate the Holiday recognized by Congress and national tradition and to depict the origins of that Holiday; these are legitimate secular purposes. Whatever benefit to one faith or religion or to all religions inclusion of the creche in the display effects, is indirect, remote, and incidental, and is no more an advancement or endorsement of religion than the congressional and executive recognition of the origins of Christmas, or the exhibition of religious paintings in governmentally supported museums.”

Supreme Court decisions on the public display of nativity scenes are just too hard to follow. Sometimes the scenes are OK; sometimes they're not. Even the best lawyers can't figure it out, so they play it safe. That's why Vignola's guidelines said menorahs and crescent moons with stars are OK, but nativity scenes are not. Display a nativity scene in a public school, and the ACLU might just come along and threaten the school district with an expensive lawsuit (which most school districts can ill afford). But put up a menorah or a crescent moon with a star, and the ACLU doesn't care.

Who knows? Maybe Donohue and his Catholic League will take this matter all the way to the Supreme Court. But first, we have to see what the judge in Brooklyn has to say about it. What could he say? He could say that Vignola's guidelines are spot-on and must be followed. Or he could say that if the school is going to allow symbols of Judaism and Islam, then it must allow symbols of Christianity. Perhaps he'll say the heck with all these religious symbols. This is a public school we're talking about, and the best way to settle matters is to make it clear that a public school is a very inappropriate place to advertise religion. But, who knows?

And One More Thing

One more thing about the Supreme Court's ruling in *Lynch v. Donnelley*. In his dissent, Justice Brennan introduced a concept that could be central to the upcoming Pledge of Allegiance case. The concept is known as Ceremonial Deism, and it says that such things as the religious belief expressed in our national motto and the Pledge of Allegiance is “protected from Establishment Clause scrutiny.” Why? Because they've been around so long that they've lost their religious significance. In other words, say there's one god enough times and you're no longer stating a religious belief.

And one more thing about the Supreme Court's ruling in *Allegheny v. ACLU*. Justices Rehnquist, Scalia*, and Kennedy, who may soon help decide whether it's OK to have public school children recite a pledge to the flag of a nation under God, didn't go along with the court's ruling. They said it demonstrated an unjustified hostility towards religion, and they warned that if the court applied that same reasoning, then it would have to rule that the Pledge of Allegiance is not OK.

We'll see.

Note: It's been widely reported that Justice Scalia has entirely recused himself from this case, but it's not certain. He may have simply sat out the decision on whether to hear the case because of something he said earlier this year. He hinted that the court shouldn't hear the case. Here's [the scoop](#).

Danger: The Grinch is a Lawyer

And something of a police force for some federal judges.

Three years ago, the Supreme Court issued its ruling in the case of *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* (530 U.S. 290). The court ruled it was *not* OK for a public school to favor students who adhere to a particular religious belief. It ruled that it was *not* OK for a school to have those students use the public address system to promote that belief.

When the court explained its ruling in Santa Fe, it said:

“School sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.”

But that’s a bunch of nonsense to the good folks of Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana. “See. That’s what we’re talking about: judicial activism. The First Amendment doesn’t say jack about nonadherents feeling like outsiders. It doesn’t say jack about some wall of separation and it doesn’t say we can’t pray wherever the hell we want to, and we’re not going to have some damned bunch of judges tell us that we can’t.”

We’ll see. The ACLU is prepared to haul the parish school district before a federal judge. Why? Because it continues to thumb its nose at the Santa Fe ruling. The ACLU’s filed suit in federal court claiming that Loranger High School is doing just what the Santa Fe ruling said it could not.

The Santa Fe case was about prayers delivered over a school’s PA system at varsity football games. The ACLU suit charges that the same thing is going on at Loranger High School in Tangipahoa Parish. The suit claims that just before each home football game, the Reverend Ralph Garner – who’s not only a preacher but also a teacher at the school – gets on the public-address system and says a prayer, just like he does in church on Sunday. But the Santa Fe ruling says this is *not* OK: it’s unconstitutional.

Joe Cook, Director of the ACLU of Louisiana, says school district officials continue to “confuse the public school with Sunday school.” Cook also says that some Tangipahoa Parish School Board meetings “resemble a revival or prayer meeting,” and that – in addition to the prayer broadcast over the PA system – the coach leads the football team in the Lord’s Prayer before each game. The problem with that, says the ACLU and the Supreme Court, is that a Jewish kid on the team is made to feel unwelcome, and he’s made to feel that way by an arm of the state: the school board.

Loranger High School Principal Billie Theriot says you can forget that. She says the school is warm and caring: the sort of place where *loners* and those who are *different* are welcome. And Theriot is hurt. Someone in the school went and called the ACLU?. She asks, “Why didn’t this person give us the courtesy of letting us know that something was bothering them?”

According to the school board’s attorney, Christopher Moody, the suit could have been avoided if the person who contacted the ACLU had merely filed a grievance. But now it’s a big deal and reporters are calling from all around the country to get the details on this backwater town that expects Jewish football players to participate in the Lord’s Prayer. “The ACLU doesn’t want you to fix a problem. They want to file a lawsuit and grab the headlines,” he said. “They’re determined to make this an issue.”

There may be a very good reason why the person who contacted the ACLU did not file a grievance. The Loranger Methodist Church is right next to the playground of the town’s elementary and middle schools. Loranger Baptist Church is just a block from Loranger High School. The town’s two churches are close to the schools in more ways than one; you can see students walking from school to church each day for what Emile Tasso, pastor of the Methodist church, calls *tutoring*.

It’s a cozy relationship. Tasso says it’s a model of President Bush’s faith-based initiative. The town’s leaders don’t like the idea of the ACLU questioning that relationship. That could change how things are done in Loranger, and anyone who invites the ACLU to do that is sure to be less than welcome from now on.

Just ask Lauren Frelich. It was nearly years ago, when Lauren was in the ninth grade. There was a school assembly to commemorate Martin Luther King day, and Lauren noticed that right after the Pledge of Allegiance, there was going to be a prayer. And she knew that was wrong.

How did she know? Lauren is not your typical student. She's the studious sort, interested more in books than in boys. She's got politics and activism in her blood, she's now a National Merit Scholar, and she actually studies such things as Supreme Court rulings. She knew about the Santa Fe ruling and she knew that the prayer should not be on the program. She pointed this out to one of the teachers, and the two got into a heated discussion about it. Next thing you know, Lauren's mom is being called to school to pick up her unruly daughter.

Ever since that incident, people have been saying things about the diminutive Lauren, and some don't mind if she hears what they have to say: she's the little girl who doesn't believe in God. The incident was two years ago, but her mother (one of the faithful) still gets a regular dose of mail from do-gooders offering to save the girl (an Atheist) from a hopeless life of godlessness.

There are other examples of why students who don't like the religious regime at school might just want to keep quiet. In the Santa Fe case, the original plaintiffs – two mothers – were known as the Does. They didn't want to be identified. They didn't want their children to be harassed for complaining about the regime. (In that case, the court found a pattern of harassment, condoned by the school district, against students who refused to accept Bibles that were being handed out at the school, or who declined to participate in religious observances at the school. One parent had to take her child out of school because of the harassment.)

Likewise, in the ACLU suit against Loranger High School, the people complaining about the regime are known as the Does in order to minimize their exposure to harassment. One of the students involved has been threatened. In three previous suits challenging the religious regime at Loranger High, anonymous threats were. . . how should we say . . . common?

On 4 November, the school board met to consider some advice offered by Cook: quit wasting the taxpayers' money on these losing causes. After the meeting, the school board said it would like to reach a settlement. That's fine by Cook, so long as the board is willing to follow the law and abide by court rulings.

Makes You Wonder

What do they teach students in civics class? It's OK to only obey the laws you like? And the other laws? Just come up with some half-ass explanation why they're unconstitutional, and then claim that you're exempt? Apply the Judge Roy Moore method of figuring what's right from what's wrong?

Warning: The Speaker's a Preacher

Back in 1999, the ACLU filed a suit against the Tangipahoa Parish School Board to bring an end to the Pizza Ministry of Steve Farmer. Farmer had been preaching at a number of the public schools in the parish, including Loranger High. He'd show up around lunchtime with pizzas, and invite students to eat pizza while he preached about something *real: Jesus Christ*. As in the current case against the school board, the plaintiffs in that case were referred to as Does to protect their identity.

Last month, a lawsuit was filed in a state court in Marion, Illinois to put the dampers on another Pizza Preacher: Ronnie Hill of [Ronnie Hill Ministries](#), a man who claims “he was saved at the age of eight,” and who has “a passion to see people respond to Jesus!” Hill is an evangelist and a motivational speaker. He regularly visits public schools to tell students about the dangers of drug abuse. He also regularly distributes Pizza Blast tickets to the students. The tickets are good for pizza at one of his after-school preaching sessions.

The suit was filed by Robert Marsh, whose daughter attends one of the four Marion schools that Hill was invited to speak at. Colette McCarty, counsel for the school board, filed a motion to have the case heard in federal, rather than state, court. On 13 November, Circuit Court Judge John Speroni agreed to the motion, and the case was sent to federal court. On 17 November, Federal District Court Judge James Foreman said Hill could speak at the schools but that he could not hand out Pizza Blast tickets at the school.

Anything you Say Can and Will be Held Against You, Kid

One more story about the public schools in Louisiana’s parishes:

On 11 November, an elementary school student in Louisiana’s Lafayette Parish school district was punished for telling another student that his parents – both mothers – are homosexuals. Marcus McLaurin is seven years old. He’s in the second grade. He was waiting in line to go to recess when a classmate asked him about his parents. McLaurin told the classmate that he had two moms rather than a mom and a dad. The classmate asked how that could be and McLaurin told him that his parents were *Gay*. The classmate still didn’t get it so McLaurin explained: “Gay is when a girl likes another girl.” The boys’ teacher overheard this, and scolded McLaurin in front of his classmates. The rest of the class went out for recess, and McLaurin took a trip to the principal’s office for using a bad word.

Sharon Huff, one of McLaurin’s moms, said the school’s assistant principal called her and said that McLaurin had used foul language. Huff asked what the boy said and was told the term was so offensive it couldn’t be said over the phone.

A week after the incident, McLaurin was sent to a behavioral clinic before school and told to write the following over and over again: “I will never use the word *gay* in school again.”

Despite the incident, one [local Web site](#) says life in Lafayette ain’t bad: “There is not much open hostility to gay people. On the contrary, it seems that gay life is accepted quite well.”

How does religion fit in here? Most of the residents of Lafayette Parish are Cajuns: Catholics. The faithful among them (those destined to sleep with the saints) hold that homosexuality is “a deviation from natural law,” and “the sad consequence of rejecting God.”

Beware: Evolution Kills!

Oh, how long has this been going on? The debate over what to allow in textbooks, especially biology textbooks. If what is known about the natural world is allowed in them, shouldn’t what is *not known* be allowed as well?

For so many years, proponents of a concept called Intelligent Design (ID) have been waging a war of paradigms against the proponents of a theory called Evolution. You’re probably familiar with the Theory of Evolution (you probably learned about it in biology class), but you might not be familiar with ID. What is it?

Proponents call ID a scientific theory, an alternative that doesn't suffer the flaws of the Theory of Evolution. Flaws? Sure. Consider the case of the Peppered Moth. Biology textbooks use this as proof of a cornerstone of Darwin's infamous theory. That cornerstone is *natural selection*, the idea that those who are better adapted to their environment have a better chance of survival.

The wings of the peppered moth consist of very fine light and dark scales. Depending on the proportion of light scales to dark, a peppered moth might appear anywhere from almost black to very light gray.

Before the Industrial Revolution hit Manchester, England, most of the peppered moths in the nearby woods were light gray. Then the new factories in Manchester burned so much coal that the soot darkened the tree trunks. The light gray peppered moths became easy targets for the birds that preyed on them, and so – after a period of 100 years – most all the peppered moths that were left were very dark. Why? Because the dark moths had better camouflage. They were harder for the birds to spot as they clung to the darkened tree trunks. They were better adapted to this new environment, and this is evidence of natural selection: evolution at work.

In the 1950s, the British scientist Bernard Kettlewell conducted a series of experiments with the peppered moth to demonstrate that what happened in the woods near Manchester was certainly the result of natural selection, and not something else. Kettlewell was so impressed with the results of his experiments he proclaimed that if Darwin had seen them, “he would have witnessed the consummation and confirmation of his life's work.”

A discussion of Kettlewell's experiments and their results became a staple of biology textbooks: strong evidence to support Darwin's theory. To aid the discussion, the textbooks included photographs that Kettlewell took during his experiments, photos showing how much more obvious the light moths were on dark tree trunks. Easy prey for hungry birds.

Not so fast. Other scientists started finding things that just didn't jive with Kettlewell's results. For instance, these moths don't hang out on tree trunks where birds can spot them. There were other discrepancies. Something was wrong. And that something – Jonathan Wells would claim – was fraud.

Wells doesn't buy this evolution stuff. He's convinced that evolution is just a big hoax, nothing less than a way to promote atheism in the public schools. And he can prove it.

Wells is a preacher. He has one Ph.D. in theology (from Yale) and another in biology (from U.C. Berkeley). He feels that biology should fit theology, not the other way around, and in 1976 – before he had studied biology – he swore to devote the rest of his life to “destroying Darwinism.”

Note: *Darwinism* is the term most often used for Darwin's theory by those who don't buy it.

In his controversial book – *Icons of Evolution* – Wells discusses fake scientific evidence that is presented as fact. He talks about the photos of light peppered moths on dark tree trunks in biology textbooks. They're fake. The moths were glued to the tree trunks. The photos were staged, and – when confronted with the evidence – scientists admit that they were.

Wells points to other problems with biology textbooks. Lots of problems. Insurmountable problems. Darwinism is mythology. A hoax. It is a lie. It should be obvious. Organisms are too complex and too varied to have evolved from some goop. The Theory of Evolution is nothing more than religion masquerading as science. It's Atheism!

There is another theory, a much better theory, to explain the diversity of life: Intelligent Design. According to ID, higher life forms didn't evolve from lower ones. People didn't come from apes. We were designed to be as we are by something (a force, a god, a who-knows-what) called the Intelligent Designer. And if biology textbooks are going to present the so-called evidence for evolution, then it's only fair that they present the evidence for the alternative theory: Intelligent Design.

Wells is not alone. ID has a whole army of proponents behind it, and they can often be found when boards of education and textbook committees get together to decide which biology textbooks are going to be used in the public schools. Such was the case on 6 November when the Texas Board of Education met to decide on biology textbooks.

We're talking money here: big money. Texas is now the second biggest buyer of public school textbooks in the country, and textbook publishers are always anxious to get their books on the state's textbook adoption list. The Texas board is also influential. When it says a textbook must have this or that to be adopted, it effects the textbooks used around the nation.

When the Texas board meets to decide on textbooks, it holds hearings. It listens to what people have to say about the textbooks, and people with a point often go to the hearings to have their say – not only about the textbooks – but about what we teach our kids, whether sex education is appropriate, should we whitewash history or tell it straight, which version of the origins of Thanksgiving should we tell, and didn't the Founders really envision a Christian country.

This year, as in years past, Wells and another senior fellow from the [Discovery Institute](#) – William Dembski, a mathematician who calls the Theory of Evolution Darwinism – examined each of the 11 textbooks up for adoption. In years past, the two have been instrumental in a nationwide effort to see biology textbooks discuss ID. And over the past several years, they have led efforts to put warning labels (see [Religion in the News: August 2002](#)) on textbooks that preach Darwinism: Evolution is only a Theory.

This year, they told the Texas board of the important factual errors they found in the textbooks. Dembski said, "All the textbooks under consideration grossly exaggerate the evidence for neo-Darwinian evolution, pretending that its mechanism of natural selection acting on random genetic change is a slam-dunk. Not so."

Wells said, "I have reviewed the coverage of evolution in all eleven biology textbooks being considered here for adoption. I found that many of them contain serious factual errors; and all of them, to one degree or another, fall short of enabling students to critique Darwin's theory using scientific evidence and information."

While they didn't convince the board to require the textbooks to discuss ID, they did get the board to require certain changes in the books. In one textbook, they got the phrase, "since Darwin's time, many of these [things] have been found," changed to "Since Darwin's time, some of these [things] have been found, while others have not."

The battle over science textbooks in Texas is spearheaded by [Texans for Better Science Education](#). To demonstrate the evils of Darwinism, the group produced a message from a Colorado man. His daughter was killed in the 1999 Columbine High shootings, and he said the teaching of evolution played a role in the shootings. Why? Because one of the two gunmen wore a shirt that fateful day that emblazoned with these words: *Natural Selection*.

The Brights are coming! The Brights are coming!

Dembski uses the story of the blind watchmaker to scoff at evolution. A man who is blind finds something in the woods. He picks it up and examines it. It seems to have a purpose. It is composed of many parts that fit together. All together, the parts do something: they have a function.

The blind man comes to a startling conclusion. Here's how Robert Ingersoll explains it in his 1896 essay *Why I am Agnostic*: "A man finds a watch and it is so wonderful that he concludes that it must have had a maker. He finds the maker and he is so much more wonderful than the watch that he says he must have had a maker. Then he finds God, the maker of the man, and he is so much more wonderful than the man that he could not have had a maker."

In his book *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), [Richard Dawkins](#) (a professor of Zoology at Oxford) explains the modern Theory of Evolution, where natural selection is just one of many factors that account for the diversity and complexity of life. You don't need an Intelligent Designer to come up with humans. According to Dawkins, "All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics . . . it is the blind watchmaker."

Dembski doesn't buy it. He says that believing natural selection (a mixture of physical law and blind chance) can yield a human is like believing that if you let a monkey beat on your keyboard long enough, it'll eventually come up with a Beatle's tune. Darwinism is just unbelievable. Dawkins says its only unbelievable if you think that blind chance is running things. It's not. There's an evolution algorithm that gives direction to natural selection. Given an equivalent algorithm for piano-playing primates, the monkey would be bound to play a Beatle's tune, and it wouldn't take all that long before it happened.

Dawkins has a penchant for coining (or trying to coin) new terms. In 1976, he came up with *meme*. It rhymes with *dream* and it means: a behavior or an idea – some unit of culture – that can be passed down by imitation. In *The Meme Machine* (2000), Dawkins says memes are involved in another kind of natural selection: a survival of the fittest among competing ideas and behaviors.

Here's how Dawkins describes memes:

"Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leading from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain."

Dawkins says that filthy word that got Marcus McLaurin in trouble is a meme. Years ago, nobody associated *Gay* with homosexuality, but now everybody uses it to refer to male homosexuals. So, it's a meme. Another candidate for meme is the term *Bright*. Dawkins and several other non-believers (folks who "don't believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny – or God" and who "share a disbelief in black magic – and life after death." have been promoting the term in place of words like atheist, agnostic, secularist, humanist, or freethinker: words that have a negative connotation amongst most Yanks.

According to Dawkins:

"The noun bright was coined in March by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell of Sacramento, California. In April, I heard them give a presentation on the new word in Florida, and they launched [The-Brights.net](#) soon after. The new meme was almost immediately given a boost by two enthusiastic articles in large-circulation newspapers. On June 21, I wrote [The Future Looks Bright for the Guardian](#), one of Britain's leading national dailies. And on July 12, the distinguished philosopher Daniel Dennett followed up with [The Bright Stuff](#) for [The New York Times](#) op-ed page.

"So, the bright meme is launched. Will it spread, like gay . . . and the backward baseball cap? Or will it nose-dive into the sand? I'm hoping it will take off. I'm even betting that it will, despite the hostility of those who misunderstand the humble noun as an arrogant adjective, and those who, notwithstanding the success of gay, resent all such coinings out of hand. But mostly, I am simply curious, as a disinterested scientist, to see what will happen."

If you're a Bright, you can be counted as one by submitting a form at [Brights.net](#).

One More Thing

On 19 November, Dawkins (who says *religion is a virus*) gave a lecture at Harvard in which he offered his ideas on why we have religion. He doesn't see it as a product of evolution (it does more harm than good, according to Dawkins, just the opposite of what he says we should expect from evolution). He sees it as a product of nurture, rather than nature. A child isn't naturally "a Christian child, but a child of Christian parents," Dawkins told the audience of nearly 500 at Harvard's Lowell Lecture Hall.

Parents dictate their childrens' religion, and society reinforces it. A child is Christian because his parents are Christian. People label the child a Christian and then act as if that were the case, reinforcing the child's identification with a belief system beyond his or her comprehension.

As Ingersoll said at the beginning of his 1896 essay, "we inherit our opinions."

The Nones are Coming! The Nones are Coming!

In the past two months, there were two news reports on the existence of *Nones*, even though there was no news about them.

One report was written on 25 November by Mark O'Keefe, a writer for the [Newhouse News Service](#). He said this news hadn't been reported yet, even though the news was two years old and had been reported by the major news outlets when it *was* news. The other [report](#) was written by Jeff Wright, a writer for the *Register Guard* in Eugene, Oregon. He said he wrote his article based on an idea he got from the [Religion Newswriters Association](#) (RNA). How about that!

RNA is a trade association and support group for people who write about Religion in the News. It offers story ideas (and background info) to religion writers. Two months ago, it suggested that writers might want to write about a group of people dubbed the Nones (a potential meme, it seems, since no one seems to know who first applied this label to these people). These are the people who usually respond *None* when asked their religious affiliation.

Note: Most religion writers were raised by parents who told them they were Christian (or Jewish or whatever). The result is that most news about religion is reported by believers, people who would never submit a form identifying themselves as Brights, and most news about religion is either neutral (the Protestants and the Catholics are at it again) or positive (a Protestant saved a Catholic from a mob of Protestants). You don't find news stories about religion written by people with Dawkins view of religion. When was the last time you heard a story about an admirable Atheist who saved a child bound to become Catholic (from drowning or being run over or some such)?

In 2001, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) conducted [a survey](#) to determine religious affiliation of people in the U.S. (of Yanks as well as everyone else in the country). This was a follow-up to a study that was conducted in 1990.

A comparison of the two surveys reveals something notable about Nones, those who don't belong to any organized religion. Their share of the hearts and minds of all Yanks went from 8% in 1990 to nearly 15% in 2001. The significance? If None was a religious denomination, it would be the third largest in the nation. In certain sections of the country, such as Oregon, it would be the largest denomination. In Salt Lake City, Utah – home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints – it would be the second largest denomination.

These Nones . . . are they atheists? Very few of them are. The survey results show that only three percent of all Nones consider themselves Atheists; only slightly more consider themselves Agnostic. Most of the Nones actually believe in a one-and-only God, but they seem to be more like Deists than anything else: There's a God, but the scriptures at the center of organized religions are the works of man.

One More Thing

There *were* survey results to report in November. The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA released the results of [a survey](#) of undergraduate college students it conducted over the Summer.

According to the survey, over 70% of third-year students agreed that their religious beliefs are important to their identity (supporting Dawkins ideas on religion and identity) and indicated they had attended religious services in the past year. But the percentage of those who regularly attend religious services dropped from just over 50% three years ago to just under 30% today.

Does this contradict the findings of the CUNY survey? Not at all. Spirituality and religion are two different things. Almost 80% agreed that "we are all spiritual beings" and 70% agreed that "most people can grow spiritually without being religious." As one student expressed it, "being spiritual doesn't mean having to follow a certain religion."

Another interesting result was that almost 90% agreed that Nones can be just as moral as Somes.

And Another Thing

That last figure is interesting. In July, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released [the results](#) of a poll that showed that less than half of likely voters would consider voting for a well-qualified Muslim candidate for president of the U.S. More than half said they would *not* consider voting for a well-qualified atheist. This, despite the fact that nearly 60% said their religious beliefs seldom, if ever, effect their votes.

These results closely match those of a poll conducted by the Gallup organization three years ago. Several months before the presidential election, over 90% of those polled said they would vote for a well-qualified Jewish candidate for president, and 80% said they would vote for a well-qualified Mormon candidate.

One Last Thing

Rocky Anderson, the mayor of Salt Lake City, is a self-professed None. In last year's election, 86% of the Nones who voted voted for Anderson.

Flirting with the Enemy: It's a Crime

On 18 November, the Scoop [reported](#) that two Raelians in Lebanon were imprisoned for "flirting with the enemy." The enemy? An Israeli soldier.

The [Raelians](#) were also in the news in November because they claim they've come up with a way to stop people from aging. On 14 November, the *Evening Standard* [reported](#) that the group was set to hold a conference in London to discuss the details of their latest research, but the conference was cancelled when it was discovered that the Raelians were behind it. Last year, the group claimed to have successfully cloned several humans.

The Raelians don't subscribe to the Theory of Evolution, and they have a whole different take on Intelligent Design. According to them, life on earth is something of a biology experiment being conducted by beings from some other world.

Watch Out! – There's a Thinker on the Loose; Nothing is Sacred

Ed Schempp passed away on 8 November. He was 95 years old.

Schempp became infamous on 17 June 1963 when the U.S. Supreme Court issued its ruling in the case of *Abington School District v. Schempp* ([374 U.S. 203](#)). That ruling put an end to Bible study in the nation's public schools.

It was 26 November 1956, and Schempp's son Ellery – a 16-year-old student at Abington Senior High School in Abington, Pennsylvania – protested a state law that said, "At least ten verses from the Holy Bible shall be read, without comment, at the opening of each public school on each school day."

The way things were done in Abington High is the Bible readings were broadcast over the school's PA system at the beginning of the school day, while the students were in home room. Then, the students stood and recited the Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Ellery brought along a copy of the Koran and read it while the Bible readings were being broadcast. He continued reading it while all the other students stood and said the Lord's Prayer, and then he was sent to the principal's office for a lecture on respect.

That evening, Ellery wrote a letter to the ACLU asking for their assistance in putting an end to what he saw as a clear violation of the First Amendment, a breach of that separation of church and state that this nation's founders found essential. The ACLU obliged.

When Ellery staged his protest, the state law made no allowance for students who objected to this religious exercise in a public school. After the protest, the state modified the law: "Any child shall be excused from such Bible reading, or attending such Bible reading, upon the written request of his parent or guardian."

It might have ended there, but Ellery's dad didn't think highly of this idea that objectors could opt out of the exercise. He had two other children – Roger and Donna – who would be going to Abington High, and he didn't want them branded as *oddballs* if they refused to participate in a daily religious exercise at the school. He decided to set things straight, and he pursued the matter to Supreme Court which ruled 8 to 1 in his favor.

Consider what the court had to say:

The fact that the Founding Fathers believed devotedly that there was a God and that the unalienable rights of man were rooted in Him is clearly evidenced in their writings, from the Mayflower Compact to the Constitution itself.

It can be truly said, therefore, that today, as in the beginning, our national life reflects a religious people

The place of religion in our society is an exalted one, achieved through a long tradition of reliance on the home, the church and the inviolable citadel of the individual heart and mind. We have come to recognize through bitter experience that it is not within the power of government to invade that citadel, whether its purpose or effect be to aid or oppose, to advance or retard. In the relationship between man and religion, the State is firmly committed to a position of neutrality.

Further, it is no defense to urge that the religious practices here may be relatively minor encroachments on the First Amendment. The breach of neutrality that is today a trickling stream may all too soon become a raging torrent and, in the words of Madison, "it is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties."

. . . the [Establishment] clause withdrew all legislative power respecting religious belief or the expression thereof.

[The Free Exercise clause] has never meant that a majority could use the machinery of the State to practice its beliefs.

The one justice who dissented called 'separation of church and state' a *sterile metaphor*. He said the court's decision was "the establishment of a religion of secularism."

And he had this to say:

What our Constitution indispensably protects is the freedom of each of us, be he Jew or Agnostic, Christian or Atheist, Buddhist or Freethinker, to believe or disbelieve, to worship or not worship, to pray or keep silent, according to his own conscience, uncoerced and unrestrained by government.

Ed Schempp didn't encourage his son to stage his protest. Ellery says he told his parents what he was going to do the evening before his planned protest. They discussed it after dinner, and the father "didn't tell me to do it or not do it," according to Ellery, who is now 63.

When the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals announced in June 2002 that it was unconstitutional to add *under God* to the Pledge of Allegiance, Michael Newdow got his share of hate mail (and hate fax and hate e-mail and hate answering machine). When the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Abington v. Schempp*, the Schempp's got their share of scorn. Says Ellery:

"We received 15,000 letters. We were accused of being everything the writer hated: 'what are you? Commies? Jews?' I don't recall any letter that asked: 'What are you, Zoroastrians?' I conclude that nobody hates Zoroastrians."

Why do it? Why go through the grief and aggravation? Ellory has a ready response:

Why did I consider this a worthwhile thing to do? First, I felt that there was a fundamental issue of fairness for all. Jews do not consider the New Testament the Word of God, and there are certainly passages there that have been hurtful to Jews over the centuries. The Bible is not the Holy Book of Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. Non-believers, pagans, and others do not need Christianity preached to them in the schools.

Nor do I consider the Bible a valuable source of truth – certainly no more than any other book written 2000 years ago. While there are some beautiful sections, there are also many quite ugly sections. And the idea of reading about Noah’s Flood under the aegis of the imprimatur and authority of a state-sponsored devotion and then going to geology or biology class was, and is, deeply offensive to my scientific sensibilities. Noah’s Flood simply never happened. I do not believe in miracles, and I thought it was wrong for the schools to teach them.

Secondly, I consider that the First Amendment has served our nation very well, and the more we respect it, the more strength it gives us.

It is important to remember that part of the genius of the First Amendment is that we do not have simple majority rule, an idea not well-understood. The majority does not have the right to round up Jews or Muslims and deport them, or worse. Here I mean the legal right, not to mention the moral issues. Hidden within the First Amendment is a fundamental protection for the rights of minorities. Prayer is not to be decided by majority vote. Nor is posting the Ten Commandments.

Thirdly, I oppose the view that praying and searching for “spiritual peace/healing” is a satisfactory substitute for learning about difficult issues in the world, and struggling with them. I think our struggle is not to find inner peace, but to keep alive the itch that makes us want to do better.

Moreover, religion by rote does not promote spiritual values, nor does constant repetition of the Pledge promote patriotic or civic values. Public prayer is not intended to promote religious values, but to enhance the authority of some churches and some political views over others. Similarly with the posting of the Ten Commandments. It is about power, not about religion.

We found that many people who protested the Supreme Court’s decision said, “well if it weren’t for prayers in the schools, many kids would never hear about Christ or God.” What an absurd idea! Christianity is hardly an endangered species in this country, contrary to some of the railings of the far right. But so what? What is the source of this notion that everyone has to be introduced to Christ or to Allah? In order that their souls might be saved? If believers are happy with their souls, why not leave mine alone?

Lastly, I believe there is an important connection between separation of church and state and other civil rights and civil liberties.

Ed Schempp was much involved with the [Unitarian Universalist Church](#). As a Unitarian, he didn’t appreciate Abington High teaching his kids that one of his core religious beliefs – God is One, not Three – was dead wrong. He was active in a number of causes and will be remembered for his fiesty sense of humor. For a taste of it, find a copy of his book *Buyers Guide to the Gods*.

Michael Newdow, are you listening?

Dad Takes his Religion Seriously – Very Seriously

In Muslim countries – I mean countries where they go by the Puritan Postulate and the clerics rule – you can get away with murder. Literally. You can kill your daughter if you think it will improve your standing in the community.

But England is not a Muslim country and it's not easy to get away with murder there.

Consider the case of Heshu Yones, a 16-year-old girl who was stabbed to death by her father, Abdallah. (The Yones' emigrated to England from Iraq. Kurds, they fled Saddam Hussein's reign of terror).

Why did her father kill his daughter? Because he believed she was having sex with her boyfriend. Someone sent Abdallah a letter accusing Heshu of acting like a whore. So, he decided to kill her for the sake of his honor.

A spokesman for the police cautioned Muslims about religiously-inspired murder: "Violence in the name of culture will not be tolerated. Murder in the name of honor will be punished by the severest penalties available in law."

Etc.

There was plenty of other news. There were stories about Jim Jones and the People's Temple and Domsday Cults Down Under and the Ten Commandments and how the Pilgrims believed in a particular god and how we should recognize that by posting the first ten laws of an ancient tribe of Asisans here and there and everywhere and . . . there's just no end to Religion in the News.

Commentary

I think this is it for *Religion in the News*. I think this is the last editon of it.

Why? It's a question of time. How much time can I devote to this?

I would consider keeping this going, but only if enough folks contact me and tell me to keep this going and say they're willing to support the effort. You know what I mean?

In that case, I'd be happy to keep this going. Otherwise

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