

Religion in the News: October 2002

by Mister Thorne

1 November 2002

October was a good month for religion in the news. The U.S. government revealed an ad campaign to recruit Muslim immigrants. An Eagle was threatened with expulsion for not accepting any of the gods. The savior of humanity was sentenced to jail. The Satanic Thought Society did its best to rile things up. Muslims were angered by the work of a blasphemous cartoonist. A man had his name changed to a tautology. And the name of the god that granted Americans their inalienable rights is revealed.

Campaigning for Muslim Immigrants

Many Americans are perplexed by the U.S. government's immigration policies. Even after the attacks on the World Trade Center, the government maintained its fast-track visa program in Saudi Arabia that allowed Arabians to enter the U.S. without proper documentation. In the past year, there have been numerous reports that the U.S. government refuses to defend its southern border against illegal immigrants. And many local governments have decided to honor the Matrícula Consular, an ID card that Mexico provides to Mexican nationals living illegally in the U.S.

After a boat load of Haitians ran aground in Florida on 29 October, escorted by the U.S. Coast Guard, many asked what the government was doing to defend the borders. But both the president of the U.S. and the governor of Florida expressed their willingness to allow the Haitians to remain. It's a good way for politicians to get votes. If a Republican administration accommodates a boat load of illegal immigrants, those immigrants will eventually become citizens and vote Republican. Ditto for Democratic administrations. And the natives won't mind one bit. No, they'll be thankful for the expanding supply of cheap labor.

So, we should not be too surprised that the government revealed an ad campaign on 29 October to recruit Muslim immigrants. The campaign features videos that show how accommodating U.S. society is towards Muslims. Muslim school children will certainly be allowed to pray to Mecca, even if Christian students are prohibited from praying at all. Malaysia will begin airing the ads next week, and the U.S. is pushing for other Muslim countries to follow suit.

The Expulsion of an Eagle

Darrell Lambert was given one week to pick a god. Either that, or he's out. The 19-year-old Eagle Scout has earned 37 merit badges, including the very highest honor that a Scout can receive, and he did more than 1,000 hours of community service while a senior in high school. Fine, but when he attended a Scout training session at the beginning of October and the discussion turned to faith, Lambert admitted to being an atheist. He got into an argument with the leader of the training session as to whether the faithless should be allowed in the Scouts. The leader reported Lambert's lack of faith to the higher ups, and it finally reached Brad Farmer, a Scout executive.

"You need to have a recognition of a supreme being," said Farmer. "We, as the Boy Scouts, do not define what that is, but you need to have a recognition."

"No way," says Lambert, who has been a Scout since he was nine years old, and who became an atheist three years ago. "It'd be like me asking them to change their belief. It's not going to happen."

The Savior of Humanity

Gamal Abdel Azziz, an Egyptian, was serving a three-year jail term in Italy for theft and drug use. In jail, he had a divine revelation. Allah told him he would liberate Jerusalem from the Israelis, and he would save humanity from all its suffering. The 45-year-old Azziz was released from the Italian jail and returned to Egypt. But, when he got back home, he began preaching and he revealed his revelation. So the Egyptian authorities threw him in jail. The charge against him is contempt of religion, and he may face another five years in jail. The liberation of Jerusalem may have to wait.

The Satanic Thought Society

On 2 October, Pam Cachay showed up at her daughter's school – San Mateo High School (in San Mateo, CA) – for the protest she had organized. It was to be a protest against the Satanic Thought Society, a student group formed to encourage the separation of church and state, according to its founders, two students who attend the high school. Admits James Doolittle, one of the club's founders, the club's real purpose is to, "rile things up a bit."

The first meeting of the group was announced over the school's PA system, and Cachay's daughter – a member of the school's Christian club – reported the announcement to her mom. When Cachay asked about it, the school's principal – Jacqueline McEvoy – noted that under the federal Equal Access Act for Secondary Schools, the school cannot bar the Society.

The police showed up to maintain order during the protest, but they wound up wasting their time. Cachay was the one and only protester in attendance.

Blasphemous Cartoons

Perhaps cartoonist Larry Gonick should get the Salmon Rushdie award for irritating overly sensitive Muslims. Part three of his cartoon history of the universe, *From the Rise of Arabia to the Renaissance*, which arrived in bookstores earlier this month, depicts the birth and rise of Islam. The book is irreverent, yet it does a good job of presenting historical events, according to critics. Says Garry Trudeau, creator of *Doonesbury*, "will reading an erudite, if flat-out hilarious account of Middle East history help us make sense of our current clash of cultures? Let's put it this way: ignorance hasn't worked."

But some Muslims have taken offense at the book, not only at some of the references to Islamic history, but to the joke Gonick plays throughout the book regarding the edict against depicting Islam's founder. Commenting on Muslim reactions against the book, Hussein Ibish, spokesman for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, who holds that, "the Koran is *uniquely* sacred," noted, "there are some people who are so worked up about these things, who are very defensive and would react badly to the most reverent and respectful comments."

Some of the negative reaction had to do with the relationship between Islam and Judaism portrayed by the book. Edmund Burke III, editor of *Islam, Politics and Social Movements*, said that Gronick's book leaves the misleading impression that, "anti-Semitism is emblazoned in the DNA of Muslims."

That's a curious comment, given that Muslim Arabs are just as Semitic as Jewish Israelis.

I am who I am

Thirty-five years ago, Charles Haffey was a young man. Like so many other young Yanks, he was sent to Viet Nam. He saw the hideous face of war, up close and personal. And that rattled his nervous system something fierce. He had a nervous breakdown after experiencing just too much horror.

He was sent home, but life would never be the same for Haffey. The war was still raging in his mind. He took to drinking and to drugs. A drug deal with a friend went bad on him, and so he decided to kill his friend and his family. But he couldn't do it. He went back home and – .357 Magnum in hand – he called the suicide hotline. "Help me commit suicide; that's what you're here for," he told the person on the other end of the line. The police were dispatched. After a three-hour standoff, they fired tear gas into his house. They arrested him, and he spent 82 days in jail for disorderly conduct.

Doctors say that Haffey suffers a number of psychic ailments: paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. They say he needs to take psychotropic drugs to keep his wits. Others might conclude that he needs more than that.

The events of 11 September 2001 rattled Haffey. He called out to God, and God responded by telling Haffey to become one of his prophets. His first assignment was to change his name to 'God.' In April 2002, Haffey went to court to have his name changed, but the court denied his request. Judge Vernon Douglas determined that, "most human beings claim a god. For the court to lend legal credentials to a human named 'God' is diminishing the rights of all citizens to their already identified god."

Disappointed, but undeterred, Haffey set about finding another name that would be acceptable to God *and* to Judge Douglas. Like so many of his brethren, Haffey thought the New King James version of the Bible was a true rendering of ancient scriptures. But he was wrong. And so he decided to change his name to a tautology: I am who I am. Judge Douglas granted the change on 2 October.

Commentary

Moslems pray to Allah. Jews are not allowed to say who they pray to. Christians, by and large, don't even know that the god they pray to has a name. Certainly, most Americans don't know the name of that singular god that granted them their inalienable rights. And why is that?

According to legend, the Pentateuch, or Torah – the Old Testament books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – was written by Moshe, who is commonly referred to in English as Moses. Moses is believed to have lived around the 13th century B.C., and to have written in ancient Hebrew. But all of his writings are long lost.

So, if we don't have the original writings, how can we know what it is that Moses wrote? How can we know that our modern, English-language Bibles are accurate renditions of ancient writings? To answer this question, let us first look at how the Pentateuch came to be translated into English.

In 722 B.C., the northern kingdom of Samaria was conquered by the Assyrians who were gaining control of the entire Middle East. To maintain their control, they took to the practice of dispersing the peoples they conquered. And so they dispersed the Israelites throughout Mesopotamia. Then, 125 years later, the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judea and deported the bulk of the population.

Although dispersed, the Israelites kept their religion, but they eventually lost their language. Another language – Aramaic – became the dominant language throughout the region. Hebrew fell into disuse, and Hebrew scribes translated the Pentateuch into Aramaic. Rather than a literal interpretation, they developed targums that paraphrased the Pentateuch.

Later, as Greek influence spread throughout the region, Greek became the dominant language. And so the Pentateuch was translated into a variety of Greek targums by Jews living in Egypt. Then, in the 3rd century B.C., an official version of these targums was prepared: the Septuagint.

Some 500 years later, with the Roman Empire ruling the western world, and with Christianity the dominant religion, the Septuagint was translated into Latin. In 383 A.D., commissioned by the pope, Saint Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin, and then he set about translating the Pentateuch. He completed his work in 404 A.D. and Christianity had a Bible: the Vulgate. This was the first book printed by Johannes Gutenberg in 1456.

Now . . . on to the English Bible. While portions of the Vulgate had been translated into English, it was not until 1385 that a complete translation was produced. This is the Wycliffe Bible, named after John Wycliffe who wanted the Bible translated into English so that common people could read it.

In Wycliffe's day, the only church was the Catholic church, and it was more powerful in England than the King of England. It imposed taxes on the English people and it decreed that only clergymen could read the Bible. It opposed any translation of the Vulgate. And it required the King of England to pay the church for the privilege of being king.

Wycliffe ran afoul of the Vatican. He called the pope the anti-Christ, and he denounced the extortion – the indulgences – of the people by the clergy. In return, the pope sought to have him tried for heresy. In 1404, twenty years after Wycliffe died, a decree was passed that prohibited the translation of the Vulgate into English: the common people were not to read the Bible.

The next big development is due to William Tyndale, born about 100 years after Wycliffe's Bible was produced. Like Wycliffe, Tyndale felt that the Bible should be made accessible to the people, that salvation was a matter between man and Christ, not between man and some corrupt church. But, unlike Wycliffe, Tyndale knew Hebrew and Greek. And his Bible was based on sources in those languages.

Tyndale approached the Bishop of London and sought permission to produce a Bible in English. He was turned down. So he went to Germany and translated the Greek New Testament. In 1526, he had the New Testament printed in English and copies shipped to England. Then he translated the Pentateuch from the existing Hebrew texts, the Massoretic texts and had printed editions shipped to England. In his translation of the Pentateuch, he introduced the name *Jehovah*. The Bishop of London had Tyndale's Bibles burned, and a good number of those in possession of them were burned at the stake for their heresy and very many more were sent to prison and tortured. The religious authorities finally caught up with Tyndale, and in 1536, he was burned at the stake for his heresy.

My . . . how things change. Just one year after Tyndale's execution, the King of England approved a translation of the Bible into English. It was a revision of Tyndale's Bible. And one year after that, there was a royal decree that every church have a copy of yet another revision of Tyndale's Bible: the Great Bible. Then, in 1560, came the Geneva Bible. Unlike previous versions of English-language Bibles, the Geneva Bible was set in Roman, rather than Gothic, type. While the Bibles set in Gothic type were huge, the Geneva Bible was the first that was compact enough to be carried about. It became very popular. In 1568 came yet another revision of the Bible set in Gothic type: the Bishop's Bible. Like the Great Bible, it was huge, suitable for mounting on a lectern in a church, but hardly suitable for personal use.

This caused a bit of a problem. In the church, there was the huge Bishop's Bible. But in the households, there was the Geneva Bible. And the two did not match. To resolve this problem, King James commissioned a new Bible that would become the standard. It first appeared in 1611, and for more than three centuries, it was the standard Bible of English-speaking Christians around the world.

Now . . . back to Tyndale's introduction of the name *Jehovah*. The Hebrew sources that Tyndale used for his Bible were the only ones available at the time. These were the Massoretic texts, so called because they were produced by Jewish scholars known as the Massorettes (the Traditionalists). They worked between about 600 and 1000 A.D. in Babylon and in Palestine. Their motivation was to preserve the ancient Jewish scriptures as Hebrew was becoming a dead language. The scriptures available to them were in ancient Hebrew, in which there were no spaces between words, no punctuation marks, no lower-case letters, and there were no vowels, just consonants. To appreciate the situation, imagine trying to translate *PHRSLKTHS* into a phrase like *this*. What the Massorettes did was to put spaces between the words and to add vowels and punctuation. The result was that Tyndale, with limited understanding of Hebrew, came up with *Jehovah* in place of YHWH.

Now, you may have heard the modern legend that the name of the god of the Israelites is unpronounceable. Not so. In the ancient scriptures, the name appears as YHWH. When translated, it becomes Yahweh (pronounced 'yah-vay'). And this name appears 6,828 times in the Torah. Given that, how did Tyndale come up with *Jehovah*, and why did he use it only 40 times?

The main reason is that the Jews had long since developed a prohibition against saying this name. One theory for the prohibition is that it is due to passages such as the third commandment, which prohibits using the name in vain, and Leviticus 24:10-16 where a man is accused of violating the third commandment and Yahweh instructs Moses to have the man stoned to death. Better not to use the name at all, rather than to risk misusing it. More likely though is that the ancient religious leaders appropriated the name for their own use and forbade anyone else from using it, lest they misuse use it and bring calamity upon everyone. But, this is odd. Consider the equivalent of Leviticus 3:15 in the Torah where Yahweh responds to Moses' query as to which god he is speaking with:

You must [then] say to the Israelites, Yahweh, the god of your fathers, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, sent me to you. This is my eternal name, and this is how I am to be recalled for all generations.

And compare that to Leviticus 3:15 in the King James version:

Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, the Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations.

By replacing the name with a title, the verse becomes meaningless. What name? And it debilitates the commandment to maintain the name for all generations.

There are other important changes between the ancient Hebrew scriptures and most modern English-language Bibles. Consider the first sentence in the Bible. According to the King James version, it goes like this:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.

But, according to the ancient scriptures, the term is not God, but *Elohim*, a plural form meaning the Mighty Ones, or, in more common parlance, the gods. In order to not use the name *Yahweh*, or to suggest the existence of other gods, the people who produced the King James version used a code. Here's how it goes:

- 1) Elohim is rendered as God (see Genesis 1:1).
- 2) Yahweh is rendered as LORD (Genesis 4:1).
- 3) Adonai is rendered as Lord (Genesis 18:27).
- 4) Adonai Yahweh is rendered as Lord GOD (Genesis 15:2).
- 5) Yahweh Elohim is rendered as LORD God (Genesis 2:4).

Well . . . once again, if we don't have Moses' original writings, how can we be sure what he wrote? For one, there are the Dead Sea scrolls that were discovered in the middle of the last century. They shed much light on the ancient scriptures, and they make clear the use of the name Yahweh. But there's much more than that. There are the many writings discovered at Ugarit back in 1928. These go back to the time of Moses, and they make clear reference to Yahweh as well as the other gods of the ancient Semites. There are the extensive Elephantine Papyri. There are thousands upon thousands of ancient writings that have been found throughout the ancient world that show, among other things, that Yahweh was one of the gods common to Semitic people throughout the area.

Funny thing though. English speaking Christians commonly recite the Lord's Prayer, and they say, "Hallowed be thy name." For the most part, they have no idea that there even is a name, much less what it might be.

Date: 1 November 2002

Place: Daly City, California

Author: Mr. Thorne (mrthorne@mindspring.com)