

Religion in the News: September 2002

by Mister Thorne

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September was a good month for religion in the news. An American bishop was nominated to be the first electronic saint. Satan was barred from prison. A boy possessed by demons was shot to death by police. Scientists explained important aspects of Jewish genes. Surveyors found that the Bible Belt has moved north. A French author was taken to court for his remarks about the IQ of Islam. And Jerry Falwell has some new neighbors: devout sinners.

Falwell's New Neighbors

Reverend Mel White, aged 62, and his partner rented a house right across the street from Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. White and his partner, Gary Nixon, are practicing homosexuals. They've been together for over 20 years. And they made the move in response to what Falwell has been saying about them.

For years, Falwell has been preaching that homosexuality is a sin (see Leviticus 20:13, which calls for homosexuals to be stoned to death). He has warned his followers about “. . . perverted homosexuals who absolutely hate everything that you and I and most decent, God-fearing citizens stand for”

Prophetically, he has warned them, “make no mistake. These deviants seek no less than total control and influence in society, politics, our schools and in our exercise of free speech and religious freedom.”

White and Falwell know each other well. White was ghost author of Falwell's autobiography, *If I Should Die Before I Wake!* White has written for other evangelists, including Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. But that all ended when White proclaimed that he was an incurable homosexual.

White and Nixon founded a group called Soulforce. It's claimed purpose is to end the suffering of sexual minorities through nonviolent means. They want to let the good people of Lynchburg see that they're good folks too. Says White “we just want Lynchburg to see us – an old gay couple – and realize that we're as boring as they are.”

There's a lot of sin to clean up in Lynchburg. For instance, Meriwether's restaurant serves shellfish and pork, in blatant violation of the law (Leviticus 11:7-9).

And there is evil brewing. One of the faithful had this to say about Falwell's new neighbors. “Hope they've got their homeowners' insurance paid up.”

The IQ of Islam

Michel Houellebecq is the quintessential French novelist. By all accounts, he drinks too much, he smokes too much, and he's quite the womanizer. And now he's got some legal troubles. He's on trial, charged with inciting religious and racial hatred. On 17 September, he appeared in court to defend himself.

During an interview to discuss his latest novel, *Platform*, Houellebecq commented that Islam is a dumb religion and that the Koran is badly written. In France, with its large contingent of Moslem immigrants, such provocative comments against Islam can land you in jail for a year. That's the penalty that Houellebecq faces for his comments.

Next month, the court will hear a complaint against the Italian writer Oriana Fallaci. In her book, *Anger and Pride*, she writes, “The sons of Allah are breeding like rats.” The court will decide whether the book should be banned.

Surveying the Bible Belt

Each decade, the Glenmary Research Center of Nashville, Tennessee, dedicated to promoting Catholicism, conducts a survey titled *Religious Congregations & Membership*. The survey measures the religious affiliations of people in the U.S. The survey has been conducted regularly since the 1940s, when the U.S. Census Bureau stopped collecting data on religious affiliation.

According to the survey, the largest percentage of people who practice their faith is in Utah, and those people are Mormons: almost three-quarters of them regularly attend the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And that turned out to be the fastest-growing church in the U.S. Its membership increased almost 20% over the past decade.

The Roman Catholic Church, the largest church in the U.S. grew by 16%. There are now some 62 million practicing Catholics in the U.S. Some of the biggest growth for this church was in the South. For example, in Hampton Roads, Virginia, the percentage of Catholics grew by 43%. At this rate, the number of Catholics there will soon exceed the number of Southern Baptists, long the predominant denomination. Immigration is a factor in this changing demography. Between 1990 and 2000, the largely Roman Catholic, Hispanic population in the Tidewater area (which includes Hampton Roads, Newport News, and Norfolk) grew by over 50%.

The overall national trend was a shrinking of liberal Protestant denominations, and growth of more conservative denominations. The trend pushed the Bible Belt north, up to the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Minnesota, as that is now the region of the country with the highest percentage of regular church goers.

In addition, on 11 September, Barna Research released the results of a survey that showed, despite a significant rise in church attendance last September, things are back to where they were before the attack on the World Trade Center: the percentage of Americans who don't regularly attend church is precisely the same as before the attack: 33%.

Jewish Genes

When most people drink, they reach a point where enough is enough. Their bodies tell them, "no more!" But for alcoholics, the more they drink, the more their bodies tell them "more! more!" Scientists and physicians have long suspected that alcoholism is inherited: it's in the genes, so to speak.

On 17 September, it was reported that researchers had discovered that almost two-thirds of Jews have a variant gene that inhibits excessive drinking. This variant is also common among Asians (notorious for their inability to drink), but is very rare among Caucasians.

There was more. On 19 September, scientists reported the discovery of a genetic mutation that effects Ashkenazi Jews, those of European descent. While the mutation appears in only 1% of the Ashkenazi, it causes a strong predisposition to colon cancer, the leading cause of cancer death in Israel. "When this mutation is inherited from both parents, it causes a serious disorder called Bloom syndrome, which greatly increases an individual's predisposition to cancer," said Dr. Stephen Gruber, director of clinical cancer genetics at the University of Michigan.

Satan Barred from Prison

In the U.S., convicted felons lose so many rights. Immediately, they lose any right to privacy. And they lose some of their Constitutional rights. They lose the right to vote, to bear arms, or to associate with whomever. But they never give up the right to practice religion.

According to federal law, prisons may not prohibit the exercise of religion so long as it does not compromise the safety of other inmates or staff. And so Patti Webb, the warden of the Green River Correctional Complex in Kentucky, allowed inmates to hold Satanic services over the summer. But then the *Lexington Herald-Leader* reported what was going on and the warden put a halt to the services in the name of safety.

Satanism is also prohibited in Texas prisons. “We’ve looked at the satanic bible and are convinced that what it advocates would put our prisons at risk, safety-wise,” said Donald Kaspar, chaplain for the Texas prison system. “One of their tenets is revenge – if somebody hurts you, hurt them back.” Curiously, Kaspar encourages inmates to read books that advocate revenge: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Demons Shot in Church

It was just past 9:00 P.M. on 4 September, and the choir for the Taylor Ranch Baptist Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, had just finished rehearsing. Then appeared one 14-year-old Dominic Montoya. He entered the church. No one recognized him, but the choir members could see he was deeply troubled; he told them he was possessed by demons. Two members of the choir, Lori Marsh and Janet Clark, prayed with him. They said the prayer calmed him down and made him become coherent. And they noticed he had a gun.

Danny Marsh, Lori’s husband, called 911. The police responded, and when three officers arrived, the boy was standing in the church foyer with Curtis Miller. Miller had asked the boy to hand over the gun, the boy refused, and Miller was escorting him out.

The officers told the boy to put his hands up, but the boy pulled the gun on them. One of the officers fired three rounds at the boy, and two of them struck him in the abdomen. He died the next day. His gun turned out to be a BB gun.

Earlier this year, Gabriel Mendoza, aged 16, was shot and killed by police outside the First Baptist Church in Albuquerque.

The First Electronic Saint

The late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen has been nominated for sainthood. The Diocese of Peoria, Illinois recently filed papers with the Vatican requesting that he be given this honor.

Sheen was the first televangelist. He hosted such TV programs as *Life Is Worth Living* which began broadcasting in 1952, and *The Bishop Sheen Program* which aired from 1961 to 1968. Before TV, he was a regular on a popular radio show: *The Catholic Hour*. In his broadcasts, he spoke of theological as well as social issues. He said that democracy could not survive without religion. He argued against communism and atheism. He quipped: “An atheist is a man who has no invisible means of support.”

Sheen died in 1979. When he died, his friend of 35 years, Billy Graham, said, “I mourn his death and look forward to our reunion in Heaven.” Sheen holds a distinct honor: he is buried beneath the high altar in the crypt of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Before he holds the honor of saint, the Vatican is going to have to examine, and pass judgement on, the miracles attributed to him.

Commentary

In 1952, Archbishop Sheen wrote *The World’s First Love*, one of some 60 books he authored. In it, he reminded his followers that, “Europe barely escaped destruction at the hands of the Moslems,” and he warned them that, “the Moslems are beginning to rise again.” He said that Islam was founded on a simple misunderstanding, and that it was imperative that Moslems be converted to Catholicism.

“At the present time, the hatred of the Moslem countries against the West is becoming a hatred against Christianity itself. Although the statesmen have not yet taken it into account, there is still grave danger that the temporal power of Islam may return and, with it, the menace that it may shake off a West which has ceased to be Christian, and affirm itself as a great anti-Christian world power,” he said.

Like Sheen, today’s evangelists are preaching against the infidels: the Moslems who cling to a simple misunderstanding, who won’t accept Christ, and who prefer a dumb religion based on a poorly-written book.

Atila Sinke Guimarães, a Catholic columnist, echoes Sheen's warnings. Last year, he wrote an essay about the consequences of the attack on the World Trade Center. "One of them was to remind the entire world of the significance of today's Muslim danger," he wrote. "Before the attack, the West had been oblivious to any serious thoughts about the Islamic danger."

Guimarães accused Arabia of funding the spread of Islam in the West, and he said today's migration of Moslems to Europe was, "analogous to the wave of Germanic barbarians who invaded Europe and completely changed the culture and socio-political structure of the Roman Empire." He speculated that unless an end was put to it – given the high birth rate of these immigrants – this silent and seemingly peaceful invasion would make Europe a colony of Islam in 50 years.

Pat Robertson weighed in. "I think people ought to be aware of what we're dealing with," he said. "Mohammed said the second most important duty of a follower of Islam is to wage jihad against the infidels. It is very clear in the Koran and in his writing and in his words what he intended."

Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, echoed Guimarães' warnings: "Our country is slowly being, very quietly, being Islamized by huge contributions from Saudi Arabia." Graham has repeatedly called Islam, "a very evil and wicked religion."

Right now, it's a religious war: largely a war of words. It's a war of words between ministers and imams, between the U.S. delegation to the U.N. and the Iraqi delegation. It's been a source of words between the U.S. and some of its closest allies, and it's beginning to be a word war between Republicans and Democrats, between those who favor waging war against Iraq, and those who urge caution and prudence and an international solution. Still, it's shaping up as a war between the sons of Allah and the sons of Yahweh.

It could soon become a shooting war. The U.S. gives every indication that it is going to strike Iraq, remove Saddam from power, and install a democratic regime in his place.

In the West, the State runs things, not the Church, and it's been that way for hundreds of years. Not so in Arabia with a younger religion that often rules things in a state of monarchy. What the U.S. is threatening is not just the demise of Saddam, but the imposition of a state that will rule over Islam. Perhaps what we want is what Bishop Sheen advocated 50 years ago: an Arabia that has ceased to be Moslem.

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