

CAL THOMAS AND “COPYCAT” RELIGIONS

By Nick Gier

They who know only one religion actually know none.

–The late Max Müller, Oxford University

It pleased the Divine Power to reveal some of the most important articles of our religion first to the Zoroastrians, and through their literature to the Jews and ourselves.

– The late L. H. Mills, Oxford University

In the fall of 1983 I met Cal Thomas in the Jansen Engineering Auditorium at the University of Idaho. Thomas was then vice-president of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, and I had invited him to debate the right-wing charge that humanism was a danger to American culture.

For the first time in my public speaking career, I had stage fright for the first five minutes. I soon recovered and drove home my thesis that humanism—widely endorsed by our founding thinkers—was as American as Apple Pie. (For more see www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/humanism.htm.) At the end of the debate Thomas put his arm around me and said: “I would love to take a course from you sometime.” That is the nicest compliment (among very few) that I’ve received from a Christian conservative.

Recently Thomas has joined others in demonizing the Muslim religion. In a December 2008 column he wrote that “existing mosques must be monitored to make sure hate is not taught and aggressive behavior toward their host countries is not promoted. If such behavior and speech are detected, the mosques should be closed and the imams arrested or deported.”

There are at least two problems with this screed: (1) Muslims have called America home for three hundred years, long before they “hosted” later European immigrants (Jefferson had Muslim slaves on his plantation); and (2) “hate and aggressive behavior” are preached in hundreds of our churches, but Thomas seems to tolerate these offenses.

A local fundamentalist college issued a recruitment blurb with the headline “Yo, Secularism, why don’t we step into the alley?” The college administration issued an invitation to a “brawl,” and they warned that their students are “dangerous”: they will

throw the “lies of this age up against the wall, lifting wallets and the occasional gift card.”

In a broadcast from Buddhist Thailand on December 8, Thomas criticized Islam as a “copycat” religion—“taking from Old and New Testaments; denying some of it while adding to it.” Jews of course could say exactly the same thing about what Christians did with their scripture. There is no Trinity in the Hebrew Bible, and the Messiah would come as conquering king not one humbled, tortured, and crucified. Isaiah’s Suffering Servant is not, as many believe, the Messiah. See www.NickGier.com/SufferingServant.pdf.

As Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of their savior, it is significant to point out that other religious leaders were said to be born of virgins, descend from royalty, and fulfill ancient prophecies. These saviors were threatened in infancy, tempted by demons, worked miracles, worshipped as a triune deity, offered redemption through grace, and transfigured themselves before their disciples. The Buddha, Zoroaster, and Krishna all lived hundreds of years before Jesus did, so will the real copycat religion now please stand?

The Jewish historian Josephus hated King Herod and chronicled his life in great detail, but it is very odd that he never mentions the slaughter of infants found in Matthew 2:16. A bas relief in the Indian Mathura Museum dated to the 3rd Century B.C. shows the demon prince Kansa standing on a huge pile of dead infants, whom he ordered killed when he heard that the baby Krishna would grow up and dethrone him. The pre-Christian *Dinkard* tells the story of a wicked ruler who repeatedly and vainly attempts to kill the young Zoroaster, a prophet who foretold the coming of the ancient Persian savior.

Luke tells the story about an old man named Simeon who was moved by the Holy Spirit to go to Mary and Joseph to witness the Christ Child (2:25-35). Secure in knowing that the Messiah had come, Simeon was able to die in peace. At least 400 years before Simeon, an old Hindu sadhu by the name of Asita heard about the birth of the royal prince Siddhartha Gautama. He was allowed to examine the child and discovered that he had all the bodily signs of that he would become the Enlightened One, the Buddha. Asita lamented the fact that at 90 years old he would die before the Buddha starting teaching.

A communion or sacred meal also comes from pre-Christian sources. The 3,500-year-old *Rig-Veda* is the oldest source: "By Holy Law long lasting food they bring us" (IV. 23.9). The soma sacrifice of the Hindus gave the participants intimations of

immortality. Zoroastrians mixed the soma juice with bread and water for their communion.

The cultic meal of the Roman god Mithra was so much like Christian Communion that Christian fathers Tertullian and Justin Martyr believed that Satan must have given the Communion to the Mithraists so as to mislead Christians. Before his ascent into Heaven, Mithra had a sacred meal of bread and wine with his twelve disciples. One Mithraic text parallels the famous passage in John. 6:53-58: “He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation.” Sacred meals of bread and wine were also eaten in the rites of Dionysos, Orpheus, Cybele, and Attis. Margaret A. Murray has shown that the idea of a religious leader eating a sacred meal with twelve disciples is a central feature of many pagan cults.

Cal Thomas insists that only the blood of Christ can mediate between humans and God, but Attis, Adonis, and other pre-Christian dying and rising gods also claimed to save by the shedding of their blood. Many Christians of course deny this doctrine, which lowers their religion to the most primitive level. Furthermore, as a Jewish source states that blood “from a wound inflicted after death does not qualify as the shedding of blood required of an atonement offering” (www.jewsforjudaism.org).

When the Jews were carried off to Babylon in 597 B.C., the religion of ancient Persia was Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster believed in one God expressed as a double Trinity, angels, heaven and fiery hell, Satan as the enemy of God, a final judgment, the resurrection of the body, and a thousand year reign of the righteous. None of these doctrines appear in Hebrew writings before the Babylonian exile. For more see www.NickGier.com/IranianImpactJudaism.pdf.

Except for these profound influences of Zoroaster and Roman religions, there is no proof that the major religions copied much from one another. The similarities are best explained by what I call that “Savior Archetype,” a socio-psychological tendency to attribute divine attributes and miraculous events to great prophets and sages. For more read the article at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/archetype.htm.

The conclusion I draw for 50 years of research is that, instead of casting ignorant and unkind aspersions, we should respect the sincerity, the devotion, and rich literary imagination of those who developed the great world religions.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read more of his columns on religion at www.class.uidaho.edu/religion.htm.