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A Lost Tanakh in Zuccotti Park

Posted by Mollie

Now that we've hit two months of Occupy Wall Street protests, let's look at a few recent stories with religion angles. I made it down to Occupy DC a week or two ago, finally. I chose perhaps the worst time imaginable — after 10 PM on a weeknight. I had hoped to chat with some of the campers but there weren't too many around and the ones I did see were wisely doing more appropriate things for the hour — imbibing and flirting and the like. I will have to try and go down again during the day. I did get pictures of a bunch of signs and met a nice man who was painting. Some of the signs were charming (e.g. "We could always use more help with dishes!") while others reminded me of the less-than-stellar smell in the park (e.g. "Please! Do Not Spit In The Water Fountain!"). The political signs ranged from support for my fellow libertarian Ron Paul to calls for exemption from repayment of student loans. In other words, things were all over the map and even contradictory.

I have two friends participating in Occupy Wall Street and even with regular conversations with them, I'm not entirely sure how to characterize the movement. They both emphasize the eclectic nature of the gatherings and laugh at my attempts to codify them. And besides, they're both hard-core atheists so they're not interested in the religion angles I am.

But Reuters religion editor Tom Heneghan is interested, and he wrote an article about religious involvement in the movement. It's very informative and interesting but I didn't think it got off to a great start:

Religions condemn greed. The "Occupy Wall Street" protests around the world condemn greed. So theoretically, religious leaders should find common ground with the rallies denouncing the inequalities of capitalism.

I mean, I don't know. It just seems so confident for something on which one could quibble regarding multiple parts. When we're talking about Occupy Wall Street and greed, are we talking about condemnations of the wealth of the so-called 1%? Or are we talking about wanting other people to pay for the student loans that you willingly signed

up for? Which one of those is greedy? And while “religions” may or may not condemn greed, what does that have to do with the “inequalities of capitalism”? I mean, one can condemn greed and condemn the envy of those who have more wealth. One can even be critical of aspects of capitalism while recognizing how effective it is in battling poverty (or as my on-a-fixed-income neighbor likes to say, “Compared to the rest of the world, we’re all the 1%!”). The whole lede is a bit shallow for the complex topics of religion, economics, philosophy and politics it’s trying to address.

Anyway, once into the story, we get a nice survey of religious involvement. Sounds like basically it’s progressive Christians who share the politics of the larger movement. Also a few other groups. We’ve seen some coverage of those things earlier here at GetReligion. Apart from the first days of protests, where media coverage was insufficient, we now have an ample supply of media coverage, with lots of storytelling and a good inclusion of religious elements. And all this despite some police action that has kept reporters away from the events.

Reuters is always good for a more international perspective and I thought this was interesting from London:

The diffuse nature of the protests, which have no central leadership or agreed list of demands, make them a difficult partner for established religion even if they seem to share some basic values.

The Church of England found that out the hard way when Occupy protesters camped in front of St Paul’s Cathedral when they could not pitch tents closer to the London Stock Exchange.

The cathedral, closely linked to the financial community, shut its doors and considered clearing out the protesters.

The debate led two leading clerics to quit and prompted several Anglican bishops and other Christian denominations to criticize the cathedral for not showing more support.

“Church denominations very rarely criticize another church at all, let alone publicly,” said Jonathan Bartley, co-director of the theological think tank Ekklesia in London.

I don’t know what it means for the cathedral to be “closely linked” to the financial community, but the article goes on to explain some of the more substantive response to the Occupy London efforts. (On that note, this brief Chris Caldwell article on why the Occupy London protesters chose to camp in front of the church is quite interesting.

The article even notes some of the pushback a Vatican document on global markets received. In general, Christian support for markets (or against some uses of religion in economic or political disputes) is underplayed in stories. For reporters interested in that perspective, rather than the typical templates, this from Cato Institute’s Doug Bandow is not a bad start.

Anyway, I'd also wanted to mention something that more than a few readers submitted. From the *Washington Post*, the piece was headlined:

Occupy Wall Street: 'Torah' missing after Zuccotti Park eviction

Here's the basic story:

Occupy The Highway protester Michael Glazer says he has seen it all at Zuccotti Park. But he wasn't around for the latest standoff between police and protesters. Now, he's worried about what he says is his missing "Torah."

Before Glazer set out to march from New York City to Washington, D.C., he was based out of the privately owned park. Among the possessions that the unemployed actor brought with him from Chicago to New York was his Tanakh, a Jewish holy book that contains texts like the Torah.

To ensure a light load for the march ahead, Glazer, who's Jewish, decided to leave the religious text at Occupy Wall Street. He stashed it in a backpack at the Comfort Tent and left it in the care of those he trusted.

As various readers commented, well, I'll just quote one reader: *The occupier did not lose his Torah, but his Tanach. I assume that if they had consulted their religion editor, the editor would have fixed the headline.*