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Humanists slice and dice the world's sacred texts

by Kimberly Winston by Religion News Service

Thomas Jefferson is back in Washington -- in the form of a new edition of the "Jefferson Bible" distributed to politicians by a national humanist organization.

The American Humanist Association has delivered electronic and paperback copies of Jefferson's highly edited version of the Gospels to all incoming members of Congress and to President Barack Obama.

The so-called "Jefferson Bible" was handcrafted by the second president with a razor blade and a paste pot. He cut what he considered supernatural events -- the virgin birth, miracles and healings -- from the story of Jesus' life and pasted together what remained. In letters to John Adams, Jefferson described this as tearing down the "artificial scaffolding" from Jesus' teachings.

A new version published by Humanist Press takes Jefferson's idea further. In addition to Jefferson's text, "A Jefferson Bible For the 21st Century" includes what its editors consider the best and the worst of the sacred texts of other world religions -- the Hebrew Tanakh, the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist Sutras, and the Book of Mormon.

A final chapter includes the "Humanist Manifesto," a declaration of principles, including the statement, "knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation and rational analysis."

Editors say the decision to include other sacred texts makes sense in an America more religiously diverse than Jefferson's, and that the book is intended as a sort of compass for what many consider to be the most intransigent Congress in history.

"We would like members of Congress and everyone else to read this," said Luis Granados, director of Humanist Press.

"It's not that we think it will make them vote for or against any particular bill, but there is timeless wisdom in this that they should be thinking about to help shape their worldview as they go about the process of making laws."

The book was funded with a grant from the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, a humanist organization, which also contributes to Religion News Service. Three members of the Secular Student Alliance, an organization of nonreligious college and high school students, contributed verses as candidates for "best" and "worst." Granados and former AHA president Roy Speckhardt decided which verses to include.

In the chapter on the Tanakh, the "best" includes "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child," (Exodus 22:22). The "worst" includes, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." (Exodus 22:18).

Also in the "worst" category across religious traditions: verses that promote violence, condone prejudice and condemn homosexuality.

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"I can read the texts as well as anyone with an armload of degrees," Granados said. "A passage that talks about slavery as a good thing, I put that in the worst. If someone wants to disagree, then fine."

The end of each chapter has a website where readers can share their opinions about the scriptures and make suggestions of their own.

Sparking dialogue is a humanist principle, Granados said. "Unlike many religions, we do not claim to have the ultimate answers to anything. Our whole point is that people need to use their own brains and think for themselves. ... If you have a disagreement, by all means, post it and let the whole world see it."

So far, a few comments have rolled in, Granados said, and not all have been favorable -- something he expected as "part of the dialogue."

Sam Rohrer, president of the evangelical Pennsylvania Pastors Network, has called the book, "just another way that a small minority of atheists is attempting to rewrite American history, deny the existence of God and build a society based solely on the humanist religion."

This is not the first time the Jefferson Bible has been distributed to Congress. In 1901, the U.S. government spent \$500,000 in today's money to publish 9,000 copies and distribute them to Congress. Every incoming congressman received one through the 1950s.

Craig Fehrman, a Yale University graduate student who is writing a book about presidents and their libraries, said he has not seen the AHA's edition of the Jefferson Bible. But he is not sure the third president would have approved of the inclusion of "best" and "worst" scriptures. Jefferson, he said, crafted the book for his own personal use -- members of his family were unaware of its existence upon his death in 1826.

"I would have to think -- and I'm echoing my understanding of this version -- that Jefferson would be happy to see his Bible read as a way to understand his own private take on religion," he said. "But would he want people to use it to bolster their own causes? Probably not."

Granados hopes AHA will make the book available -- in versions updated to include people's suggestions

for "best" and "worst" -- to new members of Congress for years to come.

"I think the process Jefferson went through, of realizing there is a lot of wisdom in the Bible and things that are not so wise, is an important process for everybody," he said.

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