

How **sour** the name of **Jesus** sounds in some nonChristian ears!

Yes, this title is a take-off of a hymn (by the same hand as "Amazing Grace") still in many hymnbooks:

"How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear! / It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast; / 'Tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary, rest.

Jesus! My Savior, Shepherd, Friend, my Prophet, Priest, and King, / My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought; / But when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought."

1 Both hymns express the evangelical **ecstasy** of that old ex-slaver John Newton (d.1807), the "wretch" (as he calls himself in "Amazing Grace") for whom (in this hymn, & in life) Jesus meant primarily what it means in Hebrew (Mt.1.21), "Savior." For 77 years I have shared that ecstasy, so it's work for me to feel my way into the truth of this Thinksheet's title.

2 OCCASION: The enveloping Jesus prayers at Geo.W.Bush's inaugural, & the aftermath. The prayers were Christian, using Jesus' name in the close: no prayer without Jesus' name is a fully Christian prayer. The white/black bookend preachers should not have said "we" pray in Jesus' name, for that is like throwing holy water on the naked savages & announcing their conversion: they should (in my opinion) had said "I...." The white invocation did not go as far as the black benediction, which invited everybody (!) to say "Amen!" to a Christian prayer--shocking & (in my opinion) inappropriate though obviously heartfelt. (I mention white/black here not because I'm a racist but because the distinction on that occasion was politically & culturally significant.)

3 A box cartoon shows that while a Gore-Lieberman administration would have flown a "God" banner, the Bush/Cheney is flying a "Jesus" banner. "Get used to it" (to use a Republican taunt at the losing side in the U.S.Supreme Court settlement of the presidential election).

4 But I felt some sympathy with the Christian who in a CAPE COD TIMES letter said the inaugural prayers should have been "generic," meaning Jesus-less. I didn't phone her, but I think she might have accepted my compromise, the one I've use for decades in public situations, viz. "I pray...." (I've never had any objection to my practice, even when opening every class session in a public university. And I do have a strong objection to Christians' censoring Jesus out of their public prayers: no excuse, in my opinion, for "generic" praying. How about the Lord's Prayer? Christians should [again, in my opinion] pray it daily, & it's not Christian: Jesus did not pray in his own name, nor did he teach his disciples so to pray until after his resurrection.)

5 A STORY before further comment on the inaugural prayers: Three days ago a UCC pastor, on the phone, read me (for critiquing) the prayer he intends to use soon in opening a session of his state legislature. Especially he wanted my response to his compromise, which was to conclude *cryptically* in Jesus' name: his benediction had three metaphors which Christians would recognize as from Jesus, & (presumably) nonChristian ears (not hearing the sounds "J-e-s-u-s") would not be offended by. "Good try," I thought; but "I pray...." (because it sounds Jesus' name) would be better. Which he does is not important for my concern, in this case, which is....

....that that legislature's only Jew addressed the Christian ministerium with the intention of quashing "Jesus" in all prayers opening legislature sessions. "How sour the name of Jesus sounds," indeed. This is good for Judaism? For Jewish/Christian relations? For America? That Jews seemed to have succeeded in suppressing Jesus' name in legislature opening-prayers, but at what price?

6 Christian clergy's self-censorship, tabuing "Jesus" for fear a Jew (or other

nonChristian) might be present, has long irritated & saddened me. Now this cop-out has become a virtue, being re-interpreted as a gracious compliance with the world's (especially some Jews') request that "Jesus" be sounded only in private, i.e. in specifically Christian gatherings.

7 The media, with a few exceptions, have not screeched at Bush &/or those two preachers (including Wm. Graham "in his father's place"). The most glaring exception I've encountered is Harv. law-prof. Alan Dershowitz's 1.30.01 column titled "A savior [Jesus] not shared by all." It wouldn't trouble me quite so much if he weren't a Jew. In spades he fits the stereotype of the aggressive Jew; & for him to be aggressive about quashing Jesus' name in the public square feeds antiJudaism, which is not far beneath the surface in most countries West & East. Let's look at some things in his piece:

(1) Graham, D. says, called Jesus "our savior" & involved "the Father, the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ," and "the Holy Spirit" & by this "particularistic and parochial language" "**excluded**" (my boldface) nonChristians, "a tolerated minority rather than...fully equal citizens." "Bush's America is a Christian nation." D.'s logic is to exclude Jesus so as not to exclude "minorities" (i.e., nonChristians) but only the majority, who name Jesus' name. If the regnant principle is to be the tyranny of minorities, why offend atheists, who want no prayer at all? It's utopian nonsense to think that an inauguration could be designed that would offend nobody's deepest feelings.

(2) "The first act by the new administration was in defiance of our Constitution." Wrong: the two prayers were acts of two preachers, not of the administration. Or does D. think Bush told them how to pray? Or that he should have told them how *not* to pray? And wrong: If Bush had wanted to "defy" the Constitution (i.e., the First Amendment), he would have chosen preachers of his own church, the UM (United Methodist): neither of the prayers were Methodist. But even if he had privileged (not established!) one church over another, the First Amendment wouldn't have been involved: it's addressed not to the whole Federal government but only to Congress (specifically, as a dual limitation on congressional power: no establishment of any church, & no interference with any church). Lawyer D. is capable of a close reading of law, but at times in- & de-flates texts "as it seemeth good unto him" (to use an old KJV phrase).

(3) D. speaks of "our glorious diversity" in religion. What happens to that if public pray-ers yield to pressures to wash out the particularities of their religions & craft generic (= least-common-denominator) prayers? Would not diversity be better served if the populace were trained to translate into their own religious language whatever public prayer they hear (as my U. of Hawaii students learned to do while hearing, before each class session, my Jesus prayers ["I pray in the name of Jesus...."])?

(4) D. says Graham's prayer was "for the Trinity," though the previous day G. told the media his prayer "will be for unity." D. quibbles. Surely he knows G. meant political unity, Republicans & Democrats working together.

(5) Nothing in either prayer suggested that other religious orientations were false; yet D. makes a false comparison, viz. a rabbi who would publicly pray "for the arrival of the 'true Messiah'." Yes, that would, as D. says, insult Christians: the insult would be in the word "true." But since neither that word nor any synonym was used in either the opening or the closing prayer at the inaugural, the prayers D. is attacking did not insult Jews. Offended, yes (as I say, offenselessness is a utopian illusion); insulted, no.

(6) What's behind D.'s piece is his belief that religion should be strictly a private (non-public) matter (the point of view which Rich.Jn.Neuhaus excoriates in his classic THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE). He represents the humanist view that the public sphere, including the public schools, should be a religion-free zone. After a few libertine decades, America is now becoming more religious. So Bush's just-created White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives makes more sense to the general public than it previously would have. And the complaints of secularists/humanists such as D. are making less sense.