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**Differing visions invoked on Religious Freedom Day
By Robert Marus
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WASHINGTON (ABP) – President Bush marked national Religious Freedom Day by proclaiming his vision of religious liberty from the White House. Meanwhile, from the steps of the nearby Jefferson Memorial, church-state separationists accused Bush and his ideological allies of endangering that very liberty.

Religious Freedom Day commemorates the adoption of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom on Jan. 16, 1786. The statute, authored by Thomas Jefferson, later became the model for the religious-freedom clauses of the First Amendment.

“Our Founding Fathers recognized that religious freedom is a right we must protect with great vigilance,” Bush said in a Jan. 16 statement. “We must continue our efforts to uphold justice and tolerance and to oppose prejudice; and we must be resolved to countering any means that infringe on religious freedom.”

But several groups that advocate separation of church and state chided Bush – as well as congressional and judicial leaders – for some of their recent actions. Participating in a joint Jan. 16 press conference at the Jefferson Memorial were leaders of the Interfaith Alliance, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, American Jewish Committee, National Council of Churches, and Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

Interfaith Alliance president Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister, said that Bush and other government leaders are forgetting Jefferson’s devotion to religious freedom. “Thomas Jefferson’s vision of the necessity of religious liberty is as important today as it was in 1786,” Gaddy asserted. “But our national memory is short and this precious principle is in trouble.”

Gaddy and some other religious leaders say that Jefferson’s idea of church-state separation – which is not explicitly spelled out in the First Amendment – is nonetheless necessary to preserve the First Amendment’s stated goals. The Supreme Court has tended to agree, although recent decisions have placed that interpretation somewhat in doubt.

In a Jan. 12 speech commemorating the historic Virginia statute, conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia attacked the court’s interpretation of church-state separation, claiming that the Constitution’s original meaning in creating religious freedom did not create government neutrality toward religion, but rather government equality among all religious faiths.

For example, Scalia said, government endorsements of “generic” religious sentiment such as the motto “In God We Trust” should be perfectly allowable under the Constitution. He also asserted that if modern courts wanted to ban government endorsement of such generalized religious faith, they should first wait for voters to authorize such an interpretation explicitly.

Gaddy called that stance outrageous. “Will we now politicize the value that just one year ago, in this very place, President Bush rightfully called ‘a cornerstone of our republic, a core principle of our Constitution, a fundamental human right?’” Gaddy asked. “Is Justice Scalia suggesting that we put religion on the ballot of our national elections and determine by a majority vote what religious language should prevail, which name for God should be used in public – if, indeed, any divine name at all?”

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, criticized Bush’s recent executive order that enacted certain portions of his “faith-based initiative,” which stalled in Congress last year. The initiative expands the ability of governments to give money to churches, mosques and other religious organizations to perform social services.

“By taking such an aggressive approach, the administration seems to be telling religious organizations to take the money now and worry about the consequences later,” Walker said. “This far-reaching action shows a lack of concern for constitutional safeguards that have served us well.”

Besides asserting that government funding always increases the risk of intrusive government regulation, Walker also said governments should not fund faith-intensive programs because of something that the Virginia religious-freedom law itself asserted: "That to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical."

In his statement, however, Bush said the faith-based initiative would actually expand religious freedom because it ends "discrimination" against heavily religious groups in distribution of government funding. "In America today, people of faith continue to wage a determined campaign to meet needs and fight suffering," Bush said. "My administration has been working to ensure that faith-inspired organizations do not face discrimination [in receipt of government funds] simply because of their religious orientation."

Other speakers at the press conference criticized a recently proposed constitutional amendment, sponsored by Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.), that would permit government-organized prayers in public schools, as well as a bill offered by Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) that would allow churches to engage in partisan politics without losing their tax-exempt status. Jones' Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act failed by a wide margin in the House last year, but he has introduced it again.

In addition to the criticisms of proposed legislation, one speaker offered an endorsement of a bill that he said would expand religious liberty. Rich Foltin, legislative director for the American Jewish Committee, urged passage of the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, co-sponsored by Sens. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Rick Santorum (R-Penn.).

"The Workplace Religious Freedom Act promotes a fundamental principle – that no employee should arbitrarily be forced to choose between obedience to his or her faith and keeping a job," Foltin said. The bill would make it easier for employees to express religious beliefs or ideas on the job in ways that do not burden their employers heavily.

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Scholar says genetics disprove founding claims of Mormonism

By Mark Wingfield

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(ABP) – Modern advances in DNA research discredit the Book of Mormon and show that Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith, engaged in deception, according to a cultural anthropologist who is a lifelong Mormon.

The recently published research of Thomas Murphy, chairman of the anthropology department at Edmonds Community College in Lynnwood, Wash., drew sharp rebuke from officials with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called Mormons. Murphy was threatened with excommunication from the church, a matter left pending after a Dec. 8 hearing was postponed.

Murphy, 35, traces his personal lineage through the first Mormon pioneers who settled in the West. But contrary to Mormon doctrine, he contends it is highly unlikely that Mormons can trace the lineage of American Indians through a Jewish remnant the Book of Mormon calls Lamanites.

According to the Book of Mormon, a "lost tribe of Israel" migrated to the Americas in 600 B.C. The introduction to the Book of Mormon describes these Lamanites as "the principal ancestors of the American Indians."

The Lamanites allegedly lapsed into apostasy, but Joseph Smith claimed to have been shown golden tablets bearing their story by an angel named Moroni. Smith said he translated these tablets in 1823 from an unknown language called Reformed Egyptian, thus creating the Book of Mormon.

Mormons contend they are the true remnant of the Christian church, the one true church. Many Christian scholars historically have insisted Mormonism is a cult or sect, not a legitimate branch of Christianity. Although no historical support for Joseph Smith's claims has been found, Mormons have accepted the church's teachings on faith, including subsequent revelations said to have been given to the church's prophet or president.

Because Latter-day Saints (LDS) and the Book of Mormon have faced stiff criticism from traditional Christian churches, leaders of the Mormon church initially expressed hope that genetic research might validate their beliefs.

"The hope is that DNA research would link Native Americans to ancient Israelites, buttressing LDS beliefs in a way that has not been forthcoming from archaeological, linguistic, historical or morphological research," Murphy wrote in his academic paper, titled "Lamanite Genesis, Geology and Genetics."

The paper was published last fall in "American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon." Murphy also is a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington, where his dissertation work focuses on Mormon representations of Native Americans.

Any hopes the LDS church had of gaining credence through science have been dashed, Murphy wrote in the essay. "So far, DNA research lends no support to traditional Mormon beliefs about the origins of Native Americans. ... Latter-day Saints should not expect to find validation for the Book of Mormon in genetics."

Instead, Murphy reported, genetic research conclusively demonstrates the ancestors of Native Americans arrived in North America through migrations from Asia 7,000 to 50,000 years ago. "No support for Mormon beliefs linking American Indians to ancient Israelites is evident in the data."

Murphy also quotes Native American researcher Michael Crawford, a biological anthropologist from the University of Kansas, who wrote: "I don't think there is one iota of evidence that suggests a lost tribe from Israel made it all the way to the New World. It is a great story, slain by an ugly fact."

In his essay, Murphy also casts doubt on Joseph Smith's claim to have translated the Book of Mormon from golden tablets preserved by the angel Moroni.

"The Book of Mormon emerged from Joseph Smith's own struggles with his God," Murphy wrote. "Mormons need to look inward for spiritual validation and cease efforts to remake Native Americans in their own image."

LDS officials and organizations committed to defending church doctrine have launched a national counter-assault to Murphy's public campaign against his own faith.

"Mr. Murphy is working closely with those who want to damage or destroy the Church of Jesus Christ," contends Allen Wyatt of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, an LDS advocacy group known by its acronym, FAIR.

He cites as evidence the fact that Murphy's paper and a related video interview are distributed on the website of Mormon Challenge, an organization skeptical of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

Murphy explains on the website's video: "We need to acknowledge a 19th century origin of the Book of Mormon. That is, we can, I think, admit that Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon in the 19th century... We have to confront not just the possibility but the almost inevitability that Joseph Smith was attempting to deceive people – at least at certain periods of time. When he pretended to have actual plates, for example, it is pretty clear he was being deceptive at that time."

Such statements are not intended to build up the LDS church but rather to tear it down, Wyatt contends. "He is not an innocent scholar being sacrificed at the hands of the oppressive Mormon church for his intellectual integrity," Wyatt added. "That is a media persona carefully fostered by his supporters and activist friends."

FAIR cites the work of one of the most frequently quoted LDS scholars involved in genetics, Scott Woodward, professor of microbiology at Brigham Young University in Utah. In video presentations and at least one radio interview, Woodward does not dispute the basic research done by Murphy. He concurs, for example, that current genetic research indicates that today's Native American people descended from Asia, not from European or Jewish stock.

The difficulty, Woodward contends, is taking that research to a distant conclusion. The fact that no Hebrew DNA has been found in Native Americans does not logically preclude the Book of Mormon from being a true account, Woodward insisted in a December radio interview. Likewise, finding evidence of Hebrew DNA in Native Americans would not prove the Book of Mormon's truthfulness, he added.

The truthfulness of the Mormon Scripture is not something that can be proved by scientific evidence, Woodward said. "I am a believer. I think that the Book of Mormon is what it purports to be."

Further, Woodward added, it should not be surprising if Native Americans today show no genetic remnant of Lehi. The Book of Mormon teaches that Lehi was a Hebrew prophet who led his people to the promised land of North America in 600 B.C. The DNA of Lehi and his followers would have been obscured over time by the more dominant genetic force of the Native Americans with whom they intermixed, he suggested.

This argument doesn't wash with Murphy, however. "They're going way far away from what the Book of Mormon says, including the introduction that says Lamanites are the 'principal ancestors of the American Indians.'" LDS apologists cannot escape the genetic evidence by claiming the genetic record of the Lamanites became obscured by intermarriage with an existing population, Murphy said, because that line of reasoning contradicts the Book of Mormon.

LDS officials and supporters have criticized Murphy for identifying himself as a Mormon while not attending LDS church services for a decade. In an interview Jan. 14, Murphy acknowledged he's not an active member of the church. "I'm a cultural Mormon," he explained. "I prefer to be called a latter-day skeptic."

However, he continues to identify with the LDS tradition, he said, because he believes his people must "deal forthrightly with the problems the genetic evidence presents. We need to find ways to get beyond the racism."