

The Tale of Theresa Banyan

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From time to time, in among the daily round of emails, those promising a better career, greater wealth, greater sexual prowess, and messages from the second son of the former leader of the republic of Congo who has a spare 200 million US dollars, will come an email like the one I'd like to discuss tonight. These are the emails one is more likely actually to read since they are usually forwarded by someone you know. Even if prefixed with a “Fwd”, we trust our acquaintance's judgement that this is a message that is going to be worth reading. “The Thermodynamics of Hell” is a story that many of you will have received by email [See handout]. The most familiar version will read something like this:

Dr. Schambaugh, of the University of Oklahoma School of Chemical Engineering, Final Exam question for May of 1997. Dr. Schambaugh is known for asking questions such as, “why do airplanes fly?” on his final exams. His one and only final exam question in May 1997 for his Momentum, Heat and Mass Transfer II class was: “Is hell exothermic or endothermic? Support your answer with proof.”

Most of the students wrote proofs of their beliefs using Boyle's Law or some variant. One student, however, wrote the following:

“First, we postulate that if souls exist, then they must have some mass. If they do, then a mole of souls can also have a mass. So, at what rate are souls moving into hell and at what rate are souls leaving? I think we can safely assume that once a soul gets to hell, it will not leave.

Therefore, no souls are leaving. As for souls entering hell, let's look at the different religions that exist in the world today. Some of these religions state that if you are not a member of their religion, then you will go to hell. Since there are more than one of these religions and people do not belong to more than one religion, we can project that all people and souls go to hell. With birth and death rates as they are, we can expect the number of souls in hell to increase exponentially.

Now, we look at the rate of change in volume in hell. Boyle's Law states that in order for the temperature and pressure in hell to stay the same, the ratio of the mass of souls and volume needs to stay constant. Two options exist:

If hell is expanding at a slower rate than the rate at which souls enter hell, then the temperature and pressure in hell will increase until all hell breaks loose.

If hell is expanding at a rate faster than the increase of souls in hell, then the temperature and pressure will drop until hell freezes over.

So which is it? If we accept the quote given to me by Theresa Manyan during Freshman year, "that it will be a cold night in hell before I sleep with you" and take into account the fact that I still have NOT succeeded in having sexual relations with her, then Option 2 cannot be true...Thus, hell is exothermic."

The student, Tim Graham, got the only A.

Now if you did not already know or if you had not already guessed it, this is a classic example of an Urban Legend. There are hundreds of examples of the story circulating on the internet, all recognisably versions of this same story. Like many

urban legends, this one often begins with an unabashed statement of the truth of the matter. It is often headed with “A true story”. Or sometimes, “This was an actual question . . .” And like all urban legends, there is some substantial variation in the details. Where did this examination take place? Was it the University of Washington, Texas A&M, McGill University or the University of Oklahoma? What was the subject? Chemistry, Physics, Engineering, Physical Chemistry, Thermodynamics, statistical thermodynamics? Some versions speak of this as a bonus question, others of the “only question” on the examination. Sometimes this is a “take-home examination”; often it is a “mid-term”.

There is extraordinary variation also over the name of the woman with whom the student desired to have sexual relations, variously Theresa, T(h)eresa Banyan, Therese Banyan, Theresa Manyan, Debby Banyan, Theresa LeClair, Susie LeClair, Ms Celine LeBlanc, Sheryl Atkinson, Jennifer Smith, Rebecca Smith, Krissy Jones, Betsy Neuhoff, Señorita Mamita Rodriguez, rarely “a young lady”, and once “my sweetheart Alex Carrigan” where the writer changes the name “to protect the innocent”.¹

In addition to the variations in detail, there is one major difference in substance. Broadly, the textual critic would have little difficulty dividing this urban legend into two essential text types, one that includes the vignette about the female student at the end and one that does not. [See Synopsis] On the whole, type 1 is fuller, richer in detail and features the vignette about the female student. Type 2 is shorter, less detailed and does not include the vignette about the female student.

¹ http://icg.harvard.edu/~es181/handouts/is_hell_exothermic_or_endothermic.html

In Type 1, the student, sometimes named as “Tim Graham”, tends to receive the only A given; in type 2 his mark is unknown.

But what is the point of this? Why am I telling you about Theresa Banyan or Theresa Manyan or Theresa LeClair or Sheryl Atkinson or Jennifer Smith etc., any of them, all of them or none of them? Our brief today is to discuss religion and the internet and I suspect that for most, this is typical of their overwhelming experience of the internet. As academics, it is all too easy to think of the internet in terms of publicising our degree programmes, accessing academic articles, using Biblical resource search sites, to see this activity as in some way typical of the standard internet user’s experience. But for most, the internet is not a place where the serious work takes place; it’s a place of recreation. One of the reasons that the internet has such an appalling reputation in so many quarters is the extent to which it is exploited by pornographers. And the reason many have broadband is not in order to use the latest Greek language software but in order to watch movie trailers (and now these are “movie trailers” and not film previews). Outside our computer clusters in this building students have to be told that these are “not for recreational use” as if, without this warning, students will revert to the most natural way of using the internet.

So I wanted to begin this lecture somewhere where the experience of the internet begins for most users, as a place of recreation, refreshment, diversion. (And in a department like ours, popular culture is itself something we study.) One of the remarkable things about the internet, though, is its ability consistently to surprise us, to teach us new tricks. Those of us present who have done any

teaching will no doubt have had that experience of dreading particular topics, of finding certain elements in the course less easy to teach than others. One of the topics I never look forward to is my annual lecture on form-criticism for the first year introductory course on Biblical Studies.

Form criticism, for those unfamiliar with it, involves the study of the oral traditions that lie behind the Biblical texts, oral traditions that are analysed by grouping them into types, parables, miracle stories, pronouncement stories, and so on. One of the difficulties with teaching this, I thought, was the absence of good contemporary analogies for the same phenomena at work. But the Urban Legend of the type illustrated here provides a fine analogy for the principles Biblical critics see at work in the development of individual units of the Biblical text. Thus, just as there are two fundamental types here, one with the concluding vignette about Theresa Banyan and one without, so too in the Gospels we find one version of the Wedding Banquet parable with the concluding story about the man who was not dressed properly (Matt. 22.1-14; this element, Matt. 22.11-14) and one without (Luke 14.16-24). Or just as the name of that student varies from version to version, so too the name of the fifth disciple called by Jesus varies from version to version: Mark has Levi son of Alphaeus (Mark 2.13-17), Luke has just Levi (Luke 5.27-32) and Matthew has Matthew (Matt. 9.9).²

And the variations we see are not just inter-gospel but are also intra-gospel. Matthew and Mark both give us two versions in their Gospels of what is clearly

² Moreover, the variation continues in the textual tradition of Mark, since several witnesses have James son of Alphaeus, presumably correlating this with Mark 3.18, which has James son of Alphaeus but no Levi.

the same story; when Jesus feeds a multitude in the desert it is first five loaves and two fishes for five thousand people (Matt. 14.13-21 // Mark 6.32-44); and it is subsequently seven loaves and a few fish for four thousand people (Matt. 15.32-38 // Mark 8.1-10). Just as the version with Theresa Banyan is coming into the ascendant, so too Five Thousand has become much more familiar because of the sole inclusion of that version in Luke and John (Luke 9.10-17; John 6.1-13).

There are many Hebrew Bible examples of the same thing – who killed Goliath? Was it David (1 Sam. 17.51-52) or Elhanan (2 Sam. 21.19; cf. 1 Chron. 20.5). How many of each kind of animal did Noah take into the ark? Did they go in two by two (Gen. 6.19-20) or seven by seven of the clean animals and two by two of the unclean (Gen. 7.2-3)? Likewise when Abraham (twice) and Isaac (once) try to pass off their wives as their sisters, these are clearly three different versions of the same basic story. Where we have little hesitation to ascribe the different versions of the exothermic / endothermic hell story to the pattern of the urban legend's transmission, so too we should have little hesitation to see these biblical examples as witnessing to a transmission of tradition and text that likewise embrace variety.

But where one of the difficulties with doing ancient history is the patchy nature of the evidence, one of the glories of working with recent materials on the internet is the relative ease with which the work can be done. Several elements in the urban legend can be traced and some accretions are relatively straightforward to spot. One of the most basic variations, for example, is in the concluding line. "The student received the only 'A' given". This is a trope common to urban legends

about examinations. No doubt you have heard several of these yourself. The examiner asks “Why?” The student responds who responded with “Why not?” “received the only ‘A’ given”. Or the examiner asks “What is courage?”, “What is a dare?” or “What is a risk”; the student writes “This is” and “received the only ‘A’ given”.³

But more interesting still is the opening of the account of the first type of the urban legend, which goes like this:

Dr. Schambaugh, of the University of Oklahoma School of Chemical Engineering, Final Exam question for May of 1997. Dr. Schambaugh is known for asking questions such as, “why do airplanes fly?” on his final exams. His one and only final exam question in May 1997 for his Momentum, Heat and Mass Transfer II class was: "Is hell exothermic or endothermic? Support your answer with proof.

There are details here that we can check. Is there a Dr Schambaugh at the University of Oklahoma School of Chemical Engineering, and are any of these details accurate? The versions that mention this name speak variously of Dr. Schlambaugh, Dr. Schalmbaugh and Dr Schambaugh; these people do not exist, but there is, I discovered, a Robert L. Shambaugh in Chemical Engineering and Materials Science at the University of Oklahoma. I sent him an email and yesterday I received this reply:

Dr. Goodacre,

³ For a useful web page on “Exam Scams”, see <http://www.snopes.com/college/exam/oneword.htm>

Yes, as you have guessed, I have received numerous inquiries concerning this particular urban legend. I do teach a course entitled "Heat, Mass, and Momentum Transfer II". This course is taught every fall. I also have asked unusual questions such as "why do airplanes fly". But I never had a Tim Graham as a student, and I never asked the question about whether hell is exothermic or endothermic.

I hope this all is of help to you.

Best regards,

Robert Shambaugh

If only we were able to send emails to the characters who appear in the Biblical stories mentioned above, to Levi son of Alphaeus, Elhanan, David or Noah. But at least we can observe how elements have been accreted to contemporary urban legends; and how reliable and verifiable detail is seamlessly annexed to the legendary body of the story. So at what stage in the story's development are these features added? One of the most remarkable things about internet lore is the speed at which it travels. The earliest version I can find of the endothermic, exothermic hell story dates back only as far as February 1997, and it's a version of Type 2 [in your Synopsis]. Within several months, by at least July 1997, the story was already circulating in Type 2 [in your Synopsis]. The momentum for the rapid spread of the urban legend is clear: while the story does now appear in multiple forms in static web sites,⁴ its primary means of travel is the invasive one of the forwarded email. Just to see how quickly internet lore travels this way, only consider how many virus hoaxes you have received and compare this with

⁴ The following example:
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/2260/religion/hellTemp.html>
illustrates everything that is awful about home-made web pages; see too the

how many genuine virus alerts you have received. I am always surprised by how quickly people apparently pass on virus hoax messages without checking them up on the Symantec web site, but the reason is clear: it's quicker and easier to press the forward button in your email software than it is to find that site you're supposed to go to and look it up, and so the hoaxer's message is propagated.

The difficulty with the spread of internet lore is that it is not always as humorously innocent as in our tale of Theresa Banyan or as harmlessly irritating as the forwarding of hoax virus warnings. One remarkable example of an urban legend that has been circulating for the last three years on the internet, the effects of which are more troubling, is the story that the Harry Potter books are an "encyclopaedia of Satan". According to this story, satanic temples are getting filled with children who are subtly introduced to Satanism by reading J. K. Rowling.

And here is dear Ashley, a 9 year old, the typical average age reader of Harry Potter: "I used to believe in what they taught us at Sunday School," said Ashley, conjuring up an ancient spell to summon Cerebus, the three-headed hound of hell. "But the Harry Potter books showed me that magic is real, something I can learn and use right now, and that the Bible is nothing but boring lies."

The story in fact originated in a satirical, entirely fictional piece in *The Onion*. Remarkably, someone – and it is impossible to know who and at what stage this happened – began the process of sending around this article as if it were a genuine

comment that "neither I nor the authors wish to trivialize religion".

news report. It is interesting that so many were apparently convinced by the piece and variations on it; note, for example, the following excerpt:

DOES THIS GET YOUR ATTENTION!!

If not, how about a quote from a High Priest of Satanism:

"Harry is an absolute godsend to our cause," said High Priest Egan of the First Church Of Satan in Salem, MA. "An organization like ours thrives on new blood - no pun intended - and we've had more applicants than we can handle lately. And, of course, practically all of them are virgins, which is gravy."

And it is something that is still around in spite of repeated attempts to rebuff it on the internet. No doubt headers like this encourage its rapid spread:

"Please forward this to every pastor, teacher and parent you know. This author has now published FOUR BOOKS in less than two years of this 'encyclopedia of Satanism' and is surely going to write more."

In the end, it is this interaction with the developing material, this active participation in the process that generates the momentum for such rapid transmission and development of materials. I could have chosen to talk today about religion on the world wide web. Perhaps I could have shown you some of the Biblical web sites I have developed myself. Or I could have taken you to the extraordinary *Vurch.com* with its catchy slogan, "Don't go to church, go to Vurch.com". But such web sites are essentially static; they are places to visit, many of them no more interactive than digital TV. Is it really so much more exciting to be scrolling up and down and clicking a mouse than to be flicking the pages of a book or jumping to one's favourite track on a CD player? The real

engine that is motoring the internet is still email, the place where the genuine interaction takes place, and a key global context in which religion is developing.

Now it has fallen to us in this series to talk about Religion in a Global Context and it seems that one additional task has been the invention and application of new words that help elucidate the topic; I don't want to disappoint you by failing to do the same today. The lecture I have given is unique among any that I have ever given in that I have used just one means of researching it: *Google*. In a surprisingly short time, *Google* has become not simply the dominant means of doing internet searches but the *only* realistic means of doing them. In what counts for ancient history in the development of the internet, searches used to be affected using *Yahoo!*, *Excite*, *Lycos*, *Alta Vista*, *Ask Jeeves*. But no-one now in their right mind would prefer one of those search engines to *Google*. *Yahoo!* even uses *Google* itself to conduct its searches, and so does *Netscape* and many of the others who used to run their own search services. The sign that something has finally become the only reasonable way of doing something is when it lends its name to the process: in a recent episode of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, the verb "to google" appears, and it is the first time I have heard this. The precise reference went something like this:

Willow: "Have you tried googling her?"

Xander (shocked): "Willow, she's only seventeen".

Googling is the new word for doing an internet search, and what we have now is the *googleisation* of our culture, in Religion, in the university as well as in recreation and all other areas of our lives. In many ways, *googleisation* is wonderful. If I want to find every variant on the internet of an urban legend in a

matter of 0.21 seconds, I can do so. Google will seek out for me people, places, names, faces, books, articles, reviews, references – anything I’d like to find in a matter of milliseconds. But the glory of Google is also its shame. In another, much earlier episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the crusty British watcher Giles bemoans the fact that students now prefer the internet to books, because books – unlike the internet – have character and soul – they each have their own smell. In a world where we think that anything and everything of any use can be found on the internet, and can be found in 0.21 seconds, there is something for those of us who also love books to be concerned about. One final comment: I wondered if anyone else had used the term *googleisation*. Naturally, I went to Google to find out. In 0.19 seconds, the reply comes back: “Did you mean globalization”?

Appendix: Some interesting variations

Self-conscious myth of origins: This version is self-conscious about the internet proliferation of the urban legend: “The following is an actual question given on University of Washington chemistry mid-term. The answer by one student was so “profound” that the professor shared it with colleagues via the Internet, which is of course, why we now have the pleasure of enjoying it as well.”
(<http://www.gcfl.net/archive/20010705.html>)

Coy version (from “The Good Clean Funnies List Archive”: “If we accept the postulate given to me by Ms. Teresa Banyan during my Freshman year that “...it will be a cold day in Hell before I give you my number” and take into account the fact that I still have not succeeded in acquiring her number”
(<http://www.gcfl.net/archive/20010705.html>).

Coarse version: <http://www.webspawner.com/users/endothemic> , “It will be a cold day in hell before I fu** with you...”

Fatigue version: “We can solve this with the 1990 postulation of Theresa LeClair, the girl who lived across the hall from me in first year residence. Since I have still not been successful in obtaining her, condition two above has not been met, and thus it can be concluded that condition one is true, and hell is

exothermic.” (<http://www.wilk4.com/humor/humore24.htm>) – cf. re. Jennifer Smith at <http://www.freeholes.com/joke/true.html>

Debunking: at <http://www.snopes.com/college/exam/hell.htm> and a plagiarising of the debunking at http://www.championsinarms.com/hall/topic.asp?ARCHIVE=&TOPIC_ID=4697