

Getting religion: New connotations

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

As the Associated Press story had it, a Greyhound passenger lost it when the bus driver and several others on the bus asked him to douse his cigarette. “No smoking” was the rule on the Miami-bound bus, just as it has come to be the rule in most confined and many open spaces everywhere.

The passenger, one Charles George of Phoenix, is now charged with 37 counts of aggravated assault. Though the bus was traveling at 70 m.p.h., he tried to bang its door open so he could exit and finish his smoke. When it wouldn’t open he grabbed the steering wheel, as deranged folk have begun to do lately. The driver wrestled both him and the wheel to get the bus back on the road, the bus rolled on its side and some folk were injured.

So far this is a “it-happens-every-day” story of our time. What struck my eye was the reassuring explanation given by Steve Volden, spokesman for the Arizona Department of Public Safety:

We believe there was some mental instability we were dealing with. He didn’t make any overt statements about wanting to hijack the bus or doing anything in the name of religion.

So the man was simply deranged, not dangerous like hijackers or those who do things in the name of religion. Poor religion. It used to be such a harmless word. Billboards used to ask us to get religion and go to “the church of [our] choice.” There seemed to be no threat in it, either of insanity or hijacking.

Religion used to be something one could kid about. Fifty years ago comedian Bob Hope told a joke about being aboard an airliner in trouble, one in danger of going down. “Do something religious!” passengers started shouting. “So I did,” Hope said. “I went up and down the aisle taking a collection.”

Religion became a part of new phrases, as H. L. Mencken recorded in *The American Language*. To get religion was an American coinage. But the word doesn’t have a long history. In my RSV concordance “religion” and “religious” show up only nine times, all in the New Testament. They appear in a few spirituals or hymns and here and there in the Book of Common Prayer. You could easily miss them.

“Religion” is usually called a “second-order” word, something that people do not describe themselves as having or getting until a polltaker asks them about their religious affiliation. In recent decades it has become a term for something that people don’t want or like. Instead, they want to be “spiritual,” which, for many, means being religious with the things that they don’t like about religion taken out.

When politicians went looking for a phrase to describe a new program, they did not say it would be “religion-based.” It would be “faith-based.” Which pretty much meant the same thing, but did not have the connotation of being worse than mental instability and on a par with “hijacking.”

The term “religion” needs rescuing by some public relations experts. Many people who are “doing [things] in the name of religion” are not killers but healers, consolers, reconcilers and sacrificers, though you’d never know it these days. To “get spiritual” sounds so much safer.