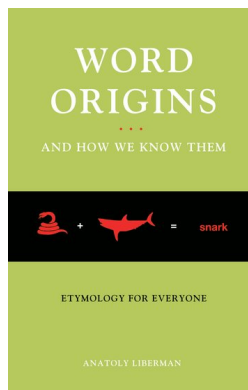




Nobody wants to be called a *bigot*



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Nobody wants to be called a bigot, but accusations of bigotry are hurled at political opponents with great regularity, because (obviously) everyone who disagrees with us is a bigot, and it is to the popularity of this ignominious word that I ascribe the frequency with which I am asked about its origin. Rather long ago I wrote (<https://blog.oup.com/2007/11/bigot/>) about *bigot* in the “gleanings,” but answers in the “gleanings” tend to be lost, while a separate essay will pop up in the Internet every time someone will ask: “Where did *bigot* come from?”

Wherever it came from, the word has changed its meaning since the old days. It used to mean “hypocrite; someone who professes his religious views with excessive zeal.” Today a bigot is a fanatic, a dyed in the wool adherent of some political doctrine (which, as pointed out, does not coincide with ours).

The questions asked in connection with *bigot* are four:

1. Does *bigot* have anything to do with the word *god*?
2. Is *bigot* (from an etymological point of view) the same word as Spanish *bigote* “moustache”?
3. Is Romance *big-* “goat” the root of *bigot*?
4. Did *bigot*, if it was coined as a term of abuse, target some religious group?

Before I answer those questions, I should warn our readers against the information one can occasionally find in the Internet and in printed sources. For example, in October 1997, the *Catholic Digest* published on pp. 117-120 an article titled “Asphalt, Bigot, and Comma.” It informed the subscribers that *asphalt* goes back to Leopold von Asphalt (1802-1880), that *bigot* derives from Nathaniel Bigot (1575-1660), an English Puritan preacher, and that *comma* traces back to Domenico da Comma (1264-1316), an Italian Dominican scholar whose signature punctuation mark led to a charge of heresy by the Inquisition (commas, apparently, were not found in the earliest manuscripts of the Bible and were therefore considered an insult to God). Many other gentlemen, including Mr. Botch, Mr. Doldrum, and Mr. Fiasco, enlivened the pages of that publication. I wrote a politely indignant letter to the editor but received no answer. Beware of amateur etymologists.



Dalí, a person who was certainly an ‘hombre de bigotes’ but not a bigot. Image Credit: “Salvador Dalí with ocelot and Cane, 1965”, Photo by Roger Higgins, World Telegram Staff Reporter, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

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According to an oft-repeated story, preserved in an old chronicle, Rollo of Normandy, on receiving the dukedom from Charles the Simple, refused to kiss the king's foot and said (in English!): "Nese bi god," that is, "No, by god." Allegedly, this is how *bigod*, later *bigot*, became an opprobrious moniker of the duke and then of the Normans. That Rollo should have offended the king and said something in English to him is beyond belief, but it is not improbable that some such taunting name of the Normans (who had the reputation for bad manners and swearing) existed. Yet the constant association in the past between the word *bigot* and religious hypocrisy (that is, obstinate devotion to a creed) does not augur well for the *bigod* theory. Also, the story has too strong a taste of a folk etymological guess invented in retrospect to explain an obscure word. To this day French *bigot* means "excessively pious; superstitious." A convincing etymology of *bigot* should probably be sought in a religious sphere, where it had a concrete addressee; the slur as we know it must have been secondary. For comparison, I may cite *bugger*, ultimately from Medieval Latin *Bulgarus* "heretic," because the Bulgarians belonged to the Greek Church. From Latin it made its way into French (where it already meant "sodomite"), from French into Middle Dutch, and finally, in the sixteenth century, into English.

One of the twentieth-century hypotheses on the origin of *bigot* connects it with Yiddish *begotisch* "pious, God-loving." Only in Yiddish do we find a positive sense of a *bigot*-word. But there its structure is transparent: "(being) by God," while whether *bigot* is *bi-got* or *big-ot*, or something else constitutes the main problem. Otto von Best, the author of the Yiddish hypothesis, attempted to connect *bigot* not only with God but also with moustache, for Spanish *hombre de bigotes*, literally "a man with a moustache," means "a steadfast man, a man of strong character." Von Best reconstructed a situation in which anti-Semites heaped abuse on the Jews clinging to their religion and refusing to shave off beards. By contrast, the Jews reviled the beard shaving apostates. Thus did in his opinion, *begotisch* lose the positive connotations (preserved in Yiddish) and acquire its present day meaning. The entire situation strikes me as rather improbable, and it remains unclear why and where the Romance languages borrowed the word *bigot* from Yiddish, but the point that in dealing with *bigot* we sometimes encounter positive or at least neutral senses is well taken, not so much on account of Yiddish as in light of Italian *sbigottire* "to dismay" (compare *sbigottirsi* "to be dismayed or amazed, dumbfounded"); *amazement* is not synonymous with *fanaticism*. (The Italian examples are from von Best's article.)

It is not my purpose to go over the rather numerous etymologies of *bigot*, for, if, as I think, the word originated as a religious slur, moustache and goats (though goats have beards) should probably be left out of the picture, which means that Spanish *bigote* has an etymology of its own. (Even if mustachioed foreigners were mocked somewhere in Europe, the taunt could not have produced the sense "an over-devout person.") By a coincidence (?), *bigot*, like *bugger*, also surfaced in English texts in the sixteenth century, though it was known in southern France four hundred years earlier; it was applied to some people living there. The ingenious derivation of *bigot* from *Visigothi*, that is, Visigoths, who were converted to Christianity in the fourth century and embraced Arianism (and were, consequently, looked upon as heretics), shatters at the difference between the initial consonants and the fact that a memory of the Goths and their beliefs would hardly have lingered for so many centuries.

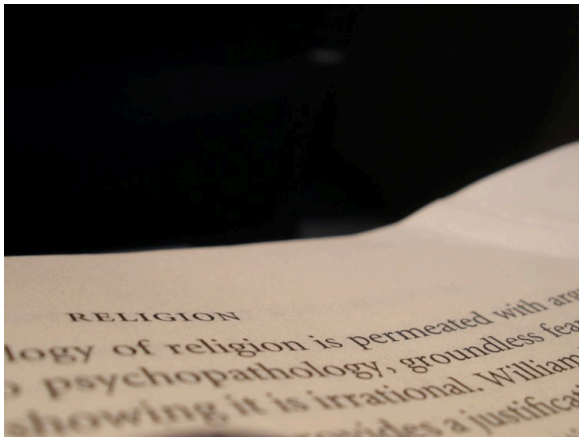


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Several religious orders had names sounding like *bigot*: *Beghardi* (from which we possibly have *beggar*), *Beguines* (like *Beghardi*, derived from the founder's name), and especially *Beguttæ*. All of them, as Wedgwood wrote, "professed a religious life, and wore a distinctive dress, without shutting themselves or binding themselves by permanent vows. We don't gather from the quotations that there was originally anything offensive in the names themselves... But the pretension to superior strictness of life easily falls under the suspicion of insincerity, and thus these names soon began to imply a charge of exaggeration and even hypocrisy." Note the accent on the deterioration of meaning in the course of time. Wedgwood traced *bigot* to

Begottæ in the OED, but *bigot* was known earlier than *Begutta*, whatever the origin of that word is.

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Of all the conjectures on the etymology of *bigot* I find the one by the French linguist Maurice Grammont (1866-1946) the best. He was so prominent as an instrumental phonetician and a general linguist, and his suggestions on early bilingual education made him so famous among specialists that his ideas outside those two areas have been overlooked. The curse of etymological work, to the extent that it goes beyond recycling the *OED* and Skeat, is that even the most dedicated researchers cannot keep track of hundreds of notes in fugitive journals, short reviews, and chance footnotes. They miss important ideas and tend to reinvent the same creaky wheel. Grammont commented on *bigot* in a review of Bloch's French etymological dictionary (I discovered it after my bibliography of English etymology was published, so that the reference is not there). As follows from the subsequent editions of Bloch's dictionary, it made no impression on its author or on anybody else. Grammont proposed that *bigot* is a shortening of *Albigot*. Albigensian heresy flourished at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century in southern France, that is, exactly where and when the word *bigot* seems to have turned up for the first time. We still have to understand the semantic history of the Italian words, cited above (were the Italian Catholics bewildered and frightened, rather than disgusted, by such views?), but it may be that we do have the answer to the riddle that has seemed insoluble for such a long time. If Romance etymologists read this blog, perhaps they will respond.

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Anatoly Liberman is the author of [Word Origins And How We Know Them](http://global.oup.com/academic/product/word-origins-and-how-we-know-them-9780195387070) (<http://global.oup.com/academic/product/word-origins-and-how-we-know-them-9780195387070>), as well as [An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology: An Introduction](http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/an-analytic-dictionary-of-english-etymology) (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/an-analytic-dictionary-of-english-etymology>). His column on word origins, [The Oxford Etymologist](https://blog.oup.com/category/oxford_etymologist) (https://blog.oup.com/category/oxford_etymologist), appears on the OUPblog each Wednesday. Send your etymology question to him care of blog@oup.com (<mailto:blog@oup.com>); he'll do his best to avoid responding with "origin unknown." Subscribe to Anatoly Liberman's weekly etymology articles via [email](https://blog.oup.com/subscribe-oupblog-via-email/) (<https://blog.oup.com/subscribe-oupblog-via-email/>) or [RSS](https://blog.oup.com/category/oxford_etymologist/feed/) (https://blog.oup.com/category/oxford_etymologist/feed/).

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Philip Grant 26TH OCTOBER 2011

Thank you for an informative article.

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Re. the etymology of 'bugger', I had always understood – from my time studying the Albigensians/Cathars as an undergraduate at Oxford – that not only does 'bugger' derive from 'Bulgarian', but also that it refers not to the Greek Orthodox Church, which was not heretical from the perspective of Rome, just schismatic, but rather to a group of heretic Bulgarians, the Bogomils, whose beliefs were similar to the later Cathars (or Albigensians). The Roman Church assimilated the two, assuming that the heresy had begun in Bulgaria.

Accusing alleged heretics of any kind of 'sodomy' was standard practice in the High Middle Ages – it was deemed to be part of their diabolical rituals conducted in secret, along with spitting on the cross and other such insults to the true religion. King Philip IV of France and his advisers levelled the same accusation of sodomy at the Knights Templar prior to their dissolution in the early fourteenth century, as well as against Pope Boniface VIII during the course of the king's quarrel with the papacy.

L Paoluzzi 27TH OCTOBER 2011

Interesting read.

I'm no expert, but I'm Italian, so out of curiosity I consulted an Italian dictionary (<http://garzantilinguistica.sapere.it/it/dizionario/> (<http://garzantilinguistica.sapere.it/it/dizionario/>)) which suggests a different origin for the verb "sbigottirsi":

"Forse dal provenz. esbair o dal fr. ant. esbahir 'sbalordire'"

(possibly from Provençal esbair or from ancient French esbahir meaning amaze)

This link seems also to basically confirm the above hypothesis <http://www.etimo.it/?term=sbigottire&find=Cerca> (<http://www.etimo.it/?term=sbigottire&find=Cerca>).

For the word "bigotto" though, the first dictionary suggest:

Dal fr. bigot, orig. epiteto spregiativo dato ai normanni per il loro intercalare bî God, nell'ant. alto ted. 'per Dio'

whilst the second mentions some of the interpretations you gave.

Hoyt 27TH OCTOBER 2011

Even in contemporary Spanish, one would be clearly understood by making a reference to 'los bigotes' — the equivalent of 'the graybeards' or 'the suits'. It clearly indicates a source of arbitrary or irrational authority. While a tad on the literary side, it really lends itself to talking about inquisition-style religious judges.

Ben Sadock 27TH OCTOBER 2011

The Yiddish explanation, which you are right to reject, is actually backwards: *bagotish* is a back-formation based on a folk etymology. The form *bigotish* exists as well and is the more standard one. And despite the folk misanalysis of *bagotish* as godly, the word is just as negative in Yiddish as in other languages.

Nylund 27TH OCTOBER 2011

"The ingenious derivation of bigot from Visigothi...shatters at the difference between the initial consonants"

I don't know anything about the etymology of the word, nor do I have an opinion one way or the other, but I do know that v and b are linguistically pretty close. The two sounds get mixed up all the time. For example, in some Spanish accents "vaca" is often pronounced like "baca." Similarly, compare the Italian word for horse, cavallo, to the Spanish word, caballo. Similarly, the non-English versions of the name (and month) April include Avril and Abril. Even within a single language, you see related words make v/b switches, eg. IR in Spanish (vas, va, van in the present and iba, iba, iban in the imperfect). Point being, v/b switches are very common.

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To be fair, you say “the initial consonants” (plural), so maybe it’s the S in Visigothi, not the V that you’re referring to. It’s not hard linguistically to get from Visigothi to Bisigot...but the dropping of the second syllable with the S is the harder part. Maybe that’s what you meant, but it’s surely not the v/b distinction.

That’s not to say I think you wrongfully dismissed that idea. It may very well be wrong for other reasons, but surely not simply because a v turned into a b.

nickzi 27TH OCTOBER 2011

“B” and “V” are quite commonly interchanged in Indo-European languages as they develop. One might note Basil/Vasili, the pronunciation in Modern Greek of words beginning with “beta” as “v-” (a trend which was underway in Hellenistic times) etc. So I am afraid that your main linguistic reason for rejecting the alleged bigot/Visigoth connection is rather questionable. The problem with the etymology is the lost sibilant and the historical implausibility of the connection.

Two points regarding “albigot”, which is, surely, the most likely derivation. The Albigensians/Cathars were notorious for strong, even extremist, views on religious/social topics, whether one took those views to be heretical or not. Secondly, it’s possible that over time al- came to be regarded (wrongly) as if it were the Arabic “al” (“the”) and was dropped, leaving “bigot” as a newly constituted word in its own right. (Here one might cite alkarawya – caraway, alkimia – alchemy – chemie (chemistry)). If one assumed that the word filtered through the Spanish Jewish community, many of whom would have been familiar with Arabic, and who might well have dropped the al-, this would perhaps explain how begotisch came into the picture, as a fairly simple combination of begot/bigot plus suffix -isch. Given the proximity of Spain to Provence, the cultural/linguistic overlap in the 13th century, and the likelihood of the then notorious Cathars being noticed for their extreme piety, this would seem like the most logical connection. Incidentally, one notes that “got/Gott” are both used as a Yiddish element meaning “god”, which would make it much easier for original (al)bigot-isch “fanatical/cultist/extreme devotee” to slip into a positive meaning of “godly/pious”.

christo 27TH OCTOBER 2011

Albegensian heresy. This rings a bell. I remember reading about this many, many years ago in Norman Cohn’s “The Pursuit of the Millennium.” I’ll have another sniff around and see if he draws an actual connection or reference to this word, if I can locate my copy. It’s been decades.

[OUPblog » Blog Archive » Monthly Gleanings, Part 1: October 2011 \(https://blog.oup.com/2011/11/oct-2011/\)](https://blog.oup.com/2011/11/oct-2011/) 2ND NOVEMBER 2011

[...] Bigot. So far (Friday afternoon) I have read seven observations. If more appear, I’ll discuss them next week. I wrote the post on bigot because I wanted to advertise Grammont’s etymology. It seemed reasonable to our readers, but etymologies are not established by plebiscites, so that, as I said at the end of the previous post, I hope that Romance scholars will either prove Grammont wrong or congratulate themselves on having a hard riddle solved. More than a hundred years ago the great French linguist Antoine Meillet said that all the good etymologies had already been offered and those being proposed were bad. I sincerely hope he was mistaken. [...]

[The “brave” old etymology | OUPblog \(https://blog.oup.com/2013/11/brave-etymology-word-origin/\)](https://blog.oup.com/2013/11/brave-etymology-word-origin/) 13TH NOVEMBER 2013

[...] and indulge in a goodly amount of hedging. My most successful inroad on this area was probably an essay on bigot, but only because I discovered a review of which no one seems to be [...]

[Etymology of 'beggar', 'bugger', and 'bigot', part 1 | OUPblog \(https://blog.oup.com/2014/02/beggar-bugger-bigot-etymology-word-origin-part-1/\)](https://blog.oup.com/2014/02/beggar-bugger-bigot-etymology-word-origin-part-1/) 19TH FEBRUARY 2014

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[...] "Nobody wants to be called a bigot" by Anatoly Liberman [...]

wayne 9TH AUGUST 2017

the normans were called bigots by the french people,the normans being of norwegian ancestry,from the danish/norse normand,meaning northman.the normans were noted by the french people for saying By God in conversation rather than By Heck,as some of my fellow yorkshiremen would say.the blasphemous french barbarians,uncouth and unwashed,took away the D and replaced it with a t.

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