

Century Marks

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Bush v. Iran © Pat Bagley, The Calgary Sun

Science and religion together: In an open letter to an imagined Southern Baptist pastor, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson calls for making common cause on behalf of the earth's environment. Wilson, reared a Baptist, calls himself a secular humanist and says he sees no way of bridging the gap between his worldview and that of evangelical Christians. But he sees no need to do so. "Surely we also share a love of the Creation," he says to his fictional pen pal, and both recognize a moral obligation to care for the environment. He notes that there is a practical reason for forming an alliance: the three leading humanist organizations in the U.S. have a total membership of only several thousand; the National Association of Evangelicals counts 30 million Christians among its members (*New Republic*, September 4).

Confession without repentance: In a forthcoming book (*Faith and Politics*, Viking) Jack Danforth, former Republican senator from Missouri and an Episcopal priest, ponders his role in getting Clarence Thomas appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. He admits that as senator he did all he could to discredit Anita Hill, who had made allegations of sexual harassment against Thomas. "I'm a real admirer of Clarence Thomas," says Danforth. "I found myself in this fight [to win his nomination] and I felt really beleaguered. . . . It was a brawl, and I'm sorry I was involved in it, but I was." Would he now do things differently? He says he's not sure, even though he

admits it was the worst thing he's ever done in his life (*Newsweek*, September 18).

Religious revival? Speaking to a group of conservative journalists, President Bush said he believes we're on the verge of a Third Great Awakening. He likened the current interest in religion to the religious revivals of the mid-18th and early 19th centuries. This revival of religious commitment, he said, coincides with the struggle against international terrorism that he depicted as a "confrontation between good and evil." He noted that some of Abraham Lincoln's supporters saw the struggle against slavery as a contest between the forces of good and evil, and that his own strongest supporters see the fight against terrorism in similar terms (*Washington Post*, September 13).

Muslim turnings: The image of Islam portrayed in the West is often that of the radical fringe; what we hear less about is the struggle for the soul of Islam. The struggle is embedded in the teachings of Muhammad: in the contrast between his more tolerant phase in Mecca and the later period in Medina, which exhibited more coercion and intolerance. George Packer takes a look at this struggle in Sudan, a country that has come through a number of failed experiments: nationalism, socialism and Islamism. It is out of these failed experiments that reform might occur, Packer concludes. "Great turns in history seldom come because someone writes a manifesto or proposes a theory. Instead, concrete experience, usually in the form of catastrophic failure, forces people to search for new ideas, many of which have been lying around for quite a while." One Sudanese intellectual told Packer that if modernizing change is to happen in the Muslim world, it will more likely come on the periphery—in West Africa or Central and Southeast Asia, rather than in the Arab region, "because it is too self-absorbed in its own sense of superiority and victimhood" (*New Yorker*, September 11).

Decent exposure? Anne Robertson, a United Methodist pastor, tells a story about a family of missionaries to Africa whose home church was bothered by the fact that the family spent time with African women who went topless. The congregation collected T-shirts for these women. While the women were pleased with the new shirts, they promptly cut two holes in them in order to use their breasts for their God-given function. "Decency is often in the eye of the beholder," concludes Robertson (*God's Top Ten: Blowing the Lid Off the Commandments*, Morehouse).

Jesus disturbs the peace: When artist Clara Maria Goldstein unveiled her paintings portraying Jesus as a rabbi in an art gallery at Gundersen Lutheran

Hospital in La Crosse, Wisconsin, she was told she would have to take them down. A spokesperson for the hospital recognized “an artist’s right to express their personal beliefs through their work”; nonetheless, the hospital has “an obligation to determine what is appropriate for our diverse patient population, and our healing environment” (AP).

Consider the irises: Israeli environmentalists and botanists are protesting plans to build a new neighborhood in the Galilee town of Upper Nazareth. They say it will lead to the extinction of the rare Nazareth iris. The wild irises, which are native to Nazareth and surrounding hills, have been disappearing for years because of construction. The Nazareth iris has been growing in the area since before the birth of Jesus. Environmentalists are urging the government to turn the natural habitats of these flowers into nature reserves and to prevent housing construction that would likely lead to the flowers’ extinction (Ecumenical News International).