

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue



Paresh Nath, The Khaleej Times, UAE

Real missionary: During his lifetime David Livingstone, Scot missionary to Africa, was accused of being too political and of not being a real missionary since he did not attach himself to a settled mission station. He believed he was called to end the slave trade and to work for the economic well-being of Africans. After he died at age 60 in 1873 he was given a hero's burial in Westminster Abbey. Livingstone's African friends—following his wishes—had first buried his heart and entrails in what is now Zambia. Livingstone is largely forgotten in his own country, Scotland, but is still a national hero in Zambia, which, according to its constitution, is a "Christian country" (Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell).

Shovel-ready prophecy: Michelle Obama's planting of a garden at the White House was a prophetic act, according to Ellen F. Davis, biblical scholar at Duke Divinity School. "The essence of biblical prophecy is to show where the social order is broken, where human action threatens the created order, and where possibilities for healing lie," writes Davis. The way the agriculture business produces food is not sustainable in the long term, Davis says: the use of chemical fertilizers is eroding the soil, for example, and chemical runoff is making water unsafe to drink (*Philadelphia*

Inquirer, April 22).

Happy today: When life is grim, columnist Mary Schmich likes to ask people, “What’s making you happy today?” She doesn’t ask, “Are you happy?” That’s a “black hole” of a question, she says, that can lead to equivocation and existential dread. Her question, instead, assumes that there’s always something, no matter how grim life is, that can be a source of gladness, however small or simple—like a flower or a bird, a skyline or a full moon, or just a cup of coffee (*Chicago Tribune*, May 1).

Forgive us our debts: After the U.S. Senate voted to prohibit judges from changing the terms of mortgages for people filing for bankruptcy, Ron Lieber surveyed some religious insights on debt. He found that Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures all have something to say on the subject. A passage in the Qur’an is particularly salient: it says that if a debtor is having difficulty making repayment, the debtor should be given more time to repay the debt. During this grace period the interest clock should cease ticking and fees shouldn’t be added so the debtor can get back on his or her feet (*New York Times*, May 2).

Crusaders (take one): A small but significant number of American soldiers, especially concentrated in the officer corps, see themselves as “spiritual warriors—‘ambassadors for Christ in uniform’”—and conflate God and country. Proselytizing is officially forbidden in the armed services, but there is ample evidence that it exists, according to reporter Jeff Sharlet. There are reports of forced prayer meetings. Some military funerals become occasions for evangelistic sermons. Some activists distribute Christian apocalyptic games to troops and correlate the war to the book of Revelation. Says one lieutenant colonel: “The military is the last American institution that tries to uphold Christian values. It’s the easiest place in America to be a Christian” (*Harper’s*, May).

Crusaders (take two): The chief U.S. military chaplain in Afghanistan told his soldiers that as followers of Jesus Christ they have a responsibility “to be witnesses for him.” “The special forces guys—they hunt men basically. We do the same things as Christians, we hunt people for Jesus,” the chaplain told his troops. His admonition was captured in footage taken by a documentary filmmaker and former military member. Some military chaplains apparently distribute Bibles printed in Pashto and Dari, the main languages in Afghanistan. Distributing Bibles is an act of gift-giving rather than proselytizing, they claim (english.aljazeera.net, May 4).

Can't climb over it: Graduates at Oberlin College commencement services have historically processed through a Memorial Arch on campus that was built in 1903 to honor Oberlin graduates who were killed during the Boxer Rebellion while serving as missionaries in China. But some seniors in the past, claiming that the arch honors questionable acts of American imperialism, in protest would walk around the arch or climb over it using a rope. This year the Oberlin administration decided to change the processional route to bypass the arch entirely (insidehighered.com, April 28).

Obama's sermon: In a 2006 speech, then-senator Barack Obama said Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is so "radical" the Defense Department wouldn't survive if the sermon's lessons were applied to it. Last month Obama suggested that the country needs the lessons of Jesus' sermon. In the middle of a speech on economic policy, Obama cited the sermon's parable about two men, one of whom builds his house on rock, the other on sand. "We cannot rebuild this economy on the same pile of sand," the president said. "We must build our house upon a rock" (RNS).

Gift of giving: Why are some people generous and others stingy? Christian Smith of the University of Notre Dame blames stinginess on consumer capitalism, which "makes people feel they don't have enough, so they feel they don't have enough to give away." Seeing generous behavior modeled encourages sharing. A sense of empathy is also important, which may explain why people without much to give are more inclined to be generous than those who are well off (*Newsweek*, May 4).

How Calvinist are you? Do you believe in bringing children up with a strict education, in avoiding sumptuous food and unnecessary expense, and in the importance of hard work? If so, you have a good chance of being a Calvinist, according to an online quiz offered by a Dutch newspaper, which is now available online in English and German. It is one of numerous projects in the Netherlands and beyond to mark the 500th anniversary of the birth in France of Protestant leader John Calvin. The last quiz question raises a typically Calvinist issue: it asks whether the time used in taking the test could have been spent more usefully doing something else (ENI).

Dollars for your thoughts: Eight people were paid \$25 each to attend the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Omaha, Nebraska, and then fill out a questionnaire about what they experienced. "We come here every week, and we're used to this congregation and the way it operates. How does someone else see this?" the senior pastor said in explaining the project (UPI).