

Century Marks

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Dr. Spin: A seminary class was debating whether the Garden of Eden story (Gen. 2-3) reinforces or resists the oppression of women when one student interjected: “It’s all just spin anyway. You can spin the text any way you want.” But Professor Jacqueline Lapsley, ruminating on the unlikely story about Balaam and his donkey (Num. 22-24), says two principles of biblical interpretation can guard against spin: our interpretation shouldn’t reinforce our own self-interest, and it should serve the larger purposes of God, that is, God’s love “for Israel, for the church and for the whole world” (*Interpretation*, January).

Papal decree: Paul Elie talked to some Vatican insiders and learned that with Pope John Paul II’s health failing in the waning years of his papacy, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger assumed additional power and influence. It appears that Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, will leave his mark less on world affairs and more on ecclesial matters. Elie says that in the modern era there is a “gap between the pope’s growing power in the church and his diminishing influence on the religious lives of individual believers.” Elie adds that Ratzinger doesn’t understand the American Catholic Church and, at age 79, is not likely to. “The task of making sense of America will await some other pope” (*Atlantic Monthly*, January/February).

St. Jack: John Danforth, former Republican senator from Missouri and an Episcopal priest, is increasingly speaking out against the religious right's domination of his party and what he sees as its divisive influence in the country. He traces the loss of collegiality in politics to the increased activism of Christian conservatives. Danforth is campaigning for the legalization of therapeutic cloning in stem cell research, which is anathema to most conservatives. Danforth has a personal motive: one of his brothers died of Lou Gehrig's disease, which is a focus of stem cell research (*Washington Post*, February 2).

The human toll: The year 2005 may well be remembered as the year of disasters. During the first ten months of the year, 88,000 people were killed in natural disasters—most notably in the earthquake in India and Pakistan and the hurricanes in the southern U.S. (This doesn't take into account the tsunami which happened at the end of 2004.) Some disaster experts don't like the word *natural*, however, arguing that there is usually a human element involved. Global warming, deforestation, coastline development, inadequate or deteriorating infrastructures and poor government response contribute to the toll (*Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, January).

Soul of the country: Christopher Malone, writing after Hurricane Katrina, says that New Orleans is a city of contradictions: the "West Bank" of the river is really farther east than the "East Bank," and "Downtown" is really upriver from "Uptown"; drinking while driving is against the law, yet there are drive-thru daiquiri shops which claim you won't be stopped for violating the law so long as the straw isn't in the daiquiri; and gambling is allowed in riverboat casinos only when the boats are "out at sea," yet they never leave port. Although there is grinding poverty, there is also abundance. It is a place where you "celebrate what you have rather than begrudge what you don't. . . . If New York is the brain [of the country], New Orleans is the gut . . . the heart and soul. I live in New York and am told it is the city that never sleeps. I am from New Orleans and know that she never seems to wake from a certain slight intoxication" (*Cross Currents*, Fall).

Going deeper: The debate over the U.S. policy in Iraq is largely construed as a decision about whether to leave or stay. Missing from the debate are such questions as: "What is the nature of Iraqis' tribal loyalties, and will they . . . make a unified Iraq impossible? If some form of democracy is possible, what are the best ideas for how to phase it in, and what case studies elsewhere in the world . . . offer the most useful lessons? How does the presence of oil help and hinder economic development?"

Perhaps most importantly, what is the range of realistic outcomes in Iraq, short of the delusional notion of a Western-style, free-market democracy, that the American people should be prepared to accept?" A document produced by the Army War College says that pursuing a successful strategy in Iraq offers little room "for error, ideological dogmatism, or ignorance about the nature of the multiple problems associated with such an undertaking" (*Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February).

Neo-gnosticism: One of the reasons the line "I'm very spiritual but I'm not religious at all" is so common, according to Garret Keizer, is that religion is hard work, while "'spirituality' is lighter on its feet." Writes Keizer: "Religion is potluck suppers, for Christ's sake—disciplines and dogmas and, most trying of all, pews full of *other people*." Those who like spirituality without religion are modern gnostics who claim to have a special knowledge of the divine. Their ultimate goal is "emancipation from the vile world of matter," and their deepest spiritual need is "to be delivered from the body, including the body politic" (*Harper's Magazine*, February).

Seditious quakers: A little-known agency has been created in the Pentagon to snoop on U.S. citizens. Called the Counter-Intelligence Field Activity, it spied on a small group of Quakers in Lake Worth, Florida. The offense? It was organizing protests against military recruitment in local high schools (*Hightower Lowdown*, February).

Incorrect buns: A school in England declared that hot cross buns can be offensive to religious minorities and told its supplier to make buns without the cross. The practice of making hot cross buns goes back to 1361, when a monk supposedly made small spiced cakes with a cross on top, to serve to poor people visiting St. Albans monastery on Good Friday (UPI, February 6).