

Century Marks

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An ecologically unbalanced children's story © Osmani Simanca A Tarde, Brazil

Let your yea be yea: Minnesota Democrat Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to Congress, intends to use the Qur'an during a private swearing-in ceremony. This triggered a hostile reaction from Virgil Goode, a Republican representative from Virginia: "If American citizens don't wake up and adopt the Virgil Goode position on immigration there will likely be many more Muslims elected to office and demanding the use of the Qur'an." David Friedman of the Anti-Defamation League defended Ellison, pointing out that no scriptures are used in the public swearing-in ceremony in the House chambers. Ellison himself said, "I'm a little incredulous about why anyone would care about what I'm going to swear on. In fact, if I swore on a book that wasn't of my tradition . . . would you trust me?" (*Detroit Free Press*, December 27, and *Ecumenical News International*).

A Mormon for president? If Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts runs for the Republican nomination for president as expected, he won't be the first Mormon to have done so. Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah ran briefly in 2000, and Romney's own father, George, was a Republican hopeful in 1967. Less well known is the fact that Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon church, ran for president in 1844. Smith, an abolitionist and a proponent of communal ownership of property, was killed by a

mob in June of that year. Most Mormons today are politically conservative and solidly Republican. Since many evangelicals consider Mormons to be members of a cult, Romney will have to win them over if he has any hope of getting the GOP nomination. This no doubt explains why Romney is taking positions on abortion and stem cell research that are more conservative than his church's. Although the Mormon church is pro-life, it doesn't consider abortion murder since it has no clear position on when the soul enters the body. The church has no position on stem cell research, but all five Mormon U.S. senators support it, as do 60 percent of Mormons in the state of Utah (*Boston Globe*, December 31).

In retreat: The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that by the end of 2006, 1.6 million Iraqis had fled within the country and another 1.8 million had gone abroad. At one point it was estimated that 1,000 people were going to Jordan each day and another 2,000 to Syria. A UN report says that Iraqi Christians are being targeted for their faith. While they make up only 4 percent of the total population, they make up about 40 percent of the refugees from Iraq, according to Nina Shea of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (*Independent/UK*, December 29, and United Press International).

Prophecy fulfilled: James Baker, former secretary of state and cochair of the Iraq Study Group, says he used to be asked often why the first Bush administration didn't topple Saddam Hussein at the end of the 1991 Gulf War. Among other reasons, he would explain, was that "if Saddam were captured and his regime toppled, American forces would still have been confronted with the specter of a military occupation of indefinite duration to pacify a country and sustain a government in power. The ensuing urban warfare would surely have resulted in more casualties to American GIs than the [Gulf] war itself, thus creating a political firestorm at home." Baker says he no longer gets asked that question (from his memoir *Work Hard, Study . . . and Keep Out of Politics!* quoted in the *New York Review of Books*, January 11).

Prophecy proclaimed: Pat Robertson reported on *The 700 Club* that God has told him that a major terrorist attack on the United States will happen in late 2007, resulting in "mass killing." "I'm not necessarily saying it's going to be nuclear," he said on his religious broadcast. Robertson had predicted in 2004 that President Bush would easily win reelection—he took 51 percent of the vote—and he said in 2005 that Social Security reform would be approved, which it wasn't. "I have a relatively good track record,'" Robertson said. "Sometimes I miss" (Associated Press).

Bearing the cross: When Gene R. Nichol, president of William and Mary College, ordered the cross removed from Wren Chapel, he brought on the wrath of numerous alumni and others. He now admits he acted hastily, and he has clarified that on Sundays the cross will remain on display all day, not just during scheduled services. But he continues to defend his decision, expressing satisfaction that both Jews and Muslims can now feel comfortable using the chapel. William and Mary was founded in 1693, before Thomas Jefferson, one of its most famous alumni, started to define the separation between church and state. The college became a public institution early in the 20th century (insidehighered.com).

Quack science: Employees at Grand Canyon National Park are not permitted to give an official estimate of the age of the canyon, due to pressure from the Bush administration. “In order to avoid offending religious fundamentalists, our National Park Service is under orders to suspend its belief in geology,” according to Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). “It is disconcerting that the official position of a national park as to the geologic age of the Grand Canyon is ‘no comment.’” Meanwhile, a book claiming that the Grand Canyon was formed by the flood at the time of Noah remains on sale at the park (peer.org).

Compulsory credo: Thomas Nelson Publishers, a conservative religious publisher in Nashville, Tennessee, has announced that from now on it will work only with writers who adhere to the fourth-century Nicene Creed. While this would include most Protestant and Catholic writers, it would exclude Unitarians, Mormons and Jews. The publisher said that it would continue to honor existing contracts, some of which are for books that are secular in nature, such as Donald Trump’s *The Best Real Estate Advice I Ever Received* (Mark I. Pinsky of the *Orlando Sentinel*).

Long fast: A teenage Nepalese boy, believed by some to be a reincarnation of Gautama Buddha, has reappeared in eastern Nepal after vanishing for nine months. Sixteen-year-old Ram Bahadur Bomjan was spotted in late December by villagers in a remote and densely forested area 95 miles east of Kathmandu, the capital city. Bomjan disappeared in March from the forests, where he had reportedly been meditating under a tree without food or water for almost 10 months. Disciples blocked requests by scientists who wanted to test the boy to see if he really had not taken any food or water (Religion News Service).