

# Century Marks

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**Double standard:** Rosemary Radford Ruether questions whether the “consistent ethic of life” of Catholic moral theory is as consistent as it claims. Current Catholic moral teaching applies an absolutist ethic to abortion, no exceptions allowed, whereas it applies a consequentialist ethic to war that allows for exceptions, makes calculations based on competing interests and ultimately leaves the matter to the conscience of the individual. “Where is the bishop who would say that soldiers who directly massacre noncombatant civilians are excommunicated? Where are the bishops who would suggest that those who manufacture nuclear weapons are excommunicated and should repent by leaving such forms of employment?” she asks. “In short, Catholicism speaks softly and carries no stick when it comes to

untimely and unjust death after birth” (*Conscience*, Spring).

**Spin zone:** The Iraq war was certainly not the first one to be encouraged by sectors of the media. The Spanish-American War, which freed Cuba from Spanish colonial rule, was set off when an explosion destroyed the *USS Maine* warship while it was docked in Havana, killing 266 crew members. Publisher William Randolph Hearst was itching for a fight with Spain. He sent hordes of reporters to Cuba to cover the explosion and within days was spinning the news to blame Spain. Other newspapers challenged the Hearst reports, but Hearst helped sway public opinion, and war against Spain was soon declared (*Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April).

**All the news:** The explosion of news sources on cable TV and the Internet has not led to wider knowledge about national and international affairs, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. In 1989, 74 percent of people could name the U.S. vice president; in 2007, only 69 percent could. On the other hand, in 1989, 68 percent could say which party controlled the House of Representatives; that figure increased to 76 percent this year. “On average, today’s citizens are about as able to name their leaders, and are about as aware of major news events, as was the public nearly 20 years ago” (people-press.org).

**Something about a wall:** The Berlin Wall came down in 1989, but the building of walls continues—walls that cannot stop armies but do stem the flow of people. The United States is building a wall on its border with Mexico to restrict immigration from the south; the Israelis are creating a “security barrier” to keep out suicide bombers; India is walling off Kashmir and Bangladesh; the Saudis have announced two walls, one to keep the conflict in Iraq from overflowing into their country; China wants to get back into the act of building walls to seal off North Korea; Russia is thinking about walling off Chechnya; and the oil-rich United Arab Emirates has decided to put up a barrier along its border with dirt-poor Oman, reports Mark Ehrman. An ancient Mongolian proverb says: “Two men in friendship are stronger than walls of stone” (*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring).

**Wall protest:** On April 20 about 20 members of an international group nonviolently protesting the Israeli-built wall near Ramallah in the West Bank were injured by rubber bullets and sickened by tear gas used by Israeli Defense Forces. Among those injured was Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1976 for her peace activism in Northern Ireland. After receiving treatment in a hospital,

Maguire said: "This wall, contrary to what the Israelis say, will not prevent attacks and violence. What will prevent attacks and violence is a peace agreement between the two peoples" (*Belfast Telegraph*, April 23).

**Sorry about that:** Both Alabama legislative chambers recently passed separate resolutions apologizing for slavery. The House version also encourages "the remembrance and teaching about the history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and modern day slavery, to ensure that these tragedies will neither be forgotten nor repeated." Some white Republicans opposed the legislation for fear it would lead to a demand for payment of reparations. And one legislator said, "What I have a problem with is apologizing for something I didn't do." Legislatures in Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina have passed similar apologies this year. For one of the two Alabama resolutions to become law, the other chamber must accept it and the governor must sign it (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 24).

**Quiet revolution:** Accustomed to portraying evangelicalism as a homogeneous, conservative political force, the media may be missing the emergence of a new movement that researcher George Barna calls "the Revolution." Represented by persons like Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in western Michigan, which meets in a converted shopping mall, this movement has rediscovered Jesus and the kingdom of God. It has staked out biblically based positions against consumerism, poverty, violence and imperialism while remaining opposed to abortion and gay marriage. The movement also tends to be open to women in leadership. Another figure in the movement is Shane Claiborne, the 30-year-old author of *Irresistible Revolution*, who is currently in Iraq to "stand in the way of war" (*In These Times*, March).

**Strange bedfellows:** Conservative legal groups like the Christian Legal Society, Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice and the Rutherford Institute are siding with the American Civil Liberties Union and Feminists for Free Expression in a free-speech case before the Supreme Court. *Deborah Morse, Juneau School Board v. Joseph Frederick* pits a principal and school board against a student who unfurled a banner across from a high school in Alaska that read "Bong Hits 4 Jesus," a nonsensical phrase that some interpreted as promoting drug use. Conservatives have joined with the ACLU and other free-speech advocates because they believe that a school victory in this case would set a precedent for curtailing students from expressing their opposition in school to abortion, homosexuality or the teaching of evolution (*Village Voice*, April 9).

**Comic relief:** In a tribute to the late Kurt Vonnegut, *Newsweek* (April 23) quotes Vonnegut's comments on humor in a [1976 interview](#) with the *Christian Century*: "Well, of course, humor is an almost physiological response to fears, as I understand it," he said. "I saw the destruction of Dresden. I mean I saw it before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterwards, and certainly one response is laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief."

**Wicked:** Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, an English professor at a Christian college, recalls a colleague who would add to his e-mail messages a scriptural tagline (from the King James Version): "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). She comments: "I used to laugh when I saw this stark reminder appended to the most ordinary notice of an upcoming meeting or campus event. Still, it was a truth that gets less press than it probably should in circles of 'nice Christian people'" (*Weavings*, May/June).