

# Century Marks

Century Marks in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue



© Jimmy Margulies

**On and off the field:** This year marks the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's shattering of the color barrier in Major League Baseball, and this October will mark the 35th anniversary of his death at the age of 53. (Amazingly, he threw out the ceremonial pitch at the 1972 World Series just a few days before dying of complications from diabetes.) The coverage of the 60th anniversary has largely ignored the significance of Christian faith in Robinson's life, as well as his civil rights work that went beyond the baseball diamond. But when Robinson was alive, progressive Christians, black and white, celebrated that work. In July 1963, for instance, the United Church of Christ presented Robinson with its Chairmanship Award. Robinson, a member of the UCC, was elected president of United Church Men, and he participated in the social ministries of both the National Council of Churches and the National Conference of Christians and Jews (Michael G. Long in *First Class Citizenship: The Civil Rights Letters of Jackie Robinson*, to be published in October by Time Books).

**Fact or fiction?** Michael J. Gerson was widely touted for his role as President Bush's chief speechwriter and as the conscience of the White House. He was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. But

according to Matthew Scully, one of Gerson's White House speech-writing colleagues, that image was one that Gerson himself helped to fashion with the media's cooperation. In *State of Denial*, Bob Woodward credits Gerson with all the significant speeches delivered by President Bush subsequent to 9/11. But Scully counters that not a single one of the lines that Woodward quoted in this context came from Gerson and that the National Cathedral address attributed to Gerson was half-written before he became involved in the process. "Few lines of note were written by Mike," says Scully, "and none at all that come to mind from the post-9/11 addresses—not even 'axis of evil.'" Gerson resigned from the White House in June 2006 (*Atlantic*, September).

**Remedial education:** There is a long history of blaming public schools for America's ills, a pattern that has led to dubious reform movements like No Child Left Behind, argues Peter Schrag (*Harper's Magazine*, September). Schrag points to a deeper problem with public education: because of the general paucity of social services and a heterogeneous population, American schools are expected to do much more than schools in other countries. "In addition to teaching a far greater diversity of children than is the case in other nations, our educational workers must address countless medical, social, and family problems before they can even begin to think about teaching math, reading, or history."

**Faithfulness matters:** The ABC campaign (Abstain, Be Faithful, and Use Condoms) to decrease the spread of AIDS in Africa has not been as successful as is often claimed, according to Helen Epstein's *The Invisible Cure* (reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*, August 16). Conservatives like to promote abstinence, but that is often unrealistic; liberals call for distributing condoms, but many people with access to condoms don't use them. Underappreciated, says Epstein, is the role that the admonition "be faithful" plays in combating AIDS. Africans don't have more sexual partners than do people in Western countries, but there is more of a tendency in African culture to have long-term *concurrent* partners, a practice that is especially conducive to the spread of AIDS. Epstein says that some old-fashioned use of fear can also work wonders. In Uganda, for example, what worked was "ordinary, but frank, conversations people had with their family, friends, and neighbors—not about sex, but about the frightening, calamitous effects of AIDS itself."

**Table talk:** A recent meeting in Cairo of key Iraqi religious leaders was the result of persistent cajoling by Canon Andrew White, an Anglican priest who has lived in Baghdad for nearly a decade. White is trying to get the leaders to pledge to reduce

violence, denounce al-Qaeda, resist terrorism and support democratic principles. Religious leaders often say one thing publicly, another thing privately. Factional fighting is fed not just by religious zealotry but by concerns for self-protection and revenge. White hopes, however, that compromises by religious leaders will make political compromises more palatable (*Christian Science Monitor*, August 22).

**Holy flight:** The Vatican has its own bank, its own postal system, its own pharmacy, its own soccer tournament—and now its own official airline. The Holy See teamed up with a small Italian charter company, Mistral Air, to launch a low-cost charter service to ferry pilgrims to many of the most important Catholic shrines, including Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, Czestochowa in Poland and Santiago de Compostela in Spain. “The spirit of this new initiative is to meet the growing demand by pilgrims to visit the most important sites for the faith,” said Father Cesare Ature of the Vatican pilgrimage office. The new service will be able to count on not only parishes and churches throughout Italy for clients, but also the Rome-based religious travel agency Quo Vadis. According to some estimates, as many as 150 million pilgrims travel annually to religious sites worldwide, with 8 million going to Lourdes and 10 million to Mexico’s Virgin of Guadalupe shrine (RNS).

**What would Jesus smoke?** Last year Malaysia’s Muslim-led government shut down two newspapers for carrying cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammed. Now some minority religious groups want a similar punishment for a Malaysian newspaper that carried an image of Jesus smoking a cigarette and drinking beer. Christian groups acknowledge that Jesus was a compassionate figure who mixed with tax collectors and prostitutes, but they find the cartoon offensive. The paper issued an apology, which has appeased most Malaysian churches but not the Malaysian Indian Congress, an ethnic political party in the governing coalition, most of whose members are Hindu (BBC News, August 23).

**Smokin’ hymns:** The Anglican Church in Jamaica is adding to its hymnals some tunes by reggae stars Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, including Marley’s hit “One Love” and Tosh’s “Psalm 27.” Both men were Rastafarians—a group that mixes Old Testament prophecy, Afrocentric social advocacy and the sacramental smoking of marijuana—and both at times were critical of Christianity. “They may have been antichurch, but they were not anti-God or antireligion,” a church spokesperson said. Tosh and Marley died in the 1980s (RNS).

**Pray for your supper:** An ashram in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, is paying widows to chant mantras in praise of the Hindu god Krishna and his consort. The widows make

\$4.50 a month for six hours of chanting each morning and evening. That is not much more than they would get from the state pension to widows, which is \$3.70 per month. But the ashram, funded by rich Hindus in Delhi, issues its payments regularly, which is more than can be said for India's government (*Economist*, August 18).