

Century Marks

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Announcing. . . the Nano Indian car © Rainer HachfeldNeues Deutschland, Germany

Jesus, your humanity is showing: Jesus' brush-off of the Syrophenician woman who asked him to cast a demon out of her daughter (Mark 7:24-30) is an embarrassment to most Christian exegetes, who have a long history of attempting to justify Jesus' apparently bigoted response. But Mary Potter Engel, who grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and then converted to Judaism as an adult, thinks this is an example of a tale told about a religious hero that reveals his humanness. Jesus' encounter with this woman resulted in a grand reversal: rather than Jesus teaching the woman, the woman reminds Jesus "that the God of love and justice has prepared a table for all, even in the presence of one's enemies." For Engel, this incident casts light on what it means to follow Jesus—not toward perfection but toward ever greater openness to "the living God who calls us beyond our limited selves and narrow worlds" (*Spiritus*, Fall).

Listening tour: *Foreign Policy* magazine (January/February) asked 12 intellectuals what one policy or gesture the next president could make to improve America's standing in the world. The answers ranged from establishing a carbon tax to ending the embargo against Cuba. But the freshest response came from former speaker of the House Newt Gingrich: listen. The newly elected president, Gingrich says, should

go on a pre-inauguration tour of capitals around the world with the sole task of asking questions and trying to understand the other leaders' points of view. "If the next president can reverse the perception that American power is deaf to the appeals of the world," Gingrich wrote, "the United States will once again be encouraged and expected to lead."

Now they plead ignorance: When Jeffrey Goldberg asked experts what they thought about the future of the Middle East after the Iraq war, he found them reluctant to speculate. David Fromkin, author of *A Peace to End All Peace*, morosely told Goldberg, "The Middle East has no future." A military historian glumly said that there is no reason to even talk about the subject, since the West is unable to control the future of the Middle East. During a chance meeting with Paul Bremer right after the release of the Iraq Study Group report, Goldberg told the former head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq that from what he was hearing, the experts were divided on the recommendations of the report. Bremer responded, "Who really is an Iraq expert, anyway?" (*Atlantic*, January/February).

Culture war: The war in Afghanistan was once a success story, but the American and NATO forces fighting there are meeting increasing resistance—and it is not only a response to military action. "Russia attacked us with guns," said one Islamic preacher, "but the Americans have assaulted our culture." Go into many Afghan homes, he said, and instead of seeing instructional CDs on the Qur'an, you'll see Western-style CDs and DVDs. His solution is to try to launch a cultural jihad. Civilian casualties also create resistance. "Afghan culture is based on honor and revenge; kill one man and you earn a family of enemies for life," says author Nicholas Schmidle (*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Winter).

The big business of books: Corporate publishers don't understand the intrinsic value of books or the social capital they accumulate, argues author Ursula K. Le Guin (*Harper's Magazine*, February). To a corporate publisher, a good book is one that makes money, and if a book doesn't sell well, it is soon pulled off the market and trashed. Contrast that with the sense that much of our civilization rests on the durability of books. "The burning of the Library of Alexandria has been mourned for two thousand years," Le Guin reminds us, "as people may well remember the desecration and destruction of the great Library of Baghdad." Reading a book is not the same thing as being entertained. Unlike TV, a book "won't do the work for you. To read a story well is to follow it, to act it, to feel it, to become it—everything short of writing it, in fact. . . . No wonder not everybody is up to it."

Huckabee's humor: Mike Huckabee's rise to the top tier of Republican presidential candidates is in part due to his ability to throw off witty, self-deprecating one-liners that reveal his populist streak. "It'll be an amazing journey when the White House is occupied by somebody who's not necessarily Ivy League, but who everybody else has written off as bush league," he says of himself. On another occasion he said, "People asked me when I ran for office in Arkansas if all the Baptists were active in my campaign. I said, 'Every one of them were active. Half for me, half against me, but they all were active.'" Huckabee no doubt honed his skillful use of humor when he was a Baptist preacher—to help make his sermons go down more easily (*New Republic*, December 31).

Politics and religion: A new blog on religion and the 2008 election campaign (www.Spiritual-Politics.org) has been launched by the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Spiritual Politics will "provide daily tracking of the way religion seems to be enhancing, disturbing, and otherwise interacting with the 2008 election cycle," says Mark Silk, director of the Greenberg Center. "We are trying to do this in a reasonably nonpartisan way, though not without attitude," he adds (RNS).

Match made in heaven? Almost half of American Jews marry gentiles, a rate that has tripled since 1970. But now JDate—a matchmaking Web site for Jewish singles—is teaming up with rabbis to reverse this trend. JDate offers a bulk rate to rabbis who will make subscriptions available to members of their congregations, and some of the rabbis are picking up the tab (*Newsweek*, January 21).

(More!) bulletin bloopers:

- The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.
- Please place your donation in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered.
- Bertha Belch, a missionary from Africa, will be speaking tonight at Calvary Methodist. Come hear Bertha Belch all the way from Africa.