

Century Marks

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Down in the gutter: David Novak, a Jewish theologian, recalls walking in a southern town one morning in 1963, on his way to a synagogue where he was going to lead Yom Kippur services. The night before there was heavy rain, and the gutters along the side of the road were full of mud. As he approached an older black woman, she stepped into the gutter to let him pass. Novak thought to himself that he was the one who should have stepped into the muddy gutter, for the Talmud says,

“Before the old you shall stand.” “So, on the holiest day of the year, when I was supposed to feel that I was being cleansed before God, I felt profoundly dirty,” says Novak, “not for what I had done, but for what I represented” to this woman “who had so debased herself because of my very presence before her” (*First Things*, February).

Define Christian: The late R. M. Hare, an Oxford philosopher who also taught at the University of Florida, wrote an essay early in his career that was never published, in which he argued that without faith in God, philosophy is not a serious pursuit, only a game. But in his subsequent work religion was not much of a factor. His son John, also a philosopher, writes that his father did attend Anglican worship services regularly and recited the creeds, although it was not clear how much of the creeds he accepted. When people asked him if he was a Christian, the elder Hare’s response always was, “I don’t know. I’ll tell you what I believe, and then you tell me whether you count me a Christian or not” (*Times Literary Supplement*, January 18).

Disciplines for dialogue: In relating to Muslims and Jews, three Christian disciplines are necessary: confession, baptism and hospitality, says Lee Camp. It is important to confess our own sins as Christians (not the sins of others), in particular the sins we have committed against these other religions. As a backdrop to interreligious dialogue, the church needs to recover a non-Constantinian understanding of baptism—the realization that we are baptized into a community that transcends race, nationality or gender, a community committed to Jesus’ way of peace and reconciliation. And with the gift of hospitality we can share who we are with strangers, while being open to the blessings that others have to give to us (*Restoration Quarterly*, volume 49).

Lower the lights: Instead of giving up chocolate or TV for Lent, some churches in the Harrisonburg, Virginia, area have pledged to use less fossil fuel. The Less Oil for Lent campaign is intended to show concern for both the Iraq war and climate change and to call attention to the U.S. addiction to oil. Some suggestions they give for consuming less oil are to walk or ride a bike to church; reduce or eliminate the consumption of meat, which requires more oil to produce than grain; turn down the hot water heater to 115 degrees Fahrenheit; and use candles instead of electric lights on Sunday (*Mennonite Weekly Review*, January 28).

Collateral damage: A record number of journalists were killed in war zones in 2007—a total of 171, and 65 in Iraq alone, according to the International News

Safety Institute. Journalists who cover war suffer from the same trauma-related disorders as soldiers and as civilians trapped in war zones—nightmares, flashbacks, depression, alcoholism and broken personal relationships. Until recently neither the journalists nor their employers paid much heed to this reality, and reporters seldom received professional help for their trauma. Iraq has been one of the deadliest wars for journalists, but the journalists whom Anthony Feinstein interviewed claim that the Bosnian and Chechnyan wars were much more psychologically traumatic (*Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*, Johns Hopkins University Press). Increasingly, journalists find that they are considered fair game, especially to insurgents. At one time journalists could get caught in the crossfire, says CNN's Nic Robertson, but now they can be put in the crosshairs because of their national identity or the content of their reports.

Write on: “Like the death of the American dream, the death of the novel must be announced by each new generation,” says Robert Clark Young. But the evidence he mounts suggests that dire predictions are actually made every decade or so. Young suggests that writers who issue such obituaries are projecting their own frustration with a lack of commercial success onto the publishing world. In truth, many of the works that endure were not that popular when they first appeared, perhaps not even in the lifetime of their authors. Though the first edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* sold out, copies of the second printing of 3,000 were still in the warehouse 15 years later, at the time Fitzgerald died. Today about twice as many copies of *The Great Gatsby* are sold each month as sold in his lifetime. “The publishing industry has never been healthier than it is today,” Young says, and “the glorious fact is that there has never been a better era in which to be a writer, which is why being a living author is extremely exciting” (*Southern Review*, Winter).

Done got Jesus: Baylor University professor Ralph C. Wood, who grew up in east Texas, says that when he was a college student, a Baptist evangelist, after learning that Wood was an English major, asked, “Why do you need Shakespeare and them boys when you done got Jesus?” Wood says he is still trying to come up with an appropriate answer some 40 years later. Unfortunately, the question isn't asked in many places, Wood says (*Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Winter).

Correction: We regret that in the course of an appreciative review of *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (in the January 29 issue), we referred to coauthor Dave Travis as Davis rather than Travis. Our sincere apologies to readers and especially to Mr. Travis for this lapse in proofreading.