

Century Marks

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God's chosen: A Marxist and a Muslim were having a discussion about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God's command. The Marxist said that if God were to ask him to sacrifice his son, he wouldn't do it. The Muslim replied, "That is why you are not Abraham" (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, August).

Beyond reason: Richard Dawkins, an ardent atheist, and Father George Coyne, retired head of the Vatican Observatory, are good friends. Dawkins claims that Father Coyne once said to him that there is no reason to believe in God and that the only reason he does is because he was raised Catholic. Coyne denies that he said there is no reason to believe in God; he said, rather, that reasons are inadequate and belief goes beyond reason. "Faith, to me, is a gift from God," says Coyne. "I didn't reason to it, I didn't merit it—it was given to me as a gift through my family and my teachers." He adds: "Dawkins's real question to me should be, 'How come you have the gift of faith and I don't?'" Coyne says he firmly believes that "God does not deny that gift to anybody" (*Discover*, September).

Homework: Asked what she thought of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin said, "If it was good enough for

the founding fathers, it's good enough for me." Palin might be surprised to know that the Pledge was written not by the founding fathers but in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, a Christian socialist and Baptist minister, with the intent of pledging support for poor and excluded Americans. And the phrase "under God" wasn't added until 1954 during the cold war with the officially atheistic Soviet Union (eagleforumalaska.blogspot.com and Wikipedia).

Color blind? While it is not clear whether Americans are ready to elect an African American as president, pollster John Zogby says that it is not surprising that a black person is running for the highest office in the land. His polling company did a survey in 1999 and again in 2007 asking people to name the most popular person in several fields of endeavor. In every field a person of color came out on top (*Politics*, August).

Rain for the just and unjust: Before the Democratic National Convention held its final session in an outdoor sports arena, Stuart Shepard of Focus on the Family posted an online video asking conservatives to pray that God would send down "abundant rain, torrential rain, urban-and-small-stream flood-advisory rain" on Obama and his supporters. After receiving complaints, Shepard took down the video. The weather turned out to be ideal that evening. Elsewhere on the religion and weather front: liberal filmmaker Michael Moore jested that when Hurricane Gustav led to the postponement of events at the Republican National Convention, it was God's way of showing disapproval of the Republicans (*Chicago Tribune*, September 2).

Cars and churches: The megachurch may represent the church's last effort to indulge the car culture of suburban America: large campuses located near interstates, surrounded by acres of asphalt and accessible only by car. With the high cost of gas and questions about the sustainability of such facilities and their environmental impact, churches may need to think about returning to the model of the neighborhood church that is accessible by walking or bicycle or public transportation. In an excellent thematic issue devoted to the church and the automobile, *Word & World* (Summer) urges churches to lead by example in moving Americans away from the car culture.

Germ warfare, part one: Most of us take for granted the convenience and health benefits of modern sewage facilities. But 40 percent of the world's population—2.6 billion people—don't have such facilities. As a result, millions of people pick up diseases that kill 1.5 million children each year. Programs aimed at providing a clean

water supply miss the point: the problem is human sewage. Modern sewage systems are costly to develop and maintain; more low-tech ones are needed, including ones that involve prudent composting (*New Internationalist*, August).

Germ warfare, part two: Americans have become obsessed with hygiene and cleanliness. One sign is an increase in the use of personal cleansers and sanitizers. In 2005 \$67.3 million were spent on sanitizers, an increase of 54 percent over the previous year. An obsession with bodily cleanliness might actually be undermining people's immune systems, which depend on germs for their viability. The adult human body has about 100 trillion cells, 90 percent of which are germs. The cleanliness craze also exposes the body to harmful toxic chemicals. Most frightening of all, it could lead to the rise of resistant "superbugs." People obsessed with cleanliness may be concerned not so much with hygiene as with keeping chaos and risk at bay (*Psychology Today*, September/October).

Survival of the fittest: Anti-evolutionists may have a new target, Spore, a computer game in which contestants engage in evolving life from the cell on up to higher kinds of organisms. The object of the game is survival of the fittest: species in the game either prevail or become extinct. The creator of Spore is also the creator of the popular SimCity and The Sims computer games (*New York Times*, September 5).

High "I" factor: A Columbia Business School professor who administers personality tests in his classes was worried that a student who got the maximum score on the narcissism scale might find the results distressing. But then he heard the student exulting to a classmate, "I aced the narcissism test—I got every single question right!" (*Wilson Quarterly*, Summer).

Beauty contest for nuns: A priest in Italy, accused of running a beauty contest for nuns, has decided to call it off. He says he was misunderstood: he wasn't about to parade nuns wearing bathing suits. He was interested in judging their "interior beauty"—their spirituality, social awareness and charity. Still, external beauty shouldn't be ignored. "Being ugly is not a requirement for becoming a nun," he says. "External beauty is a gift from God, and we mustn't hide it" (AP).

If you're Jewish: Larry Blumberg is trying to get more Jews to move to his corner of the Bible Belt. Dothan, Alabama, which is known as the Peanut Capital of the World, is overwhelmingly Christian. Blumberg heads an organization that will pay Jewish families \$50,000 to move to Dothan. If they participate in the local temple and stay at least five years, they get to keep the money (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*,

September 8).