

Century Marks

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Beyond bombast: Mel Seesholtz and Bryan Polk couldn't be more different in their perspectives, yet they team-teach a course in religion at the Abington campus of Penn State University. One goal of the course is to demonstrate that it's possible for people with sharply different points of view to have a civil conversation. The two engage in unscripted discussions on topics suggested by students, ranging from the big bang theory to the "under God" phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance. They bring in guest speakers of varied perspectives, including a young earth creationist and a secular humanist. The students affirm the value of getting at least two perspectives on every issue, and their level of engagement indicates that they are learning from the dialogical method (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 25).

Chaplains without God: The Tufts Freethought Society wants the university to establish a humanist chaplaincy for students who wish to explore a meaningful and ethical life without being religious. Harvard, Rutgers and Adelphi universities already have humanist chaplains. The humanist chaplain at Rutgers tries to engage students

with what he believes are the three big human issues: what we know about the universe, how we make our mark on history and how we can survive and propagate the human race. The humanist chaplain at Harvard is working with the Harvard Divinity School to develop a curriculum for training humanist chaplains. If this is a trend, it is an uneven one: Stanford and Columbia created similar positions and later eliminated them ([Inside Higher Ed](#), November 12).

Hell to pay: To see how religion impacts economic behavior, Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary, a husband-and-wife research team at Harvard, analyzed data from 59 countries where a majority of the population follows one of the four major religions. One of their most intriguing discoveries: in developing countries, a sharp rise in people's belief in hell, when accompanied by flat rates of church attendance, correlates with economic growth. A belief in heaven has a similar, though less pronounced, correlation with economic growth. McCleary, the daughter of a Methodist missionary, says their findings don't mean that governments should promote religion, but that they should value religion and not regulate it (*Boston Globe*, November 15).

Stingy givers: By some estimates only 3 to 5 percent of foundation money goes to organizations serving the most needy populations—the poor, people of color, children at risk, the disabled. These organizations are especially hurting during this deep recession. The most wealthy individual donors are even stingier relative to these populations; typically most of their charitable giving goes to universities, medical organizations and arts and cultural institutions. Pablo Eisenberg at the Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute encourages foundations to increase their payout rate beyond the mandated 5 percent, to make their application and accounting procedures easier and to support not just special projects but also the operating expenses of nonprofit organizations (*Wall Street Journal*, November 9).

Play list: A high-profile group of musicians, including Pearl Jam, R.E.M., the Roots and Rosanne Cash, is petitioning the government to release a list of all the music that was played at Guantanamo prison during coercive interrogations. These artists protest the use of music in torture, a practice that has been discontinued. Suzanne G. Cusick, a music professor at New York University who has researched the use of music as torture, says that “sound at a certain level creates sensory overload and breaks down subjectivity and can [bring about] a regression to infantile behavior.” She adds that this effect depends “on the constancy of the sound, not the qualities

of the music" (*Washington Post*, October 22).

Next best option: Two methods have been used to squash insurrectionist movements in non-Western countries, says political commentator William Pfaff—and both have failed. One method, used in the early years of the Vietnam War, treats an insurrection as a conventional military operation and attempts to overwhelm it with superior military force. The other approach is the “clear and hold” method popularized by General David Petraeus in Iraq and being considered for use in Afghanistan. Pfaff suggests the best option is not to get into the situation in the first place; second best is to get out as quickly and gracefully as possible, which is what Pfaff recommends for the U.S. in Afghanistan (williampfaff.com).

Holy rollers: Portland, Oregon, is known as a bike-friendly city, with 6.4 percent of commuters pedaling their way to work. But it comes with a cost: there have been three cycling fatalities this year and six in 2007 (though none in 2008). It seemed natural to the priest at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Parish to bless a new church shrine honoring Madonna del Ghisallo—the patron saint of cyclists—and to remove some pews so that cyclists could roll their bikes into the sanctuary to pray before the shrine. Thirty-five cyclists showed up for the blessing of the shrine, which features a painting of the Madonna watching over a ghostlike riderless bike. The priest blessed each of the bikes by squirting a few drops of holy oil on the bike chains (RNS).

Bravado is a killer: By the time Americans reach the age of 85, women outnumber men 2.2 to 1. And among people in their nineties this disparity grows to 3 to 1. Men are at greater risk for coronary heart disease, suicide and homicide. Despite the fact that from birth males are more fragile than females, boys and men are conditioned to be tough. Hence, males are much more reluctant to seek medical help. “The cultural reasons for not going to the doctor are killing men,” says Dr. Marianne J. Legato, author of *Why Men Die First* ([Web MD](#)).

Disarmed: An armed robber apologized to a cashier in Indianapolis, but he said he had to rob the currency exchange because times are tough and he had a two-year-old to support. When the cashier started to cry, asking the man to reconsider his actions and mentioning God, the robber asked her to pray with him. On their knees, they prayed for nearly ten minutes. The robber gave the cashier the sole bullet in his gun as a sign he wouldn’t hurt her. He sent the cashier into the bathroom and then took only \$20 from the cash register before leaving (UPI).