

# Century Marks

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John Cole, Scranton Times-Tribune

**American paradox:** “America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior,” argues Bill McKibben (*Harper’s Magazine*, August). As a share of its GDP, the United States is second to last among developed countries in foreign aid; almost 18 percent of American children live in poverty, compared to 8 percent in Sweden; the U.S. murder rate is four to five times that of European countries. We have higher rates of divorce and teenage pregnancy too. Americans have hijacked the teachings of Jesus that “call for nothing less than a radical, voluntary, and effective reordering of power relationships, based on the principle of love,” says McKibben. The dominant American theologies of end-times obsession and consumer-oriented religiosity “undercut Jesus, muffle his words, deaden his call, and in the end silence him.”

**Reality and the just war:** In principle John Wyclif (d. 1384) believed in the theory of just war, but in practice he thought it virtually impossible to conduct one, according to Ian Christopher Levy (*Theological Studies*, volume 66). Like Augustine, Wyclif believed that war is not a good in itself, but should be used only as a means to peace and should only be conducted out of love for the enemy. Yet since love is patient and does not return evil for evil and because war is so spiritually perilous, it is better to follow the law of Christ—the way of charity, peace and humility—even if

it results in martyrdom, and to leave vengeance to God. Wyclif did not use the divine sanction of war in the Old Testament to justify contemporary wars, for, as Levy puts it, “times have changed; the New Testament commandment is to preach the gospel to every creature and love all men by forgiving them the injuries they inflict, just as Christ did.”

**Practical theology:** As a philosopher who has taught in several divinity schools and seminaries, Nicholas Wolterstorff has noticed that the teaching of the practical disciplines is chaotic and that those who teach them are deemed second-class faculty. The assumption is that when students pursue the practical disciplines they will simply apply all that is taught in the rest of the seminary curriculum. Wolterstorff recommends that preaching, liturgics, pastoral counseling and administration be taught in the context of the reading of theology—from the church fathers to liberation theology—with a view to the kind of communities the students will ultimately minister to. Referring to the medieval teaching of theology for the formation of the monastic community, he observes that “it would be fascinating to mine the tradition of formation theology to see what we can learn about forming our communities to be seekers of justice” (*Theological Education*, volume 40).

**Unlikely trio:** At first reflection it would not seem that Arthur Miller, Susan Sontag and Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), who died within nearly three months of each other, had much in common. But C. Clifton Black probed beneath the surface and discovered that all three had fathers in some aspect of the garment business. They all became public intellectuals who passionately cared about what it means to be human in our time. They believed that the morality of remembering is important, and all three lived lives that were redoubts against fear. Miller was the one most identified with theater, but Sontag also wrote several plays, and as a youth Wojtyla cofounded a theater—his pseudonymously published *The Jeweler’s Shop* was adapted as a movie starring Burt Lancaster. Beyond that, the differences are many. Wojtyla was the only one “comfortable with the project of exploring ‘our life in God’s light’” (*Theology Today*, July).

**Elective surgery:** The human being is far from a perfect organism, writes biologist Mary Beth Saffo (*The American Scholar*, Summer). Besides being metabolically impoverished, “our anatomy could use a little touching up.” For starters, how about a redesign of the sinus cavities or improvement of the spinal architecture? People with high dental bills might envy sharks and snails, which have the ability to replace their teeth. And then there’s the immune system, which doesn’t protect us from all

diseases, and even has the capacity to attack us sometimes. Where would you like some improvement—the muscles or joints, the digestive or respiratory systems, your hearing or sight? Says Saffo, “casual consideration of the average talk show, or faculty meeting, or the stupendous folly of environmental abuse, makes it clear that even our vaunted intelligence, a key to our evolutionary success, has its limitations.” Imagine that.

**How to avoid getting burned at the stake:** Although not a catechism in the usual sense, *The Lutheran Handbook: A Field Guide to Church Stuff, Everyday Stuff and the Bible* (Augsburg Fortress) is an accessible and light-hearted compendium. Newly initiated and seasoned Lutherans (and other Christians) can learn about the seven funniest and the five grossest Bible stories, how to sing a hymn and listen to a sermon, how to share their faith with others, and much more. The handbook also counsels initiates on how not to get burned at the stake: Avoid public heresy, the practice of witchcraft and getting nabbed in a political uprising. If you are accused of heresy, demand a public trial, state your position clearly and repeatedly, and support your case with scripture. If that doesn’t work, consider recanting. If burning at the stake seems imminent, try wearing flame-retardant material. If you can’t escape, ask that dry wood be used with plenty of kindling so you can get it over with as soon as possible.

**Damned if you do . . . :** Back in 1994 a lawyer working for the Catholic Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, was responding to a lawsuit seeking support for a child fathered by a seminarian. He argued in Archbishop William Levada’s name that the mother had engaged “in unprotected intercourse” when she “should have known that could result in pregnancy.” In other words, church-prohibited contraception should have been used. The legal argument went unnoticed until Stephanie Collopy returned to court last month (July) seeking added child support. Levada this year succeeded Pope Benedict XVI, née Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as the Vatican’s doctrinal watchdog. The August 3 *Los Angeles Times* article pointing to the earlier legal defense said that Levada was unavailable for comment, but the attorney, Richard J. Kuhn, explained that when he wrote the argument he had taken a “common sense” legal perspective. Kuhn said he doubted that Levada actually saw his pleading in the case. Ultimate responsibility still lies with Levada, said theologian Richard O’Brien of the University of Notre Dame. “Archbishop Levada would have—or certainly should have—known what his lawyers were arguing on his behalf.”

They said it . . .

The decision to go forward with the Bolton appointment, without Senate approval and despite his demonstrable, monumental lack of qualifications, is the Bush-Cheney way. It's macho, in your face, unilateral, we don't give a damn, we're doing it our way, and if you don't like it, tough. That's the style that got the United States into Iraq and into the torture scandal.

—Matthew Rothschild, editor of *The Progressive*, on the recess appointment of John Bolton as U.S ambassador to the United Nations (August 1)

The whole point of this war, it seems, was to establish a long-term military presence in Iraq to ensure American domination of the Middle East and its precious oil reserves, which have been described, the author Daniel Yergin tells us, as "the greatest single prize in all history."

—Columnist Bob Herbert on why the current administration won't cut its losses and leave Iraq (*New York Times*, July 28).