

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue



As published in the Chicago Sun-Times. Reprinted with permission.

Real preaching: In a 1948 article, Catholic theologian Yves Congar noted two legitimate complaints to be made about sermons: First, preachers too seldom speak like persons with a spiritual life of their own who are living the things that they preach. Second, preachers don't address the life situations of their congregants. Congar thought that "preachers should be showing [people] what it looks like to live this Christian teaching" (*Worship*, July).

True confessions: Michael Jenkins, dean of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, says that the pastor of a large evangelical church told him he had decided to do away with a corporate confession in worship services. It's too much of a downer, the pastor explained. Jenkins asked him, "Isn't it more of a downer for your people to leave worship without confessing their sins and hearing the assurance of God's pardon?" (*Cultural Encounters*, Winter).

Politics by other means: Lindsey Graham, probably John McCain's best friend in the U.S. Senate, was asked to suggest something unusual about McCain in the context of discussions about Iraq. Graham responded that McCain believes that "some political problems have military solutions." For his own part, McCain has said what he took away from the Vietnam War—which he thinks was a winnable

war—was the lesson that a quagmire is a quagmire until someone figures out a way to get out of it by winning. He seems to have applied those lessons to Iraq (*Atlantic*, October).

Corps issues: No one was shocked when John McCain used a visit to Columbia University to criticize the university for not having a Reserve Officers Training Corps program on campus. But many were surprised to hear Barack Obama say that “the notion that young people here at Columbia or anywhere, in any university, aren’t offered the choice, the option of participating in military service, I think is a mistake.” Columbia students are allowed to take ROTC at other schools in the area. ROTC was dropped at Columbia and other universities in the wake of the opposition to the Vietnam War. Currently the university opposes it because the military discriminates against openly gay men and women (insidehighered.com).

Beyond black and white: Dwight Hopkins, a theologian at the University of Chicago Divinity School and a member of Barack Obama’s former congregation (Trinity United Church of Christ) says that Obama wasn’t shaped by the “black-white” narrative of the U.S. “For the first 22 years of his life, he is Hawaiian,” Hopkins noted, and Hawaii is a place where “whites are a minority population, and blacks are not seen much at all.” Those years in Hawaii, which embraces a spirit of openness and the melting pot, shaped Obama’s adult sensibilities (*University of Chicago Magazine*, September-October).

Iran cell group: State-of-the-art research in genetics, infertility treatment, stem cells and animal cloning are taking place at the Royan Institute in Tehran. Every research project must be presented to an ethics committee to ensure that it doesn’t conflict with Islamic teaching. While abortion is allowed in Iran only when the mother’s life is in danger, research on human embryos is allowed. An imam on the ethics committee explained that embryonic stem cell research produces only a clump of cells, not a human fetus. According to Islam, a fetus becomes a human being only when it is “ensouled,” somewhere between 40 and 120 days after conception, depending on how one interprets the Qur’an (washingtonpost.com).

Power list: *Forbes* magazine did not include any religious leaders in its list of “The World’s Most Powerful Women” (September 15). One humanitarian was named, at number 38 of 100—Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace laureate from Myanmar. Otherwise the list includes political leaders, business executives and media figures or entertainers. The top five are: Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany; Sheila C.

Bair, chair, Federal Deposit Insurance Company; Indra K. Nooyi, CEO, Pepsico; Angela Braly, CEO, Wellpoint; Cynthia Carroll, CEO, Anglo American. Condoleezza Rice is ranked seventh, Hillary Rodham Clinton 28th, Nancy Pelosi 35th and Oprah Winfrey 36th.

Changing their tune: Ten years ago the Southern Baptist Convention went on record saying that the woman's place is "to serve as [her husband's] helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation." Now that conservative evangelical Sarah Palin is running for the vice presidency, an SBC official says that the earlier statement doesn't speak "to the appropriateness of women serving in political office." Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics says that this theological revisionism stems from fear of being frozen out of the White House should the Republicans win or getting blamed for their loss if they don't (ethicsdaily.com).

Darwinian apology: The Church of England has posted at its Web site an apology to Charles Darwin for rejecting his theories of evolution nearly 150 years ago. Addressing Darwin, the statement says that "200 years from your birth, the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still. We try to practice the old virtues of 'faith seeking understanding' and hope that makes some amends" (cofe.anglican.org).

Ringling out: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was the first person to ring a set of treasured bells after they were returned to the Danilov Monastery, the seat of the Moscow Patriarchate. The bells had spent decades at Harvard University. After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution the 18 bells were sold by the Soviet government as scrap metal to a U.S. industrialist. He bought the bells to save them from being melted down and donated them to Harvard. The ringing of the bells became a familiar sound in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The monastery tried for years to get the bells back, and finally did so when a Russian oil and metals magnate intervened. This Russian funded the casting of new bells for Harvard (ENI).