

Century Marks

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RJ Matson, the St. Louis Post Dispatch

Shell game: According to the Pentagon, more than 320 tons of depleted uranium (DU) were used in the 1991 Gulf War. No figures are available for the amount used in the current Iraq war. The U.S. Army claims no health risks are involved with the use of DU shells, but the United Kingdom's Atomic Energy Authority has concluded that a half-million people could die in Kuwait and Iraq from the effects of DU used in the Gulf War. Stillbirths and congenital birth defects rose 250 percent between 1989 and 1999 in the Basra region, where DU shells were heavily used. DU has a radioactive half-life of 4.5 billion years and is particularly deadly once it enters the food chain. Writes Mark J. Allman: "The hypocrisy of the American use of DU in Iraq is obvious. The U.S. invaded Iraq for violating UN sanctions and because of a perceived threat of weapons of mass destruction, and then used in the invasion weapons disapproved by the UN as WMDs" (*America*, October 17).

Shipping costs: You would think a good strategy for getting food to Africans dying of starvation would be to purchase the food from other Africans. It would lower shipping costs, get the food to the people who need it quickly and help African farmers. But that approach, which was supported by the Bush administration, violates the political axiom that "American generosity must be good not just for the

world's hungry but also for American agriculture" (*New York Times*, October 12). Actually this arrangement, protected by American law, does not even help American farmers as much as it benefits agribusiness and the shipping industry. It also benefits some nonprofit aid organizations, like Catholic Relief Services and CARE, which have become grain traders themselves, selling donated food in poor countries in order to generate revenues for their antipoverty programs. That's why the Coalition for Food Aid has opposed the administration's plan to purchase food in Africa. CARE has had a change of heart: it now supports the proposal.

Sweet sugar: So-called "flex cars" have computerized sensors that adjust to whatever fuel is in the tank—gasoline, alcohol or some mix of the two. They're very popular in Brazil, where over 60 percent of new autos have this flexibility. Unlike in the U.S., where hybrid cars sell at a premium price, flex cars in Brazil cost the same as standard, gasoline-run cars. While flex engines consume 25 percent more ethanol per mile than gasoline, the alcohol costs about a third to half as much as gas. Ethanol burns more cleanly, and it helps cane, beet, wheat and corn farmers, from whose crops the alcohol comes. There are about 4 million flex cars in the U.S., but there are 14 states without any ethanol pumps (*Christian Science Monitor*, October 7).

Curriculum revision: In response to criticism—including an article in the *Christian Century* ("Lesson plans," by Mark A. Chancey, August 23)—the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools has revised "The Bible in History and Literature" curriculum intended for use in public schools. Chancey, a biblical scholar at Southern Methodist University who wrote a report for the Texas Freedom Network, criticized the curriculum for pushing a conservative Christian perspective, for being insensitive to religious-liberty issues and for lacking academic integrity. Among the changes: the revised curriculum deletes the claim that NASA has documented that two days are unaccounted for in history—which purportedly is proof of the Joshua 10 story about the sun standing still. (NASA denies this claim.) A representative of the curriculum has called Chancey and other critics "antireligion extremists" who "never met a Bible curriculum they didn't dislike." Chancey says he appreciates the changes made in the curriculum, but he still has objections, particularly regarding the way it represents the role of religion in U.S. history and its lack of academic rigor (Associated Baptist Press).

All is vanity: The word for "busyness" in Russian is also the word for "vanity," suggesting that busyness is an "empty, unproductive spending of time, something

like walking on a treadmill, only without the benefits of exercise.” The word *busyness* entered the English vocabulary in the middle of the 19th century, and it was used in a lighthearted fashion at first, as in “being cheerfully occupied.” But now *busyness* conveys the sense that one needs more time. But why? And for what? The average American work week has decreased from 76 hours in 1863 to 39 in 1950 to only 34 hours in 2003. The most prosperous people are the busiest of all, yet no group of people in history ever had it so good or easy. Ironically, much current busyness stems from leisure activities. Americans “are restless. And our busyness is an expression of this inability to rest, rather than its cause.” Additionally, “Americans who suffer from busyness today do not prioritize. They treat all their occupations—work, family, and even leisure—as equally important” (*Social Research*, summer).

Unless a grain of wheat . . . : Diana Butler Bass, who has been studying revitalized mainline congregations, was asked by the *Wittenburg Door* (September/October), “What can turn a dying mainline church into a vital congregation?” She responded that 90 percent of the revitalized congregations she has been studying were on the verge of dying—few people were left, and the churches were about to shut down. Some experienced divisiveness or other kinds of crises. One vestry was so divided that fistfights broke out in meetings. In other cases there was clergy misconduct. What these congregations had in common was the painful awareness that if they didn’t make radical changes they would die, which made an opening “for the Holy Spirit . . . to move in and really make a change.”

Anglican bankruptcy? George Carey, former archbishop of Canterbury, caused a stir recently by saying that the church in Britain is in such serious decline that if it were a commercial enterprise, the church would have declared bankruptcy long ago. The Church of England has become “a club for the old, the resigned and those tired of life,” he declared. He lamented the fact that his efforts to renew the church in the 1990s weren’t supported by clergy, and he warned that efforts by Archbishop Rowan Williams could face the same fate. Carey threw his support to Williams’s Fresh Expressions initiative, which encourages alternative forms of worship. But he said that for the church in Britain to be renewed the focus would have to be “on mission from top to bottom” (*Telegraph*, October 12).

Church, state, mosque: While European countries seem very secular on the surface, the centuries-old pattern of established Christian churches persists. In France most churches are owned by the state; numerous Western European

countries have state-supported religious schools; and many of their official holidays are tied to the Christian year. This arrangement, which privileges Christianity, has made it more difficult for religious minorities to assimilate. In the case of Muslims, this has led to a sense of disenfranchisement, feeding the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. Writing in the *Nation* (October 17), Richard Alba and Nancy Foner say that the European difficulty in assimilating new religious groups should be a lesson to the U.S., especially for those who would erode the wall of separation between church and state. "If the state now privileges Christian expressions of morality and belief above others, then the successful inclusion of these immigrants and their children will be in peril."

Leap of imagination: Christopher Herbert, the Anglican bishop of St. Alban's, is troubled by the most strident Christian voices. "There is a noisy, almost angry, literalism around desires to define and codify who is, or who is not, a 'real Christian,' and what seems to accompany this is a plodding, narrow biblicism which is punitive in tone and joyless in character." Apprehending the beauty and truth of God, which involves paradox and apparent contradiction, takes faith, but also playfulness and imagination (*Anglican Theological Review*, summer).