

Century Marks

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Taking Jesus seriously: Michael Utzinger, a religion professor at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, was once asked at a job interview for an academic position whether he was a Christian. When he said yes, the follow-up question was whether he was willing to kill in the name of Christ. The interrogator, a historian, seemed to assume that if someone truly believed in his faith, he would be duty bound to spread that faith by any means necessary, including violence. Utzinger told the interviewer that he actually tries to follow what Jesus had to say: “Blessed are the peacemakers” and “Do not repay evil with evil” (*Cresset*, Michaelmas).

Imaging God: *Image* journal (Fall) asked writers, artists and musicians, “Why believe in God?” The respondents avoided rational arguments. Most of them told stories. Doris Betts said, “I keep deciding to believe in God, even on bad days. In this, my seventh decade, faith seems to me not certainty but commitment, a renewable vow.” Richard Rodriguez said monotheistic religions would be healthier and less inclined to extremism and violence if believers were able to admit their disbelief. Richard Jones said he didn’t come to faith easily, and when he did it was from reading scripture, especially Mark’s Gospel. “It was as if Jesus cured not only the people in the gospel story,” he wrote, “he cured me of my spiritual blindness.”

Speaking of God: Sociologist Reginald Bibby asked Canadians to rank 12 different values. He found that theists placed a higher value on love, patience and friendship than atheists did. Whereas there was only a 5 percent difference between theists and atheists in valuing honesty, there was a 32 percent difference in valuing forgiveness (UPI).

Revisiting Niebuhr: Reinhold Niebuhr’s ideas are more important now than anytime since he died in 1971, argues Paul Elie (*Atlantic*, November). Ironically, “bellicose neoconservatives, chastened ‘liberal hawks,’ and the stalwarts of the anti-war left” all claim that he would support their position on the Iraq war. Elie thinks it is Niebuhr’s biblical view of history that has enduring value, a history that “tells of a people confident of its special role yet thwarted again and again on account of its

pride, and growing in wisdom through a sense of the frailty of human nature and the limits of earthly powers.” As for the war in Iraq, Elie suggests that following Niebuhr would mean recognizing both that the war in Iraq is lost, in the sense that we can’t remake the fractious country in the image of America, and that a quick withdrawal from Iraq is impossible: having invaded Iraq, the U.S. now has a shared history, which brings with it a shared responsibility.

Big scoop: Americans spend \$20 billion each year on ice cream. But according to United Nations figures, over the next 10 years it would take only \$7 billion to provide clean water and basic sanitation for the entire world, and another \$4 billion to finance basic health care for the same period that would prevent the death of 3 million infants each year (*Theology, News and Notes*, Fall).

Organ donation: The Church of England says human organ donation is a Christian duty, in line with the giving of oneself and personal possessions voluntarily for the well-being of others. The church’s statement came during discussion in the House of Lords on whether a position on organ donation should be adopted across the 27-member European Union, of which Britain is a part. The church made it clear that it remains firmly opposed to the sale of human organs, but it said that living donors giving organs freely is acceptable when no commercial gain is involved (RNS).

Falling star: In the recent *Journals: 1952-2000*, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. passes on a story he picked up from a reporter who sat next to President Reagan at a dinner in 1987. Reagan shared his view that the Chernobyl crisis had been predicted in Revelation 8 with the opening of the seventh seal, resulting in a great star falling out of the sky, causing people to die from bitter waters. The star was called Wedgewood, Reagan said—which translates as “Chernobyl” in Ukrainian. The reporter later looked up the reference and discovered that the star was called Wormwood instead (*New York Times Book Review*, October 7).

Writer for the rest of us: Jacques Barzun, historian and culture critic, turns 100 this month. A prolific author, he has written for a wide audience. When an editor suggested that a certain topic called for more “heightened language,” Barzun responded: “You are a sky-high highbrow. Me, I suspect highbrows (and low- and middle-) as I do all specialists, suspect them of making things too easy for themselves; and like women with a good figure who can afford to go braless, I go about brow-less” (*New Yorker*, October 22).

Shot in the dark? Members of a new congregation in Ventura, California, have been handing out shot glasses to patrons at local bars, inviting them to their church called Catalyst Ventura. The glasses are inscribed with the words, "Give us a shot." The church is for "the unreached and the overchurched," according to the pastor (*Ventura County Star*, September 15).

Sisterhood: *Fidelis Sisters* is a new e-zine by, for and about young clergywomen, sponsored by the Young Clergy Women Project, an initiative funded by the Louisville Institute. The project includes a password-protected online community, face-to-face meet-ups, and a preaching conference in collaboration with the Cathedral College of Preachers. A companion group for seminarians and seminary graduates seeking their first call has also formed (www.youngclergywomen.org).