

Century Marks: Sinless aliens, etc.

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Cellumaniac© Angel Boligan, El Universal, Mexico City

Seeing double: Author Andrew Harvey, who grew up in India with very tolerant English Protestant parents, was drawn to an eclectic kind of mystical religion. But when his father was dying he went to church, and after the priest was finished preaching, the crucifix came alive: Harvey had the sensation that the Christ figure on the cross had taken a knife and slashed open Harvey's heart. After leaving the church Harvey saw a man with no legs or arms, and he saw in this man the Christ he had just seen on the cross. This experience led him to combine his mysticism with activism on behalf of people who have no voice and to inspire other people to lead

lives of service (*Sun*, May).

Prayer request: Kirbyjon Caldwell, the African-American pastor of the largest United Methodist congregation in the country, is often referred to as President Bush's spiritual adviser, but Caldwell has endorsed Barack Obama for the presidency. Caldwell says that after a rally in Houston he asked Obama how he might pray for him. Obama responded, "Pray for my wife and my children." The focus was on his family, not himself, said Caldwell, who said the check he wrote for Obama was the first political contribution he's ever made at any level (beliefnet.com).

Muslim after all? A rumor widely circulated in right-wing America is that Barack Obama is Muslim. In fact Obama is a member of a United Church of Christ congregation. But in Islamic jurisprudence, Obama is a Muslim, and the worst kind—an apostate one. A child born to a Muslim father is automatically a Muslim, regardless of whether the father is a practicing Muslim, which Obama's was not. Shireen K. Burki, who was also born to a Muslim father and whose mother is Christian, predicts that if Obama is elected president, al-Qaeda will use his purported apostate status for propaganda purposes in the Muslim world (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 19).

Outside the gates: Writer Andrew Sullivan reports that there are 12 countries that ban HIV-positive visitors from their territories—countries like Iraq, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan . . . and the United States. China has recently removed its ban on HIV-positive visitors as it prepares to host the upcoming Olympics. HIV is the only medical condition that results in banning under U.S. law; entry to the U.S. of persons with leprosy or tuberculosis is left to the discretion of the secretary of health and human services. A bipartisan group of senators is working to repeal the ban. Sullivan, a native Brit living in this country, is himself HIV-positive. Each year he must leave the country and reapply for an HIV waiver in order to return, even though he's lived here nearly 25 years (*Washington Post*, May 14).

Where hell is real: Shlemon Warduni, auxiliary bishop of the Chaldean Church in Baghdad, says that if you don't believe in hell, you should come to Iraq. Everybody there is living it on a daily basis. The electrical system runs only several hours a day; there is no diesel fuel to run generators, which is ironic in a country with an abundant supply of oil; and food is too expensive to buy. But the biggest problem is lack of security. "You don't know whether you'll make it home," the bishop says.

“Threats of attacks and abductions never end.” While as many as half of Iraqi Christians have fled the country, the bishop has never had to close his church. On Easter Sunday, Chaldean churches were filled to capacity (*Oasis*, May).

Extraterrestrial beings: Intelligent life may exist on other planets, according to José Gabriel Funes, the Vatican’s top astronomer. “Just as a multiplicity of creatures exists on the Earth, so there could be other creatures, even intelligent ones, created by God,” the Argentine Jesuit said. “This does not conflict with our faith, because we cannot set limits on the creative liberty of God.” Funes says such creatures may never have fallen into sin, and so have no need of salvation through Christianity (RNS).

No lone Christians: John M. Buchanan argues that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian, and that God places us in the blessed community called the church. Buchanan, senior pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and editor/publisher of the *Century*, makes this case in the just-published book *A New Church for a New World* (Geneva Press). Buchanan doesn’t waste time lamenting the decline of mainline denominations, and sees hope for a smaller, leaner mainline church in the future. Yet he’s not ready to write off denominations or declare this a postdenominational era.

Out with the new: By a ratio of almost 2 to 1, unchurched Americans prefer churches that look more like medieval cathedrals to the modern, utilitarian church facilities that currently are being constructed. This preference for the Gothic, found among both unchurched Catholics and unchurched Protestants, is even more pronounced among people between the ages of 25 and 34. “I don’t like modern churches, they seem cold,” said one survey respondent. “I like the smell of candles burning, stained-glass windows [and] an intimacy that’s transcendent” (survey by LifeWay Research).

Post-Baptist? Nearly one out of five Georgians was a Southern Baptist in 1970. That ratio is now down to about one in ten. The shift is due to a flattening in denominational growth and rapid growth in Georgia’s overall population. There are still a little more than 1 million Southern Baptists in the state (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 15).

Strange bedfellows: BigChurch.com is a social networking site for Christians who are looking for dating partners or life companions who share their beliefs. The site is

owned by Penthouse Media Group, a purveyor of pornography (*Newsweek*, May 19).

Dishonorable degrees: Willam Barton Rogers, founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that the granting of honorary degrees is “literary almsgiving . . . of spurious merit and noisy popularity.” At Washington University the decision to grant Phyllis Schlafly, one of its most famous alumna, an honorary doctorate has aroused a largely unfavorable response. Many on campus are furious that a woman who has given her career to crusading against women’s rights and attacking evolution is going to be so honored by the university. The university defends the decision, saying Schlafly has had “a broad impact on American life,” and in many cases the controversies surrounding her views “have helped people better formulate and articulate their own views about the values they hold” (insidehighered.com, May 16).

“[There is a] pain in the tummy of every African American that has not been articulated. And if you were to have a forum recognized by the nation, accepted by the nation, endorsed by the nation, people could come and tell their stories and tell it without fear. You really are a great country, and you owe it to yourselves to exorcise this demon. You owe it to your own children.”

—Desmond Tutu, retired Anglican archbishop of South Africa, encouraging the U.S. to organize its own Truth and Reconciliation hearings to deal with racism in America (*Chicago Tribune*, May 18)

“People aren’t good at doing things they dislike. Like asking me to judge the Miss America contest—if your heart’s not in it, you don’t do a very good job.”

—Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts, a Democrat who is gay, on persuading Republicans to bail out the economy (*Boston Globe*, May 17)