

Century Marks

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Faith in the media: Tim Russert, moderator of *Meet the Press*, never forgot or forsook his Catholic upbringing in a working-class neighborhood in south Buffalo. Russert, who died of a heart attack last month, served as an altar boy, and he received a Catholic education from elementary school through college. *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham reports that Russert implored him to appear on his weekend cable show alongside Christopher Hitchens, who had just published a blistering attack on religion. Russert, knowing Meacham was an Episcopalian, wanted him to come on the show and defend the faith. Shortly before his death Russert sent Senator Ted Kennedy, who has brain cancer, a rosary blessed by Pope Benedict XVI, with a note saying that he was praying for him (*Newsweek*, June 23).

Speaking of rosaries: A Polish clothes company has been forced to withdraw a nationwide advertising campaign depicting teenagers in erotic poses with Roman Catholic rosaries after the ads were condemned by the country's Advertising Ethics Commission. In one ad, a girl and boy are gazing earnestly at their rosaries, with a caption that reads, "Protect me, Father!" In another, the two teenagers are in suggestive poses, with the caption, "I know 69 ways to keep my virginity—do you?" "This was the most protested advert in recent years," a deputy director of the AEC told journalists in Warsaw. "This one advert provoked more protests than all others

over the past year” (ENI).

Insurance policy: Insurance companies can help prevent child abuse in the church, just as they helped make seat belts mandatory, argues legal analyst Marci Hamilton. They can require that churches and other organizations conduct background checks on employees and report allegations of abuse. They can lobby to eliminate civil and criminal statutes of limitations on child-abuse cases (though the Supreme Court has ruled that criminal statutes of limitations can’t be extended retrospectively). And insurance companies can study whether mandatory reporting statutes are working (FindLaw.com).

Prescription denied: A small but growing number of pro-life pharmacies refuse to sell contraceptives. This development has set off debates between those who say medical professionals and suppliers should have the right to exercise their faith and those who say medical professionals should put clients’ needs ahead of their own beliefs. Some pro-life pharmacies don’t post their restrictions and won’t help customers find a pharmacy that will supply contraceptives. In some cases, customers have had their prescriptions taken and not returned (*Washington Post*, June 16).

To tell the truth: Scott Ritter, former United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq, agrees with Scott McClellan’s recent claim (in his book *What Happened?*) that the mainstream media didn’t do their job in the buildup to the Iraq war. Ritter acknowledges that some journalists were pressured by their employers to adhere to the government’s line, but he also wonders whether deals were made between major news outlets and the Pentagon before the war began to allow reporters to be embedded with the troops in Iraq. He is especially interested in relations between NBC News (owned by General Electric, a large beneficiary of war) and the Pentagon. While the Bush administration was telling Congress it had no plans for war, the Pentagon was working on a plan to embed reporters with troops in Iraq, and NBC News was working on the technology needed to make live broadcasts from the war theater (TruthDig.com).

Nuclear distraction: Human rights violations in Iran are not being scrutinized since Western countries are preoccupied with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, according to Shirin Ebadi, 2003 Nobel Peace Prize-winner for her work on human rights in Iran. The current government in Iran is taking advantage of this oversight: arrests, detentions and judicial harassment of journalists, lawyers, students and trade unionists are

rising. “Undoubtedly a military attack on Iran would worsen human rights in the country,” Ebadi says.” Look at Iraq—now the fundamentalists have a pretext for their extremism. No one talks about freedom of speech or human rights. People just want a safe shelter. . . . As a human rights activist I tell the people of the world that if you want to help people in Iran the solution is not to launch an attack” (guardian.co.uk, June 13).

Unbelievable: A bill has passed the South Carolina legislature authorizing the production of license plates with the phrase “I Believe” and picturing a Christian cross over a stained glass window. The bill became law without the signature of Governor Mark Sanford, who said, “While I do, in fact, ‘believe,’ it is my personal view that the largest proclamation of one’s faith ought to be in how one lives one’s life.” The American Civil Liberties Union and the American Jewish Congress are considering suits against the state (*New York Times*, June 6).

WHO’S THE HAPPIEST? The perception that people unfettered by religion are happier than those who regularly attend church is false, says Arthur Brooks, author of *Gross National Happiness: Why Happiness Matters for America—and How We Can Get More of It*. “People who believe in no moral constraints on activities have less happiness,” according to Brooks. “If you honestly have beliefs, if you have values and adhere to them, that will give you peace,” he says. There are exceptions to his benchmark for happiness: people who view God as a condemning deity, and those who believe but infrequently practice their faith. They end up fearing death the most, he says (RNS).

Bird of a feather: Graduation from high school with honors represented more than an academic achievement for Corey Bird of Pembroke, North Carolina. A Native American, Bird was determined to wear two feathers on his robe when he walked across the stage, to honor his heritage and represent his deceased mother and grandfather. School administrators told him not to. After the Native American Rights Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union sent a letter to the school officials, Bird was granted the right to wear the feathers (narf.org).

Not appealing: A church in Suffolk, England, is being investigated by environmental health officials to determine whether its chimes are a “statutory nuisance.” Some 20 petitioners complained that the ringing of the chimes on Sunday afternoons prevents them from enjoying their gardens. One of the petitioners said she objects only to a three-hour-long pealing of the bells that occurs once every month (except for August). “It drives everybody nearby potty,” she says. The vicar

of the church asked what would happen if people in the vicinity of a football stadium objected to the noise from fans. "Would they, on the same grounds of finding it a nuisance, be able to silence the crowds at every home game?" (*Telegraph*, June 13).

"One's devotion to something cannot be truly steadfast until it has withstood moments of doubt, for the plain reason that nothing is perfect—everything on earth is vulnerable to outside forces that can divert it from its intended or natural course."
—Mohammed Naseehu Ali, essayist and fiction writer, reflecting on his Islamic upbringing (*New Yorker*, June 9 & 16)

"Children take credit for their own successes but blame their failures on their parents."
—James McConkey, emeritus professor of English, reflecting on the question "What Kind of Father Am I?" (*American Scholar*, Spring)