

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue



Free Blackberry©Frederick Deligne, Nice-Matin, France

Saint power: Though they were both Catholics, Dorothy Day and Cardinal Francis Spellman were polar opposites. Day was a pacifist, a onetime communist and an outspoken critic of American policies. Spellman was known for his social, political and theological conservatism. Yet Spellman was stunned when some American Catholics implored him to silence Day. In declining to do so, Spellman explained, “She might be a saint.” No bishop or cardinal would want to be remembered for having censured someone the church would later canonize as a saint (*Spiritual Life*, Winter).

Bible power: Robert Alter, who has translated sections of the Hebrew Bible into English (*The Five Books of Moses, Psalms*), said when asked to explain his continuing

fascination with the Bible: “There is surely no greater poetry that has come down to us from anywhere in the ancient world than the Book of Job, or the finest of the Psalms, and no more brilliant and probing narratives than the stories of Jacob and Joseph and of David.” Besides, biblical literature “asks us to examine our lives and reconsider what our vision of reality is.” There is no one biblical worldview, but rather a whole spectrum of competing worldviews, and that diversity is rewarding. The idea that we are created in the image of God is elusive and ambiguous, and it is through the “subtle and profound representation of individual character in biblical narrative” that we get glimpses of what it means (*Believer*, January).

God is not fooled: At a panel discussion in New York titled “Madoff: A Jewish Reckoning,” Rabbi David Gaffney said that the Talmud makes a distinction between a crook and a thief. “A crook is somebody who comes in with a gun and holds people up. A thief is someone who comes in the night and steals his way into someone’s home. The thief is a more despicable person in the Jewish mentality, because he thinks he’s fooling God.” Discussion about appropriate punishment for Bernard Madoff, who bilked investors out of millions of dollars through a Ponzi scheme, ranged from excommunicating him or stripping him of his money to stoning him (*New Yorker*, February 26).

What Abe might say: Lincoln biographer Ronald C. White Jr. imagines what counsel Lincoln might give President Obama: Write your own speeches, especially the major ones. Take time for contemplation and reflection amidst the pressures of the office. Don’t rush into solutions for the formidable problems. Value ambiguity, the ability to see reality in its complexity—that is a sign of humility, not weakness. Noting that Lincoln never formally joined a church, White encourages Obama to make a case in our multicultural and multireligious society for the religious and moral values that provide the historical foundation of our society (*Wilson Quarterly*, Winter).

Target voters: Zogby pollsters regularly ask voters what one store they’d like to shop at for the rest of their life and then correlate their response with how they voted. Obama won among Macy’s shoppers by 26 points, Bloomingdale’s by 35 and Neiman Marcus by 29. While Republicans typically enjoy big margins with Wal-Mart and Sears shoppers, Obama took a big bite out of this advantage—McCain won the Wal-Mart voters 58 to 41 percent. McCain won the Sears voters by 13 points, compared to Bush’s 39 point advantage four years ago. In 2004 Bush won J. C. Penney voters, but Obama won them by 13 points. Obama won Target voters by 27

points (*Politics*, January).

Praiseworthy: Pastor Jeremiah Wright seems to have softened a criticism of his former parishioner. In a sermon delivered at Howard University the day before Barack Obama's inauguration, Wright said Obama "was able to do what nobody of African descent was ever able to do in the 211-year history of this country." In an interview afterward with ABC, Wright continued to criticize the network because it had been the first to air clips of his fiery sermons that became a source of controversy during the presidential campaign (UPI).

Pope on the Web: The Vatican has extended its digital communications capabilities by launching its own video channel on the Web site YouTube. The Vatican channel (www.youtube.com/vatican) features short video news clips about events involving Pope Benedict XVI and other Vatican officials in four languages. Although users will be able to e-mail site administrators to react to content, the channel does not allow for the posting of comments by the public (RNS).

War propaganda: The chief military rabbi in Israel is being accused by an Israeli human rights group of distributing pamphlets to Israeli soldiers fighting in Gaza that border "on incitement and racism against the Palestinian people." The *Ha'aretz* newspaper reported that right-wing groups were also distributing pamphlets on military bases that included racist messages. One pamphlet implored the Israeli soldiers "not to show concern for a population that surrounds us and harms us" (AFP).

Sex and the seminary: A survey of 36 seminaries and rabbinical schools discovered that more than 80 percent do not require a full-semester course on sexuality for graduation and that two-thirds of them do not offer a course in sexuality issues for religious professionals. The "Sex and the Seminary" study recommends that competency in sexual issues should be required for ordination. It was sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and Union Theological Seminary in New York (www.religiousinstitute.org).

Sex and counseling: Gary McFarlane, a therapist working for a national counseling service in the United Kingdom, was fired last March because he said his Christian convictions prohibited him from encouraging gay sex. McFarlane filed a claim of unfair dismissal on religious grounds, arguing that he was discriminated against because of his Christian faith. "If I were a Muslim, this would not have happened. But Christians seem to have fewer and fewer rights," he said. But his employer claimed

that McFarlane had been fired because he wouldn't honor its equal-opportunity policy that all clients should be treated alike regardless of their sexuality (*Telegraph*, January 9).