

Begging to give

Feature in the [July 28, 2009](#) issue



World political map Emad Hajjaj, Jordan

Living examples: Michael Perry long ago left the fundamentalist sect in which he was raised, but he's not about to scoff at his background. "There is enough derision in the world," he explains. Besides, he says, "mine is a chastened apostasy—I don't claim to have the answers, and although I stand outside the church of my parents, I still peek through the windows for guidance." The exemplary lives of Perry's parents left a lasting impression. For years his parents have taken in foster children, many with special needs. And despite the fact that it nearly got them thrown out of their church, his parents refuse to condemn people of other faiths (*Coop: A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting*, HarperCollins).

Sabbath keeping: When the late Michael Jackson was a child performer with the Jackson Five, he longed for time just to play. On the Sabbath he was able to escape the pressures of performance. The elders in his Jehovah Witness church treated him like everyone else, even though he was already a star. "I still miss the sense of community that I felt there," Jackson said. "I miss the friends and the people who treated me like I was simply one of them. Simply human. Sharing a day with God" (RNS, originally published by Beliefnet in December 2000).

Doubts about doubt: Poet Christian Wiman observes that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection differ in the details, but they have one point in common: "Many of his followers doubted him, sometimes even when he was staring them in the face." We should learn several things from this, says Wiman: If Jesus' disciples doubted him in his presence, than doubt has little to do with distance from events. And "what we call doubt is often simply dullness of mind and spirit, not the absence of faith at all but faith latent in the lives we are not quite living, God dormant in the world to which we are not quite giving our best selves" (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, spring/summer).

Naming Jesus: President George W. Bush, a self-confessed evangelical Christian, was known for his references to his personal faith, but Eamon Javers at *Politico* notes that President Obama is invoking the name of Jesus even more than Bush. Neither conservatives nor liberals know quite what to do with Obama's display of religiosity. "I think it's a veneer, a facade that covers over a lot of policies that are anti-Christian," said Tony Perkins, head of the conservative Family Research Council. "I don't need to hear politicians tell me how religious they are," remarked Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (Martin Davis in "Sightings," June 25).

Pain medicine: Sister Nancy Kehoe, a clinical psychologist, reports about the hard-earned lessons learned by a woman named Beverly, who was tormented by mental illness. Beverly describes her own formula for dealing with pain: "When you are in pain, you must 1) wait for the relief which has always come by God's grace; 2) function as well as you can with as little self-pity and self-hatred as possible; 3) still 'be kind to all I meet' as much as I can; 4) take it one day at a time; 5) treat yourself and others as lovingly as possible. When you have failed, accept God's, others', and your own forgiveness as soon as possible. Then with His help, 'Take up your bed and walk'" (Nancy Kehoe, *Wrestling with Our Inner Angels*, Jossey-Bass).

Behind the chadors: Google "I am Neda" and you'll find several hucksters who are selling T-shirts to honor the young Iranian woman who was shot in the streets of Tehran during the post election protests. Many Westerners were surprised to learn that women were so politically engaged in a country run by conservative mullahs. But women were also organizers in Iran's "constitutional revolution" in 1905 and again in the Islamic revolution in 1979 (salon.com, June 27).

Cover up: President Nicolas Sarkozy has said the wearing of burkas by Muslim women is not welcome in France. “The problem of the burka is not a religious problem,” he said; “this is an issue of a woman’s freedom and dignity.” France has had a vigorous debate about the propriety of Muslim women wearing the hijab, a traditional head covering (UPI).

Nature vs. nurture: Men prefer women with Barbie-like figures, evolutionary psychologists once claimed. But a new consensus is emerging that suggests this preference arises only in cultures in which women are economically dependent. In countries like Britain and Denmark, where women tend to be independent, and in non-Western cultures where women are responsible for food gathering, men don’t show a preference for the hour-glass figure that is so admired in countries where women are seen as adornment—Japan, Greece and Portugal. American men take a view that lies somewhere in the between those two poles (*Newsweek*, June 29).

Ties that bind: The Southern Baptist Convention voted last month to sever ties with a Texas congregation for not being tough enough on gays. The controversy stemmed from a debate over whether to include photos of families parented by same-sex couples in a congregational directory (edgeboston.com, June 24).

Aid or development: Some of the greatest advances in economic history derived from agricultural development, yet the approach of the U.S. to alleviating hunger gives priority to food aid rather than to agriculture. On the other hand, some efforts in development are ill-conceived—such as promoting crops suitable for growing in Europe or North America rather than in Africa. The unique needs of women are often ignored, even though about 80 percent of farmers in Africa and 60 percent in Asia are women. Egypt has weaned itself from food aid by means of agricultural development since the 1970s, despite the fact that its population has more than doubled in that period (*Foreign Affairs*, May/June).

Imagine this: Richard Dawkins, an academic who is militantly atheistic, is backing Britain’s first atheist camp for children. For children ages seven to 17, the camp will include lessons on rational skepticism and moral philosophy, as well as traditional outdoor and musical community activities. The sing-along will reportedly include John Lennon’s “Imagine,” which contains the lyrics: “Imagine there’s no heaven—it’s easy if you try.” A spokesperson for the camp said that there will be very little in the camp program that attacks religion (ENI).

Why we need books: Both religion and democracy have depended upon books—not just the ideas contained in the books but the books themselves, argues writer Stephen L. Carter. “In a world in which most things seem ephemeral, books imply permanence: that there exist ideas and thoughts of sufficient weight that they are worth preserving in a physical form that is expensive to produce and takes up space.” Given the importance of books, Carter wonders “when Congress and the administration will propose a bailout for the publishing industry” (*Daily Beast*, March 17).