

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

caglecartoons.com/espanol



Pain too shall pass: The great French painter August Renoir suffered from painful arthritis in his later years, and had to strap a brush to his paralyzed fingers to do his creating. When friends suggested he give up painting, Renoir responded, “Pain passes but beauty remains forever” (Paul Coutinho, S.J., in *Just As You Are*).

Speedy correction: Joshua Speed knew his friend Abraham Lincoln to be a religious skeptic, so he was mystified one evening in the summer of 1864 when he saw Lincoln poring over the pages of the Bible. Speed told the president, “If you have recovered from your skepticism, I am sorry to say that I have not.” To which Lincoln responded: “You are wrong, Speed. Take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better

man" (*American History*, October).

Right to remain silent: Anglican theologian and priest Sarah Coakley says that a quality of great leaders is that they "can put the wounds of the past behind us, without repressing them, in order for us all to move forward with grace and forgiveness." She cites Nelson Mandela as an example. Another leadership quality, Coakley says, is the ability to remain silent the way Jesus did before Pilate. Ignatius of Antioch put it this way in his Epistle to the Ephesians: "The one who truly possesses the word of Jesus is also able to hear his silence, that he may be perfect, that he may act through what he says and be known through his silence" (interview with Coakley by Jason Byassee at faithandleadership.com, August 18).

Towering misinterpretation: John Piper, an evangelical pastor in Minneapolis, declared that it was providential that a tornado damaged the steeple of the Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis while the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was holding its convention nearby. It was, he said, a warning to the Lutheran body not to allow gays to be approved for ministry. Greg Boyd, a pastor and theologian in Minneapolis, challenged Piper's theology and noted that most tornadoes occur in the Bible Belt, the region least tolerant toward homosexuals, and that the fewest strike in the Northeast, where there is the most tolerance (gregboyd.org/blog, August 21).

Lessons from Harry Potter: At first religious conservatives did not take kindly to J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, warned about "subtle deductions" in the book series that could corrupt the Christian faith, and evangelicals worried about the positive portrayal of wizardry. Now both the evangelical *Christianity Today* magazine and the Vatican newspaper have praised the latest Harry Potter movie. Some religious interpreters go so far as to see in Harry Potter a Christ figure. Russell W. Dalton, a professor at Brite Divinity School in Texas, sees something else in Harry Potter: a theme of tolerance toward others, he says, is a critique of fundamentalism (*Boston Globe*, August 16).

The true believer: The conservative Newt Gingrich, long a nominal Southern Baptist, joined the Catholic Church this past March. Some pundits think Gingrich is positioning himself for a Republican presidential primary campaign in 2012. Gingrich says he has found comfort in surrounding himself with "2,000 years of intellectual depth." He goes to mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine in Washington, where his wife sings in the choir (*Time*, August 24).

American Hindus: Americans are becoming more like Hindus, argues Lisa Miller, a senior editor at *News week* (August 24 & 31). Like Hindus, Americans increasingly believe there are many paths to God: 65 percent think that many religions lead to eternal life (including 37 percent of white evangelicals). And 24 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation. Another possible similarity: like Hindus, whose bodies are burned on a pyre after death, more than a third of Americans choose cremation—up from 6 percent in 1975.

Something borrowed: A study by T. R. Reid (author of *The Healing of America*) of health-care systems in other countries seeks to dispel myths about so-called socialized medicine. Reid points out that many aspects of the U.S. health-care system resemble those of other countries: Native Americans and veterans are treated through a government-run system like Britain's; people who get insurance through their employers benefit from a system much like Germany's; people over 65 are part of a system (Medicare) resembling Canada's. But those without insurance are like the citizens of Burundi or Burma: they must pay for medical care out of their own pocket, and if they can't afford it they remain untreated (*Washington Post*, August 23).

Tax cheats: Surveys say most Americans believe that income tax evasion is wrong, yet it's estimated that \$350 billion a year is lost because people cheat on their taxes. Many tax cheats rationalize it by saying the rich don't pay their fair share. Ethicist David Callahan thinks that along with closing tax loopholes that favor the rich, the Obama administration should sponsor a campaign to instill ethical citizenship—and should provide more resources to the IRS to go after tax cheats (DemocracyJournal.org, summer).

Manifest destiny: The expansion of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank has “become a kind of concrete kudzu to Palestinians,” says Walter Rodgers, formerly a CNN bureau chief in Jerusalem. Rodgers expects that attempts by the Obama administration to put a freeze on Israeli settlements in Arab territories will fail, as did those of previous administrations. “When in the past I've raised the ethical implications of these land appropriations, Israelis have dismissed me, saying, ‘Hey, you Americans did it to the Indians,’” says Rodgers (*Christian Science Monitor*, August 25).

Skiing for Christ: Lynchburg, Virginia, home of Liberty University, doesn't get a lot of snow. To attract students interested in winter sports, the university has added a lodge and ski park utilizing Snowflex, a synthetic material that makes it possible to

ski throughout the year. Liberty, founded by the late Jerry Falwell, has developed a reputation for providing recreational attractions. It already has an ice-skating rink, paintball fields, motocross tracks, indoor soccer facilities, and bow-hunting and shooting ranges. “We want to show them we can have just as much fun or more fun and not have a hangover,” says a senior student who is learning to snowboard (insidehighered.com, August 25).