

# Century Marks

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lemonadeCam Cardow, The Ottawa Citizen

**Straying from the fold:** Fred Phelps, pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, is known for picketing military funerals with followers carrying placards that read “God hates fags” and “God hates America.” Members of his church are mostly from his family. But Nate Phelps, the sixth of Fred Phelps’s 13 children, will have nothing to do with his father’s work. Nate, 51, left home on the eve of his 18th birthday. He says that violence was ever-present in his upbringing and that he chafed at the rigid parenting he received. Now an atheist living in Calgary, Alberta, Nate says he rejects “any system that is sustained by hatred, any theology that acts with deliberate cruelty toward others, then revels in the suffering it causes, any ideology that would marginalize a group of people and debase them for whom they choose to love” (ENI).

**Someone's watching:** If God had put surveillance cameras in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve might have done the right thing but for the wrong reason—fear of being caught, says philosopher Emrys Westacott. He imagines two very different kinds of colleges: Scrutiny College, which constantly monitors students to keep them from cheating, and Probity College, which relies on an honor system. Which would you prefer your children would attend? While the first college might keep students on the straight and narrow, it actually inhibits their moral and personal growth,

argues Westacott. To grow morally we have to learn to struggle with the tension between what we want to do and what we ought to do—and we have to have the freedom to break the rules if we wish. Personal growth includes developing trusting relationships, which are undermined by scrutiny and surveillance (*Philosophy Now*, June/July).

**Back to the future:** Authors like Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows*) argue that the Internet is driving us to distraction and lessening our ability to concentrate. That's nothing new, according to Elizabeth Drescher. People living in medieval times had their own distractions. A medieval manuscript was typically illustrated in the text and margins, like hypertexted Internet pages, with images that often had nothing to do with the text itself. One might page through the book to see the illustrations rather than read the text. Books of commentaries contained glosses—a conversation between interpreters of the biblical text—that had the feel of blogs. Bound books in the Middle Ages often included disparate materials, ranging from Chaucer to an almanac to herbal remedies. Reading then too was an interactive social experience, as people gathered in groups to hear a book read ([religiondispatches.org](http://religiondispatches.org), July 12).

**Price of belonging:** Unlike Christian churches, in which giving is voluntary, Jewish synagogues charge membership fees. In 2005 the average yearly synagogue fee was \$1,100. In urban areas the fees could be two to three times that amount. According to Lisa Miller, Orthodox Jews typically spend much more: a family with three children could pay \$50,000 to \$110,000 a year for school fees on top of synagogue membership, summer camps and the additional cost of kosher foods. Most rabbis will not turn away people who can't afford the membership fees (*Newsweek*, July 8).

**Waiting for Gandhi:** When columnist Nicholas D. Kristof recently took his family to Israel and the West Bank, they ended up being stoned by Palestinian kids in East Jerusalem and tear-gassed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank. But Kristof returned hopeful about a small movement of Palestinians who resist Israeli occupation through nonviolent protests patterned after those of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. For this approach to be successful, Palestinians must avoid even stone-throwing, and women will have to be front and center in the movement. "Israeli security forces knew how to deal with bombers but were flummoxed by peaceful Palestinian women," said Kristof, reporting on nonviolent resistance in the village of Budrus that redirected an Israeli security fence. A documentary titled *Budrus* has been made about this event (*New York Times*, July 9).

**And a side order of peace:** Conflict Kitchen is a takeout restaurant in Pittsburgh that sells food from countries with which the U.S. is in conflict. Every four months a different country—and menu—is highlighted, along with the culture and politics of the country and the reasons for the conflict. It is now serving Iranian food, with assistance from Pittsburgh’s Iranian community ([kubidehkitchen.com](http://kubidehkitchen.com)).

**Iconoclasm in Indonesia?** A sculptor in West Java was dismayed to see his giant sculpture depicting three women defaced and torn down by Muslim activists. The Muslims regarded the sculpture as pornographic, even though the figures wore traditional sarongs. The extremists also claimed that the sculpture depicted the Holy Trinity and was evidence of the spreading influence of Christianity. While the Muslim majority in Indonesia has tended to be tolerant of other faiths, the government feels increasing pressure to pass Shari’a-based laws to stem the spread of gambling and prostitution and to avert what some see as an effort at Christianization. Moderates accuse the government of taking a hands-off approach to vigilantes, like the ones who destroyed the sculpture, and worry about the “Talibanization” of Indonesia ( [Time.com](http://Time.com), July 7).

**Kudos:** Peter W. Marty was named Parish Pastor of the Year by the Academy of Parish Clergy. The academy gives the award annually based on the the minister’s faithfulness, leadership, personal motivation and congregational objectives. Marty is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, and chair of the Christian Century board of trustees. St. Paul has a pastoral residency program for newly ordained pastors ([apclergy.org](http://apclergy.org)).

**Signs of the times:** “Try Our Church—We’re Not That Organized,” a church sign in Colorado. “Never judge a book by its movie,” a sign on an independent bookstore (Diana Butler Bass and Debra Dean Murphy via Facebook).

**Deathbed utterances:** “This is no time to make new enemies”—Voltaire, in response to a priest who advised him to renounce Satan. “. . . and now for a final word from our sponsor”—Charles J. Gussman, the brains behind some old radio shows as well as some TV shows, including episodes of *Gilligan’s Island*. “Only you have ever understood me . . . and you got it wrong”—the philosopher Hegel to his favorite student ([asylum.com](http://asylum.com), July 12).