

Life on the playground

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 24, 1999](#) issue

Across the street from the *Christian Century's* offices there used to be a wholesale outlet that sold barber supplies. On the first morning I reported for work as editor of this magazine in the summer of 1972, I left the house without a comb, so I stopped by the store to buy one. An employee looked at me with disdain. "This is a wholesale outlet; we don't sell combs." I slunk away, chagrined and embarrassed as a country boy in a big city would be, and walked across the street to my first day at work.

The barber supply shop moved out last year. But throughout almost all my 26 and a half years as editor, an assignment that ends February 15, that shop on the corner was there to remind me of a moment when my elevated ego was reduced to its proper size. I like to think that God gave me that early morning encounter as a constant reminder of the importance of modesty.

I intend to continue as a columnist here as long as my successor feels I have something to say. But Martin Marty tells me that future historians will want to know what the editor was thinking when he turned over administrative duties to John Buchanan, a good friend and a Presbyterian pastor who knows how to do things decently and in order. I have been thinking that the editor's task is to make critical judgments-and to retain a sense of modesty while doing it.

A few weeks ago I suggested that what is going on in Congress and the White House looks like what happens in a schoolyard playground when there is no teacher around to step in and call a halt to all the foolishness. A reader who describes herself as a Lutheran mother wrote to remind me that there is a supreme teacher available to address this situation. Lord knows, she is right; problem is, that divine teacher has set up the schoolyard in such a fashion that the kids are free to mess up their lives without regard to ultimate consequences. And it is an editor's duty to point this out.

My Lutheran correspondent meant well; a Christian writer ought never to conclude that things are hopeless. God is always there to make things right. But the freedom to sin is a painful fact of life, which is why this particular editor feels free to express despair over God's absence from the schoolyard. We live in a world in which we push

God away and then, in an act of enormous collective arrogance, pretend that we are interested in knowing what he wants us to do.

The other evening I watched, appalled, as Ted Koppel asked Phil Wogaman, the president's pastor, what Clinton had done to "atone" for his misconduct. What could Wogaman possibly say in that setting? The question was asked in a secular context, measure for measure, with no awareness of grace. Behind the word atonement were implied questions: what amount of money Clinton should pay, how many times he should confess, how often he should say that what he did was immoral and stupid. Why didn't he just resign?

By secular standards-and this has been clear in the demands of secular commentators from the outset-Clinton should have resigned the moment that tests on the blue dress blew his cover. But how would resignation have addressed the much larger picture, the seven-year campaign to oust Clinton from office, led by Kenneth Starr and inspired by the forces of the Religious Right and a vindictive Republican Party? A Clinton resignation would not have begun to address that ugly confluence of events, beginning with Paula Jones, whose story was hinted at in a conservative magazine and whose case against the president was funded by conservative enemies of the president; continuing with Linda Tripp, who was on a quest for a book contract, and then with a gullible Monica Lewinsky, who learned not to trust those who pretend to be good friends; and finally involving the convenient connection between Kenneth Starr and the Paula Jones case.

No, the issue is not atonement. As my Lutheran correspondent knows, that has been handled on a cross. But what would Ted Koppel do with that kind of answer? Indeed, what would he have done with the explanation that the forgiveness that matters is in God's hands-for which we are thankful, since what we do daily cannot be forgiven by anyone but God.

And what about Jean Bethke Elshtain's insistence on the same network program that a prayer breakfast was not the proper locale for the president's confession of sin? Of course, his was a public political-religious confession. The president had already made his private confession to God, to his family, to friends. But the media were demanding more, so he spoke in the context of a religious gathering. You want him to say the word sin in a press conference? Surely you jest.

Ever since Jimmy Carter confessed at a press conference that he was "born again," the media have been chewing on religious terminology. But they don't understand religious language because it is the language of grace and eternity, not the language of the sound bite and the all-news channel. Such language is antithetical to any secular measurements.

One of the worst developments in my tenure in this office has been the extent to which the Religious Right has succeeded in controlling the public debate with its simplistic way of speaking of religion in the public arena, thereby linking itself to media language which knows nothing of ultimacy and everything about absolutes.

The emergence of commercially driven advocacy secular journalism at a time when the Religious Right came out of its shell and decided to enter the political game has been one of the most devastating developments in public life in this century. What has this confluence of simplicity and absolutism done to our public life?

Consider: John F. Kennedy had a lady friend, a divorced woman who lived in Georgetown who came to the White House to have dinner and a social evening with him at least 16 times during the final two years of his life. These were not hasty, furtive encounters, but extended evenings, often involving other dinner guests. Members of the media knew about this affair but made no effort to tell the story to their readers.

Today, thanks to the religious sex police, the powers of the independent prosecutor, and the commercially driven media, future presidents will think twice before having such extramarital encounters. Which is, no doubt, a good thing. As my mother always told me, you should avoid even the appearance of evil.

So I will close on an admonishing note: Avoid the appearance of evil. But especially avoid the greatest evil, the search for the mote that is in your neighbor's eye.