Century Marks

Century Marks in the February 10, 2004 issue

Crisis on ice: A team of amateur Israeli and Palestinian explorers climbed a previously unscaled moutain in the Antarctic, and at the summit the six men and two women unfurled their national flags and read a statement supporting a nonviolent solution to the conflict back home: “We have proven that Palestinians and Israelis can cooperate with one another with mutual respect and trust. We hereby declare that our peoples can and deserve to live together in peace and friendship.” The group, which included two former Fatah activists and an Israeli special forces veteran, dealt with controversies along the way. They argued about Yasir Arafat, especially since he had endorsed their mission and invited them to visit him once they arrived home. And one of the Palestinians stirred up dissension by arguing that the Jews have no right to the Temple Mount. They even argued over what to name the mountain they were climbing. They eventually settled on Mountain of Israeli-Palestinian Friendship (*Guardian*, January 20).

That evil religion: It wasn’t particularly novel for conservative Christians, following 9/11, to castigate Islam as an evil and violent religion. In colonial America, in response to piracy by North Africans resulting in the enslavement of Americans, Cotton Mather referred to Muslims as the “fierce monsters of Africa” and “Mahometan Turks, and Moors, and devils.” Though Mather believed the captives had fallen under the judgment of God, this didn’t excuse their captors, the “filthy disciples of Mahomet.” Even after the piracy subsided, Islam became a “type” that represented all that was evil about false religions. Protestantism was, of course, the true faith—at least certain forms of it. Hence, Roman Catholicism and Judaism could be lumped with Islam as a form of religion that was irrational, legalistic and superstitious. Associating an opponent with assumed characteristics of Islam became a standard polemical device. Even Roger Williams, standard-bearer of religious liberty, likened Quakerism to following after “that stupendious [sic] Cheater Mahomet.” Some early Americans, including Jonathan Edwards, believed that in the “last days” Muslims would either be destroyed or converted en masse (Thomas S. Kidd, “Early American Uses of Islam,” *Church History*, December).

Follow the script: Much has been made of former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's revelation that the Bush administration was aiming to topple Saddam Hussein long before 9/11. But Iraq was just one of many issues on which moderates in the cabinet like O'Neill, Colin Powell and Christine Whitman felt marginalized. To them it seemed that a small group , driven by political or ideological considerations, was determining policies on the environment, tax cuts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the North Korea crisis. O'Neill, who had served in other Republican administrations, was especially taken aback by the different style of decision-making. He expected an analysis of data and a debate over strategies. But in the second Bush cabinet the "why" questions weren't on the table, only the "how" ones. The president seldom tipped his hand, and O'Neill and others didn't know where he stood on issues—even in their own area—until he made public pronouncements. Some meetings even seemed scripted, according to O'Neill: it was as though the insiders knew ahead of time the direction being set, and they played their roles accordingly (Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty*, Simon & Schuster).

Well-posed question: As a theoretical physicist and a novelist, Alan Lightman appreciates the possibilities and limitations of both science and the arts or humanities. Science engages what his thesis adviser Kip Thorne called the "well-posed question"—a problem for which there is a definite solution, even if it takes a lifetime or more to discover it. Scientists shouldn't waste their time on problems that aren't well posed, ones for which there are no solutions. But there are many interesting problems that can't be well posed in this sense: For instance, "Does God exist? Or, What is love? Or, Would we be happier if we lived a thousand years?" Science has no answer for these questions, yet they are "still fascinating questions, questions that provoke us and bring forth all kinds of creative thought and invention" (*Dædalus*, Fall).

Episcopal cool: Frank Griswold, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, who is at the center of the controversy over the election of an openly gay bishop, says that people say to him: "I love the church." But he demurs: "I certainly love Christ, who is the head of the church, but isn't it a bit dangerous if one identifies oneself or one's security with some aspect that could change?" As he handles the crisis in the Episcopal Church and the prospect of schism, Griswold keeps himself grounded by reading the Psalms each day, attending the daily celebration of the Eucharist, working out in a gym and seeing a spiritual director regularly. His spiritual director is helping him to ask, "What is God inviting me to do in this situation?" Griswold claims

to be learning the discipline of dispossession, in which “the more [that] is taken away from me in terms of security, ego gratification and all the rest—the more I am reduced to deep trust in Christ” (interview at www.beliefnet.com).

Smoke out: Forty years ago the U.S. surgeon general issued a warning concerning the health risks of smoking. In those days, 46 percent of Americans smoked; today the number is down to 22.6 percent. Over 90 percent of smokers began smoking before they turned 18 (CNN, January 10).

Chemical brew-haha: The chemical 1,3,7-trimethylxanthine is so potent in its purified form that lab technicians who work with it must wear masks and gloves. The chemical warrants the following warning label: “May be harmful if inhaled or swallowed. Has caused mutagenic and reproductive effects in laboratory animals. Inhalation causes rapid heart rate, excitement, dizziness, pain, collapse, hypotension, fever, shortness of breath. May cause headache, insomnia, nausea, vomiting, stomach pain, collapse and convulsions.” You won’t see such a warning in your local coffee shop, even though 1,3,7-trimethylxanthine is caffeine (*American Scholar*, Winter).

Reality TV gone to seed: The UPN network has announced a new reality TV series in which five 16-year-old Amish youth will be paired with five other youth and immersed in a city to see what happens. The assumption seems to be that the Amish kids are country bumpkins who won’t know how to respond to the allures and temptations of the city. One TV executive admitted that this is a replacement for another proposed reality series featuring Appalachian folks in Beverly Hills, a remake of the 1960s show *Beverly Hillbillies*. The plug was pulled on this series after a considerable outcry about exploiting Appalachian folk. The TV executive quipped that “the Amish don’t have as good a lobbying group” (*Washington Post*, January 18).