

Century Marks

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Jesus du jour: “Every era gets the Jesus it wants,” claims Susannah Heschel. Commenting on *The Passion of the Christ*, the Dartmouth religion professor says that Mel Gibson’s Jesus “is not simply the product of his own religious imagination; it is an effort to shape the American cultural moment,” as it attempts to sanctify “the right-wing memory of the horrific events of September 11—the Passion of America.” Gibson’s Jesus resembles the fascist myth of the “Aryan Jesus,” a Jesus marked by three myths: he was no lamb of God but rather a macho man; he was racially Aryan, not Jewish; and he liberated himself from the constraints of the Jewish religion. Like the Aryan Jesus, Gibson’s Jesus “withstands a barrage of physical abuse,” and the film challenges viewers: “Are you macho enough to watch this film, man enough to be a Christian?” Ultimately, the question *The Passion* poses for Heschel is whether we will see in it an expression of our own suffering as Americans, or regard Jesus’ suffering as representative of the suffering of those who are casualties of American bombs (*Tikkun*, May/June).

AIDS relief: Donald Messer of Iliff School of Theology in Denver became involved with HIV and AIDS issues in the early 1980s when he was asked to speak on the theological questions surrounding the illness. To prepare for his talk, he met with persons infected with HIV. That turned out to be a transforming experience. Messer pledged to those men that he would tell their stories. *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence* (Fortress) is an extension of that pledge. The greatest problems in the AIDS crisis, says Messer, is the underlying prejudice against persons living with HIV/AIDS and the tendency of individuals and groups to be in denial about AIDS: “This can’t be happening to ‘our’ people or to ‘good’ people—it only happens to those who are very marginalized and outside the church’s ‘walls.’” He calls people to be aware of the global trends of the disease and to press the government to support the Global AIDS Fund.

Judge not (take one): Following 9/11, Hesham A. Hassaballa, an American Muslim, held an open house at his mosque to promote understanding and goodwill. When two men rode up on motorcycles, dressed in leather, the members of the mosque

were visibly shaken. Hassaballa himself kept expecting the cyclists to do something wrong. But after taking them on a tour of the mosque, Hassaballa concluded that these cyclists were two of the nicest men he had ever met. Unfortunately, Hassaballa reports, there was nearly a 70 percent increase in incidents against Muslims in 2003, and hate crimes against Muslims increased by 121 percent (*Chicago Tribune*, May 23).

Judge not (take two): For good and ill, parents leave marks on their children. But how should children judge their parents? What John D. Barbour says to memoirists on this subject is good advice for all children in sizing up their parents. Remember that your parents were shaped by influences beyond their own control. What may seemed to have been a negative may have been intended for good—especially attempts at discipline. Parents shouldn't be blamed for trying to pass on what they value. What we most react to in our parents may well have to do with issues we struggle with ourselves. Perhaps the best antidote to unfairly judging parents is to become a parent: not only will we be judged someday by our own children, but as parents we realize we are coping with other issues besides being a parent. Finally, "to fully understand another person," including our parents, "is to forgive" (in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, edited by Paul John Eakin, Cornell University Press).

When lightning strikes: The chances of winning a lottery, according to *Investment News*, are 7 million to one. And winning the lottery can be just the start of more troubles for the lucky few. "Every time a state lottery agency has a big payday, it's tantamount to clearing an untrained pilot for takeoff." Close to one-third of lottery winners eventually seek some kind of bankruptcy relief (PreachingToday.com, May 23).

Big gamblers: Christians are more likely to invest in lottery tickets than non-Christians, while non-Christians are twice as likely as Christians to fast, a newly released survey shows (Religion News Service).

Left Behind: The success of Christian books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* and the apocalyptic Left Behind novel series is actually hurting sales at Christian bookstores. Whereas in the past these titles would have been sold almost exclusively in Christian bookstores, now they are being marketed by chain stores and discount outlets like Sam's, often at discounted prices (*Ledger-Enquirer*, May 22).

How not to win friends: Ralph Drollinger, who leads weekly Bible studies for legislators in the California state capitol, recently wrote that female lawmakers with children at home are living in sin by being away from those children. The legislative women's caucus was not pleased. Said one member: "I guess we're supposed to stay barefoot and pregnant. What about dads who live in Sacramento four days a week? Is that sinful?" Drollinger had earlier referred to Catholicism as "one of the primary false religions of the world." Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver, are both Catholics (*Los Angeles Times*, May 21).

In case you wanted to know:

- Christian Exodus is a movement trying to enlist at least 50,000 Christians willing to move in order to establish a conservative sovereign Christian state within but independent of the U.S. "Such a nation will be free of burdensome taxation and federal meddling in local affairs," the movement claims (see www.ChristianExodus.org).
- A judge in Ohio, playing Solomon, decided that a family Bible had to be put on auction and the proceeds split between the two siblings who were feuding over who owned the 125-year-old treasure that had belonged to their deceased mother. The siblings had rejected a proposal to share the Bible on a rotating, six-month basis (AP, May 25).
- Donald Sneed of Dallas, who bills himself as a "private theological researcher," has released a video, *The God Number*, that provides "mathematical and scientific proof" that God exists. He draws on a concept called "Definity-Uninity-Infinity," which "substantiates the identification of the specific number that represents God," which turns out to be zero (*Chicago Reader*, May 21).
- A Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was conducted by a robot (*Harper's*, June).