

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue



Mike Lester, The Rome News-Tribune "Excuse me, sir. There's a Jeep Cherokee in the parking lot with its lights on..."

Christianity lite: Some of the CEOs notorious for unethical business practices are also “born-again” Christians. The list includes the recently acquitted Richard Scrushy of HealthSouth, Ken Lay of Enron and Bernard Ebbers of WorldCom, who was just sentenced to 25 years in prison. How did they justify to themselves actions that are unethical, if not criminal? Robert S. McElvaine of Millsaps College (*Chicago Tribune*, July 17) has an explanation, inspired by what he learned from two of his students who were comparing Hinduism and Christianity. Hindus believe in karma, they pointed out, so what one does in this life matters for the next life. But what matters for Christians is mere belief in Jesus Christ. This brand of Christianity, according to McElvaine, “basically says all you need to do is accept Jesus and then you can do whatever the hell you want (unless, of course, your name is Bill Clinton).”

What makes a “good” Christian? Is it belief or action that makes one a Christian? Does it mean volunteering extensively, or opposing abortion and the death penalty, or believing in personal change and redemption? That is what researchers at Boston University School of Theology are trying to find out with a 59-question survey posted at www.religiositiescalesproject.com. Other scales used to measure what makes a good Christian used evangelical or conservative standards, they discovered. They

hope to solicit other points of view and measure a broader scope of behavior. The researchers say that *practicing Christian* could be substituted for *good Christian*. They are trying to measure the importance of numerous variables to Christians rather than make judgments about how good or bad people are.

Real evangelicals: Writer David James Duncan grew up in a fundamentalist Seventh-Day Adventist Church, but once he was given the freedom to choose he left and never returned. He looks for God in nature and in what he calls the great wisdom texts of human experience. He does not think that the name *evangelical* necessarily fits those who are most inclined to own that moniker. Instead, it should belong to those who are inspired and motivated to live by the spirit of Jesus. “When the non-Christian Ambrose Bierce, for instance, wrote, ‘War is the means by which Americans learn geography,’ there was acid dripping almost visibly from his pen. His words, however, are aimed at the same antiwar end as the gospel statements ‘Love thine enemies’ and ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’ And ‘Blessed are the peacemakers.’ Bierce’s wit is in this sense evangelical whether he likes it or not” (*Orion*, July/August).

Hogwarts or hogwash? Before he became pope, Benedict XVI declared that the Harry Potter novels erode Christianity in the souls of the young. He shared his views in an exchange with a fellow Bavarian Catholic, Gabriele Kuby, who published a book in which she argues that the fantasy series blurs the line between good and evil. Prior to the July release of the sixth volume in the Harry Potter series, an Italian newspaper reported that the Vatican was concerned not about the fictional use of magic, but about “the mixture of reality and supernatural that does not submit to common principles and regulations of the church hierarchy” (ENI, July 15).

Osama’s poll numbers: Support for Islamic extremism is declining among Muslims, according to a recent poll taken by the Pew Center for the People and the Press. For instance, 15 percent of Moroccans and 25 percent of Pakistanis said that suicide bombings could be justified against civilian targets, a drop from around 40 percent a year ago in both countries. One exception to this trend appears in Jordan, where 57 percent think suicide bombings and violence can be justified in defense of Islam. Nearly three quarters of Moroccans and about half of those in Pakistan, Turkey and Indonesia—all largely Muslim nations—think that Islamic extremism is a threat to their own countries (*Guardian*, July 15).

Boston teed off: Three years ago Pennsylvania Republican senator Rick Santorum wrote at a Catholic Web site (Catholic Online) that “it is no secret that Boston, a seat of academic, political and cultural liberalism in America, lies at the center of the storm” of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal. More recently Santorum and his spokesman put forward the theory that the liberal bias of Harvard and other academic institutions in the Boston area explain why sexual freedom is more predominant in Boston. Statistically, however, Boston can’t be considered the center of the priest-abuse scandal. That dubious honor belongs to Covington, Kentucky, where since 1950 9.6 percent of priests have been accused of abuse compared to 7 percent in Boston. Dioceses in Albany, New York; Jackson, Mississippi; and Belleville, Illinois, all have higher percentages of accused priests than Boston (*Boston Globe*, July 17).

Ten and counting: When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in early July that the state of Texas could continue to display the Ten Commandments on its capitol grounds, it actually was ruling on a version of the text which includes 11 commandments—or 12 if you’re Jewish (Jews consider “I am the Lord thy God” the first commandment). Sponsored by the Fraternal Order of Eagles, the display presented a compromise version of the commandments to maintain the support of both Jews and Christians of various traditions, who don’t divide the commandments the same way (*Newsweek*, July 11).

Matter of class: Mario Cuomo, former governor of New York, says Americans have to get beyond a simplistic disparagement of government and apply the prescription of Abraham Lincoln, who said: “We should do for ourselves collectively through our government the things the market system does not do at all or as well.” Cuomo says that elementary and high school education, health care, end-of-life security, highways, pensions, space travel and care for the disabled are among those programs that a market system doesn’t serve well. He fears that with the large tax cuts that have gone to the wealthy over the past 11 years, “we risk a weakened democracy and an emerging plutocracy, a nation in which the wealthy rule and the rest stagnate” (*USA Today*, June 29).

Laws of religious relativism: “Any religion is, by definition, crazy to nonbelievers,” according to “Yr hmb1 srvnt” of the *Dallas Morning News* (June 30).

Beyond the Steel Curtain: The late James Henry Smith was a rabid Pittsburgh Steelers fan. After his death, his family created a tableau at the funeral home: the

deceased was placed in a recliner with a TV remote in his hand, a Steelers blanket was spread across his legs, cigarettes and a six-pack of beer were placed at his side, and a continuous loop of Steeler highlights was set to play on a TV. "It was just like he was at home," his sister said.

Fish or fowl? You've seen the early Christian fish symbol used as a bumper sticker. Now BushFish.org is marketing its own version of this symbol, which reads "One nation . . . Under God," with "Bush" in large type in the middle. This car magnet is for those Christians who are tired of secularists telling them that prayer has no place in the public school system, evolution is the only explanation for human origins, "God" shouldn't be in the Pledge of Allegiance, the Ten Commandments don't belong in public places, Terry Schiavo had no right to live and life begins after birth. That about covers it all.

They said it...

"Tenderness and stubbornness make for a good marriage, and marriage is the true test of character—to make a good life with your best critic. You have many critics, but your spouse is by far the best informed of all of them."

—Garrison Keillor, radio host of *A Prairie Home Companion* (Tribune Media Services)

"I talk about things for everyday life. I don't get deep and theological."

—Joel Osteen, pastor of the nondenominational Lakewood Church in Houston, the largest congregation in the country, which just moved to its new home, the 16,000-seat Compaq Center (RNS)