

Century Marks

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Chris Slane, New Zealand

"Instead of endorsing universal health care—a topic she knows a lot about—[Sen. Hillary] Clinton is busy cosponsoring with Sen. Robert Bennet, R-Utah, a law to bar desecration of the flag. Has anyone burned a flag lately?"

—Columnist Helen Thomas on the Democrats' lack of courage to buck the Republican-controlled Congress, which cut \$40 billion from programs aiding the poor and passed another \$95 billion worth of tax breaks (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Decemer 13)

"They hate [President] Bush more than they love Iraq."

—Peter Dula, Iraq program coordinator for the Mennonite Central Committee on the antiwar movement in the U.S., which he respects (*Mennonite Weekly Review*, December 12)

"The new Pope . . . has identified a group of people and said, regardless of how they behave or what they do, they are beneath serving God. It isn't what they do that he in concerned with. It's who they are."

—Blogger Andrew Sullivan on the Vatican ruling that excludes gays from candidacy to the priesthood (*Time*, December 12)

The miracle that wasn't: Bruce Wilkinson not only believes in miracles but thinks we should expect them, and he wrote a small book on the subject—*The Prayer of Jabez*—that made him wealthy. With his wealth he launched Dream for Africa, a Christian organization focused on solving problems of AIDS, orphans, poverty and hunger in Africa. Making Swaziland his base of operation, he aimed to put 10,000 orphans in group homes with Swazi supervisors. The homes, grouped in mini-villages of 50-some homes, would also function as a bed-and-breakfast sites where tourists could stay for \$500 a week—combining charity and vacation. Wilkinson's plan ultimately failed, according to the *Wall Street Journal* (December 19), because the Swazis saw his efforts as one more form of Western colonialism. He had asked the king of Swaziland for a 99-year lease on 32,500 acres near two of the country's best game reserves, in addition to control over the game parks. The American ambassador to Swaziland had advised Wilkinson against taking the orphans out of their native villages and placing them in an alien environment. Wilkinson eventually resigned from the organization he had established. He says, "Somewhere in this it's got to be all right to attempt a vision that didn't work and not to make it an overwhelming failure."

To make resolutions—or not: Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), writer and lexicographer, was in the habit of writing resolutions in his journal. A typical list of resolutions: to rise at eight, to keep a journal, to read the whole Bible through before Easter, to gather arguments for Christianity and to worship God more frequently in

public. His periodic assessments of how well he was keeping his resolutions were seldom positive: "I have corrected no external habits, nor have [I] kept any of the resolutions made in the beginning of the year, yet I hope still to be reformed, and not to lose my whole life in idle purposes." All this adds poignancy to the last prayer he wrote before he died: "Grant, O Lord, that my whole hope and confidence may be in [Jesus Christ's] merits and in thy mercy: forgive and accept my late conversion, enforce and accept my imperfect repentance . . . and receive me, at my death, to everlasting happiness, for the Sake of Jesus Christ. Amen." (John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, eds., *The Supplicating Voice: Spiritual Writings of Samuel Johnson*, Vintage).

Beyond control: A police state like the former Soviet Union lives by the Leninist principle that trust is good but control is better. But Karl Marx himself had wondered, Who controls the controllers? The only response is to have more controllers, which leads to a pervasive system of control in which people say only what they think authorities want to hear, and stop thinking for themselves. Jürgen Moltmann (*Theology Today*, January) turns the Leninist maxim around—control is good, but trust is even better. But trust can only flourish where there is freedom for people to grow in truth telling. To restore trust where it has been lost, there must be repentance, confession of guilt, a change of heart, and reparation—which can happen on both the personal and the political levels. Even nations are capable of "confidence building measures" that restore the trust of their citizens or of other nations.

Outing the truth: Bill Moyers reports that every 18th-century democratic constitution included a statement about the public's right to information, with two exceptions: Sweden and the United States. Not until 1966 did the U.S. see passage of the Freedom of Information Act, which, with some exemptions and exclusions, requires the federal government to disclose records upon written request. Moyers was White House press secretary when President Lyndon Johnson signed this law, and he knew Johnson hated the idea of journalists disclosing what went on behind the scenes. He called the Freedom of Information Act "the damned thing," threatening to veto it. But because of pressure from some editors, he signed the bill, and then ended up taking credit for it (Moyers's December 9 speech for the 20th anniversary of the National Security Archive, posted at www.commondreams.org).

National day of prayer: Bruce Barton, author of the popular *The Man Nobody Knows*, was an isolationist. Around 1950 he was urging the United States to institute

a day of repentance in which the U.S. “would confess that everything it has done in foreign policy, beginning with the Spanish-American War, was based on the false premise that when any people anywhere in the world are doing something we don’t like, it is our moral duty to shoot them” (Richard M. Fried, *The Man Everybody Knew: Bruce Barton and the Making of Modern America*, Ivan R. Dee).

Did you know? National Public Radio has been under pressure from conservatives for its alleged liberal bias, but Jeffrey A. Dvorkin, NPR ombudsman, notes that NPR draws on many think tanks for its commentary. A tally of commentaries by think tank experts in 2005 indicates that interviewees more often came from the right than the left: 239 from the right, 141 from the left (www.npr.org, December 14).

Undefining “God”: Novelist and naturalist David James Duncan says that *God* is a word that needs to be undefined, not defined. “God is Unlimited. Thought and language are limited. God is the fathomless but beautiful Mystery Who creates the Universe and you and me, and sustains it and us every instant, and always shall. The instant we define this fathomless Mystery It is no longer fathomless. To define is to limit. The greater a person’s confidence in their definition of God, the more sure I feel that their worship of ‘Him’ has become the worship of their own definition. I don’t point this out to insult the fundamentalists’ or anyone else’s God. I point it out to honor the fathomless Mystery” (*Portland Magazine*, Fall).

Just for you: The “Me Church” is where it’s all about you: it doesn’t start until you get there, if your baby cries you can just stay seated, and the church will even get you tickets to the Super Bowl. Check it out at sermonspice.com. Click on View Videos, then scroll down to and click on “MeChurch.”

No photos please: Taking photos is forbidden among the Amish, and photos got Amishman Jake Byler of Ohio into trouble. A 70-something widower, Byler had engaged the services of a prostitute, who, along with her boyfriend, extorted \$67,000 from him by threatening to put photos of him engaging in the illicit act on the Internet. When Byler’s bank and his own family members started to raise questions about his financial dealings, Byler confessed his sin. Byler cooperated with the authorities, who videotaped Byler making a payment to his extortioners. Eventually, the prostitute, her boyfriend and several accomplices were indicted for extortion, theft and burglary (*Plain Dealer*, December 14).