

Century Marks

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Allah be praised? Farah Ahmedi lost a leg and severely mangled the other one when, as a second-grader, she stepped on a landmine in her native Afghanistan. Then she lost her father and sisters in a bombing when the Taliban took over her country. Later, her brothers tried to escape to Pakistan, but they haven't been seen or heard from since. Ahmedi and her mother took a harrowing trip themselves to Pakistan, where they were linked with World Relief, an evangelical American organization, which sponsored their relocation to the U.S. Not knowing any English, Ahmedi was mentored by an American Christian woman, who helped her to make the transition to this country. Ahmedi says her American friend is respectful of her Islamic faith. They share with each other what their religion means to them, without belittling the other or trying to convince her that her faith is inferior. Ahmedi, now a high school senior, was recently recognized by Paul McCartney for her contributions to the United Nations Adopt-a-Minefield Program; she had raised \$200,000 to clear three minefields (Farah Ahmedi, *The Story of My Life*, SSE/Simon & Schuster; *Daily Herald*, December 28).

How the mighty fall: The fate of those who lost their lives in the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, was fixed nearly 40 years beforehand, argue Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn (*102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers*, Times Books/Henry Holt). In the mid-1960s New York City relaxed its building code for high-rise buildings, making them easier and cheaper to build. The New York Port Authority, owner of the towers, declared early in 1968 that it would build according to the new code, which wouldn't go into effect until December of that year. As a result, there was less fireproofing installed in the World Trade Center buildings than in older structures like the Empire State Building, and there was more rentable space at the expense of safety and security features like evacuation routes. Although the Port Authority assured the city that the towers could withstand a direct hit from a commercial airplane, the fireproofing materials used in the buildings were never adequately tested. Dwyer and Flynn compare the hubris behind the Twin Towers to that behind the Titanic, which sank nearly a century before.

RSVP: Marilyn Chandler McEntyre is troubled by bumper stickers that read: “The Bible said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Instead, she would like to see bumper stickers that say: “If you can’t handle paradox, get out of the pulpit.” Or “If you can’t handle metaphor, get out of the ministry.” She says that the Bible is “arguably the most mysterious, strange, challenging, complex book in the world,” and should be approached with a sense of mystery, not wooden literalism. Reading it should be considered an invitation: “‘Come,’ it says over and over. Come to me and I will give you rest. Enter it. Sit and eat. Dwell. Consider. Trust. Look again. The ground of all theology lies in that invitation. First and last, it is a proposal, sent in love by the heavenly Bridegroom, that summons us into a relationship more intimate than any we can know this side of heaven” (*Weavings*, January/February).

Time for talk: Some wonder if Rowan Williams has abandoned his rather liberal views on homosexuality since becoming archbishop of Canterbury. Not so, says Mike Higton (*Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, SCM Press, reviewed in *Expository Times*, December). Rather, Williams wants neither a plurality of theologies existing side-by-side nor the imposition of his own ideas on the Anglican Communion. The key to Williams’s approach is to facilitate a serious conversation between opposing factions and points of view.

Stop the shooting: The number of soldiers applying for conscientious objector status has been growing, according to the *Washington Post* (December 31)—some 110 in 2004, or four times the number in 2000. About half of those applications were approved. Although that number isn’t huge, the GI Rights Hotline operated by the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Conscience and War, said it received more than 36,000 calls in 2005 from soldiers asking about how they can get out of the service, compared to fewer than 1,000 a year before the war in Iraq began. “Going home gave me the opportunity to put my thoughts in order and to listen to what my conscience had to say,” said one soldier whose application for CO status was denied. Answering people who asked him about the war took him “back to all the horrors, the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood or an innocent man decapitated by our machine gun fire,” he said.

Mix and match: A growing number of people are attending more than one church in a given week or month. This is especially true of young people: they may go with their family to church, then also attend the services—or youth group—of another church that seems to click more with them. Christian Smith, director of the National

Study of Youth and Religion, says that many parents are supportive of their youth looking for an authentic relationship to faith, and that “if you don’t choose it, it’s not authentic for you.” But critics say that this is one more example of a consumerist approach to religion and that it is more difficult for these people to enter into a deep relationship with a church (*New York Times*, December 30).

Endorphin high: Merrimack College, a Catholic institution near Boston, offers a course on “The Spirituality of Running,” open only to serious runners as a religious studies elective. Students learn about the history of running going back to the first Olympic Games, which were actually a religious festival. Besides reading essays on running, they view films such as *Prefontaine*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Running Brave*, and are expected to write seven brief reports on movies or stories about running and a personal essay on a spiritual running experience. The professor, who is also a coach for the college’s cross country team, views running as a form of pilgrimage (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 6).

Hot as hell: Some think hell can’t be any hotter than 832 degrees Fahrenheit. Above that temperature, brimstone vaporizes (Chuck Crisafulli and Kyra Thompson, *Go to Hell: A Heated History of the Underworld*, SSE/Simon & Schuster, reviewed by Religion News Service).