

Century Marks

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Strange bedfellows: Ralph Reed, former director of the Christian Coalition, and Jack Abramoff, the Washington lobbyist now under indictment for fraud and conspiracy, worked together on the gaming industry—the former to get rid of it and the latter to promote it. As Al Franken tells the story in *The Truth (with Jokes)* (Dutton), in Alabama Abramoff hired Reed to rally churches to oppose the introduction of a state-sponsored lottery program, which was threatening to Abramoff's clients, the Choctaw casinos in Mississippi. Reed used radio ads featuring James Dobson and sent antilottery bulletin inserts to churches throughout the state. In Texas, Reed organized church support for closing an Indian-run casino that competed with another of Abramoff's clients, an Indian-run casino across the border in Louisiana. In both cases, Reed was paid with casino money channeled through intermediary organizations to conceal from Reed's supporters the source of revenue. *USA Today* (January 17) reports that Reed, who is running for lieutenant governor in Georgia, said that if he knew then what he knows now he "would not have undertaken that work."

Curious John: When Hungarian-born historian John Lukacs came to this country in 1946, he was disappointed with the lack of curiosity in his American students, a condition which he says has only gotten worse. To learn anything, says Lukacs, one must be curious enough about something to pursue it, to see where it leads, and in so doing, find out how little one knows. Such curiosity, and knowing how little one knows, are chief qualities in a historian. In the 16th century, the French term for intellectual historians was *curieux* (interview on *Mars Hill Audio Journal*, volume 75).

Exilic community: There are no good figures on how many Christians live in the Middle East, but by one estimate there may be 10 million, the largest group being the 6 million or so who live in Egypt. Although Christians have deep roots in the Middle East, they are increasingly a beleaguered minority there, especially with extremist Islam on the rise and tensions between factions such as the Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq putting the squeeze on them. "Being anti-Christian is a way of showing what a good Muslim you are," says a Lebanese journalist. This pressure

means that more Christians are leaving the region. In Iraq, well-to-do Christians have been targets of robberies and kidnappings, causing many professionals to leave the country. Says one Christian businessperson in Iraq: “Christians started to leave in Saddam’s time because of the oppression. Now they are leaving for a new reason—fear of religious persecution” (BBC News, December 15).

Twain views of Twain: Mark Twain is often considered to have been hostile toward religion, but his relationship to religion was actually more complex, says Dwayne Eutsey (*Soundings*, Spring/Summer). Twain said that what he really wanted to be was a preacher of the gospel, a calling undermined by his own distaste for formal religion. “I have never heard a sermon from which I have not derived some good, but there have been some near misses,” Twain commented. One of his best friends was Joseph Twichell, a Congregational minister whose church Twain attended, although he never became a member. Twichell was a liberal who was friends with numerous Unitarian ministers. Some of the religious themes in *Huckleberry Finn* may have been mediated through Twichell, including a disdain for tradition; an interest in direct experience of the divine, especially in nature; and an earnest desire to do the right thing even if it entails bucking convention—like Huck not reporting runaway slave Jim to his owners.

He who laughs: Foy Valentine, who just died, knew what he was speaking of when he critiqued fundamentalism, having been a victim of the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. Valentine said of the conservatives: “The inclination to conserve the creativities of the past can become such a compelling obsession that nothing new can ever pop into our heads. One of the tragedies of fundamentalism, religious or political or social, is that it is a joyless, argumentative, dogmatic, quarrelsome, fighting neurosis that squelches freedom and quenches creativity. The Devil of fundamentalism scowls and frowns and complains and opposes and bickers and moans and maneuvers and manipulates and schemes and plots but seems incapable of achieving the freedom to enjoy a hearty laugh. Revealed religion, we bear in mind, calls for creativity as well as conservation” (*Whatsoever Things Are Lovely*, Christian Ethics Today Publications).

The Lord moves: Some members of the Sardis United Methodist Church in Georgia were so ornery that the UMC North Georgia Conference shut the church down last summer. The congregation had had four different pastors in a five-year period. Some members took the UMC Conference to court (a case they lost). They held meetings on the grounds of the church and broke padlocks. Some former members are

forbidden to go onto the church grounds, except for the cemetery. If they were to go into the church, they wouldn't be able to understand what people are saying: a Korean congregation has permission to use the building (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 19).

Separation of state and Satan: After the high school marching band in Woodbridge, Virginia, played "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" at a football game, a man wrote to the local paper suggesting that playing such a song at a public school event was a breach in the wall separating church and state. The band director quickly pulled this song from the repertoire—which also caused a furor (*Chicago Reader*, January 13).

From Century e-mail: In light of President Bush's decision not to seek federal warrants before engaging in domestic wiretapping, a reader passed along the following quote from a 1934 speech by Adolf Hitler: "If anyone reproaches me and asks why I did not resort to the regular courts of justice, then all I can say is this: In this hour I was responsible for the fate of the German people, and thereby I became supreme judge of the German people" (cited in William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*).