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VATICAN EXTENDS REACH TO THE INTERNET—The Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* has reported that the police have acted on its complaint against Internet sites that carried objectionable material regarding God and the Virgin Mary. According to the paper, a special police unit “took over an internet site due to the blasphemous nature of unrepeatable words which accompanied the name of the Madonna.” Visitors to the site found blacked-out pages and the words “Site seized by the Head of Rome’s Special Police Force on the orders of Rome’s Chief Prosecutor.” Four other similar sites were closed.

LAMB FROM GOD?—This summer, thousands locked to Durmen Village in Uzbekistan to see a black lamb born with white patterns in its fleece that resemble the Arabic words for Allah on one side and Muhammad on the other. The beneficiaries of the phenomena include the lamb’s owner, who has been able to buy a car and put a new roof on his house with the donations pilgrims have made, and Islamic militants (including the nephew of the lamb’s owner) who have been at odds with a secular government. The lamb appears to be in the last car on the gravy train—it gets no special food or pen and is slated for eventual slaughter for a religious feast.

AUDITING GOD—Arthur Andersen has made partial restitution to 10,000 mostly elderly investors who lost \$570 million when the Baptist Foundation of Arizona, one of Anderson’s clients, went bankrupt. The company’s action, which reversed an earlier decision to fight the investors in court, means the victims will get about half their money back. Andersen, however, refuses to admit a role in the foundation’s failure.

THEY BOTH LOSE—After a Saturday night of bar-hopping in Fort Worth, Texas, last July, Johnny Joslin and Clayton Frank Stoker, both in their early twenties, got into an argument about heaven and hell. Stoker had the idea to settle it by pulling the trigger on the loaded shotgun he had placed in his mouth. Joslin offered himself as the guinea pig, and was shot in the chest when he pulled the gun out of Stoker’s mouth. Stoker, a county corrections officer, now sits in jail awaiting trial for first-degree murder.

Mountain Meadows Massacre Artifact Now Believed to Be Fake

A lead scroll inscribed with an alleged confession to the Mountain Meadows Massacre by convicted murderer John D. Lee is now believed to be a fake. The artifact, discovered in January 2002 by a National Park Service volunteer working on a project to stabilize historical buildings at Lee’s Ferry on the Colorado River, was declared a fake in separate statements by forensic document examiners George Throckmorton of Salt Lake City and William Flynn of Phoenix, Arizona.

The scroll measuring approximately 12 by 16 inches is inscribed with a confession that stated the murder of over 120 California-bound Arkansas emigrants by members of a Mormon militia was committed “On orders from pres [sic] Young thro [sic] Geo Smith.” George A. Smith was an Apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who traveled extensively through Southern Utah preaching the reformation and preparing “Zion” for the second coming of Jesus Christ during the period preceding the tragic event. The inscription also reads “by my own hand, J.D. Lee - Jan 11 - 1872.”

After a thorough authentication effort coordinated by Chris Goetze, lead archeologist of the Glenn Canyon National Recreation Area, both document examiners arrived at the same conclusion upon reviewing known Lee handwriting samples.

In a recent letter, William Flynn writes: “Considering the consistent significant differences found in the questioned writings on the scroll with the known writings of John D. Lee and the minimal affect of the lead on one’s writing, it is the opinion of the undersigned that the handprinted data and signature appearing on the ‘Lee Scroll’ were not executed by the maker of the known John D. Lee writings.”

Samples of Lee’s writings are extensive. As the adopted son of Brigham Young, Lee, along with many of his nineteen wives, colonized much of southern Utah and northern Arizona, keeping diaries and in 1871 chiseling a petroglyph in a rock. After warrants were issued for his arrest for participation in the crime, Lee was excommunicated by LDS Church officials. While in exile, Lee moved to the Colorado River to establish a profitable river crossing. Captured by federal authorities in 1874, Lee was tried twice for leading the massacre. He was found guilty of murder in the second trial and executed by a firing squad at Mountain Meadows in 1877.

—Keith Bryan Jeffreys

Fed Ed Officials Reach Out to Religious Groups

Last summer, an Education Department team traveled around the country meeting with religious groups to coach them in applying for some of the \$1 billion in federal grant money that has been made available for after-school and tutoring programs. The effort, which is designed to get programs in place as early as this fall, is being spearheaded by John Porter, head of the department's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. It is authorized by the education bill approved by Congress last year that gives money to schools, businesses, and community-based organizations, which according to the Bush administration includes churches and other religious entities, for after-school programs and tutoring.

—Andrea Szalanski

New CFI Center Debuts in Florida

The Center for Inquiry–International is pleased to announce the opening of a new Center for Inquiry in Florida (CFI–FL). The Florida center is committed to reason, science, and freedom of inquiry in all areas of human interest. It is the first of its kind in the Southeast. There are other centers in Los Angeles and in the metropolitan New York area.

CFI–FL will serve the entire state of Florida. It will host conferences, seminars,

and family oriented programs, and perform secular celebrations such as marriages, memorials, and namings.

The center will encourage the development of critical thinking skills and ethical alternatives to the reigning mythologies of the day. CFI–FL will provide a community setting for secular humanists, skeptics, and nonbelievers. It will offer positive and affirmative activities for Floridians.

The evolution of humanism is about to enter a new epoch.

—Katherine Bourdonnay

Minnesota Observes 'Indivisible Day'

July 4, 2002, was "Indivisible Day" in Minnesota, according to an official proclamation signed by Governor Jesse Ventura. The document calls for people of "all world views to coexist in harmony" and for mutual respect for all our citizens." The "whereas" includes the phrase "if we are to remain 'One nation, indivisible,'" and does not include the words "under God."

The proclamation was issued in response to a request by Atheists of Minnesota for Human Rights, which supplied the language. It has drawn the ire of religious conservatives, who attacked Ventura for signing the proclamation, as well as his refusal to make the Pledge of Allegiance mandatory in public schools and to sign a proclamation making May 2 a voluntary day of prayer in the state.

—Andrea Szalanski

Fading Dreams

"... The number of Americans who rarely or never attend church is growing far faster. According to the National Opinion Research Center biennial survey, the number of Americans who said they never attended church or attended less than once per year rose from 18 percent in 1972 to 30 percent in 1998. In 2000 the National Election Study found that nonattenders—who overwhelmingly vote Democratic—represented 27 percent of the electorate. By contrast, voters who identify themselves as members of the religious right fell from 17 percent of the electorate in 1996 to 14 percent in 2000 ... the proportion of observant Catholics—another Rove-targeted group—also dropped during the '90s."

—"Majority Rules," by John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The New Republic*, August 5 & 12, 2002. The article examines the strategy of George W. Bush's chief political advisor, Karl Rove, for expanding the Republican Party base, including an analysis of the falling number of "observant, tradition-minded, moralistic" voters that had been targeted by the GOP.

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SCRIPTURE-BASED SMACKING—A private religious school in England has gone to court to overturn a British law that bans corporal punishment in school. Head teacher Phil Williamson of the Christian Fellowship School in Liverpool said Christians are entitled to use such methods in disciplining their children, citing the biblical passage: "Your rod and staff they comfort me." In presenting the case, the lawyer for the school said "It is a central tenet of the Christian religion that mankind is born with a heart inclined to all kinds of evil. Discipline in the educational context is therefore vital." Corporal punishment was barred in British state schools in 1986 and extended to the country's two hundred private schools in 1990.

BARBIE AND DANCING DRAWS IRE OF IRANIANS—Iranian police have been combing toy stores for Barbie dolls and confiscating their stock. The action follows a proclamation denouncing the doll, which is sold in Iran wearing swimsuits and miniskirts, as un-Islamic. Iranian toy manufacturers are replacing Barbie with "Sara," who stands on the shelves in the *chador* or traditional Iranian folk costume. The attack on Barbie is being viewed as a reaction by religious conservatives to a reformist government and increasing personal and commercial liberties.

Meanwhile, a Tehran court has sentenced Iran's most famous male dancer to a ten-year suspended jail term for promoting corruption among young people. Mohammad Khordadian lives and performs in Los Angeles, and his dance programs are broadcast both in the United States and in Iran by satellite. He was arrested last spring during a visit to Iran. His sentence prevents him from leaving Iran for ten years, from giving any more dance classes, and from attending public celebrations or wedding ceremonies of anyone but close relatives for three years.

TALL TALES FROM TELEVANGELISM—Benny Hinn has cancelled plans to build a fifty-acre, \$30 million "World Healing Center" in Texas, and observers are wondering what happened to the money donors gave to support it. His organization is declining to give an accounting, although it insists that the funds raised were returned or used as the donors wished. Hinn has, however, built a new world headquarters and is awaiting completion of a \$3 million "parsonage" in California.