

Sightings 12/5/05
Down but Not Out
-- Martin E. Marty

In his December 1 column, David Brooks calls ours "The Age of Skepticism" (*New York Times*). Reliably conservative as always, Brooks surveys the national scene. His verdict: The Iraq War and US citizens' attitudes? Down. Trust in government? Down. In the UN? Down. Internationalism, politics, morale, partisanship? Down. Polls: Is government headed in the right direction? Down. View of leadership in the country? Down. Citizens' faith in their own side? Down. Faith that we can solve problems? Down. Readiness to take them on? Down. Resolve to rebuild after Katrina? Down. Doing something about energy policy? Down. About Darfur? Down. There are still other downs in his column of downers. And a scan of competitor columns to Brooks's left and right reveals still more downs.

I read Brooks on the way home from the last in an orgy of speaking engagements, many occasioned by my need to catch up on commitments postponed during a three-year assignment at Emory University in Atlanta. My Frequent Flier log counts twenty-four stops in seventeen states during September-October-November. These stops, usually of town-and-gown variety, but sometimes of church-and-gown, gave me a chance to sample, to converse, and to respond to questions by faculties, students, townspeople, etc. More than this cheery soul would like to report, the general character of peoples' queries and responses in the religious world was at least as down as was that of Brooks's secular list.

What I heard in my sampling: Catholicism: Demoralized, drifting. MEM: "But don't lay peoples' energies compensate?" Mainline Protestantism: The mantra is "they are declining." MEM: "But if the movement and stats are lagging, what about the tens of thousands of exemplary parishes and projects?" Islam: Extremist threats appear to be inspired by the faith. MEM: "Yes, but by misreadings; and what about the faithful Muslim citizens down the block?" Judaism? Confused about direction in Israel, lacking focus at home. MEM: "But the celebration of 350 years of Judaism in this country led to some positive signaling, didn't it?" African American churches: Troubled especially in inner city circumstances. MEM: "But are they not the 'light in the cities' in so many places?" "Spirituality": Losing its fascination, turning into clichés. MEM: "Still, aren't there adventures, discoveries?" Evangelicalism: Getting to be seen as a menace by non-evangelicals because of political and commercial over-zealousness. MEM: "But what of the marvelous varieties of evangelicals who don't fit that mold?" Etc.

General response to MEM: "How can you be so hopeful?" MEM: "I didn't know I was." Meanwhile, I pirate Alasdair MacIntyre's image, that we might do what the Benedictines did at the beginning of (another?) "Dark Ages": Keep the lights on, the books open, the prayers ascending, the community a refuge against the forces, and perhaps the base for countering them.

In my tribe, last Sunday, November 27, was the real New Year's Day, the first Sunday in Advent and the start of a church year. This gave me a chance to move from the podium

to the pulpit, and to preach on the Isaianic (chapter 40) "Comfort ye, comfort ye" passages. Will such speak to the moment, "the age of skepticism"?

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.