

names provide a window into the middle-income Bunyoro family. The occurrence of death-related names rose and fell with the fortunes of the pre-World War II period, but during the 1940s, Christian religious names took off in popularity and never flagged. When the AIDS crisis hit Uganda in the 1980s, very few families gave newborns names such as “This child might die.” Education,

religion, and Uganda’s anti-AIDS program had “reduced the sense that death was either inexplicable or the result of malice.”

The new data provide unusual insight into village-level African life that is so often missing from spotty official records. Even census data from relatively recent times are problematic. The 1931 census of the colony, often cited, was an extrapolation

from enumerations of only 40 percent of villages. The 1948 tallies disappeared before reaching Kampala, and the figures from the first post-independence census in 1969 were marred by a failure to note ethnicity, making it impossible to determine the effect of immigration on population increases. In 1980, the results were stolen before they could be fully analyzed.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

God’s Speed Dial

THE SOURCE: “Celebrity Spirituality” by Daniel Harris, in *Salmagundi*, Fall–Winter 2008–09.

MODERN CULTS HAVE BECOME corporate enterprises, writes Daniel Harris, author of *Cute, Quaint*,

Hungry, and Romantic (2000) and other books. They grow by successfully recruiting celebrities, trying to “hijack” a star’s fan base and transform it into a worldwide franchise. For new religions, famous people become “brand ambassadors,” using

their glamour and reputations to give the cults their identity and coherence.

Madonna lends her allure to Kabbalah, Tom Cruise to Scientology, Harris writes. Celebrities do not describe themselves as religious; they are *spiritual*. But as Hollywood’s spiritual tourists reject the “despotism of pontiffs and preachers,” the designer religions they embrace are far more demanding of their bank accounts and personal lives than the most domineering

EXCERPT

Veni, Vidi, Vici

It wasn’t quite the Second Coming, but almost. For the six days in April [2008] that Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States, all the coverage, the hoopla, the accolades, the promotion, and the PR surrounding the visit could have led someone to believe that it had been Christ, and not His self-proclaimed vicar, who had come to America. . . .

The strong Protestant hold on American culture and thought has for many decades simply been dying away. And, because Protestantism itself—originally founded on

a revolt, a bitter one at that, against Roman Catholicism—was the main carrier of anti-Roman sentiment, it is only natural that as the influence of Protestant thinking has waned, so has anti-Catholic sentiment. . . .

Pope Benedict XVI’s visit is another symbol of an amazing historical shift in American and Protestant attitudes toward a political-religious institution that for many years had been viewed as antithetical to all that Americanism and Protestantism stood for. Even more amazing is how Protestants themselves have been the most eager ones to reach across that gulf and embrace Rome.

—MARTIN TRUEBLOOD, a commentator on church-state issues, in *Liberty* (Jan.–Feb. 2009)

clergy of the past. “Repelled by the atrocities committed in the names of Jesus, Jehovah, and Muhammad, most stars turn their backs on orthodox beliefs and cobble together their own sui generis theology, a spiritual Esperanto so unspecific and inclusive that it offends no one.”

The religions of celebrities are the ultimate expression of an ancient spiritual impulse, the worshiper’s desire to eliminate the mid-

What do you give a celebrity who has everything? A god.

dleman, the clergy, and achieve direct contact with the divine. Famous people are egomaniacs, gods in their own right, and they do not want to be kept waiting, Harris says. They want God to be accessi-

ble, a name in their BlackBerry.

Spirituality is the opiate not just of the masses but of the powerful. Hollywood stars have reached the summit of fame and fortune. They have achieved their culture’s highest aspirations in difficult careers but, at their very moment of triumph, have come face to face with feelings of meaninglessness. What do you give a celebrity who has everything? A god.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Lullaby of Taxis

THE SOURCE: “Not So Silent Spring” by Dawn Stover, in *Conservation Magazine*, Jan.–March 2009.

WHEN REPORTS STARTED TO trickle in a few years ago about European blackbirds imitating ambulance sirens, car alarms, and cell phone ringtones, researchers were skeptical, writes Dawn Stover, an editor at large for *Popular Science* magazine. Doubting scientists asked for tapes. What came back were “pitch-perfect” renditions of urban noises, even a recording made near a golf course of birds copying the annoying sound of a golf cart backing up.

Animals are literally changing their tunes in response to a growing human din, Stover says. While bird and animal calls were once thought to be randomly scattered across the acoustic spectrum, many researchers now say the distribution is not accidental.

When part of the spectrum is invaded by the noise of moving cars, passing ships, and overhead jets, animals begin to adapt. Great tits in the Netherlands are switching to higher frequencies to avoid being drowned out by low-frequency traffic noise. European robins now sing primarily at night, and researchers think they do it to avoid interference from street noise. In Berlin, nightingales sing louder on weekday mornings than on weekends, when there is less traffic to contend with. And male blackbirds have begun to imitate sirens and ringing cell phones to boost their evolutionary odds: An expanded song repertoire signals that a bird has reached maturity, and female blackbirds prefer mature males.

While most animal noise research has focused on birds, some scholars think undersea noise is increasing even faster than urban

clamor, affecting whales and other animals. About twice as many ships ply the oceans today as in the 1960s, and they are bigger, faster, and louder. Oceans have a “deep sound channel” in which noise can travel for hundreds of miles. Humpback whales are thought to dive down to the channel and sing into it to communicate with one another, but this channel can also transmit noise from offshore drilling and commercial shipping to distant locations. Canadian scientists have found that beluga whales change their frequencies in response to the presence of icebreakers, and other researchers have reported that orcas have altered their calls.

If such trends continue, new subspecies may develop that are unable to understand one another. And low-frequency-bound species could lose their ability to communicate. Could this be the end of orioles, great reed warblers, and house sparrows, which can’t sing in the higher registers? Stover concludes that “humans, already powerful conductors of the material world, may be extending their fierce control to the audible one.”