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NEWS OF THE WEIRD

BY CHUCK SHEPHERD
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A God by any other name

In August, a Roman Catholic bishop in the Netherlands, Martinus Muskens, suggested that Christians start referring to God as "Allah" as a way of relieving world tensions. "Allah is a very beautiful word . . . What does God care what we call him? It is our

problem." A priest in Rome said Muskens' intentions were good, "but his theology needs a little fine-tuning." Muskens said he spent eight years in Indonesia, where Catholic priests used "Allah" during Mass. ■

Government in action

• Bookkeepers wanted: (1) Pentagon investigators discovered in August that a small South Carolina company fraudulently collected \$20.5 million in shipping costs, including one invoice of \$999,798 for sending two washers (cost: 19 cents each) to a base in Texas. According to Bloomberg News, the Defense Department was said to have a policy of automatically and unquestioningly paying shipping bills labeled "priority." (2) The Senate Finance Committee found in April that more than 450,000 federal employees and retirees owe back federal income taxes (totaling about \$3 billion), including almost 5 percent of the employees and retirees of the U.S. Tax Court.

the Palestinian Authority admitted that, after Hamas violently split from the government in mid-June, civil servants nonetheless failed to act quickly and thus in July continued to pay the salaries of about 3,000 Hamas security officers (who were formerly PA employees, but who by then were fighting the PA).

• Bureaucrats being bureaucrats: (1) About 30 Iowa school districts had their funding applications for preschool grants tossed out in September, the state Department of Education said, because the paperwork was not double-spaced, as required. (2) In August,

• Jane Balogh, 66, was informed in September that she will not be prosecuted for defrauding elections officials in Seattle, despite having illegally registered her dog, Duncan M. MacDonald, to vote. Balogh, protesting how easy officials have made it for people to vote illegally, put her home phone account in Duncan's name, which is all the proof required for registration, then signed him up, and when an absentee ballot arrived, she went public about her scheme. However, despite the public confession, Duncan continued to be sent official absentee ballots for the two subsequent election cycles. ■

Police Blotter

• Just say no: In September, police in Hertfordshire, England, stood fast under criticism for their program of placing posters around the area reading, "Don't Commit Crime." Said a police spokeswoman, "If stating the obvious helps to reduce crime or has any impact at all, we will do it."

a skirt. (Police said alcohol was involved.) (2) Catherine Delgado, 35, was arrested in Annapolis, Md., in August after she appeared, smudged with fudge, in a hotel lobby around midnight with "large slabs of fudge bulging out of her pockets" (according to a Washington Post story). A police officer later checked a nearby Fudge Kitchen store and found the door inexplicably open and a large display quantity missing from the front window. (Police said alcohol was involved, along with fudge.) ■

• People who are messes: (1) Tommy Tester, 58, minister of Gospel Baptist Church in Bristol, Va., was arrested in July after he allegedly urinated at a car wash, in front of children and police officers, while wearing

News that sounds like a joke

• Oral-B's Triumph SmartGuide toothbrush, available in the United Kingdom for the equivalent of about \$280, uses navigation technology to transmit the exact location of the toothbrush to a base unit so that the user can see which areas in his mouth the brush might have missed. The wireless LCD mouth display can be mounted on a mirror or held in the free hand.

• At about 9 p.m. on Aug. 23, a fire broke out in the Comedy Zone nightclub in West Knoxville, Tenn., right in the middle of an act in which a hypnotist had just placed 10 audience members into a trance. However, despite an "everyone for himself" attitude that typically marks such emergencies, the 10 hypnotized subjects somehow managed to make it out of the club safely. ■

People with too much money

The adolescent offspring of some well-to-do parents are serious art collectors, according to a September Wall Street Journal report, and their interest appears not to be motivated solely by their parents' strategies to shield income from the tax collector. Ms. Dakota King, 9, for example, owns 40 pieces and specializes

in animals and "happy colors." Ms. Shammie Fleischer-Amoros, 10, who admitted, "I'm really scared, but Daddy told me I have to negotiate," succeeded in getting \$200 knocked off of a \$3,200 sculpture she really wanted. An 11-year-old last year "waved a paddle" to win a \$352,000 Jeff Koons sculpture. ■

Obsessions

Just when Internet newspaper sites appear to be gaining ground as replacements for printed editions, a 70-year-old woman identified only as Maggie told the Edmonton (Alberta) Sun in September that her paper edition of the Sun is a crucial part of her daily diet, literally. She eats it, in strips, and has, she said, for the

past seven years because it tastes good. "I can't explain it," she said, and it was only when she recently experienced a blockage of her esophagus, and doctors found a ball of paper, that she revealed her obsession. Doctors cited by the Sun said that except for the blockage danger, newspaper eating is not unhealthy. ■

Least competent criminals

Too puny for a life of crime: Keith Bellanger, 20, failed in his attempted burglary in Duluth, Minn., in September when homeowner Wayne Boniface, age 69, walked in and beat him up so thoroughly that Bellanger had all his clothes ripped off trying to get away. And in Bay Shore, N.Y., in September, a 32-

year-old man wielding a tire iron, who was attempting to mug Bruce Ferraro, 74, on the street, was forced to abandon the job and run for it when Ferraro, after a struggle, took the iron away from him. (The mugger was captured by police nearby when his car stalled.) ■