

Opinion: A Top 10 list of religion stories for 2014

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—It was a topsy-turvy year in 2014, and here are my picks for the top 10 religion stories of the year:



Rabbi A. James Rudin**1. Islamic extremist groups,** especially the Islamic State and Boko Haram, dominated the year's news with atrocities that included beheadings, crucifixions, mass killings and persecution of religious minorities, including Christians in Africa and the Middle East. A gruesome highlight was Boko Haram's kidnapping of 200 Nigerian girls and then forcing the captives to convert to Islam. Despite U.S. military action against the group and Pope Francis' call for their defeat, a long struggle lies ahead.

2. The pope continued to reshape both the global Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican's central leadership. Denounced by religious conservatives and applauded by moderates and liberals, Francis removed archconservative Cardinal Raymond Burke from his powerful position in Rome and also fired the authoritarian commander of the Swiss Guards. The pope addressed a host of subjects, including evolution, poverty, marriage and divorce, homosexuals and the role of women in the church.

3. The decline of religious identity and observance in much of Europe and the United States continued in 2014. Surveys and polls documented significant losses in both congregational membership and personal commitment. At the same time, many religious communities are flourishing across the Global South.



Tension continued surrounding the status of Jerusalem's sacred Temple Mount in 2014. (Wikipedia Image)**4. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict** attracted headlines because of the war in Gaza. Islamic militants staged terrorist attacks inside Israel, including a lethal assault on worshippers at prayer in a synagogue. And tension continued surrounding the status of Jerusalem's sacred Temple Mount. At year's end, a viable "peace process" appeared more elusive than ever.

5. Twenty-five years after the collapse of the self-proclaimed atheistic Soviet Union, Orthodox Christianity is surging in Russia, led by its religiously devoted president, Vladimir Putin. Church buildings neglected under communism are being rehabilitated, and observers see signs of a spiritual revival among Russians under the age of 40.



Russian President

Vladimir Putin meets with members of the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod. (Wikipedia Image)**6. The past year** saw significant gains for the homosexual communities. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia now allow same-sex marriages, up from 17 just a year ago. And there were advances in key areas involving legal and social equality, employment, child adoption, hate crimes and bullying.

7. Violent clashes continued between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The Buddhist majority claims the Muslims are mostly illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. Although Buddhists frequently are perceived as a nonviolent community, the Buddhists in Myanmar have engaged in bloody clashes with Muslims amid accusations of “ethnic cleansing.”

8. Clergy wrongdoing, both sexual and financial, crossed religious lines during the year. Many Catholic communities still were reeling from the sordid revelations and costly court cases involving priests who sexually abused young people. The Chicago Archdiocese released more than 21,000 pages of evidence related to such clergy abuse. Mark Driscoll, leader of a Seattle-based megachurch network in five states, resigned in October following a series of charges that included financial misconduct, plagiarism

and a harsh hyper-macho theology. In the nation's capital, Barry Freundel, a prominent Orthodox rabbi, was accused of voyeurism and secretly spying on naked women in the mikvah, the ritual bath. Freundel was fired from his congregational position and suspended from his university teaching job.



Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.**9. Mormon leaders** publicly acknowledged the church's founder and prophet, Joseph Smith, had at least 40 wives, including a girl who was just 14. The report admitted that for Smith's first wife, Emma, polygamy was "an excruciating ordeal." The disclosures were part of a Mormon "transparency" campaign to counter criticism of the church, its early leaders and some of its teachings.

10. Notable deaths during the year included 110-year-old pianist and Holocaust survivor Alice Herz-Sommer; Jewish public intellectual Leonard Fein; mysticism scholar Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi; and Bishop John J. Nevins, the first Catholic bishop of Venice, Fla., and a pioneering leader in Catholic-Jewish relations.

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