

2011: A year of taking it to the streets

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#)

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(RNS) 2011 was supposed to be the year the world ended. Twice.

But after evangelist Harold Camping's doomsday predictions failed to materialize, all eyes are now on 2012 when, according to an ancient Mayan calendar, we need to once again prepare for the end of the world as we know it.

Jesus was pretty clear: the wars and rumors of wars, the earthquakes and uprisings, are just the beginning of the end. Indeed, 2011 had enough tumult, anxiety and unrest to make people think maybe the end is nigh after all.

For the Arab world, the Arab Spring upended longstanding regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia and could do the same in Syria and Yemen. A magnitude 9.0 earthquake left more than 21,000 dead or injured in Japan and literally tipped the earth off its axis, while a smaller Aug. 23 quake along the East Coast sent finials and angels tumbling from atop Washington National Cathedral.

Frustrated demonstrators occupied Wall Street, and a damning sexual abuse scandal ricocheted through the Roman Catholic Church and Penn State's football program. To top it all off, the Crystal Cathedral went belly-up.

And that's not even counting the 2012 presidential campaign.

Here's a quick tour through the topsy-turvy world of religion in 2011:

Taking it to the streets

From Tahrir Square to the Wisconsin Statehouse to Zuccotti Park, 2011 was the year of taking it to the streets as popular anger -- against despots, union-busting

politicians and Wall Street tycoons -- coalesced into (mostly) peaceful protests. Religious leaders voiced concern for religious minorities swept up in the turbulence of the Middle East, as well as support for the Occupiers' goals of fairness and equity in the global financial system.

'Do not rejoice when your enemies fall...'

The street celebrations that followed the death of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, meanwhile, left a bad taste in the mouth of many Americans. "In obedience to Scripture, there can be no rejoicing when our enemies fall," said David Gushee, a Christian ethicist at Mercer University. Americans, however, had fewer qualms about bin Laden's eternal fate: a poll after bin Laden's death found that two-thirds of Americans think he's paying for his sins in hell.

Who's in hell? Who knows?

Michigan megachurch pastor Rob Bell can't say for sure whether bin Laden -- or anyone else -- is in hell, at least not in the way Christians have traditionally thought of it. Bell's book, "Love Wins," rocketed to the top of The New York Times best-seller list by questioning traditional beliefs on hell and sparked a heated public discussion of hell and damnation. Southern Baptists were quick to disagree, passing a resolution affirming the reality of hell as "eternal, conscious punishment" for those who do not accept Jesus Christ.

Cults and personality

With the GOP campaign in full swing, crucial blocs of evangelicals fell in and out of love with Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry and Herman Cain, but never really fell for Mitt Romney. One poll found that 53 percent of evangelicals don't think Mormons are Christians; Dallas pastor (and Perry supporter) Robert Jeffress called Mormonism a "cult." By year's end, evangelicals were swooning for Newt Gingrich, a thrice-married Roman Catholic convert who carries some heavy ethical baggage. Said Ron Godwin, the provost of Jerry Falwell's Liberty University: "My conclusion is the devil I know is preferable to the one I don't really know." But in a sign that Mormons have arrived, "The Book of Mormon," a heartfelt (if somewhat obscene) ode to Mormon piety from the creators of "South Park," swept the Tony awards, including Best

Musical.

Ghosts of scandals past

Nearly 10 years after the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandal erupted in Boston, the bishop of Kansas City, Mo., was indicted for failing to report a priest suspected of possessing child pornography to police, and a grand jury slammed the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for allowing 37 known abusers to remain in ministry. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' report on the "causes and contexts" of the scandal faulted -- among other factors -- the turbulent culture of the 1960s, and victims launched a long-shot bid to make Pope Benedict XVI face charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. U.S. bishops offered to share what they've learned with Penn State, where an eerily similar abuse cover-up led to the sacking of coaching legend Joe Paterno.

Do Ask, Do Tell

After 18 years as one of the touchiest issues in the culture wars, Congress retired the Don't Ask/Don't Tell policy that barred gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military. For the first time, a majority of Americans (53 percent) voiced support for legalizing same-sex marriage, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) officially welcomed non-celibate gay clergy. New York became the sixth state to allow gay marriage, and Catholics in Illinois pulled out of state contracts for adoption and foster care rather than comply with the state's new civil unions law.

Church & State

In a widely expected but little-loved ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Kansas pastor Fred Phelps' right to hold "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" protests outside military funerals. The justices also denied a challenge to an Arizona program that gives tax credits for donations to private school scholarship programs, and will rule next year on tough state immigration laws that have angered religious groups. In Oregon, jurors convicted two sets of parents from a faith-healing church of criminal neglect after one child died and one was nearly blinded from lack of medical care.

A matter of conscience

The nation's Catholic bishops, concerned about growing threats to "religious freedom" emanating from the White House, launched a policy offensive over gay marriage and mandated insurance coverage for birth control. At the same time, the bishops said sharply that they, not doctors or administrators, have the final say over what constitutes ethically problematic procedures in Catholic hospitals.

Enemies, foreign and domestic

After last year's heated battles over Muslims' rights to build an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, the spotlight shifted to Capitol Hill, where House Republicans convened hearings on the "extent of radicalization in the American Muslim Community." Barely two weeks later, Florida provocateur Pastor Terry Jones presided over a mock trial of the Quran, sentencing the Muslim holy book to death by fire; subsequent riots swept Afghanistan. By year's end, major companies pulled sponsorship of a new TLC reality series, "All-American Muslim," after conservative activists complained of creeping acceptance of Islam.

End of an Era

The Crystal Cathedral, the iconic embodiment of suburban Protestant positivity, was sold for \$57.5 million to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange County -- a sample shift within the American religious landscape, as aging mainline Protestants are literally lose ground to growing numbers of Hispanic Catholics.

Do-it-yourself faith

Pay, pray and obey? Not so much. A June survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that more than two-thirds of Americans say they can make up their own minds on abortion or homosexuality and still be faithful members of their churches. Meanwhile, 60 percent of Catholics say you can be a good Catholic without aiding the poor, and three in four said the same about not giving money or time to the church, according to a survey conducted by researchers for the National Catholic Reporter.

Passages

Pioneering Jewish folksinger Debbie Friedman died at age 59; Harvard theologian Peter Gomes died at 68; evangelical gang activist David Wilkerson died at 79 and the "evangelical pope" John Stott died at 90; National Catholic Reporter publisher Joe Feuerherd died at 48; Episcopal liberal lion Bishop Walter Righter died at 87 and fiery civil rights icon Fred Shuttlesworth died at 89.