

2014 in review: An unsettling year, with religion in a starring role

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#)

December 26, 2014

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(RNS) For most of recorded history, Isis was an Egyptian goddess, a benevolent type who cared for widows and orphans, cured the sick and even brought the dead back to life.

This year, the world met the other ISIS.

The rise of the so-called Islamic State, variously known as ISIS or ISIL, dominated headlines in 2014 as a self-proclaimed caliphate sowed death and destruction across Iraq and Syria. For some, the group confirmed their worst fears about Muslim extremists, bent on killing religious minorities and subjugating women in a quest for domination that included leveling villages and beheading hostages.

The terror wrought by the Islamic State reflected a sense of turbulence that upended international news in 2014. But it was not the only source of unrest. The Ebola virus in west Africa put the world on edge, and a bloody war between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza, kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria, and the slaughter of more than 100 children at a school in Pakistan added to the mix.

At home, America wrestled with police brutality as grand juries declined to prosecute officers in the deaths of unarmed black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City. From botched prison executions to a stream of desperate migrant children flooding America's southern border, things felt troubled, disorienting, always on the verge of breaking apart.

Religion played a large role in those stories, and in other major headlines from 2014:

A banner year for church-state court decisions

A string of court decisions paved a way for greater accommodation of religion in public life, dealing a blow to atheist groups that warned that the separation of church and state was under attack. In *Greece v. Galloway*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld sectarian prayers at public meetings, and the justices also ruled 5-4 in favor of the Hobby Lobby arts-and-crafts chain in its bid to refuse a full range of contraceptive services to employees. That ruling also established religious rights for private businesses, a precedent that could have a range of ramifications. In addition, atheists lost bids to require religious groups to have greater transparency on donors; to remove “In God We Trust” from U.S. currency; and to end a tax break for clergy housing. A federal appeals court ruled that a cross-shaped relic can remain at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at Ground Zero.

Pope Francis wanted open debate, and he got it

Pope Francis hosted a headline-grabbing Synod on the Family at the Vatican that publicly pitted Catholic conservatives against his reformist allies who want to open Communion to divorced and remarried Catholics as well as create more space for LGBT Catholics and their families. In an unusually public debate, 200 or so bishops talked of acknowledging the “gifts and qualities” of gay Catholics, but later backed down and failed to pass a measure on welcoming them “with respect and delicacy.” After the synod, Francis demoted Cardinal Raymond Burke, the outspoken American prelate who led the opposition to any changes. Attention now shifts to the synod’s second act, scheduled to be held in October 2015, when final decisions may be made.

A whirlwind shift on marriage equality

Discussions on homosexuality echoed far beyond the Vatican, however. The number of states allowing same-sex marriage doubled, from 17 to 35 in addition to the District of Columbia, after the Supreme Court declined to review a number of pro-marriage rulings from lower courts. Within major denominations, the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted by wide margins to allow gay clergy, and a number of United Methodist pastors were vindicated after court battles over marrying same-sex couples. Among evangelicals, the giant relief organization World Vision said it would recognize the same-sex marriages of employees, but reversed itself within 48 hours after donors revolted. Southern Baptists held two major conferences on homosexuality, and while they held the line against homosexuality, top ethicist

Russell Moore called “ex-gay” therapy harmful and “severely counterproductive.”

Boldface names

Among the names that captured the public imagination in 2014:

- Seattle megachurch pastor **Mark Driscoll** resigned after facing a series of allegations involving plagiarism, bullying and an unhealthy ego.
- Conservative activist **Bill Gothard**, an advocate of home-schooling, modest attire and large families, resigned after a series of abuse allegations.
- German Bishop **Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst**, whose \$43 million housing renovation earned him the unwelcome nickname “Bishop Bling,” was fired by Pope Francis.
- D.C. pastor **Amy Butler** became the first woman named senior pastor of New York’s storied Riverside Church, and **Libby Lane** was appointed the first female bishop in the Church of England.
- Retired Episcopal bishop **V. Gene Robinson**, whose election as the first openly gay bishop ruptured the Anglican Communion, announced his divorce from his husband, Mark Andrew.
- **Popes John Paul II and John XXIII** were proclaimed saints by Pope Francis, and **Pope Paul VI** was beatified.
- **Meriam Ibrahim**, a Sudanese Christian, was finally freed after nearly being executed for apostasy.
- Mormon feminist **Kate Kelly** was excommunicated for advocating for women in the priesthood.
- **Rabbi David Saperstein** was confirmed as the first non-Christian U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.
- **Blase Cupich** was installed as the new archbishop of Chicago, Pope Francis’ first major appointment to the U.S. hierarchy.
- **D.C. Rabbi Barry Freundel** was fired after allegedly installing a hidden camera in the mikvah, or ritual bath, used by women at his prominent Georgetown synagogue.

Mormon misconceptions

In a series of online essays, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints tried to carefully debunk popular caricatures of Mormon beliefs, a remarkable exercise in the real-time evolution of a distinctly homegrown American religion. No, the church said, Mormons don’t get their own planet in the afterlife, and no, there’s nothing “magical” about sacred temple garments. No, founder Joseph Smith didn’t literally translate an ancient Egyptian papyrus scroll as part of LDS scriptures, but yes, Smith practiced plural marriage—as many as 40 wives, the church conceded.

America, meet the Satanists

Satanists, curiously, had a big year in 2014. In Oklahoma City, the New York-based Satanic Temple unveiled plans to erect a monument to Satan on the state Capitol grounds (right next to a Ten Commandments monument); in Boston, the group held a controversial “Black Mass” near Harvard despite an outcry from local Catholics. Filmmaker Roma Downey, however, cut Satan from her biblical epic, *Son of God*, after some viewers pointed out that the actor playing Satan looked too much like President Obama.

Passages

Kentucky pastor Jamie Coots, a Pentecostal snake-handler and star of the reality show “Snake Salvation,” died of a snakebite at age 42; Westboro Baptist Church founder **Fred Phelps**, infamous for his anti-gay rallies, died at 84; charismatic evangelist (and friend of Pope Francis) **Tony Palmer** died in a motorcycle crash; **Pentecostal preacher Myles Munroe** died in a plane crash in the Bahamas at age 60; right-to-die activist **Brittany Maynard** died at age 29 after a public battle with brain cancer; and the **Alban Institute**, which had provided resources and consulting for mainline Protestant churches, closed its doors after 40 years.