

2009, a year of division, unintended consequences: Actions and reactions

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When Pope Benedict XVI visited Africa last March, he made countless pleas on behalf of the poor and the war-weary. Yet the words that got the most attention were spoken on the papal plane when he said condoms are part of the problem, not the solution to Africa's HIV/AIDS pandemic.

And so it was in the year of religion in 2009, when well-intended gestures of goodwill and reconciliation erupted into firestorms of controversy. Even the best-laid plans often carry unforeseen consequences.

"People can have good motives toward a middle position and cooperation and all of that, but it just turns out to be extremely difficult to do because our divisions are so deep-seated," said John Green, director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

Many of the controversies revolved around a president and a pope, both of whom spark strong personal reactions.

In January, President Obama reached out to evangelicals by inviting mega church pastor Rick Warren to deliver the inaugural invocation. Gay groups seethed because of Warren's activism against same-sex marriage. When Obama offered another prayer slot to openly gay Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson, conservatives detected a sign of support for gay activists.

Later that month, Benedict was surrounded by controversy when, in a bid to find a place for disaffected traditionalists, he welcomed back Bishop Richard Williamson, an outspoken Holocaust denier. He spent much of his May trip to Israel trying to patch relations with Jewish groups.

Obama was back on the hot seat in May: when he accepted an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame, conservative Catholics blasted his support of abortion rights. The president's Notre Dame speech sparked a public debate on the

essentials of American Catholic identity.

In June, U.S. Catholic bishops sought to “clarify” the church’s relationship with Jews—asserting that everyone would be targets of evangelism and conversion. Jewish leaders threatened to pull the plug on 40 years of dialogue. By October, the bishops backed down, saying interfaith dialogue will never be used as a means of covert proselytism.

By year’s end, it was the pope’s turn in the spotlight again, when he offered shelter to disaffected Anglicans who could no longer accept their churches’ tolerance of homosexuality and women’s ordination. What the Vatican said was intended as a pastoral gesture to Anglicans quickly became viewed as a sign of the pope’s diminished commitment to ecumenism and Christian unity.

“We have two kinds of religion gaps—a gap based on affiliation and identity, which seems to have diminished a good bit, and a faith-based divide based on behavior and ideology, which is much harder to bridge,” Green said.

Obama’s June speech in Cairo in which he tried to recalibrate U.S. relations with Muslims at home and abroad was generally well received. [Members of the Religion Newswriters Association picked that effort at reconciliation as the most significant religion news story of the year.]

“Since 9/11, the story of Islam has been that it’s a religion of war or it’s a religion of peace—a sort of a ping-pong back and forth,” said Stephen Prothero, a scholar of American religion at Boston University. “But with Obama, he’s trying to reach out to the Muslim world in a way that’s more evenhanded.”

In the U.S., concerns about homegrown radicalization grew after Army Major Nidal Hasan killed 12 fellow soldiers and a civilian at Fort Hood in Texas. Within a month, five Muslim men from Virginia were picked up in Pakistan on charges of trying to join an anti-American jihad.

Obama has cautioned about the overuse of “terrorism” or “terrorist” for Muslims linked to radical or disruptive acts, but he said it was an “act of terrorism” when a Nigerian Muslim on Christmas day tried to light an incendiary device on an airplane as it approached Detroit. The man was thwarted by passengers and arrested upon the plane’s landing.

In the aftermath of the Christmas day arrest, CAIR National Executive Director Nihad Awad reiterated his message following the Fort Hood killings: "It is the responsibility of mainstream Muslims in America and worldwide to repudiate those whose unlawful and un-Islamic actions tarnish the beautiful faith of Islam." *-Religion News Service*