

Top religion news in 2010 evoked sense of déjà vu

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue

The calendar may have said 2010, but for Pope Benedict XVI and much of his global flock, it looked and felt a lot like 2002.

For the second time in a decade, damning charges of child molestation at the hands of Catholic priests dominated headlines, this time reaching the highest levels of the Vatican, as critics questioned whether Benedict himself mishandled abuse cases.

The Roman Catholic Church wasn't the only institution battling a sense of déjà vu, as some of the most controversial religion stories from the past 20 years returned to the headlines.

A 1994-style fight over health-care reform not only pitted Republicans against Democrats but also Catholic bishops against Catholic nuns. Lingering questions about President Obama's Christian faith morphed into a belief among one in five Americans that he's actually a Muslim. Nearly ten years after 9/11, Islamophobia returned with a vengeance as a Florida pastor threatened to torch a pile of Qur'ans, and Tennessee officials debated whether Islam is actually a religion.

This time, the resurrected stories were more pointed, the debates more polarizing. Old stories found new life online, and voices that once would have been dismissed as extreme were amplified by the Internet, Facebook and Twitter.

"New media have had the effect of keeping certain news stories alive, bringing them back from the dead

and propelling them into the news," said Diane Winston, a scholar of religion and media at the University of Southern California.

The

2010 abuse scandal, unlike the 2002 crisis in the U.S., was largely confined to Europe, starting in Ireland and later erupting in the pope's native Germany. Four bishops resigned, and Benedict ended the year by telling cardinals that worldwide guidelines for handling abuse cases will be forthcoming.

"It was really almost like the crater of a volcano, out of which suddenly a tremendous cloud of filth came, darkening and soiling everything," the pope told a German journalist in a book based on six hours of interviews in July.

[Vatican's

official newspaper leaked excerpts in which the pope suggested that condoms might sometimes be justified in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Benedict said that a male prostitute, for example, is someone whose use of a condom "can be a first step" in the practice of sexual morality.]

Here

at home, the ghosts of 9/11 loomed large as a fight over a planned Islamic community center a few blocks from Ground Zero became a litmus test for tolerance toward American Muslims. Evangelist Franklin Graham was disinvited to a National Day of Prayer event at the Pentagon for calling Islam an "evil" and "wicked" religion—comments he made back in 2001.

Even as Michigan's Rima Fakhri was crowned the first Muslim Miss USA, 53 percent of Americans admitted harboring unfavorable views of Islam. Oklahoma voters passed a preemptive ban on judges using Islamic law in state courts, although a judge put a restraining order on its enactment.

Omid Safi, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said he is most concerned by the reaction against the organizers of Park51, the proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero. "This is the most interfaith-y group of Muslims

imaginable," he said. "They are as successful an American story as it gets; it's the perfect immigrant narrative. These are people who get sent by the State Department overseas to say Muslims can live freely in this country, and then they are caricatured as jihadist radicals."

Distrust

of Islam was not limited to American shores. A year after Switzerland banned minarets at mosques, Belgium and France banned Muslim women from wearing full-face veils in public.

Like the 1994 Republican

resurgence, the Democrats' midterm "shellacking" was fueled in large part by anger over health-care reform. The plan split American Catholics, with bishops opposing it and Catholic hospitals and nuns supporting it. The hierarchy later dismissed the dissenters' support for the plan as mere "opinion," however "well considered."

In

Episcopal Church ranks, it felt a lot like 2003 again as Mary Glasspool was elected the church's second openly gay bishop. New Hampshire bishop V. Gene Robinson, whose 2003 election sparked a global schism, announced that he will retire in 2013. Glasspool's election prompted Anglican leaders in London to sideline their rebellious American branch on some international panels.

For the fourth time in nearly a dozen years, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly voted (373 to 323) to ask its regional presbyteries to lift a ban on partnered gay clergy. Similar proposals have failed in the past, though the defeats have grown narrower each time.

A rash of teen suicides and gay bullying

spurred religious leaders, rock stars and even Obama to join the "It Gets Better" project, while an October poll found that two-thirds of Americans see a link between religious teachings against homosexuality and higher rates of suicide among gay youths.

Religious teachings

against homosexuality are not enough to justify a ban on gay marriage, a

federal judge ruled in August in striking down California's Proposition 8. And religious beliefs are not enough to justify the unconstitutional law that created the National Day of Prayer, another federal judge ruled in April.

Pioneering televangelist Robert Schuller, after a bitter and public family feud, handed his Southern California pulpit over to daughter Sheila Schuller Coleman, who filed for bankruptcy in October, citing church debts of \$43 million.

Religious and humanitarian groups rallied to deliver relief to earthquake-ravaged Haiti, where an estimated 220,000 died, more than 300,000 were injured and more than 1 million were left homeless. Ten U.S. missionaries were temporarily detained on charges of trying to smuggle Haitian orphans out of the country.

And along the Gulf Coast, social service agencies were stretched thin trying to deliver relief to families and businesses struggling to cope with the massive BP oil spill. —RNS