

The stories of 2001: More than 9/11

Cover Story in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

1. September 11

"Nine-Eleven" has become a shorthand reference to the shocking day when four hijacked airliners crashed into the World Trade Center's twin towers, into a side of the Pentagon and into a field in Pennsylvania—bringing to the U.S. numbing, outrageous examples of the terrorist mayhem that much of the world has experienced in the past. It was a nine-one-one call that shook America's sense of security.

In selecting the top religion-related news stories of 2001, Century editors made the obvious No. 1 choice—the terrorist attacks and the subsequent military, political, diplomatic and financial counterattack against Afghanistan's Taliban, the al-Qaeda network and possibly other targets. As some analysts have noted, the "war on terrorism" is, like it or not, profoundly religious in its roots—both in its violent, extremist interpretation of Islam and the instinctive "God bless America" response.

The conflict's first few months saw the U.S. and Great Britain painstakingly define the war as not one against Islam but against evildoers, not as a "clash of civilizations" but as a defense of civility and civilization, not as revenge but as justice. In defending U.S. Muslims from slurs and hate crimes, President Bush—like other mainstream Christians—praised peace-loving Islam and visited with Muslim leaders to underscore the ideal of religious pluralism. That included the White House's distancing itself from disparaging remarks against Muslims by conservative Christian figures like Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham.

Unlike the high-profile, mainstream Christian protests against launching the 1991 Persian Gulf war, today's mainline Protestant and Catholic groups raised relatively muted concerns about the "war on terrorism" that did not make big news. Some have questioned whether the bombing in Afghanistan is moral, whether enough humanitarian relief can be delivered quickly and whether proposed domestic security measures might seriously erode cherished constitutional rights, especially affecting "foreign-looking" citizens and residents. But such concerns are voiced also

by many lawmakers and journalists, by people in secular as well as religious circles.

In judging the biggest news stories of the year, editors saw the effects of the September 11 attacks as two significant developments for people of faith. First, there were the ramifications of the horrific attacks taking the lives of thousands of innocents—Americans as well as many foreign citizens who worked in New York's World Trade Center. If the buildings, target of a less-successful bombing in 1993, were a symbol of Western domination to furtive extremists claiming the blessings of Allah—contrary to most Islamic scholars—then the Ground Zero ruins also became a symbol of U.S. unity, heroic character and the fragility of life.

2. Attention to Islam

The second top story was the renewed attention in the United States to Islam and Muslims, so different from the curiosity of 1979-80 when Iran's theocracy was in the news and in 1991 when Iraq's Kuwait invasion and battle with the U.S. had some in the media talking about jihad, or holy war. Over the last ten years, however, American Islam has gained in prominence. Even if (according to a recent study and poll) the Muslim population in this country is something less than the 6-7 million usually claimed, organized Islam in the U.S. has become politically astute and savvy in its defense of Muslims' civil rights.

In other words, this time around U.S. political leaders were aware that there were mosques, Islamic organizations and articulate spokespersons to meet and talk with. No less important, the Muslim communities provided a domestic window to the more than 1 billion Muslims worldwide.

3. Faith-based eclipse

Had the long-planned September 11 attacks been aborted or delayed, the top religion news story of the year might have been the Bush-pushed initiative to share more federal funds for social service among religious groups. As it is, it ranks third on the list. The expansion of previous Charitable Choice legislation and the exceptional publicity given to the idea by the White House, however, only served to bring to the fore the fears of some mainline churches and other defenders of church-state separation that certain legal safeguards would be set aside.

John Dilulio, a scholar appointed by Bush to promote and guide the proposed program, said at one point that religious groups would not be allowed to violate

equal-opportunity hiring laws. But church-state separationists also worried that recipients might be required to participate in religious activities as well. After a few months, Dilulio announced he was quitting a job that he said was only intended to be a temporary role for him, but his departure and a reluctant U.S. Senate tended to put the brakes on a bill passed by the House. The White House still has hopes that some version of the initiative will be acceptable to Congress.

4. Stem cell debate

The fourth top religious news story was the debate over what laws should be enacted regarding stem cell research and human cloning. Some surveys indicated public backing for federal funding for research leading to an expected use of stem cells from embryos for treatment of Parkinson's disease, diabetes and a number of other ailments, but the House passed a bill July 31 to ban any use of human embryos, whether cloned or from unused frozen fertilized eggs. After much consultation and volunteered advice from religious organizations, President Bush told a nationwide TV audience he would permit federal funding for research on existing stem cell lines available from frozen embryos, thereby refusing to encourage the creation of new embryos that would be destroyed in the research process. The compromise decision displeased many scientists as too limited and cheered some conservative Christians.

What had been predicted, however, was that private research groups might create embryos by cloning to benefit stem cell research. Such was the announced goal of a Massachusetts company that said in November it had cloned some human embryos which grew long enough to form four to six cells, but not stem cells. Advanced Cell Technology called it "the first halting steps" toward a new era in medicine, but the news alarmed Catholic, United Methodist and evangelical spokespersons who urged a legislative ban on human cloning.

5. Israel and Palestine

No. 5 on the list was the escalating violence between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East. After the brief period of relative peace brought by the Oslo Accords, the conflict erupted anew in September 2000 and has steadily intensified since Ariel Sharon took power in Israel. Between September 28, 2000, and September 28, 2001, 709 Palestinians and 155 Israeli Jews were killed in the conflict. On August 9 at least 15 people were killed and more than 100 wounded when a Palestinian suicide

bomber blew himself up in a Jerusalem restaurant. Responding to the increasing harshness of Israel's military occupation of Palestine and the rising Palestinian death toll, young men belonging to Hamas and other radical groups also struck in November and December, detonating explosives strapped to their bodies in crowded areas of Israeli cities.

Each attack has been followed by heavy firepower from Israeli troops and attempts by Yasir Arafat, head of the Palestinian Authority—ineffective and half-hearted, Israel contends—to control Palestinian radicals. Meanwhile, the suicidal hijackings in America on September 11 have eroded American efforts to broker a peace in the Middle East.

6. Presbyterian turmoil

The lower tier of top news stories was led by the turmoil in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) over whether to liberalize church policies regarding homosexuality issues. By March of 2001, a majority of the regional presbyteries voted down a proposed rule that would have barred ministers from conducting rites to bless gay or lesbian couples. At the annual General Assembly in June, by a 317-208 vote, delegates surprisingly approved another proposal for presbyteries to consider—eliminating barriers to ordaining otherwise qualified nonheterosexual pastors, elders and deacons. Proponents argued that no presbytery would be forced to ordain gays, that it was a local option. But opposition was strong in early presbytery voting in late 2001, and the growing strength of a conservative Confessing Church Movement has led key denominational leaders to admit that a split may be down the road.

7. McVeigh and the death penalty

The seventh story on the Century list was the continuing debate on the morality of capital punishment, spurred in part by the execution of Timothy McVeigh for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing. His execution by lethal injection made him the first federal prisoner to be put to death in 40 years. But the list of death row prisoners who have been released has grown to 90 since 1973, as the use of DNA testing has improved or as other new evidence emerged to exonerate them. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, in a July speech, conceded her concern that the system may be allowing some innocent people to be executed.

8. Unauthorized ELCA ordination

The eighth story is the handling of gay issues by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, particularly an unauthorized ordination on April 28 in Minnesota of pastor Anita Hill, a lesbian in a committed relationship. Three former bishops and an active one, Paul W. Egertson of Los Angeles, took part in the service and about 500 other Lutheran clergy lent their support—despite warnings from the denomination and a ruling by St. Paul Area Synod Bishop Mark Hanson that the ordination was invalid. Egertson later agreed to resign shortly before his six-year term was to expire. Hanson was elected in August as the new presiding bishop for the denomination (over a conservative runner-up) for a six-year term that will see the ELCA eventually grapple with gay issues in its biennial conventions.

9. Pope goes east

Undaunted by age and infirmities, Pope John Paul II sought to repair bridges with Eastern Orthodox churches while continuing his pilgrimage to historic places in early Christianity. In early May, the pontiff went to Greece, Syria and Malta “in the footsteps of St. Paul.” He offered an apology to Greek Orthodox leaders for past Catholic sins against that church and in Damascus made his first visit to a mosque. In a June trip to Ukraine the pope was greeted by many Catholics in that predominantly Orthodox country, and he appealed for harmony despite the boycott of his visit by Ukraine’s largest Orthodox body. The pope, now 82, traveled to Kazakhstan, then made his first visit to the seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which was celebrating its 1,700 years of existence.

10. Jackson's confession

Number 10 on the list is the surprising confession in January by civil rights leader Jesse Jackson that he fathered a child, born in 1999, out of wedlock with a former associate, who was paid foundation sums to support her move to Los Angeles. Though Jackson said he was going to go on a hiatus and was reconciling with his wife of 38 years, it was not long before the 59-year-old Baptist minister resumed public appearances.

In other news:

A conflict in an Episcopal parish in Accokeek, Maryland, pitted an interim woman bishop against a traditionalist pastor appointed by the parish without her approval. The conflict, taken to court, highlighted ongoing liberal-conservative tensions in the denomination—tensions also reflected in a June 24 irregular ordination of four

Episcopal priests in Denver by a pair of Anglican bishops from abroad to serve in the potentially schismatic Anglican Mission in America.

Kevin Mannoia, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, resigned the post in July under pressure from the organization's board. The NAE had decided to review an earlier decision, promoted by Mannoia, that the evangelical body admit denominations that also held membership in the National Council of Churches. The National Religious Broadcasters announced in early 2001 that it was breaking its longtime ties with the NAE as well.

Attorney and Greek Orthodox lay leader Elenie Huszagh was installed as president of the National Council of Churches, succeeding Andrew Young.

Abroad: Ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria between Christians and Muslims claimed hundreds of lives; the U.S. delegation walked out on the fractious United Nations conference on racism held in Durban, South Africa; China intensified its crackdown on nongovernment-sanctioned religious activities, especially against the Falun Gong spiritual movement; a missionary plane mistakenly thought to be carrying illegal drugs was shot down over Peru's northern jungle by a Peruvian aircraft, killing American missionary Roni Bowers and her infant daughter; former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was brought before an international tribunal at The Hague on charges of genocide.

Deaths:

Alvin A. Barry, president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; William Waldo Beach, Christian ethicist; Robert McAfee Brown, theologian, ecumenist and activist; Gerhard Ebeling, German theologian; Ira Eisenstein, rabbi-theologian and a founder of the Reconstructionist movement; James D. Ford, former chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives; Jim Gittings, Presbyterian communications executive; Winthrop S. Hudson, church historian; David R. Hunter, National Council of Churches official; Morton Kelsey, Episcopal priest and author of numerous books on spirituality; Sarah Polster, founding editor of the Religion-in-Practice series of books at Jossey-Bass; David H. C. Read, former pastor of New York's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church; Rousas John Rushdoony, advocate of Christian theocracy; Howard Schomer, former president of Chicago Theological Seminary, active in human rights, ecumenism and mission work; Ninian Smart, world religions scholar; Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, publisher of Hinduism Today and spiritual leader

of Sri Lanka's 2.5 million Tamil Hindus; Leon Sullivan, American Baptist minister and antiapartheid activist; Jesse H. Ziegler, former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools.

Some notable books:

Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church, by Richard Lischer (Doubleday). *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, by Diana L. Eck (HarperSanFrancisco). *Heaven Below : Early Pentecostals and American Culture*, by Grant Wacker (Harvard University Press). *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, by René Girard (Orbis). *Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to Best Places and Practices*, by Paul Wilkes (Westminster John Knox). *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*, by William C. Placher (Westminster John Knox). *The Human Being: The Enigma of the Son of Man*, by Walter Wink (Fortress). *Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional*, by William F. May (Westminster John Knox). *Luther's Works on CD-ROM*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Fortress /Concordia). *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, by Barbara Brown Taylor (Cowley).