

Religion played a prominent role in major news events of 2014

BY KEVIN ECKSTROM

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 another ISIS.

The rise of the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, dominated headlines in 2014 as the self-proclaimed caliphate sowed death and destruction across Iraq and Syria. For some, the group confirmed the 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 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 military school in Pakistan added to the mix.

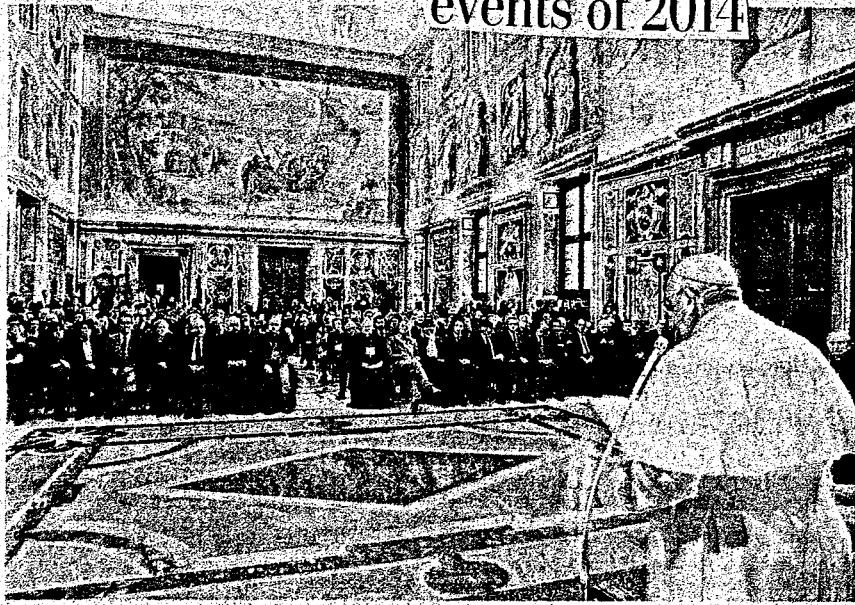
Religion played a large role in those stories and in other major headlines from 2014:

Church-state court decisions

Court decisions advanced the accommodation of religion in U.S. public life, dealing a blow to atheist groups that said the separation of church and state was under attack.

In *Greece v. Galloway*, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-4 ruling, 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, which could have ramifications.

In addition, atheists lost bids to remove "In God We Trust" from U.S. currency and to end a tax break for clergy housing, and a federal appeals court ruled that a cross-shaped relic can remain at the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York.



ALESSANDRA TARANTINO/L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pope Francis, shown speaking Friday to the Italian Olympic Committee, hosted a Synod on the Family this year that examined the standing of divorced, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics.

Pope Francis and open debate

Pope Francis hosted a headline-grabbing Synod on the Family at the Vatican that pitted Catholic conservatives against those who want to open Communion to divorced-and-remarried Catholics and create more space for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics. In an unusually public debate, 200 or so bishops talked of acknowledging the "gifts and qualities" of gay Catholics, although they did not adopt a measure on welcoming them "with respect and delicacy."

After the synod, Francis demoted Cardinal Raymond Burke, the outspoken U.S. prelate who led the opposition to any changes. The synod's second act is scheduled for October 2015, when final decisions may be made.

A shift on marriage equality

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 pro-

marriage rulings by 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 it reversed itself within 48 hours after donors revolted. Southern Baptists had two major conferences on homosexuality; they held the line against homosexual relations, but top ethicist Russell Moore called "ex-gay" therapy harmful and "severely counterproductive."

Names in the news

Seattle megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll resigned after facing allegations involving plagiarism, bullying and an unhealthy ego.

Conservative activist Bill Gothard, an advocate of home-

schooling, modest attire and large families, resigned after abuse allegations.

A German bishop, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, whose \$43 million housing renovation earned him the 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; 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.

Kate Kelly, founder of the Ordain Women movement within the Mormon church, was excommunicated.

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 archbishop of Chicago, Pope Francis's 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 Georgetown synagogue.

Mormon misconceptions

In online essays, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints tried to debunk popular caricatures of Mormon beliefs. 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, and, yes, Smith had as many as 40 wives.

America, meet the Satanists

Satanists had a big year. 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 Black Mass near Harvard. 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 42; Westboro Baptist Church founder Fred Phelps, infamous for his "God Hates Fags" 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 60; right-to-die activist Brittany Maynard died at 29 after a battle with brain cancer.

— Religion News Service