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From nuns to 'nones': 10 ways religion shaped the news in 2012

by Religion News Service

Washington — From the nuns to the "nones," religion dominated the headlines throughout 2012. Faith was a persistent theme in the presidential race, and moral and ethical questions surrounded budget debates, mass killings and an unexpected focus on "religious freedom."

Here are 10 ways religion made news in 2012:

Gun violence as a new "pro-life" issue

A shooting rampage that killed 12 and injured more than 50 others inside a crowded movie theater in Aurora, Colo., couldn't do it. Neither could a gunman who killed six people at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis. But a hail of bullets inside Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. -- which took the lives of 20 first-graders and six adults -- was able to mobilize religious activists on gun control after years of failing to gain traction.

"Those who consider themselves religious or pro-life must be invited to see that the desire to prevent gun-related deaths is part of the religious defense of the dignity of all life," wrote Jesuit Fr. James Martin, contributing editor at *America* magazine.

America's fast-growing nonreligious community

One in five Americans (19 percent) now claim no religious affiliation, up from 6 percent in 1990. The so-called "nones" include unbelieving atheists who staged a massive "Reason Rally" in Washington, but two-thirds of the unaffiliated say they believe in God or a universal spirit. Almost nine in 10 say they're just not looking for a faith to call home.

An April study found that among the under-30 set, the only religious group that was growing was the "unaffiliated," with an increasing tide of young Americans drifting away from the religion of their childhood. By year's end, a study from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that there are about as many religiously unaffiliated people in the world (1.1 billion) as there are Catholics, and they're the third-largest "religious" group worldwide, behind Christians and Muslims.

Nuns on the bus and in the spotlight

The "nones," however, shouldn't be confused with the other big newsmaker of 2012: the nuns, who found themselves facing a Vatican crackdown and accusations that the umbrella group of most U.S. sisters was embracing "radical feminist themes" and not working strongly enough against abortion and same-sex marriage. The reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was seen as a hostile takeover by many rank-and-file Catholics, who rallied to the sisters' defense.

A separate group of sisters, meanwhile, dubbed themselves the Nuns on the Bus and embarked on a 2,700-mile tour to advocate for the poor. Sr. Simone Campbell, whose group NETWORK organized the tour, landed a prime-time speaking slot at the Democratic National Convention, where she slammed the budget drafted by GOP vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan, a fellow Catholic.

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The "Mormon moment"

Even though he lost his White House bid, Republican Mitt Romney nonetheless made history as the first Mormon to win a major party's presidential nomination. He also exceeded in overcoming significant evangelical wariness of his Mormon faith -- he won more evangelical support (79 percent) than Sen. John McCain did in 2008 (73 percent). What's more, evangelicals dropped some of their long-harbored suspicion of Mormons, according to surveys, and some even viewed the faith more positively as a result of Romney's campaign.

Even ailing evangelist Billy Graham made a late and somewhat surprising entry into campaign politics, vowing to "do all I can to help" Romney and later scrubbing his ministry's website of all references to Mormonism as a "cult." Despite frosty ties with the U.S. Catholic hierarchy, President Barack Obama carried the critical Catholic swing vote, largely on the support of Hispanic Catholics. The largest share of his "religious" coalition came from an unexpected source: religiously unaffiliated voters, at 23 percent.

Unprecedented strides for gay rights

Gay rights made unprecedented strides in 2012 when voters in Washington, Maryland and Maine approved gay marriage and Minnesota voters rejected a constitutional amendment to ban it. But a series of events in May showed Americans' mixed feelings on the issue: North Carolina approved a constitutional ban while Obama endorsed same-sex marriage. The United Methodist Church upheld its teaching that homosexuality activity is "incompatible with Christian teaching," while a Gallup Poll found that a

majority (54 percent) of Americans now see homosexual relations as "morally acceptable."

All eyes are now on the U.S. Supreme Court, where justices in 2013 will consider challenges to a 2008 California referendum that stopped gay marriage, and the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act that prohibits the federal government from recognizing legal same-sex marriages performed in nine states and District of Columbia.

Rallying against contraception in the name of "religious freedom"

One of the more unexpected entrants into the 2012 campaign was a fierce debate over birth control, centered around Catholic and evangelical resistance to the Obama administration's mandate for free employee coverage of contraception. Even as Obama vowed to carve out exceptions for religiously affiliated institutions like hospitals and universities, Catholic bishops and evangelical colleges launched a full-throated assault on the mandate as a threat to "religious freedom." So far, more than 30 lawsuits have been filed to stop the mandate.

But a LifeWay Research showed that almost two-thirds of Americans believe businesses should be required to provide the coverage for free, even if contraception conflicts with the owner's religious ethics. Earlier polling found that 58 percent of Catholics support the mandate; another found that Catholics rejected the idea that religious liberty is under siege.

The long shadow of sexual abuse

As U.S. Catholics marked the 10th anniversary of the clergy sex abuse scandal that erupted in Boston, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was confronted with two landmark criminal convictions: Msgr. William Lynn, found guilty of child endangerment for shuffling abusive priests around the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and Kansas City, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn, convicted of failing to tell police about a priest suspected of sexually exploiting children.

Even as the Penn State abuse scandal showed that abuse is not just a "church problem," popular Franciscan priest Benedict Groeschel was forced to retract statements that seemed to defend priests who sexually abuse children and blamed some victims for "seducing" them. The chairman of the bishops' National Review Board warned the prelates: "If there is anything that needs to be disclosed in a diocese, it needs to be disclosed now. No one can no longer claim they didn't know."

New threads in America's diverse religious tapestry

The 2012 campaign marked the first time that neither major party ticket included a white Protestant, but there were other signs of America's growing racial and ethnic diversity. New Orleans pastor Fred Luter was elected the first black president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which was formed in 1845 in the defense of slavery. Rep. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, will become the first Buddhist member of the Senate; her House seat was won by Democrat Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu member of Congress.

The number of mosques in America has jumped 74 percent since 2000, up to 2,106. "Islam," said David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "is one of the few growth spots in America's religious mosaic."

Boldface names

Among the big names topping the religion headlines in 2012:

Evangelist Franklin Graham apologized for questioning Obama's Christian bona fides in February, when he couldn't say whether Obama was a Christian, in part because, "under Islamic law, the Muslim world sees Barack Obama as a Muslim."

ABC canceled its short-lived saucy church drama "GCB" after viewers lost faith in the bedazzled desperate housewives in choir robes. Then-candidate Newt Gingrich called the show "anti-Christian."

Crystal Cathedral founder Robert H. Schuller left his California megachurch and lost a bid to recover assets as part of the church's bankruptcy. The iconic glass building is now scheduled to become a Roman Catholic cathedral.

The Dalai Lama won the prestigious \$1.7 million Templeton Prize for his efforts to bridge the divide between science and religion.

Southern Baptist public policy guru Richard Land lost his radio show and later announced his retirement after he was accused of plagiarizing racially and politically charged remarks in the Trayvon Martin case.

Former Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore won his old job back almost a decade after losing it when he refused to remove a 5,200-pound granite Ten Commandments monument from his courthouse.

Yale theologian Sr. Margaret Farley was publicly rebuked by the Vatican for her book "Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics," which was deemed "not consistent with authentic Catholic theology."

Metropolitan Jonah, the leader of the Orthodox Church in America, was sacked for failing to report or remove a priest accused of rape.

Jesus may or may not have had a wife, at least according to a 4th-century papyrus fragment that includes the cryptic line, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife ...'" The Vatican dismissed it as a "clumsy fake."

Paolo Gabriele, the trusted butler to Pope Benedict XVI, was sentenced to 18 months in a Vatican jail for leaking private papal documents in an attempt to rid the Vatican of corruption out of his "visceral love" for the church and the pope.

The U.S. got its first Native American saint, Kateri Tekawitha, a 17th-century Mohawk woman who practiced extreme acts of religious devotion despite torment for her baptism and conversion.

Justin Welby will be the next archbishop of Canterbury, and the first task of the former oil executive will be finding a way for the Church of England to reconsider its vote this year not to allow women to become bishops.

Passages

2012 saw the passing of several leading religious figures, including: William Hamilton, the theologian behind *Time* magazine's famed "Is God Dead?" cover story in 1966, at age 87; Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III, at age 88; Christian artist and "painter of light" Thomas Kinkade, at age 54; Watergate felon and evangelical icon Charles Colson, at age 80; Leontine T.C. Kelly, the first black woman to be elected a United Methodist bishop, at age 92; March for Life founder and anti-abortion activist Nellie Gray at age 88; Unification Church founder Rev. Sun Myung Moon at age 92; and anti-hunger activist and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee Sen. George McGovern, at age 90.

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