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The top 10 religion stories from 2013

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Commentary

Here are my picks for the top 10 religion stories of 2013:

1. A pair of popes: Pope Benedict XVI's surprise resignation and the election of the Argentina-born Pope Francis (hello, Third World!) was easily the biggest story of the year. The new pope's modest personal style and his extraordinary commitment to social and economic justice has upset some conservatives and given hope to progressives within the Catholic Church.
2. Sunni-Shiite schism: The brutal Syrian civil war and the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi shattered hopes for a "kinder, gentler" Islamic world. The ballyhooed Arab Spring spilled over into a series of bitter internal and external conflicts with Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Shiite-led Iran as major adversaries.
3. Falls from grace: The once glowing reputations of retired Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony and Yeshiva University President Rabbi Norman Lamm are no more as both were accused of inadequately responding to the clergy sexual abuse scandal, with consequences including Mahony being stripped of public duties (but not his vote in the papal conclave) and Yeshiva facing a \$380 million lawsuit. The sordid revelations and the cover-ups and indifference of many religious leaders have devastated the lives of the victims and damaged the integrity of religious institutions.
4. Terrorism at home and abroad: Islamic militants in the U.S. and the U.K. carried out lethal terrorist attacks during 2013. The Boston Marathon massacre and the machete murder of British soldier Lee Rigby on a London street by a self-proclaimed jihadist shocked the world.
5. Israel: President Barack Obama paid his first visit to the Jewish state as president in May, and voters returned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to office as two new chief rabbis were elected. There were

demands that ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews no longer be exempt from the mandatory draft for Israel's military and security forces.

6. Gay marriage: Popular support for same-sex marriage increased as the U.S. Supreme Court struck down large sections of the Defense of Marriage Act and rejected an appeal in California's Proposition 8 case, effectively allowing such unions there. Exodus International, which promised to change gays into heterosexuals through "reparative therapies," closed down and admitted failure.

7. Cracks in the stained-glass ceiling: The Rev. Elizabeth Eaton was elected presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a first for the denomination. Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, meanwhile, continued to wrestle with ongoing controversies, including breakaway congregations and expensive legal battles over church property and real estate.

8. Who's a Jew? Like most such surveys, the Pew Research Center's study of American Jews contains enough statistics to satisfy every perspective and opinion. The Pew report, which analyzed the current state of Jewish belief and identity, revealed that for young Jews under the age of 35, ethnic and ancestral roots were more formative to their Jewishness than religious belief. While about a third of American Jews consider themselves part of the Reform movement, the smaller Orthodox community is both younger and more fertile than other groups. Clearly, it's not your grandparents' Jewish community anymore.

9. Reza Aslan and Jesus: Each year scholars, journalists and lots of other folks write about the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. In 2013, Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American Muslim and a sociologist of religion, created a stir with his book describing Jesus as a Jewish "zealot," a rebel against the ancient Roman occupiers of Israel. Aslan, who converted to Christianity but now describes himself as a "person of faith" shaped by Islam, set his critics' teeth on edge by basing his book not on traditional New Testament sources, but on Roman documents and the controversial writings of Flavius Josephus, an often discredited Jewish historian. Fox News also couldn't understand why a Muslim would want to write about Jesus. There is a pattern: A new film, play, book or TV series frequently gains wide but temporary attention by claiming to be historically accurate.

10. In memoriam: These are only a few of the notable deaths this year: Noted religious sociologist Robert Bellah; Philadelphia pastor and former congressman William H. Gray III; Catholic commentator and author the Rev. Andrew Greeley; Jewish philosopher Rabbi David Hartman; former New York City Mayor Ed Koch; New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg; and anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela.

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