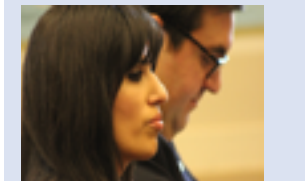


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**Commentary & Opinion**  
RN-R columnists share their thoughts on issues pertinent to Christianity today, Page 2 and 3

**US Catholic Bishops elect new slate of 'safe' leaders**  
Catholic Bishops elected two moderate archbishops to lead the American Catholic hierarchy. Page 4



**Congress pushes for release of American pastor held captive in Iran**  
Congress is pressing for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen who has been imprisoned in Iran for his religious beliefs since September 2012. Page 5

**Quebec to restrict "overt" religious expression in public square**  
A charter has been introduced in this Canadian province aimed at the secularization of Qubec's public life. Page 6



**'A Christmas Candle' by Max Lucado opens this month**  
A movie based on a book by popular Christian author, Max Lucado, examines the struggle people often experience with faith. Page 9

**Violence against Muslims in Myanmar**  
Over 240 Muslims were killed by Buddhists in the past year.

**A Manual for Creating Atheists**  
Peter Boghossian has written a new book training atheists how to talk Christians out of their faith. Page 11



**'Jerusalem', A tribute to the holy city**  
A new film, shot in both 2D and 3D, featuring the city of Jerusalem is now playing in IMAX and other huge screen theaters in the USA. Page 12

Volume 1, Issue 10 December 2013

Published monthly in Springfield, MO

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

# From the Kremlin to Branson, MO

“The Miracle of Christmas” has shared the story of the birth of Christ around the world

From Russia and Communist China to Branson, Missouri, here comes The Internationally renowned theatre group The Messiah Project to present “The Miracle of Christmas” December 11, 2013 at the Dick Clark Theatre in Branson, Missouri.

“The Miracle of Christmas” is one of many faith-based productions that The Messiah Project of the Ozarks has brought to audiences worldwide. Though headquartered in Springfield, Missouri, The Messiah Project has performed literally in dozens of nations, including communist China and post-soviet Russia.

As The Messiah Project's director, Lindsey Robison, notes, “we have been welcomed in non-Christian and communist countries because of our international stature and the professionalism of our productions.” “But,” Robison adds, “it is our Christ-centered message that most resonates with our world audiences. We are honored to have a double mission.

## In Oval Office, evangelicals press for immigration reform

**By LAUREN MARKOE**  
(RNS) Speaker of the House John Boehner signaled Wednesday (Oct. 13) that there would be no immigration reform this year, an announcement made the same day that some of the nation's most prominent evangelical pastors met with President Barack Obama to try to advance the issue.

Only months ago, immigration reform seemed to enjoy strong bipartisan momentum.

It still does across the nation, said Russell D. Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, one of the eight clergy invited to the Oval Office meeting.

“I urged the president not to make this a divisive issue, but to work with House Republicans,” said Moore. “We need to work together to fix the system rather than just scream at each other.”

The Obama administration, in a statement issued after the meeting, squarely blamed House Republicans for the impasse. The Democratic-led

Senate passed a bipartisan immigration reform plan in June.

Wednesday afternoon, Boehner said the Republican-dominated House would not take up the Senate bill, which means no immigration reform this year.

In their Oval Office meeting, the president told the pastors that “there is no reason for House Republicans to continue to delay action on this issue that has garnered bipartisan support,” according to a White House statement.

The Rev. Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, said he is not discouraged by Boehner's announcement. “I'm a pastor and I transact in hope,” Salguero said, making the case that immigration reform would boost the economy and help keep families together. “Immigration reform would be a wonderful Thanksgiving and Advent gift to the nation.”

Another pastor in the meeting, the Rev. Jim Wallis

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## Catholic Church Goes Virtual .catholic domain reserved for official church websites

**By ERIC J. LYMAN**  
ROME (RNS) The Vatican has secured the use of the new Internet domain name “.catholic,” but bloggers hoping that platform could ramp up their own digital pulpit will be disappointed — the Holy See says it'll be reserved for church-related organizations, not individuals.

The new rules on how to assign rights to the “.catholic” domain name are part of the larger issue of how to adapt a tradition-bound, 2,000-year-old institution to the fast-paced digital present.

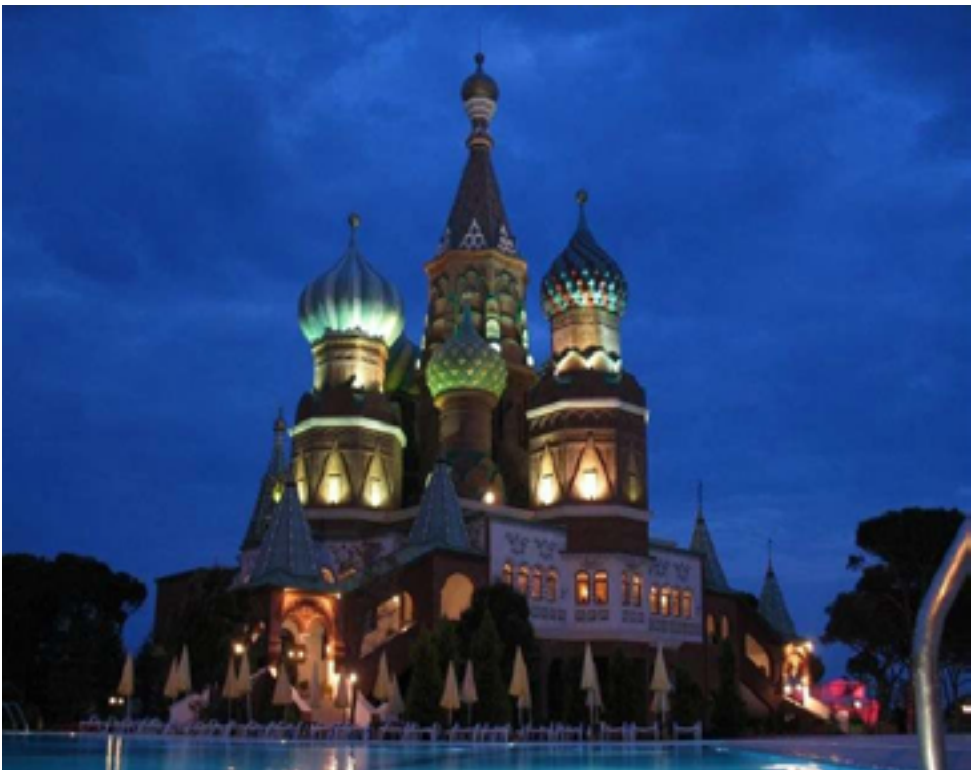
Case in point: As the parameters of the new domain name were being set, Ivano Dionigi, president of the

Vatican's Latin Academy, said Friday he was still debating how to say “Twitter” in Latin.

Pope Francis tweets in eight languages, and his Latin feed is surprisingly popular — it has more followers than the native languages of the last previous two popes, German and Polish. But there is still no consensus on how to refer to the medium in the church's official language, Dionigi said.

National top-level Internet domains, such as “.it” for Italy or “.ca” for Canada or “.mx” for Mexico, are usually limited to sites based in those countries, and so the Vatican's “.va” domain is necessarily restricted because it can be used only

Continued on page 2



The Kremlin Palace in Moscow, Russia. The Messiah Project performed Handel's “Messiah” here in 2010, bring the message of the Savior to people who may never have heard it before. This was just one of the many productions put on in communist countries over the years.

## U.K. minister Sayeeda Warsi calls on West to protect Christian minorities

**By KEVIN ECKSTROM**  
WASHINGTON (RNS) The highest-ranking Muslim in the British government on Friday (Nov. 15) called on Western governments to do more to protect besieged Christian minorities across the world, particularly in the Holy Land where they are now seen as “outsiders.”

Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, the government's minister for faith and the first Muslim member of a British cabinet, said religious freedom is a proxy for human rights and must not be an “add-on” to foreign policy.

“A mass exodus is taking place, on a biblical scale,” she said in a speech at Georgetown University. “In some places, there is a real danger that Christianity will become extinct.”

Warsi, a mother of five and the daughter of Pakistani immigrants, said Christian minorities in war-torn regions of Egypt, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere are threatened by Muslim majorities in the very places that gave rise to Christianity.

“What concerns me is that these communities ... are now being seen as outsiders,” she said in a forum hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations. And when the majority religion is offended or aggrieved, “the local Christian community is fair game, and that somehow collective punishment can be meted out against these communities for what they see as the perceived actions of their co-religionists” abroad.

Following on efforts by former Prime Minister Tony Blair to foster interreligious understanding, Warsi aims to make religion a cornerstone of foreign policy for Britain and its Western allies. She also tries to take religious beliefs and sympathies into account in creating government



Baroness Sayeeda Warsi at an Muslim Eid Reception on September 21, 2010 Photo Source Wikimedia Commons

policy at home and abroad.

She has been critical of both Muslim extremists and those who would deny Muslim women the right to wear a headscarf, and said protecting the religious freedom of minorities is a responsibility of all faiths.

“It shouldn't just be for Christians to speak for Christians, and Jews to speak for

Jews, and Muslims to speak for Muslims,” she said.

The solution, she said, “will not come by Christians in the West and Muslims in the East, but actually will be Muslims in the West and Christians in the East, both of whom come from a minority perspective, a minority experience perspective.”

## Atheists Challenge tax exempt status of churches

**By KIMBERLY WILSON**  
(RNS) Nonbelievers are challenging the Internal Revenue Service's special exemptions for religious organizations in a federal court in Kentucky, saying churches and other religious groups should have the same financial rules as other nonprofit groups.

If they prevail, it will change the tax-exempt status of churches and other religious organizations, and require the same transparency of donors, salaries and other expenditures that secular nonprofits must currently meet.

“This is a very strong case,”

said Dave Muscato, public relations director for American Atheists, a national advocacy group and lead plaintiff in the case. “It seems to be straight-up discrimination on the basis of religion.”

American Atheists is joined in the suit by Atheists of Northern Indiana and Atheist Archives of Kentucky. Oral arguments were heard Thursday (Nov. 21) in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky in Covington.

The case centers around who must file IRS Form 990, an annual reporting statement

Continued on page 2

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# Commentary

## Faith and Culture: *The economics of Christmas*

This month we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Messiah.

Much debate swirls around the “cultural war” raging between the sacred and the secular.

Many Christians are offended because some businesses require their employees to refrain from saying “Merry Christmas” and use the more generic “happy holidays,” as a way of not offending non-Christian patrons. I won’t bother to share my opinion here.

Despite the best efforts to remind people that “Jesus the reason for the season,” I think Christians are missing a huge point.

Christmas is hugely commercialized even by -- and perhaps, especially by -- Christians. Since over 70% of the people in the USA claim to believe in God, the majority of religious citizens are contrib-

uting to the problem.

A little research on the Internet reveals some staggering facts.

US Citizens will purchase between 25 and 30 million live Christmas trees this year. Another 15 million artificial trees will be purchased. The average cost of a live tree is \$34.87 and the average cost of the artificial tree is \$70.55. A conservative estimate reveals Americans will spend almost \$2 BILLION on Christmas trees alone this year. This figure doesn’t include decorations inside or outside the home.

Retail Christmas sales can account for up to 40% of a merchant’s annual sales. The average hovers around 20%. According to one statistic, seasonal Christmas sales last year alone were \$579.5 BILLION.

Want to know if you are you a “good Santa” or a “stingy Grinch?” Polls show that



**Steve Highlander**  
Managing Editor RN-R,

the average American family’s Christmas budget for presents in 2013 is \$704. By the way, the highest average budget on record was \$866 in 2008.

Gift cards are a quick and easy present nowadays. Gift card sales were expected to reach \$52 Billion in 2012. Consider the fact that about 10% of all gift cards are never redeemed. From 2005 through 2011 retailers reported \$41 billion in unredeemed cards. This adds up to huge profits for the retailer, since they get paid up front and never have to take product out of inventory.

Let’s turn our attention

to entertainment. The three highest grossing Christmas movies since 2000 were: 1. How the Grinch Stole Christmas with Jim Carey, grossing \$260,044,825 that year. 2. The Polar Express in 2004 earning \$182,157,477. 3. Elf, earning \$173,389,518. You could pretty much double that for concession stand sales.

You might find all this interesting, but wonder what my point is?

It is this: Christmas was and is about the birth of a savior who was born in a barn and later said, “I don’t have anywhere to lay my head.” With all our protests about the secularization of Christmas, it might do us well to remember who’s birth we are celebrating. Does our American Christmas frenzy really reflect the Christ we so adamantly say we contend for?

We can pay lip services to

the phrase “Merry Christmas,” and totally fall into the trap of commercialization.

I have always wondered why Jesus is the only one who doesn’t get a present on His birthday. Perhaps it is time to put Christmas back into the proper perspective. \$600 Billion would go a long way in meeting the needs and alleviating the suffering of people around the world.

Is it feasible to spend \$600 billion to basically celebrate one day out of the entire year?

I am not suggesting we do away with Christmas, I am suggesting we honor the Messiah’s birth by practicing His message of sacrificial love.

*Dr. Steve Highlander is a pastor and author. He holds a doctorate in Pastoral Theology and is a Certified Christian Counselor. He can be contacted through his website at c3mministries.com.*

## Upstairs Over a Vacant Lot: *Authority can be dangerous unless properly delegated*

People can bow to authority or they can ignore it. If they ignore it, the evidence says they will pay a penalty. Certain people in our American system have been given authority by the voters. If you voted for those who take office, you have granted them a measure of authority. If you voted against them, they remain in authority because of the will of the electorate. If you failed to cast a ballot, you have contributed to their victory.

Up to this point, what I have written in this column is a very well-known fact. How well-known is it that with authority comes power? It seems to me that many folks vote to express an opinion they hope will be favorable to their personal in-

terests and without regard for the possibility that if their interests change their vote still stands. When personal interests change, you are still under the authority of those in office. Authority can be fickle!

In the event that you do not change, it is still a possibility that the one with authority over you may change. Is it possible? Yes! Is it probable? It has happened again and again throughout the history of this nation. Authority can be fickle!

Such is the case with human government from the courthouse to the statehouse to the White House. So it is with county commissioners (and the courthouse crew), city councilmen (or councilwomen), state representatives, state senators,

governors, other state office holders members of congress, and all federal office holders.

All of the above are elected. They, in turn, appoint others to positions of authority, and they delegate to others, and so forth and so forth. Thus, you have the spread of authority through a maze of bureaucracy. They are the product of voting or not voting. They are secular in authority and secular in power. Their positions become “set in stone” because of many factors, not the least of which is money. Money motivation can be a very, very, powerful negative!

Reliance on the “kingdom of man” is standing on a shaky foundation. “Standing on the rock” is reliance on the Kingdom of God!



**Dr. Paul C. Collins**  
Publisher RN-R

My patriotism is real. My love for America is real. My willingness to be subject to delegated authority is real. But somewhere in the mix of emotional connections, I have an allegiance to an invisible government headed by an unelected person of great and unlimited power that matches his unlimited authority. His name

is God, because he is God! His son, Jesus Christ, is the Lord of lords and King of kings! His Holy Spirit is God with me, in me, and for me. The Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit are never fickle. They can be trusted! They are eternal, their word never changes, and their power is never diminished or tarnished.

In every season, I give thanks for the gift of Jesus Christ.

*Dr. Paul Collins is the founder and Executive Director of Acts Ministry, Inc and Publisher of the Real News - Review. He is an ordained Methodist Minister, Presiding Bishop of Acts Church International and currently serves as senior pastor of Acts Church in Springfield, MO.*

## Seasons of Reflections: *Christmas, God’s mountain, and the valley experiences*

In the midst of the holidays—where do you find yourself on “God’s Mountain?” From our perspective, at times it feels like we are in a rut—in a valley—one in which we have spent way too much time. From God’s perspective, however, if we are his we ARE making progress.

Progress was part of the package deal. God will always follow through on his promises regardless of lack of cooperation on our part. But sometimes our lack of cooperation impedes the rate at which we proceed up the mountain

or the length of time we spend in a valley. Nevertheless, God himself will see to it that we make progress. God is faithful to continue to carry us on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

If you would permit me to share a personal story, God may choose to use it to heal a life other than my own. I am sharing in obedience to a message I heard recently, a point of which was that some people are too proud to confess their faults one to another, so as to be healed. I have felt that my “hindsfeet”



**LeAnn Kennedy**

have been stuck in the mud of a valley for some time. Because of the way the Lord sovereignly knit me together, I have a bent towards a type-A personality and a melancholy tempera-

ment. My struggle at times is to keep in balance the effort I put into my relationship with him and resting in his grace. I know that I can do nothing in and of myself, but God has said that I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me; and he has also told us that we must make an effort to do certain things. So for me, I often struggle in my mind to find that fine line: the line of obedience, the effort on my part to obey but trusting His grace to empower me to do so. Working but resting. No one can work their way to God and no one can work their way out of a valley. We will get out of the valley when we have passed through. Resting in his grace and in patient, confident expectation that progress will have been made in my life, even

in the midst of a valley, is the gift of peace from the One who even now is still with me.

So what does all of this have to do with the Holiday season? I am thankful that God has patiently worked in me and with me over the years of my Christian life. As I look back in hindsight, I am thankful for my progress, made possible by the Lord Jesus Christ and the working of the precious Holy Spirit. Christmas is a personal celebration of the gift God offered to me, the gift of his Son, the gift that keeps on giving. The gift of his life, the gift of his blood, and the gift of his power is mine and I am thankful.

*Excerpted from Ms. Kennedy’s book Seasons of Reflection published by Acts Press.*

## Catholic Goes Viral

*Continued from page 1*

for sites that originate from within the 110 acres of the tiny city-state.

But other domains don’t carry geographical restrictions, though newer top-level Internet domains created by ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) like “.movie” or “.guru” or “.museum” are more restrictive than the Web’s original monikers “.com,” “.org” and “.net.”

In the case of “.catholic,” individuals — whether religious bloggers or a cleric — will not have access, according

to Monsignor Paul Tighe, secretary of the Vatican’s social communications council.

That extension will be reserved for church institutions such as dioceses, parishes, religious orders, schools, universities or hospitals. Use of the domain, Tighe said, will be a guarantee that a site is “authentically Catholic.”

“The domain will create a cohesive and organized [Web] presence ... so the recognized structure of the church will be mirrored online,” he said, according to Italian media reports.



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The vision of the **Real News-Review** is to be a newspaper that will bring attention to the power and influence of religion in today’s world. Acts Ministry is a distinctively Christian organization seeking to present the news of all religions in a professional manner while, at the same time, maintaining a Christian perspective.

We believe that we can report the news with accuracy even though we see events through our paradigm as Christians.

The stories and opinions expressed in **The Real News - Review** do not necessarily reflect the opinions and beliefs of Acts Ministry, Inc, its board or larger body of associates.

To suggest or submit a story or to write the editor contact Steve Highlander at [editor@actsmediagroup.com](mailto:editor@actsmediagroup.com).

## TAX EXEMPT

Continued from page 1

that provides information on a group’s mission, programs and finances.

Current tax law requires all tax-exempt organizations to file a Form 990 financial report — except churches and church-related organizations. A few state, political and educational organizations are exempt as well if their annual revenues fall below certain amounts.

This means the IRS treats religious organizations differently than it does all other organizations, the suit holds. It claims the IRS policy is a violation of the First Amendment and the due process promised under the Fifth Amendment.

IRS spokesman Anthony Burke said the agency’s policy is not to comment on pending litigation.

The suit argues that religious organizations receive preferential treatment because they do not have to withhold income tax from compensation to clergy, reveal staff salaries, or disclose the names of donors who give more than \$5,000.

The plaintiffs allege that because they must reveal the names of major donors, they are hindered in the amount of money they can raise.

“We have donors who tell us, ‘I would like to give more than this but I don’t want people to know I am an atheist,’” Muscato said. “That is hurting us to be held to that different standard.”

The suit also alleges that, because religious organizations do not file Form 990, there is little proof that the organizations’ activities benefit the public and should therefore be tax-exempt. It holds that such “subsidization of religious entities” costs taxpayers \$71 billion per year.



For the people of first century Israel, subjugated by Rome and ruled in part by a phony 'king' collaborating with the oppressor, the true Messiah would come to liberate His people by physically uprooting



**Virgil Hill**  
**RN-R Columnist**

the foreigners and pretenders  
and re-establishing the throne  
of David.

Despite the recent claims by Reza Aslan in his best-selling book "Zealot," this was clearly neither the intent nor means of Jesus. As a result, His claim to the role of Messiah, especially after the anathema of crucifixion, was largely rejected.

His way of restoration and fulfillment of the Kingdom, as fully developed by N.T. Wright in his work "How God Became King," was simply not in accord with the orthodox teaching of scripture and tradition of that day and place. He was dismissed as just another failed Messianic pretender.

Today, the State of Israel, created by international powers in the wake of the Holocaust as a sanctuary for Jews from across the globe and as a nominally secular state, has no King upon David's throne but a parliament (the Knesset), a Prime Minister and a President.

Modern faithful Jews, wheth-

er Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, still await the day when the Messiah will come.

American Christians, while claiming Jesus as Lord, nonetheless also seek a contemporary Messiah via politics-as do other citizens. Thus the rise of tribalism in our polis as clans are established and cults around various figures emerge.

This is truly a bi-partisan phenomenon in which persons such as Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama come to be venerated by their followers. Within these cults no dissent is tolerated and no acknowledgement of imperfection is accepted.

Such fanatic devotion leads to equally passionate opposition movements, e.g. Obama-hating, that also will not abide critical thinking and are given over to frequently bizarre allegations that are accepted on faith by members of the group.

Surely Christians, of whatever ideological bent, ought to be able to exercise humility and Spirit-led discernment to focus on what Jesus, our one true Messiah, demands of us and cast aside our devotion to these false Messiahs of our day.

*Virgil J. Hill is a lifelong Ozarker and activist and is an ordained minister with Acts Ministry.*

# America's Moral Compass

*Wanted: Christians who respond to the “signs of the times”*

I'm afraid we Christians have created a vacuum by retreating from public life. We have associated with each other and read our own literature, listened to our own music, stayed out of politics, and let the rest of the world go by. We have refused to accept the Christian responsibility of being the salt and light to the world.



**Dee Wampler**  
RN-R Columnist

Secular minded people have taken over influential posts in colleges, government and the media and have used their positions to promulgate their own humanistic goals.

Our system needs to be challenged by those holding a biblical view of God. The fact is, the secular humanists didn't steal America; it was given to them.

Unless American Chris-

tians awaken and descend from the bleachers onto the playing field of America's moral debate, then we are not going to turn this country around.

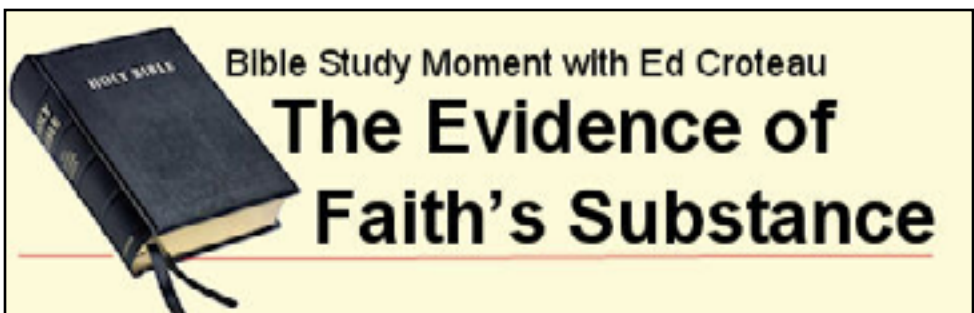
We live, without doubt, in time of great moral and spiritual crisis. In fact, we are in a war. The question: What have you done in midst of this Great War? Have you taken a stand against pornography,

against abortion, against the radical homosexual agenda? Have you written one letter, or protested in one march or done anything at all? Or have you just silently surrendered?

Are you supporting your church and encouraging your friends to get involved and take a public stand?

I urge you to strike a powerful blow on behalf of the American family, to be discerning, to join pro-family groups and organizations, and most of all, to attend and support your local church.

*Dee Wampler is an Author, Defense Attorney, Former Prosecutor, and a Native of Springfield, MO. He believes America needs a moral compass and advocates an honest look at America's Christian History.*



# Scientific confirmation of the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ

In his book “Science Speaks,” Professor Peter Stoner (Professor Emeritus of Science at Westmont College), documents how he applied Probability Science to calculate the mathematical probability of Jesus fulfilling just eight of the many Old Testament prophecies for the Messiah. These eight prophecies are: 1) Isaiah 40:3 (Messiah has a forerunner), 2) Micah 5:2 (Messiah’s birthplace), 3) Zechariah 9:9 (Messiah’s entry into Jerusalem), 4) Psalm 41:9 (Messiah’s betrayal), 5) Isaiah 53:7 (Messiah’s silence), 6) Zechariah 11:12 (Messiah’s betrayal), 7) Zechariah 11:13 (the Potter’s Field), and 8) Psalm 22:16 (Messiah’s crucifixion).

Probability Science places great emphasis on insuring no bias goes into the analysis, so to make his calculations as unbiased as possible, he spread the work across nearly 600 university students, in twelve different classes, with each class working independently from the others in analyzing the detailed circumstances surrounding each prophecy, allowing the students to be as conservative in their probability calculations as they needed to be, in order to reach a consensus in their group (even among the most skeptical students).

He brought the 12 independent analyses together and compared their results, and finally submitted his students' work to an independent committee of the American Scientific Affiliation for peer review by a team of experts (an essential step often overlooked in the scientific method). This committee verified that his application of the science of probability to these prophecies was done correctly.

So what is the probability that Jesus Christ could have met the requirements of just these eight Old Testament prophecies by chance? That is one chance in 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (twenty-eight zeroes)! That's the same as saying for every 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 people that are investigated, the odds are that one of them would meet all eight prophecies. There are only 6,000,000,000 people on the earth. With Christ the only person in history fulfilling just eight prophecies, what are the odds it's just coincidence?

What am I trying to say? Anyone who minimizes or ignores the significance of the Bible's identifying signs concerning Jesus Christ as mankind's Savior would be foolish. We are dealing here with truth. These are issues of eternity and final destiny. Gambling my money at Las Vegas or on a lottery ticket is one thing. Gambling my soul on anyone or anything except Jesus Christ is another matter entirely.

*Ed Croteau is a resident of Lee's Summit, MO and hosts a weekly study in Lee's Summit called, "Faith: Substance and Evidence." He can be reached with your questions through the Lees Summit Tribune.*

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# USA Religion

## US Catholic bishops elect ‘safe’ leaders

Although the results were expected, not everyone was happy with the election choices

By DAVID GIBSON  
BALTIMORE (RNS) The U.S. Catholic bishops on Tuesday (Nov. 12) stuck with tradition and two known quantities in electing Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., and Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Houston to lead the hierarchy as the bishops wait to see how Pope Francis reshapes their membership.  
As the current vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Kurtz's election as president was expected and he won a 53 percent majority on the first ballot, gaining 125 of 236 votes cast.  
The selection of DiNardo as vice president — and likely successor to Kurtz in three years — was seen as a safe choice as well.  
“They elected two moderates who are not radical change agents in any way,” said Russell Shaw, a former spokesman for the bishops and author who was at the meeting.  
DiNardo emerged from a slate of nine candidates and won a majority of votes on



Newly elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, center left, Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky. and new vice president, center right, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, speak to the press on Tuesday (Nov. 12) in Baltimore. RNS photo by David Gibson

margin, 147-91.  
While the bishops did not opt for a culture warrior like Chaput to lead them, they also bypassed Los Angeles

the church's turn toward the Global South represented by the election of Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as Pope Francis.

gay marriage, though he is seen as a well-rounded candidate with deep roots in Catholicism's social justice teachings. In a press conference after his election, Kurtz cited his 12 years as a parish priest as his most important experience.

“How can we warm hearts and heal wounds?” Kurtz said after his election, vowing to follow Francis' example of reaching out to those marginalized by the church or society.

He cited advocacy for immigrants and the poor as well as traditional concerns over abortion and euthanasia as issues he and the conference would stress.

He did not propose any particular new initiative, however, and observers say he will have to consult with the rest of the 250 bishops gathered here as he tries to advance the hierarchy's agenda.

By custom, the vice president is voted in as president at the end of his three-year term. But three years ago, a group of conservative bishops rallied to deny the then-vice president, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., the top spot and instead elected New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan. That move upset many bishops.

“I was astounded,

disappointed and somewhat ashamed,” Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., wrote on his blog on the eve of this vote. “(A) great bishop was embarrassed, a group of bishops within the conference were celebrating their victory, and I thought it was one of the worst experiences of being a bishop I had experienced.”

The bishops seemed determined not to repeat that experience, nor did they want to reward conservatives with another victory. In addition, while Dolan is gregarious and media savvy, there was a desire to find a softer-spoken leader for a quieter time while the conference looks toward a retrenching period under Francis.

“Both Kurtz and DiNardo are very likable guys,” said Michael Sean Winters, a National Catholic Reporter columnist and close observer of the hierarchy's inner workings.

DiNardo was recently the bishops' point man in the fight against abortion but he also worked at the Vatican for many years before being named a bishop in Iowa in 1997 and then head of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston in 2006.

The choices, Winters added, were more about pragmatism than ideology. “Many bishops want someone who they think can run a meeting or will get back to them in a timely fashion,” he said. “They don't really want to work with anyone with hard edges.”

The leadership elections were one of the few notable items on an otherwise mundane public agenda. The bishops also overwhelmingly voted to develop a document against pornography.

The real debates were expected to go on behind closed doors in sessions that will last through Thursday. Church sources say the bishops are expected to have frank talks about contentious issues like their stance against the Obama administration's contraception mandate.

But they are also expected to discuss the larger direction of the hierarchy. The election of Pope Francis and his oft-repeated desire to push the bishops in a new, more pastoral direction have unsettled the bishops, who in recent years were already divided and often unable to agree on major statements or initiatives.

Many of the bishops meeting here said the conference was in something of a holding pattern, waiting to see who Francis will name to leading U.S. dioceses and whether he can recast the U.S. hierarchy in his mold and perhaps leave it more unified.

**“How can we warm hearts and heal wounds?”**  
**~Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz ~**

the third ballot, defeating the runner-up, Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, by a 147-87 margin. Three years ago, Kurtz defeated Chaput — a conservative lightning rod in the hierarchy — by a nearly identical

Archbishop Jose Gomez, a Mexican-born candidate who would have been the first Latino in the hierarchy's top ranks. Gomez would have reflected both the growing Latino presence in American Catholicism and

The bishops also passed over other, more progressive candidates who might have reflected the new tone of inclusion and a focus on the poor demanded by Francis.

Kurtz has previously led the conference's fight against

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# Congress pushes for release of American pastor imprisoned in Iran

By KATHERINE BURGESS  
WASHINGTON (RNS)

Congress is pressing for the release of Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen who has been imprisoned in Iran for his religious beliefs since September 2012.

On Wednesday (Nov. 20) the House Foreign Affairs Committee approved a bipartisan resolution condemning Iran's persecution of religious minorities and urging Abedini's immediate release. The resolution will now go to the full House.

The Senate unanimously passed a similar resolution Nov. 14.

The U.S. and Iran are conducting talks in Geneva aimed at reining in Iran's nuclear program, and those backing Abedini hope the time is right for his freedom.

"It is important especially with the nuclear negotiations in Geneva that Congress speak out with one voice on behalf of pastor Abedini in support of his immediate release," said U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican.

The House and Senate resolutions follow Abedini's transfer from Evin Prison, a facility for political prisoners, to Rajai Shahr Prison. He is now held in a ward for rapists and murderers, according to the American



**Naghmeh Abedini, wife of imprisoned Iranian-American minister Saeed Abedini, at Capitol Hill hearing on religious minorities in Iran on March 15, 2013. Behind her is her lawyer, Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice. RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks**

Center for Law and Justice, a law firm that represents Abedini's wife, Nagmeh. Abedini has been allowed visits from his Iranian family, who have confirmed he is alive.

The Iranian government sentenced Abedini to eight years in prison after convicting him of "undermining" the government by spreading his religious beliefs. Abedini had previously

worked with house churches in Iran; in 2012 he helped at an orphanage and visited family.

Rep. Chris Smith said that Abedini promised the Iranian government he would not proselytize — and that Abedini had upheld his side of the bargain.

Since his arrest, Abedini has endured beatings causing internal bleeding and has had medi-

cal care withheld, according to the ACLJ.

His wife and two children await his return.

Abedini's persecution is part of a wider policy against religious minorities in Iran, Smith said.

President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have both spoken out for Abedini's release.

# Federal judge: Clergy tax-free housing allowance is unconstitutional

By SARAH PULLIAM BAILEY  
(RNS)

A federal judge has ruled that an Internal Revenue Service exemption that allows clergy to shield a portion of their salary from federal income taxes is unconstitutional.

The clergy housing exemption applies to an estimated 44,000 ministers, priests, rabbis, imams and others. If the ruling stands, some clergy members could experience an estimated 5 to 10 percent cut in take-home pay.

The suit was filed by the Wisconsin-based Freedom from Religion Foundation on grounds that the housing allowance violates the separation of church and state and the constitutional guarantee of equal protection. The group's founders have said that if tax-exempt religious groups are allowed a housing subsidy, other tax-exempt groups, such as FFRE, should get one, too.

U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Crabb on Friday (Nov. 22) ruled in their favor, saying the exemption "provides a benefit to religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise."

The case, decided in the District Court for the Western District Of Wisconsin, will likely be appealed to the Chicago-based 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which covers the states of Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana.

The housing allowances of pastors in Wisconsin remain unaffected after Crabb stayed the ruling until all appeals are exhausted. Crabb also ruled in 2010 that the National Day of Prayer was unconstitutional; that ruling was overturned the following year.

Earlier this month, the 7th Circuit barred the enforcement of the Obama administration's contraceptive mandate, an issue circulating through federal courts across

the country and likely to be taken up by the U.S. Supreme Court next spring.

Churches routinely designate a portion of a pastor's salary as a housing allowance. So, for example, a minister that earns an average of \$50,000 may receive another third of income, or \$16,000, as a tax-free housing allowance, essentially earning \$66,000. Having to pay taxes on the additional \$16,000 (\$4,000 in this case), would mean an 6 percent cut in salary.

The exemption is worth about \$700 million per year, according to the Joint Committee on Taxation's Estimate of Federal Tax Expenditure.

Crabb ruled that the law provides that the gross income of a "minister of the gospel" does not include "the rental allowance paid to him as part of his compensation, to the extent used by him to rent or provide a home and to the extent such allowance does not exceed the fair rental value of the home, including furnishings and appurtenances such as a garage, plus the cost of utilities."

Tobin Grant, a political science professor at Southern Illinois University, said the exemption dates from an era when churches paid clergy who lived in church-owned parsonages.

"Over time, fewer churches owned parsonages and instead gave clergy housing allowances, which were also treated as tax-free. The difference, however, was that these were regular salaries that now had an exclusion. Part could be tax-free, part couldn't. So, why not give a pastor a huge housing allowance, which is tax free?"

The ruling addresses the housing allowance, while parsonages are still tax-exempt properties, like the churches that own them.

Peter J. Reilly, a contributor to Forbes, writes that the



**Churches typically designate a portion of the pastor's salary at housing allowance. Many pastors of small church would be significantly impacted by a ruling that would stat taxing this part of their income. Stock photo source 123rf**

exclusion goes back to 1921.

"I'm not sure what Congress could do in this instance," he said. "There is strong clergy influence on both sides of the aisle though, so there is a good chance that Congress will at least try to make it look like it has done something."

The law's tax exemption has been contested since a decade-old dispute between the IRS and California megachurch pastor Rick Warren. In 2002, the IRS attempted to charge Warren back taxes after he claimed a housing allowance of more than \$70,000.

He eventually won the federal court case, and that led Congress to clarify the rules for housing allowances. The allowance is limited to one house, and is restricted to either the fair market rental value of the house or the money actually spent on housing.

Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, co-presidents of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which brought the suit, hailed the decision. "May we say hallelujah! This decision agrees with us that Congress may not reward ministers for fighting a 'godless and anti-religious' movement by letting them pay less income tax," they said. "The rest of us should not pay more because clergy pay less."

The Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and Southern Baptist-affiliated GuideStone Financial Resources plan to fight for the exemption.

"The clergy housing allowance isn't a government establishment of religion, but just the reverse," said Russell Moore, president of the ERLC. "The allowance is neutral to all religions. Without it, clergy in small congregations of all sorts would be penalized and harmed."

# Can God take a tweet? ‘The Twible’ delivers holy writ with Twitter wit

By JANA RIESS

(RNS) Nearly every home has at least one Bible, although few read it.

But 16 percent of Americans log on to Twitter every day. And that's where author Jana Riess takes the word of God. A popular Mormon blogger at Religion News Service and author of "Flunking Sainthood," Riess spent four years tweeting every book of the Old and New Testaments with pith and wit.

Now, the complete collection — each chapter condensed to 140 characters — is on sale as "The Twible," (rhymes with Bible) with added cartoons and zippy summaries for each biblical book.

Her tweets mix theology with pop-culture inside jokes on sources as varied as "Pride and Prejudice," "The Lord of the Rings" and digital acronyms such as LYAS (love you as a sister). To save on precious character count, God is simply "G."

Thus, the Ten Commandments passage in Exodus 20:1-17 becomes: "G's Top Ten List: No gods, idols, or blasphemy. Keep the Sabbath holy & love Mom. Don't kill, cheat, steal, lie, or look @ Xmas catalogs." That last one covers coveting.

The book of Ruth is summed up: "Foreign girl wins Israeli edition of The Bachelor, thanks to savvy stage mom-in-law. Oh, and BTW? Women rock."

The woman of virtue in Proverbs 31 has strength among her precious qualities, so Riess gives her "Michelle Obama arms."

The collection reads like a comedy club encounter with a believer at the microphone. But her irreverent tone vanishes when she goes to the heart of the Christian text, the gospel stories of Jesus' crucifixion.

For Luke 23, she tweets: "There's just nothing funny about Jesus dying on a cross. Sorry. Catch up with me in the next chapter."

"Nothing I could say would be appropriate," Riess said in an interview. "I think I am very respectful to Jesus himself."

Riess had no trouble getting sassy with snarling prophets or self-important disciples "who misunderstood or distorted what Jesus said. I know I could never do what they did — give up everything and follow their teacher to do extraordinary things for God. (But) they are very concerned with themselves and with the day to day," she said.

Riess reads the Bible as a charge to generosity and justice, as well as a guide to salvation. That allows her to mock the Tea Party more than once.

"I don't see the Bible as some do, as a free market treatise on capitalism. It is very much about the idea that the government (not only the individual) is supposed to be righteous and caring for everyone," Riess said.

One of her favorite tweets is Matthew 25, where Jesus says his sheep, who fed and clothed the poor, are heaven bound. "P.S. Sorry goats, you're on your own," her tweet concludes.

A devoted Mormon convert, Riess, said she will donate 25 percent of her net profit (after her self-publishing expenses) among five charities — faith-based and secular — that provide humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

"The hardest chapters were the Bible's many violent and disturbing passages," said Riess. "I never want to trivialize pain."

Also difficult: 150 Psalms including some of the Bible's greatest and most familiar poetry of praise, love and lamentation. "Twitter is all about being concise. It's not the greatest medium for conveying literary beauty," she said. Indeed, the 23rd Psalm in "The Twible" is no King James Version: "G's my shepherd. He lets me nap in green pastures. He protects me from the wolves. Sometimes it rocks to be a sheep, y'know."

The book does turn serious in short essays where Riess draws on Jewish and Christian scholars and authors to elaborate theological points. She turns to the late novelist Reynolds Price to discuss the ending of the Gospel of Mark.

As Price pointed out, the gospel originally concluded with the women fleeing the empty tomb in terror, leaving the reader to wonder what's next. "He wants us to live out the story," writes Riess. "We are the women who discover the empty tomb — will we panic? Spread the word? What will we do next?"

Still, the goal of "The Twible" is, as Riess advertises, to make the Bible short and funny.

That doesn't fly with Wayne Grudem, research professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona. "The few brief segments of ('The Twible') that I looked at, while somewhat amusing, seemed to me at times to be disrespectful to the original content, even to the point of being irreverent. I cannot treat the Bible that way. God says, through Isaiah (66:2), 'But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.'"

But Ralph Williams, a University of Michigan professor emeritus of English, who taught the Bible as literature for decades, has no problem with the idea of "The Twible."

"When people come to the text in new and different ways, they may be inspired to take a look for themselves (at the Bible)," Williams said. And for those few who have already read the original, "The Twible" can "invite us to see it in terms we might not have thought before."

As for Riess' tone, Williams said, "Any religion which can't afford to be laughed at isn't worth believing in."

## Evangelicals press for immigration reform

*Continued from front page*

of Sojourners, said afterward: "As faith leaders, we know the urgency and the human cost of our broken system and are committed to working and praying until reform passes."

On Tuesday (Nov. 12), five immigration reform activists, including the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, vowed to fast to pressure Congress into passing an immigration reform bill.

The other clergy who met with the president were: Leith Anderson, president of the National Association

of Evangelicals; Eusebio Elizondo, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle; Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church; Hyepin Im, president and CEO of Korean Churches for Community Development, Los Angeles; and Mike McClenahan, senior pastor of Solana Beach Presbyterian Church.

Moore said the president asked him to pray at the meeting. Moore led the group in prayers for Obama, Vice President Joe Biden — who attended the meeting — Congress and the nation.

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# World Religion

## Quebec's secularism charter heads to lawmakers

Proposed charter has goal to “affirm the Values of Secularism and the Religious Neutrality of the State”

By RON CSILLAG

TORONTO (RNS) Quebec's long-awaited secularism charter was formally introduced in the province's legislature on Thursday (Nov. 7) under a new name but with the same goal of restricting “overt” religious expression in the public square.

The rebranded Charter of Quebec Values was introduced

proposal, said the mouthful of a name was selected by government lawyers, adding they like long names that encompass the major details in the title.

“There's no new phrasing,” Drainville told reporters Wednesday, down playing the new title. “It's the name of the bill. You need to give bills a name. Jurists have been work-

employees, including hijabs, yarmulkes and Sikh turbans, as well as large crosses and crucifixes. It would affect civil servants, day care workers, nurses, teachers, doctors and others.

The idea, according to the drafters of the bill, is to establish religious neutrality and gender equality in the public sector.

the measure.

As a minority government, the PQ will need the support of opposition parties for the bill to pass. The Coalition Avenir Quebec party has proposed a much less sweeping ban on religious expression, while the Liberals have called for the charter's headgear provisions to be all but eliminated, with the exception of people covering their faces while receiving state services.

The provincial government is allowing for a one-year transition period to implement the provisions. The charter calls for disciplinary measures for those who do not comply with its bans, but those are unspecified in the bill.

Meanwhile, Canada's federal government has said that if the charter is approved, Ottawa would order a review by its Justice Department.

“We would challenge any law that we deem unconstitutional, that violates the fundamental constitutional guarantees to freedom of religion,” Jason Kenney, the federal multiculturalism minister, said in September.



**Bernard Brainville, the minister responsible for proposal, during a May 2010 promotional tour of the sovereignty of Quebec in Trois-rivières. Photo Source Wikimedia Commons.**

*“You don't protect the rights of individuals by taking away their rights....”*

~ Jean-Marc Fournier -- Opposition leader

in Quebec City as “Charter Affirming the Values of Secularism and the Religious Neutrality of the State, As Well as the Equality of Men and Women, and the Framing of Accommodation Requests.”

Bernard Drainville, the governing Parti Québécois minister responsible for the

proposal, said the mouthful of a name was selected by government lawyers, adding they like long names that try to summarize everything in the bill. That's the real reason.”

It was previously known as the Charter of Secularism.

Under any name, the measure would ban all “overt” and “conspicuous” religious headgear worn by public sector

Moments after the PQ submitted the charter, the opposition Liberals called it an attack on religious freedoms.

“You don't protect the rights of individuals by taking away their rights,” opposition leader Jean-Marc Fournier said, echoing the sentiments of religious groups that have lashed out at

## Church of England ‘one generation from extinction’ says former archbishop

By TREVOR GRUNDY

CANTERBURY, England (RNS) A former archbishop of Canterbury has warned that the Church of England faces extinction in less than 25 years unless it can attract more young people now.

Talking to 300 churchgoers in Shropshire, West England (Nov. 18) on the eve of a church agreement to start a campaign to evangelize England, Lord George Carey said: “We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. We are one generation away from extinction and if we do not invest in

young people there is going to be no one in the future.”

Carey was Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the world's estimated 85 million Anglicans from 1991 until 2002 when he joined the House of Lords (Britain's Upper Chamber of Parliament).

He said that every one of the church's 43 dioceses (territorial units governed by bishops) could disappear within 25 years if an urgent campaign to attract the young was delayed.

“There is a prevalent view that people don't want to hear

what we have to say anymore.”

There are 25 million baptized Anglicans in England and Wales but fewer than one million of them attend services on Sundays, church statistics show.

“I am convinced that churches can grow, must grow and should grow,” said the 78-year-old retired prelate. “But to sit in a cold church, looking at the back of people's heads, is perhaps not considered the most exciting place to meet new people and hear people and hear prophetic words.”

## Vatican to display bones of St. Peter for the first time

ROME (RNS) The Vatican said it would display for the first time bones believed to be the mortal remains of St. Peter, the leader of Jesus' 12 apostles, to mark the end of the Year of Faith, Nov. 24.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, wrote in Monday's editions of L'Osservatore Romano, that the Catholic faithful making a pilgrimage to St. Peter's tomb to mark the end of the Year of Faith will enjoy “the exposition ... of the relics traditionally recognized as those of the apostle who gave his life for the Lord on this spot.”

Fisichella was referring to the long-held belief that Peter was crucified upside down and died in either A.D. 64 or 67 on the spot now marked by the Clementine Chapel inside the basilica that bears his name.

The church never officially declared the bones — which were discovered in the 1940s — authentic. But a series of exhaustive tests conducted on the bones between their discovery and 1968 convinced Pope Paul VI they had been “identified in a way we can hold to be convincing.” Previously, only the box containing the bones was on display.

Pope Benedict XVI declared the Year of Faith would begin on Oct. 11, 2012, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Benedict said at the time that the Year of Faith was a “summons to an authentic and renewed conversation to the Lord.”

## Religious conflict rips through Central African Republic

By FREDRICK NZWILI

(RNS) A cycle of violence in the Central African Republic is quickly degenerating into a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims, amid a deteriorating humanitarian crisis, church leaders and U.N. officials warn.

The landlocked nation of 4.6 million people has experienced chaos since March, when an Islamist rebel alliance known as “Seleka” overthrew President Francois Bozize, a Christian, and installed rebel commander Michel Djotodia as president.

Seleka was formed in December 2012, when Islamists and other rebel groups from Chad and Sudan joined forces. The militants had crossed into the country, attacking government installations and destroying churches and church missions, businesses and homes, Christian agencies report.

In the latest development, the U.N. said Wednesday that some 2,000 people were seeking shelter at a Catholic mission in the city of Bouca, in the northwest of the country.

Hopes for peace had grown after Djotodia disbanded the Seleka in September, but sections of ex-Seleka fighters are still attacking villages and church centers.

Church leaders say the violence is surging, while U.N. officials say the situation is slowly degenerating into a Christian-Muslim conflict as the rebels escalate attacks and Christian militia retali-

ate. Some have voiced fears of a potential genocide.

“We did not have tensions until the arrival of Seleka,” said the Rev. Andre Golike, president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Central African Republic.

The armed conflict has produced 400,000 internally displaced persons and 64,000 refugees. International groups say people are in urgent need of relief aid.

“The situation is bad and the people extremely worried,” said Golike. “There are also constant killings and abuse of civilians' rights. Many are fleeing to the neighboring countries.”

On Nov. 18, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in a report to the U.N. Security Council warned that violence in the country risked spilling further out of control. In the report, Ban's adviser expressed concern over revenge attacks between Christian and Muslim groups.

“We must do everything in our powers to de-escalate the religious tensions between Christian and Muslim communities,” said Jeffrey Feltman, the undersecretary for political affairs.

The Roman Catholic Church has reported the most property damage. In June, it lost 28 cars and three motorcycles in the Diocese of Bangassou, a city in the southeastern region of the country. A pediatric hospital, a pharmacy and an Internet cafe were also burned down, Bishop Juan Jose Aguirre of Bangassou reported.

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Peace on Earth!”

~ Luke 2:10-14



# The Messiah Project presents “The Miracle of Christmas”

Continued from the front page

diences in Moscow, Novgorod, and St. Petersburg but portions of the concert were broadcast to all 12 time zones that span the great nation of Russia.

On several occasions, Robison has taken various artists from vocal, instrumental, dance and visual arts to perform in China, appearing on the Chinese national and international television networks.

During July 2013, The Messiah Project presented inspirational performances as an outreach to the disaster areas in Japan.

Plans are now underway for a “Goodwill” concert tour to Turkey, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates.

While Branson has long been a mecca for lovers of country music and other popular entertainments, performances of faith-based classical music have rarely graced Branson’s stages. On December 11, 2013, The Messiah Project of the Ozarks will bring an international cast of musicians, singers, dancers together

in presenting two shows. The Messiah Project’s evening performance will begin with “The Miracle of Christmas,” featuring the best of Christmas music from around the world -- featuring the Sinfonia Chamber Orchestra of Krakow, Poland. As a special treat, the show’s second act will feature Gian-Carlo Menotti’s classic Christmas operetta, “Amahl and the Night Visitors.” A show earlier in the afternoon will feature a separate performance of Menotti’s “Amahl.”

Though composed for children, “Amahl” appeals to audiences of all ages. Unlike other Christmas entertainments, Menotti’s operetta avoids the banalities of Santa Claus and sugar plum fairies to tell the deeply moving story of Amahl, a crippled shepherd boy, and his poor, widowed mother, who are visited one fateful evening by—imagine!—three kings. Bearing gifts for a legendary newborn child, the star-led kings pause in their journey to rest overnight with the widow.

As they sleep in her hovel, Amahl’s mother, envious of the gifts intended for another, steals gold for her own lame son. But the kings forgive her. The child whom they seek does not need gold. Rather, he “needs the love of every human being to build his coming kingdom.”

The woman laments that she has no gift of her own to offer, when up jumps her son Amahl. He offers his own most precious possession, his crutch, when a miracle occurs—his lameness is cured!

The story ends triumphantly, with Amahl accompanying the kings to Bethlehem to worship the Christ Child.

Since its first performance in 1951, “Amahl” has continued to open hearts to the miracles of faith, forgiveness, and charity—strong lessons for us all to learn, child and adult alike.

“The Miracle of Christmas” has a large cast well suited to the Branson stage. The Sinfonia Chamber orchestra is under the direction of Stephen Byess, Music Director of the Arkansas

Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Credo Dance Academy is under the direction of the accomplished dancer and choreographer, Kate Riegler. The Messiah Chorale will serve as the chorus.

“Amahl” soloists include internationally acclaimed Czech bass-baritone Dr. Michael Sust, who sings the role of Melchior.

Soprano Jenna Cantrell, voice instructor at Evangel University plays Amahl’s mother. Distinguished local tenor Eric Meruelo performs in the role of Kaspar. The role of Amahl will be performed by two local young artists, Silas Brown and Lily Slater. Colin Knoth sings the role of Balthazar.

“Amahl and the Night Visitors” will be performed December 11 at 1:30 p.m. in Dick Clark’s American Bandstand Theatre. “The Miracle of Christmas” with “Amahl and the Night Visitors” will be performed at 7:00 p.m., also in the Dick Clark Theatre. For reservations and ticket packages, call 800-682-1265.



Silas Brown stars as Amahl, a crippled shepherd boy and Jenna Cantrell plays his poor, widowed mother in The Messiah Project’s “Amahl and the Night Visitors.” This musical has been performed around the world and will come to Branson for one day only on December 11, 2013. Featuring a mix of local talent and International performers, this musical drama will thrill young and old alike as it shares the timeless Christmas story from a different point of view. Photo Courtesy The Messiah Project

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# Religion and Life

## Violence against Muslims in Myanmar

Islamic organization visits country where more than 240 Muslims were killed in the past year

By RICHARD S. EHRlich (RNS) At the end of a three-day tour, the Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation told Buddhist-majority Myanmar to repeal “laws restricting fundamental freedoms” after more than 240 Muslims were killed by Buddhist mobs during the past year.

Before the OIC delegates left Myanmar on Saturday (Nov. 16), they visited minority ethnic Rohingya Muslims who fled the violence and are now living in squalid camps along the border with Bangladesh in Myanmar’s Arakan state, also known as Rakhine.

Headed by Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the OIC delegation called on the government to continue legal reforms, The New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported.

The Myanmar government responded by saying it would help “put an end to all acts of violence, protect the civilian population from violence and ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including in the Rakhine State,” the IOC said.

Myanmar has refused to grant citizenship to 800,000 Rohingya and told them to “return” to Muslim-majority Bangladesh even though many Rohingya have lived on the Myanmar side of the border for generations.

On Friday (Nov. 15), about 3,000 Buddhists led by robed monks marched through Sittwe, capital of Arakan state, to protest against the OIC’s

involvement in the Southeast Asian nation’s ethnic problems.

Anti-OIC activists — who include monks and others who express racist views against the darker-skinned Rohingya — suspect the OIC harbors a plot by Saudi Arabia to control their country.

The protesters also converged on Sittwe’s airport to voice their anger when the OIC delegates’ plane arrived, before the officials transferred to helicopters to reach the Rohingyas’ isolated camps.

About 5,000 of the 240,000 Rohingya who fled their homes because of the clashes welcomed the OIC when the delegates visited camps for internally displaced people near Sittwe.

The OIC — accompanied by officials from the Muslim-majority nations of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Egypt, Bangladesh and Malaysia — arrived in Myanmar on Nov. 14, and met government officials in the capital Naypyitaw to discuss the “peace and stability of Rakhine state and rehabilitation,” according to The New Light of Myanmar.

They also spoke with the Interfaith Friendship Group, United Nations officials and others.

The 57 nations that comprise the OIC make it the world’s largest international Islamic organization.

The OIC describes itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world.” It has a permanent delegation at the United Nations.



Some 90,000 Rohingya now find themselves squeezed into camps near the state capital Sittwe, living in cramped barrack-type shelters. Photo Credit: Mathias Eick, EU/ECHO, Rakhine State, Myanmar/Burma, September 2013

## Steady stream of abortion cases headed toward high court could limit abortions

By RICHARD WOLF USA TODAY – WASHINGTON (RNS) A steady stream of abortion cases is heading toward the Supreme Court, making it only a matter of time before the justices are likely to consider a new wave of state restrictions.

Although the justices have refused to consider two major cases from Oklahoma in the past two weeks, more states are seeking the high court’s blessing for restrictions that have been struck down by state and federal appeals courts.

As conflicting decisions at those courts pile up, it be-

comes more likely that the justices will agree to consider laws such as those banning abortions after 20 weeks, regulating the use of abortion-inducing drugs, imposing restrictions on clinics and doctors, and requiring that women receive counseling and testing before ending their pregnancies.

“It’s a pivotal moment,” says Caitlin Borgmann, a City University of New York law professor who writes a blog on reproductive rights. “The restrictions are now getting to a point where they’re actually shutting down clinics.”

The court already has on its January calendar a challenge to Massachusetts’ 35-foot buffer zone around abortion clinics. Early next month, justices are likely to agree to consider another case, challenging the requirement under President Barack Obama’s health care law that nearly all employers provide insurance coverage for contraceptives.

Those two cases represent conservatives’ challenges to state and federal laws aimed at providing added protections for women’s health. But the overwhelming majority of cases headed to the high court focus on efforts by states to restrict or limit abortions.

The court refused Tuesday (Nov. 12) to consider Oklahoma’s appeal of a state Supreme Court ruling striking down a requirement that women have ultrasound tests performed, displayed and explained before getting abortions. But a North Carolina case working its way through lower courts eventually could reach the justices.

Last week, the court turned away another Oklahoma ap-

peal of a state Supreme Court decision, striking down a law that restricts abortion-inducing drugs to the uses approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Because doctors prefer off-label uses in most cases, the law would have banned almost all medication abortions.

Whatever cases the justices ultimately agree to hear, they will offer the court a chance to clarify its 1992 ruling in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, which upheld abortion rights but gave states broader authority to impose restrictions such as 24-hour waiting periods and parental consent.

“The stakes have been ratcheted up,” says Teresa Collett, a law professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis who had hoped to defend Oklahoma’s mandatory ultrasound law at the Supreme Court. “The stakes are higher for both sides.”

Since its landmark 1973 decision in Roe v. Wade established a woman’s right to abortion, the Supreme Court has revisited the issue on a sporadic basis, and limits have increased.

A 1980 case restricted the use of Medicaid funds for abortions to cases involving rape, incest or the woman’s health. Casey approved a range of restrictions in 1992. And in 2007, the justices upheld a federal ban on so-called partial-birth abortions, usually performed between 20 and 24 weeks of pregnancy.

Since then, state restrictions have multiplied. In 2011, 92 provisions passed in 24 states. Last year there were 43 more, according to a survey by the Guttmacher Institute, a sexual

and reproductive health think tank that supports abortion rights.

While opponents of abortion may be winning in state legislatures, backers of abortion rights have beaten back many of those laws in court. That has led state officials to appeal their cases to the Supreme Court in hopes that Justice Anthony Kennedy, who wrote the Casey opinion with two colleagues who have since retired, will side with other conservative justices and approve more restrictions.

“If the court decides to take an abortion case, it could certainly use the case to further elaborate on the standard that should be applied to evaluate abortion restrictions,” says Jennifer Dalvin of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Among the cases headed toward the high court:

\* A Texas law banning most abortions from medications such as Mifepristone, also known as RU-486, and requiring doctors who perform abortions to get hospital admitting privileges. A district court judge struck down the hospital provision, but an appeals court said it could take effect pending the state’s challenge. That ruling has been appealed to the Supreme Court.

\* An Arizona law banning most abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy, by which point the fetus may feel pain. That is before the fetus becomes capable of surviving outside the womb, making it a direct challenge to Roe and Casey. Similar laws are being challenged in Idaho and Georgia.

(Richard Wolf writes for USA Today.)

*“Christmas gives us the opportunity to pause and reflect on the important things around us - a time when we can look back on the year that has passed and prepare for the year ahead.”*

~~David Cameron

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# ‘A Christmas Candle’ provides hope for the season

## Max Lucado on his new film and why December is so painful for so many

By SARAH PULLIAM BAILEY  
NEW YORK (RNS) Former presidential candidate Rick Santorum and popular Christian author Max Lucado have paired up with singer Susan Boyle for a Christmas film in the trio's first theatrical release, which hits theaters on Friday (Nov. 22).

“The Christmas Candle” features a minister who struggles with his own faith and belief in miracles as he ministers to the English village of Gladbury. The film is a first for Santorum, who is now CEO of distributor EchoLight Studios.

“The greatest thing I have going for me is that people always have low expectations,” Santorum said after a film screening.

Religion News Service spoke with Lucado, whose book inspired the movie and who has a cameo in the film, on the film's tensions and why December can be so difficult for so many. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: What do you hope to accomplish with this film?**

**A:** Our hope is hope. Our hope is that we can have a creative way of retelling the Christmas story about the birth of Christ in a way that's engaging and encouraging. It's actually a story of people in this small village living with the promise of the birth of Jesus. The story of the birth of Jesus says that God enters the world in common

places and does uncommon things, and Gladbury is a very common place where uncommon things were happening.

**Q: The film seems to display a tension between faith and works. What is the role of miracles in that tension?**

**A:** As a minister, I struggle with, “Is it all right to pray for a miracle? Why does God heal or why doesn't he?” I don't think it's too tidy. As the minister struggles, it's a bit autobiographical. There have been seasons in my life where I've wrestled with what's my part and what's God part.

My thinking is that miracles exist to reveal God, but miracles don't exist for God to do me any favors. There are occasions where God intervenes in the natural flow of events to display his power, as much as to do something kind for me. That helps me on the occasion when he doesn't answer the way I want him to. My faith helps me say, “God is using my struggle. My struggle is the answer to the prayer.” There's a mixture of faith as trusting God to do what is right, not in expecting him to do what I want.

**Q: There's a lot to compete with around the Christmas season. How do you break through the noise?**

**A:** At Christmas, there's not a lot of stuff about Christmas — I mean the biblical story of Christmas. I think there's an

opportunity for retelling the birth narrative in creative ways that people long for and appreciate. Every person, at some point during Christmas, asks, “Now why do we do this? Santa Claus and shopping are fun, but isn't there something more to this?” Those of us who know the birth narrative, we want a reminder too. I think there's always a place to come back to the Bethlehem story.

**Q: It seems like there's a lot of potential for outrage with the Christmas wars. Is that productive?**

**A:** I don't know if there's any need to get antagonistic about it. Every faith has its story; every faith has its roots. The Muslim faith, the Hindu faith, the Christian faith — we all have our stories. Part of the joy of sharing this planet together is that we all share our stories. I don't think there's any threat to hearing one another's stories. I think the danger comes when we tell people “quit telling your story.”

**Q: Is it challenging to be a pastor in December?**

**A:** Christmas is happy for many people, but there are a large number of people who are finding it real difficult because it reminds them of what they don't have. The way to respond to that, I think, is to acknowledge how difficult it can be and to bring a word of comfort, but then also to remind them of



The author of “The Christmas Candle,” the book on which the film was based, Max Lucado, had a cameo in the film, while his wife Denalyn was an extra. Photo courtesy of EchoLight Studios

what they do have. The Christmas message says what you have is a Redeemer, a Savior, a God who came, who cares, and who's coming again.

**Q: You have said that your wife dealt with depression, and struggled to deal with it in a public way as a pastor's wife. You said, “In tough times, it's important for us to be a barnacle on the boat of God's church.” Are you suggesting people just hang on and run with it?**

**A:** That's to combat the thought that “Nobody can understand me, or nobody's been through this before.” I really

believe the devil has lies. What makes tough times tough is we start believing those lies. You combat the lies by staying in community with people, at least availing yourself to the possibility that somebody's been through this and somebody has a solution.

**Q: The pastor character in the movie seems to struggle during the Christmas season.**

**A:** There's a very poignant

scene in which the reverend, who's struggling with faith, has refused to pray for sick people, because he doesn't believe anything happens. Then finally he does, and he comes in with his Bible in which he's written Scriptures and placed them on the pages, apparently because he can't find them, and he reads these Scriptures. It's really a tender moment for him and the person for whom he's praying.

## Student leader at Christian college reveals he's an atheist

By EMILY ATTEBERRY

USA TODAY (RNS) Eric Fromm, the student body president at Northwest Christian University in Eugene, Ore., has spent the last three years in a constant state of fear that his peers might find out his long-kept secret: He doesn't believe in God. Fromm, a senior communications major, “came out” as an atheist to his classmates in an Oct. 30 column published by the online student newspaper, the Beacon Bolt. Fromm explained in the column that he had primarily chosen the university based on its communications program. Though he has felt comfortable at the university the past three years, he “wasn't at peace” and wanted to set the record straight. Though a few of his close friends knew his secret, others had verbally attacked and ignored him when they heard he was an atheist. As his secret began to spread, rumors circulated that Fromm “hated Christians.” “Every day I'm burdened by the fact that my peers might reject me because I'm different from them,” Fromm wrote. “I'm writing this primarily because I don't

want to keep my atheism a secret any longer, but I'm also writing this because I want to take my peers to task on their inability to accept those who don't fit their Christian pattern.” Within hours of being posted, the post went viral on the Internet, attracting hundreds of comments ranging from support to ridicule. University officials say they accept Fromm for where he is on his “journey.” “Eric's story within the blog post isn't a surprise to us,” Jeannine Jones, a university spokeswoman, told ABC News. “We as an institution meet students where they are at and believe that our God is big enough.” According to the university website, the school aims to foster “wisdom, faith and service through excellent academic programs within a Christ-centered community.” The reception on campus was overwhelmingly positive, and Fromm says he is relieved to have the secret out. “I don't have to hide anymore,” Fromm, 21, told The Eugene Register-Guard. “I know that people accept me for who I am.”

(Emily Atteberry writes for USA Today.)

## Move over Hanukkah bush, here comes the Menorah Tree

By LAUREN MARKOE

(RNS) Many Christians married to Jews want a Christmas tree. What's Christmas without one?

But for some Jewish partners, it's just too much of a symbol of a Christian holiday to have in the house.

Michael Patchen figured out a solution for him and his wife, Jenny, who is also Jewish but grew up with a Jewish parent, a Catholic parent and a Christmas tree she loved.

He calls it the “Menorah Tree,” a twist on the signature religious object necessary to celebrate the eight-day Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

Patchen made the original Menorah Tree just for his wife. But with his brother, Alex, he decided to mass-produce it this year, in time for Hanukkah, which begins the evening of Nov. 27 (the day before Thanksgiving).

The Patchen brothers' Menorah Tree is not what some people call a “Hanukkah bush,” basically a Christmas tree decked out for the Jewish Festival of Lights, as Hanukkah is also called.



A “Menorah Tree,” seen here with lights and ornaments, was invented by Michael Patchen. Photo courtesy Michael Patchen

In some Jewish households, a Hanukkah bush is considered good holiday fun. But they're too close to Christmas trees for others. Sandy Sussman authored the children's book “There's No Such Thing As A Chanukah Bush, Sandy Goldstein” and makes the ar-

gument that it's nice to help friends celebrate their holidays, but celebrations in your own home should reflect what you personally believe.

A Menorah Tree, said Patchen, is “really just a big menorah,” an essentially Jewish object. He notes that the original menorah of ancient Judaism may well have been

inspired by another Jewish symbol — the branched tree known as the “Tree of Life.”

But to modern people, the Menorah Tree also evokes Christmas — perhaps too much for some Jews. With branches made of Frazier

Continued on page 11

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# Religion in Society

## COMMENTARY: Counting Christian Martyrs worldwide A call for a more realistic reporting of Christian martyrs around the world

By JUDD BIRDSALL

(RNS) Christianity can be a deadly commitment. Sunday November 10th was the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, an occasion that reminds Christians that many of their brethren are killed for their faith every year. But how many?

On Tuesday the BBC published an article exploring the controversy over the dramatically large numbers of Christian martyrs published by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. According to the center, more than 100,000 Christians are martyred every year.

I worked in the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom for several years, and I have always found this figure puzzling. My colleagues and I produced an annual report on persecution worldwide that contained accounts of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of martyrs. Some Christian human rights organizations place the number as high as 1,000. Why is there such discrepancy?

It all depends on how one defines "martyrdom."

The center, home to the world's leading scholars of Christian demographics, defines Christian martyrs as "believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility."

The definition seems straightforward enough, but the annual number of Christian martyrs will vary from hundreds to hundreds of thousands depending on how we interpret "situations of witness." The center is clear about

its use of "a broad definition."

This definition goes far beyond deaths in the context of public proclamation of belief in Jesus. It is interested in the "entire lifestyle" of the murdered believer. Even if a killer is not targeting Christians on account of their faith, Christians are "counted as martyrs to the extent that their actions in such situations are a testimony to their faith."

This understanding leads the center to ascribe the term "martyr" to millions of Christians who have died in civil conflicts in places like Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (As an aside, we should be shocked and compelled to action by any mass killings, Christian or otherwise.)

The center's broad definition and large numbers force us to reconsider our standard definitions of martyrdom. A martyr is not just a solitary saint mauled by lions in a coliseum or a reformer burned at the stake. "Situations of witness" vary widely and may seem quite mundane. Many martyrs are ordinary folks with extraordinary courage and commitment.

The center is highly regarded for producing top-notch products that often challenge prevailing perceptions of contemporary world Christianity. I was delighted to host the center's director, Todd Johnson, for a lecture at the State Department's Forum on Religion & Global Affairs in 2011.

Like its other work, the center's reporting on martyrdom is rigorous and interesting — and if nothing else, it shows that lots of Christians die in terrible circumstances. But I

fear that its expansive definition works better in theory than in practice. It doesn't ring true to the religious freedom activists who carefully monitor persecution and martyrdom year after year. More importantly, an overly broad definition of martyrdom risks cheapening the term and diminishing the very real sacrifice of those who are killed for following Jesus.

Calling millions of Christian victims of bloody civil wars "martyrs" is a bit like calling all the victims of 9/11 "heroes." To be sure, many exhibited remarkable heroism. But most 9/11 victims were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The same goes for most Christians who lose their lives prematurely as a result of human hostility. They are often caught up in conflicts sparked by a complex web of ethnic, economic, political, ideological and other factors. Singling out the religious factor — let alone identifying religious martyrs — is incredibly complicated.

That's not to say religion isn't a major motivating and mobilizing factor in many conflicts. Nor is a narrower definition of martyrdom problem-free. No definition is perfect. Any attempt to define and quantify martyrs will invariably oversimplify a convoluted human tragedy.

I would argue for an understanding of martyrdom that is honest and modest. Honest about the messy complexity of human violence and modest about the ability to quantify with any precision the number of people violently killed for their faith. The number of clear-cut martyrdoms each year is actually quite low, and they often make international news.

It may sound counter intuitive, but it's better to err on the side of under counting martyrs than to risk over counting them. What's at stake is credible religious freedom advocacy. Abusive regimes fear public scrutiny and look for any

opportunity to undermine an advocate's credibility.

Conservative estimates of the severity of persecution allow us to say to the world: We know this much abuse happened, and the reality may be worse. We can't afford to give persecutors any grounds to claim the reality is actually much better.

However many Christian (or other) martyrs there may be each year is too many. In the battle against global religious persecution, careful, realistic reporting is an essential weapon.

*(Judd Birdsall is a former U.S. diplomat and a current doctoral candidate at Cambridge University. From 2007 to 2011 he served at the U.S. State Department in the Office of International Religious Freedom and on Secretary Hillary Clinton's policy planning staff. He was also founding chairman of the Forum on Religion & Global Affairs. Birdsall is an editorial fellow with The Review of Faith & International Affairs, a peer-reviewed journal.)*



Refugees cross from DR Congo into Uganda at the border village of Busanza in Kisoro district. Children typically suffer the most in persecution with one or both parents being killed or the family being forced into refugee camps to survive. Photo Source 123rf

## Religious groups rally around U.N. climate talks in Warsaw

By ERIC J. LYMAN

WARSAW, Poland (RNS) The latest United Nations climate summit got off to an unusually emotional start when Yeb Sano, the head delegate from the Philippines, issued a tearful plea at the opening plenary.

With his country ravaged by Typhoon Haiyan — the kind of extreme weather that experts say is becoming more common due to climate change — Sano choked back tears as he announced he would fast in solidarity for his countrymen left without food.

Sano said on Nov. 11 he would refrain from eating during the conference unless important progress was made. Sano's gesture has so far failed to trigger much of a change in the entrenched negotiations, and with talks expected to stretch into the weekend, he is still on his hunger strike.

Even so, Sano's act helped galvanize support from religious leaders: former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams; Olaf Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches; Munib A. Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation; and numerous interfaith groups have all joined the fast and called on their supporters to join as well.

"It's an illustration how much interest there is in this process from faith-based groups," said Mohamed Adow, a veteran climate change activist with the British-based group Christian Aid.

Adow has been following the climate change process for six years, but most of the religious groups involved in the process are new. The United Nations does not break down

participation from nongovernmental groups by the type of organization, but observers say participation by faith-based groups has mushroomed in the last two years.

The Warsaw talks — the 19th U.N. climate change summit — includes wider participation from religious groups than any of its predecessors meetings, observers say. Part of the reason is because the scope of the climate change debate has widened dramatically in recent years, now touching on issues of poverty alleviation, development, forced emigration, as well as stewardship of the planet.

"There are two main theological angles in this climate debate: the theology of creation and the theology of justice," said Martin Kopp, a theologian with the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine, in France.

"The theology of creation talks about the role between man and earth. ... Genesis says 'replenish the earth, and subdue it,' and this has profoundly impacted the human mindset about the way we relate to the world," Kopp said. "The theology of justice is about the concern for the poor and vulnerable, which appears many times in Scripture."

"Both of these theologies," he argued, "are relevant in this process."

Several representatives of faith-based groups met in Warsaw with Christiana Figueres, the U.N.'s top climate change official, and she said she welcomed their increased participation. Individual negotiators have also said they take the views of faith-based groups into account when weighing their options. The ultimate impact of all that activism on the negotia-

tions is harder to measure.

But that does not curb the enthusiasm of some members of the new movement.

"I think we can be a tipping point in this process," said Raquel Kleber, from the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil. "It's estimated that 80 percent of the people in the world believe in God. We can be a powerful force."

Aaron Cohen, a Jewish climate and agriculture activist from New York, agreed: "This level of participation we see here, it is just the start," he said.

Christian Aid's Adow said the case must be made that confronting the risks from climate change has numerous ripple effects.

"Addressing this one problem can have an impact on many areas everyone must agree on," he said. "We can help eradicate poverty, provide people with clean drinking water, better health, education, sanitation, plus, of course, avoiding the risks from the worst impacts of climate change. These are issues every religious person can agree deserve our best efforts."

Kopp, who fasted for three days twice during the Warsaw talks, said acts like Sano's can help unite disparate groups.

"All our belief systems differ in some ways," he said. "But things like this show us what we have in common. The support we've received is astonishing. I've personally received hundreds of emails of support, and sometimes I can't sleep at night because I'm so excited about the role we're playing here. Of all the roles faith can play in this process, maybe the most important is to show that there is still hope."

## Rise in Italian Catholic Church attendance attributed to 'Francis effect'

By ERIC J. LYMAN

ROME (RNS) First, the name "Francesco" leapfrogged to No. 1 on the list of the most popular baby names in Italy.

Then, the city of Rome reported a tourism boom, mostly from Latin America.

Now, there's word Roman Catholic Church attendance is

climbing throughout Italy.

Blame it on "the Francis effect."

Italy's Center for Studies on New Religions reported Sunday (Nov. 10) that around half of the 250 priests it surveyed reported a significant rise in church attendance since Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis in March.

"If we project these findings nationally, and if half of the parishes have been touched by the Francis effect, then we're talking about hundreds of thousands of people returning to the churches," said Massimo Introvigne, the center's director and a professor at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University.

The findings come as Opinioni, a political polling company, reported Monday that more than four in five Italians had a "positive" or "extremely

positive" opinion of the new pope.

In the poll, Opinioni asked for opinions on 21 public figures in Italy — the pope, sports stars, politicians, entertainers, business figures, and others. Respondents were asked to place them in five categories: extremely positive, positive, neutral, negative, extremely negative. Eighty-two percent rated the pope in one of the top two categories, far outdistancing all other public figures.

The latest findings fit into the popular narrative of Francis, who has earned headlines for his humble and popular style and statements. Roman police say that average attendance at papal audiences in St. Peter's Square are on the rise, and souvenir sellers have been quoted in the local press as saying business has improved since March, despite Italy's moribund economy.

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***"Maybe Christmas, the Grinch thought, doesn't come from a store."***  
***Dr. Seuss***



# Got faith? ‘A Manual for Creating Atheists’ challenges faith

## Atheist instructor writes book teaching atheists how to convert Christians to Atheism

By KIMBERLY WINSTON (RNS) Got faith? Peter Boghossian says get rid of it. Boghossian is a philosophy instructor and author of a wildly popular new book, “A Manual for Creating Atheists,” that seeks to equip nonbelievers like him with the skills to convince believers to abandon their faith.

And while the book is sure to upset many religious people and even some atheists, it may signal a change in the way atheists engage believers. Unlike previous best-selling atheists Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, Boghossian wants his readers to refrain from high-decible attacks against God and, instead, home in on faith.

“Faith is an unreliable reasoning process,” Boghossian, 47, said in an interview from Portland, Ore., where he teaches at Portland State University. “It will not take you to reality. So we need to help people value processes of reasoning that will lead them to the truth.”

He compares reasoning people out of it to administering treatment to drug addicts. “Faith,” he writes, “is a virus.”

To fight that virus, Boghossian’s book details techniques for creating “street epistemologists” — atheists trained to attempt to get believers to think more critically. He writes that he has used these techniques on friends, students, strangers and prison inmates. They include:

- \* Avoid facts: Facts seldom persuade, but getting someone to question why they believe can cause them to re-evaluate.

- \* Avoid showing frustration: “De-conversion” takes longer than conversion, he writes, and requires patience for those who would make nonbelievers.

- \* Avoid politics: They sidetrack the discussion, which should be about faith.

In what is perhaps the biggest difference between his methods and those of other,

better-known atheist authors, Boghossian insists that his street epistemologists be, above all, kind, considerate, empathetic and respectful of people of faith.

“The ideal street epistemologist models the behavior she would like to see in others,” he said. “They should be gentle and open to ideas. They should be compassionate and seek no reward for disabusing people of specious ways of reasoning. Nobody owes you for helping them to reason better. You do it because you care about people and want to help them.”

“A Manual for Creating Atheists” is Boghossian’s first book. He is known within atheist circles for a 2012 lecture he gave entitled “Jesus, the Easter Bunny and Other Delusions: Just Say No!” that became popular on YouTube. In it, he says he does not assume believers are wrong, and advises his street epistemologists to do the same.

“If somebody knows something I don’t know, I want to know it” as long as it is based on evidence, he said. “So if there is enough evidence to warrant belief in the Quran or the works of L. Ron Hubbard or that Moses parted the Red Sea we ought to believe those things. There isn’t sufficient evidence and that’s why people invoke faith. You would not need to invoke faith if you have sufficient evidence.”

And despite the title, Boghossian claims he is not proselytizing — a loaded word for atheists because of its association with religion — but “educating.”

“Proselytizing, by definition, means converting people and having them value being closed off to alternative beliefs and ways of thinking,” Boghossian said. “I’m advocating that we help people value belief revision and enable them to develop a mechanism that lets them differentiate reality from make-believeland. This is almost the



18 February 2012 English: Image of Peter Boghossian lecturing at Portland State University Peter Boghossian is a philosophy teacher and author of a wildly popular new book, “A Manual for Creating Atheists.” Photo by Paul Pardi courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

opposite of proselytizing or converting people.”

Kurt Volkan, founder of Pitchstone Publishing, the book’s publisher, said atheism’s discomfort with proselytizing may be changing.

“I think atheists would like there to be more nonbelievers,” said Volkan, also an atheist. “It is a title that invited opinion, discussion and debate, which we like to see as a publisher.”

Proselytizing or not, the book quickly struck a nerve. “A Manual for Creating Atheists” sold out its first printing before

its Nov. 1 release date and ran through a second printing in just two weeks. It also broke into Amazon’s top 100 overall best-seller list — a milestone usually reserved for better-known atheist authors from much larger publishers.

“And we just had to order more,” Volkan said, noting that the book is on track to be the publisher’s all-time best-seller by the end of the month. “It is a happy problem to have.”

Not everyone is a fan, of course. Tom Gilson, the national field director of Ratio Christi,

a student apologetics alliance, has followed Boghossian since first viewing his Easter Bunny lecture. He has read the book and criticized it on his blog, ThinkingChristian.net.

Gilson finds particular fault with Boghossian’s definition of faith as “belief without evidence” and “pretending to know things you don’t,” which he calls both “weak” and “erroneous.”

“He is very strong on the importance of the Socratic method and the importance of objective truth and the impor-

tance of evidence,” he said. “As a Christian, I agree with every one of those. Where he is weak is in defining faith and explaining why he disagrees with it.”

Even so, he believes Boghossian and his street epistemologists should be taken seriously.

“He is the best tactician the atheists have,” Gilson said. “He understands human psychology. He understands persuasion theory. He knows what it will take to confuse and maybe disabuse people of their faith if they don’t have a solid foundation of why they believe.”

Atheist readers seem to be taking it quite seriously. The book has been endorsed by Dawkins and other atheist heavy hitters including Michael Shermer, Victor Stenger and Sean Faircloth. One group of London atheists — 600 of them — has asked Boghossian to mentor them via Skype before they hit the streets in search of believers.

“Our aim is to better equip ourselves to have genuinely meaningful conversations with people of faith,” said J. Scott Swanson, a member of the London group. “Things get quickly heated when people feel under attack and conversations just grind to a halt. We want to help change that.”

Boghossian said he is surprised by the immediate success of the book and is hopeful he won’t have to do what he predicts in the book’s acknowledgments — sleep on friends’ couches to hide from angry readers.

“What I hope will happen is that instead of wanting to physically injure me, people will invite me to have a conversation,” he said.

## Online profiles and job searches: Muslims more likely to experience discrimination

A recent study has indicated that about 10 percent of US firms are using social media to research job applicants.

Researchers claim that your online profile is public information and they will use it as part of their criteria for a hiring decision -- without having to reveal it.

Since US hiring laws restrict the type of personal questions -- such as religious preference, or sexual orientation -- that can be asked, Human Resource personnel can discover the answers in other ways that do not break the law.

Researchers Fong and Alessandro Acquisti submitted 4,000 job applications then tracked employers to find out how many searched for a job candidate online. The study analyzed the number of interview offers a Christian candi-

date received versus a Muslim candidate, as well as a gay candidate relative to a straight one, then cross-referenced that information with the US states and counties where the companies were based.

After 9/11 claims of discrimination against Muslims increased dramatically.

The study found that Muslims were less likely to be offered an interview than an equally qualified Christian applicant.

Researchers found no significant variance between interviews being offered to equally qualified gay and straight applicants.

Recently, discrimination law suits have been won against a number of companies, including the retail giant Abercrombie and Fitch.

“Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

The virgin’s name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!” But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

## Menorah Tree joins Jewish and Christian holiday customs for families

*Continued from page 9*

pine garlands, and standing more than 6 feet tall, the Menorah Tree is just begging for lights and ornaments.

But not candles. Menorahs are typically made to hold candles. Hanukkah commemorates the victory of a small band of Jews, the Maccabees, over their Greek oppressors in 167 B.C. Rededicating the desecrated Jewish temple in Jerusalem, the Maccabees found a vial of oil, enough to burn for one night. Miraculously, it burned for eight.

“Don’t put real candles on the Menorah Tree,” said Patchen, a father of three from Greenwich, Conn., who works in the financial sector. It’s made of all-artificial materials, but “it’s just not a good idea — just like you wouldn’t put candles on a Christmas tree.”

Patchen made his first Menorah Tree out of foraged materials when he and his wife were newlyweds, about eight years ago, after Jenny brought home a tiny glass Christmas tree that he didn’t feel comfortable displaying. So he built her a Menorah Tree as a surprise and “labor of love,”

hoping it would scratch her Christmas tree itch.

It did. Through the years, their children have made Hanukkah-themed ornaments, so that the tree each holiday season is “a tapestry of their lives,” Michael Patchen said.

Now he hopes his mass-produced Menorah Tree, which retails for \$250 and features at its center a Star of David, a symbol of Judaism, will fill a

need for interfaith families — or even Jewish ones like his.

He quotes from the recently released Pew Center study on Jewish life in the U.S.: More than 70 percent of Jews married to non-Jews have a Christmas tree in their homes.

The Menorah Tree is perfect, he said, for those who “want something big and bold that feels more Jewish.”

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## Miraculous conception in Israel revealed

### The Christmas Story from the Book of Luke

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”

And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.”

Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”

And the angel departed from her. Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For

indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”

And Mary said: “My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maid-servant; For behold, hence-

forth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house.”

***Luke 1:26-56 NKJV: Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.***



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# ‘Jerusalem,’ a tribute to the holy city

New film highlighting Jerusalem is now playing in big-screen theaters around the country

By LAUREN MARKOE

(RNS) It may be as close as a person can get to praying at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Western Wall, without actually going there.

The newly released movie “Jerusalem,” filmed in 2D and 3D and playing on IMAX and other giant-screen theaters across the U.S. and the world, gives viewers grand, hallmark panoramas, at once awe-inspiring and intimate.

For years filmmakers had sought the rights to capture the city from the air, but never before had permission been granted, in part because the holy city is a no-fly zone.

Still, before filming began in 2010, producer Taran Davies came up with an extensive wish list of all the sites and rituals he wanted in the film, and presented it to advisers familiar with the spectrum of religious and secular officials who would have to approve.

“They all laughed and said forget about it,” Davies said. “They said, ‘It’s impossible and you’re not going to get half of what you’re looking for.’”

But his interfaith and multinational team persisted, presenting their case for a cinematic, nonpolitical portrait of Jerusalem to a seemingly endless list of authorities — from

the Israeli Air Force to the Supreme Islamic Council to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Eventually, over many cups of tea, Davies said, the producers got the green lights they needed.

In “Jerusalem,” the camera swoops into the Garden of Gethsemane, where the Gospels place the arrest of Jesus, and the pilgrim-packed Church of the Holy Sepulchre to record the Orthodox Christian Holy Fire ceremony. It flies over the Western Wall to witness thousands of Jews receiving a priestly blessing from a rabbi and Muslims prostrating for noon prayers at Al-Aqsa, the site where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven on a staircase of light.

The film, distributed by National Geographic, makes reference to the conflict over Jerusalem, but does not dwell on it, instead emphasizing the long, strong roots tethering believers to the city’s ancient stones.

“Over time, this city became the gateway to God for three major religions, and the most fought over piece of land in history,” intones narrator Benedict Cumberbatch, whose voice will sound familiar to fans of PBS’ “Sherlock.”

When the camera is set



A scene from “Jerusalem” in which Muslim women from nearby villages are on their way to noon prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Photo by George Duffield, courtesy Jerusalem US LP/National Geographic Society

on solid ground, “Jerusalem” summarizes 5,000 years of the city’s history, and introduces three tour guides — all teenage girls and modern Jerusalemites — one Christian, one Jewish, one Muslim.

It’s much to crowd into a

45-minute film. But Cumberbatch reads a tight script that starts with the Jebusites — the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Jerusalem — and hits the highlights of the stories of the city’s Jews, Christians and Muslims.

“Jerusalem” also includes a

good dose of archaeology, explained by University of North Carolina religious studies professor Jodi Magness, as the camera follows her through ancient passageways at the heart of the Old City. Special effects “build” Jerusalem’s Second Temple, showing us what it might have looked like when its last stones were laid.

“I wanted to see where there was room to do something novel, to avoid the buzz words and clichés,” said Daniel Ferguson, a co-producer. “It was also important that the science in the film be up to date. Knowing the film will play for five to ten years in museums, we avoided anything that might date us, especially politics.”

“Jerusalem” ends on a hopeful note — with the teenagers strolling through the city, expressing an openness toward

people considered the enemy by many of their co-religionists.

But the lack of tension in the film may make those who have been to Jerusalem, or read news accounts, wonder if the producers went too far in sidestepping the animosity that also characterizes the city.

A reviewer in The Boston Globe wrote that it feels like Jerusalem’s ancient walls have been “whitewashed.”

But even if “Jerusalem” doesn’t entirely avoid clichés, audiences disheartened by news of faltering Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, may nonetheless welcome it.

“Every religion has an assumption about one another,” says Nadia Tadros, the Christian teenager cast in the film. “We think we are so different, but we are more in common than we realize.”

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