

Our top 23 of 2023

Happy new year! Here are the *Century* articles from last year that enjoyed the most online readers.

January 2, 2024



1. Ross M. Allen interviews David Bentley Hart: [What we think we know about God](#)

Ross Allen talks to Eastern Orthodox theologian, philosopher, and cultural commentator David Bentley Hart in a far-ranging and fascinating interview. Hart opines on heresy, grace, Bible translation, Paul Tillich, fundamentalism, dogma, socialism, and (if you can believe it) much more.

2. Amy Frykholm interviews Elizabeth Schrader Polczer: [Signs of Mary Magdalene in John 11](#)

New Testament scholar Elizabeth Schrader Polczer's work has created quite a stir. She chats with CC senior editor Amy Frykholm about some intriguing irregularities in manuscripts of John's Gospel and what they might say about the early church.

3. Steve Thorngate interviews Amy-Jill Levine: [What should churches do about the treatment of "the Jews" in John?](#)

CC managing editor Steve Thorngate talks to Amy-Jill Levine, a professor of the New Testament and Jewish studies, who is a member of an Orthodox synagogue and writes and speaks regularly to Christian audiences. They discuss how churches might approach anti-Jewish elements in gospel passages.

4. Peter W. Marty: [Words to avoid at church](#)

CC editor/publisher Peter Marty shares some of the phrases he has learned do more harm than good in a church setting. You might recognize some of them from, well, most worship services: *visitors*, *attending church*, *taking the collection*. Marty explains why his church avoids these terms and others.

5. Paul Hopkins: [My UCC church's listening experiment with our evangelical neighbors](#)

Paul Hopkins describes his attempt to bring together people from his progressive church and from a nearby conservative congregation for discussion. The project seemed to go really well...and then the evaluation forms came in.

6. Peter Choi: [Deconstructed, reimagined faith](#)

There has been a very public exodus of younger generations from evangelical Christianity in the US. But Peter Choi sees the same themes of this spiritual "deconstruction" more broadly in the church, and he shares five shifts that characterize this moment of collective faith reorientation.

7. CC editors: [Bearing witness to multiple stories](#)

The CC editorial team penned this column about a month after Hamas's brutal terror attack in Israel, during Israel's escalating military response. The piece does not call for a particular solution or declare who is good and who is evil; instead it points to

real stories of collective trauma experienced by real human beings on both sides of the conflict.

8. Julian DeShazier: [The little engine that needed collaborators](#)

CC Voices columnist Julian DeShazier offers some thoughts on clergy burnout. Often the root cause, he explains, is a lack of collaboration in the congregation. Clergy aren't meant to be like rock stars who do it all—even if sometimes they want to be.

9. Rachel Mann: [Atonement without participation?](#)

CC Voices columnist Rachel Mann takes on substitutionary atonement theory. While she admits it has some real appeal, she ultimately finds it to be idolatrous. Mann instead longs for an account of redemption that is more relational and participatory.

10. Amy Julia Becker: [Worshiping at the church of Taylor](#)

Amy Julia Becker reflects on the widespread appeal of Taylor Swift and the religious fervor of her concerts. Becker wonders whether these momentary experiences of connection might eventually lead people toward a more profound sense of belonging and spiritual sanctuary.

11. Nijay K. Gupta: [Did Jesus tell us to pray for our enemies?](#)

Nijay Gupta explores Jesus' teaching to love enemies and pray for those who persecute. While Steve Bannon used the phrase "pray for our enemies" in a confrontational way, Jesus emphasized compassion, abundance, and positive change, urging believers to embody divine love.

12. Jessica Mesman: [The woman behind tarot's strange beauty](#)

CC associate editor Jessica Mesman tells the story of Pamela Colman Smith, the artist who illustrated the iconic 1909 Rider-Waite tarot deck. Colman Smith's spiritual journey is somewhat opposite to Mesman's own: an adult convert to Roman Catholicism, the artist was drawn more and more to the tradition over time.

13. Martha Tatarnic: [Getting ultrareal about the church](#)

Martha Tatarnic reflects on the pressures church leaders face to revitalize declining congregations. Drawing on the distance running concept of “ultrarealism,” Tatarnic calls us to accept and celebrate the actual and imperfect nature of the church.

14. Jonathan Tran: [Anti-racism’s mission drift](#)

CC Voices columnist Jonathan Tran critiques the modern trajectory of American anti-racism. He argues that its shift to an emphasis on individual guilt, sensitivity training, and the lucrative diversity industry has disconnected it from its original purpose of addressing systemic inequalities.

15. Mac Loftin: [A better response to the decline of the Christian West](#)

Mac Loftin contrasts two perspectives on the perceived decline of Christianity in the Western world: one that emphasizes the self-preservation of Christian traditions and another, proposed by Jesuit priest Michel de Certeau, that embraces transformation and grace in the unfamiliar.

16. Ron Cole-Turner: [Soul-altering substances](#)

Ron Cole-Turner delves into the intersection of psychedelics and spirituality. He emphasizes the potential of psychedelics in inducing mystical experiences and their emerging role in treating various mental health disorders, but he also insists on the need for caution.

17. Kathryn Reklis: [The Barbie conversation](#)

CC Screen Time columnist Kathryn Reklis reflects on the *Barbie* phenomenon—both the summer blockbuster movie and the conversations it spurred. Reklis concludes that while the film is flawed, the discussions about embodiment, death, and feminist utopias are well worth having.

18. Martin B. Copenhaver: [An old man dreaming dreams of psalms](#)

Martin Copenhaver explores a unique album from music legend Paul Simon. At age 81, Simon was directed in a dream to create *Seven Psalms*, a deeply spiritual and evocative piece filled with religious imagery, though the artist himself identifies as non-religious.

19. Melissa Florer-Bixler: [As a pastor, it's my job to pay attention](#)

CC Voices columnist Melissa Florer-Bixler contemplates what it means to be a pastor. Her Mennonite tradition emphasizes the priesthood of all believers, and she understands her particular role to be grounded in the act of paying attention—to the world, to stories, to details, to people, and to injustice.

20. Katherine Willis Pershey: [Prayers rising past the immanent frame](#)

Katherine Willis Pershey reflects on her congregation's architecture. The design of its building reflects what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “the immanent frame”—a mindset of secularity that Pershey has battled in her own faith journey.

21. Ben Norquist: [My land acknowledgment](#)

Ben Norquist tells the story of the plot of land he owns, starting with the present day and going back in time to the days of Potawatomi villages. The story takes a turn in 1845 when the General Land Office issues a patent to settler Thomas Patchell that legally transfers this parcel of land to him, making it private property for the first time.

22. Debie Thomas: [Each of my dyings](#)

CC Voices columnist Debie Thomas reflects on some of the “dyings” she faces, taking comfort in a contemporary reworking of the Anima Christi prayer. She wonders, “How many crosses did Jesus carry in his lifetime, how many dyings did he endure before he shouldered that final instrument of death up to Calvary?”

23. Walter Staggs: [The pedagogy of *Ancient Aliens*](#)

Religious studies professor Walter Staggs recounts how and why he began using the show *Ancient Aliens* in some of his classes. While Staggs may not be persuaded by all the alien-related conspiracy theories, he thinks it is time for a paradigm shift in the ways we engage with ideas like the ancient astronaut theory.