

The stories of 2000

Cover Story in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

When Vice President Al Gore picked Joseph Lieberman as his running mate, it was the first-ever selection for a national ticket of a Jewish nominee—and a practicing Orthodox Jew at that. Though in decades past the decision might have been viewed as highly risky, choosing Lieberman was seen quickly as a “plus” for the Democrats. On the campaign trail, the sabbath-observing Lieberman spoke freely of Judaism’s influence in his life, drawing some cautionary words from the Anti-Defamation League and others concerned with the separation of religion and government. Yet born-again Republican nominee George W. Bush and Southern Baptist-raised Gore had already set a pattern of talking about their personal beliefs. And both supported increased opportunities for religious organizations, the so-called faith-based charities, to perform social services with government funds.

For the *Century*, this presidential election, distinguished by the first Jewish nominee for vice president and campaigns in which religious issues and religious values were a feature of public debate, was the top religion news story of 2000.

Runners-up were 2) the outbreak of violence in Israel, focused at first around holy sites, which eviscerated the peace process; 3) the Vatican statement *Dominus Iesus*, which asserted Catholic primacy on matters of salvation and inflamed ecumenical tensions; 4) the ups and downs of the National Council of Churches, which aided young Elián González’s return to his father in Cuba and later fumbled a pan-Christian statement on bolstering heterosexual marriages; and 5) the ongoing struggles of mainline denominations to address gay issues in a year when Vermont became the first state to make same-sex civil unions legal.

Other top stories included significant Southern Baptist rifts, an aging pope confessing Catholic sins and visiting the Holy Land, and the specter of bankruptcy facing Canadian churches over long-ago child-abuse cases.

Religious issues first arose on the campaign trail in debates over whether the leading candidates for the GOP nomination displayed proper religious sensitivities. After Bush opened his South Carolina primary campaign on February 2 with an

appearance at fundamentalist Bob Jones University, the Texas governor came under attack from rival Senator John McCain of Arizona for not speaking out against the school's anti-Catholic stance and its policies forbidding interracial dating. Bush later sent regrets to Cardinal John O'Connor of New York, saying the visit was "a missed opportunity causing needless offense."

Late that month, McCain gambled with a strategy to reach more independent voters and centrist Democrats by declaring that neither party "should be defined by pandering to the outer reaches of American politics and the agents of intolerance, whether they be Louis Farrakhan or Al Sharpton on the left or Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell on the right." The next day, February 29, McCain described Robertson and Falwell as "forces of evil" influence on the Republican Party, but he later apologized for calling them evil.

At the Republican convention in Philadelphia, the Reverends Robertson (who was reordained this year) and Falwell, and two other icons of the Religious Right, GOP presidential also-rans Gary Bauer and Alan Keyes, were all kept away from the podium as party leaders sought to avoid too close an identification with the Religious Right. Eager to win the White House, Religious Right groups cooperated in keeping a low profile.

Gore's choice of Lieberman as running mate gave the Democratic ticket a figure known for moral integrity. The Connecticut senator was one of the early critics of President Clinton's sexual affair with a White House intern, and Lieberman has repeatedly challenged Hollywood to set higher moral standards for its films.

Lieberman introduced more God-talk than usual into the campaign, and it appeared that he struck a favorable chord with a substantial proportion of the public that saw ethics and the family as critical issues. In multifaith America, the fact that he was a "religious man" was more important than his allegiance to "modern Orthodoxy," that wing of Judaism that adheres to Jewish law but also engages fully in public life.

Two weeks before Election Day, Lieberman said he had been advised by friends and foes alike to tone down his religious rhetoric. But he asserted before a crowd at the University of Notre Dame that "this is a conversation that we as a nation need to have." He added, "I believe we are still struggling to regain our moral balance in part because we are still struggling to regain our spiritual balance."

Hopes for progress toward peace between Israel and Palestinian authorities, barely kept alive for the first nine months of 2000, started unraveling dramatically on September 28, when Israeli hardliner Ariel Sharon visited Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque compound, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount. Palestinians took it as a provocation, and rock-throwing youths drew armed responses from Israeli troops. Within 12 days, about 90 persons were dead, most of them Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. The death toll has since reached more than 280.

At the outset of the conflict, the Jewish-held Joseph's Tomb inside the West Bank Palestinian city of Nablus was in the spotlight. Though the domed tomb is revered by Muslims as the burial place of a medieval sheikh, it is regarded in some Jewish circles as the burial spot of the biblical patriarch Joseph. Arabs were barred from the site, essentially an army compound circled by barbed wire. But after nine days of sustained attack, Israeli soldiers abandoned the site. It suffered some damage but then was repaired, painted and rededicated as an Islamic shrine by Palestinian residents.

In other outbreaks of violence, Jewish and Muslim religious sites alike suffered damage. "Holy space here is exploited in terms of political interests," said Rabbi David Rosen, an Orthodox rabbi active in interreligious dialogue.

Ranked No. 3 on our list of top stories was an international flap prompted by the Vatican's issuance September 5 of *Dominus Iesus*, which warned Roman Catholics that churches which do not have a "valid Episcopate [bishops] and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery are not Churches in the proper sense."

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, added in an official memo that theologians who describe Protestant churches as "sister churches" foster "ambiguities." Both documents avoided using the word "church" for Protestant bodies, employing instead the term "ecclesial communities."

First reports generally noted that the documents said little, if anything, that was new, and that *Dominus Iesus* ("On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church") was aimed at Catholic theologians who "have argued that all religions may be equally valid ways of salvation." Yet news headlines, along with many Protestants, often saw the move as a putdown of Protestant churches.

Anglican and Protestant leaders issued rather measured responses, saying the pronouncements were disappointing in light of the ecumenical dialogues and cordial contacts of more than three decades. The new Vatican documents “are certainly not consistent with the spirit of Vatican II,” said a spokesman for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Geneva.

The pope and the Catholic hierarchy made repeated efforts in the last three months of 2000 to assuage the ecumenical bruises. John Paul II took nearly every opportunity to say Catholicism is not abandoning interreligious activities. To 30,000 Holy Year pilgrims in St. Peter’s Square on November 15, the pontiff said that doctrinal divisions “between the disciples of Christ gathered in various churches and ecclesial communities” prevent common sharing of communion. “Yet baptism is the deep root of a fundamental unity that binds Christians despite their differences.”

To another large general audience on December 6, the pope seemed to take a more inclusive tack on salvation than did *Dominus Iesus*: “The gospel teaches us that those who live in accordance with the Beatitudes—the poor in spirit, the pure of heart, those who bear lovingly the sufferings of life—will enter God’s kingdom.” Also: “All who seek God with a sincere heart, including those who do not know Christ and his church, contribute under the influence of grace to the building of the kingdom.”

The financially struggling National Council of Churches worked—with mixed results—on establishing a downsized form that remains engaged in major national issues. The organization, which has 36 member church bodies, was a major player in the U.S. government’s successful efforts to return six-year-old Elián González to Cuba. But chief executive Robert Edgar stumbled in a late-year effort to begin joint activities with evangelicals and Catholics.

Joan Brown Campbell, Edgar’s predecessor at the NCC, worked with the Cuban Council of Churches and as an unofficial adviser to Juan Miguel González, the father of the boy rescued off the coast of Florida last year after his mother and nine others drowned. The United Methodist Board of Church and Society found itself praised and castigated in March when the agency created a fund for González’s legal case. The funds were transferred the next month to the NCC. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling on June 28 resolved the seven-month custody battle by rejecting appeals of Elián’s Miami relatives who wanted him to remain in the U.S.

Edgar's long-term goal for the NCC, which was endorsed this year at the NCC General Assembly, is to create a wider ecumenical table at which the National Council can address common concerns in concert with Catholic bishops and evangelical groups. In a step toward such joint efforts, Edgar affixed his name to a statement urging churches to redouble efforts to support marriage. He was joined by the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Kevin Mannoia, plus a Catholic bishop and Southern Baptist official Richard Land. The latter stressed at a November 14 news conference that the statement describes marriage as "a holy union between one man and one woman," and added in his own remarks that it precludes "counterfeit alternative relationships" such as same-sex unions. Edgar at first defended the statement, but later removed his name for fear of aiding opponents of same-gender partnerships. Left chagrined were those who thought the first pan-Christian statement was a laudable move to help heterosexual marriages without making specific reference to unsettled gay issues.

Issues of gay rights and rites, a perennial conundrum for mainline denominations, ranked as the No. 5 story in the *Century's* view. Prompted by a court ruling in late 1999, Vermont became the first state in the union to legalize marriage-like rights for homosexual couples. The bill, signed into law on April 28 and made effective July 1, allows couples to obtain a "civil union" license (not recognized in other states) and receive property and inheritance benefits.

However, at the national conventions of the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church, most delegates resisted giving church approval to such rites. Methodist and Presbyterian authorities moved to reinforce existing church teachings against homosexuality.

Dissent from those positions nevertheless continues at the local level. The year was filled with cases of clergy defying denominational prohibitions on same-sex rites, contending that committed covenants between adult couples deserve blessings from the church. "It is my experience that the spirit of God continues to move ahead of the institutional church," said Susan Russell, a lesbian Episcopal priest in Los Angeles who heads the church's national ministry to homosexuals.

The conservative leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention won approval for another change in the Baptist Faith and Message (the second change in three years), but they also received a couple of significant challenges.

Former President Jimmy Carter dissociated himself from the denomination. The Baptist General Convention of Texas—the increasingly moderate state association of Southern Baptists—voted at the end of October to withhold about \$4.3 million of support next year from SBC seminaries. In addition, the Texas convention limited support to the SBC executive committee in Nashville to \$10,000 (down from \$700,000 this year) and cut out entirely its support (totaling \$350,000 this year) to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, headed by Richard Land. Carter and the Texas Baptists both objected to what they said were moves by SBC leaders to make the Baptist Faith and Message a “creed” by which to measure the loyalties of seminary officials, faculty and other employees of SBC institutions.

The SBC annual meeting in June revised the Faith and Message to stipulate that “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by scripture,” and it reasserted a fundamentalist view of scripture, resisting attempts to restore language in the Faith and Message statement that had described the Bible as “the record” of God’s revelation in Christ. SBC executives said their critics’ attacks were “unwarranted and misleading,” and they took heart from conservative associations forming in Texas and Virginia, where moderate Southern Baptists have gained toeholds.

The seventh biggest religion news story is another that revolved around Pope John Paul II, this time on the attainment of two personal goals in the year he turned 80. On March 12 he made history by begging forgiveness from God for the sins committed by the members of his church over the last 2,000 years. Later that month he fulfilled his dream of visiting Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other Holy Land sites inside Israel, Jordan and Palestinian enclaves.

In this pope’s earlier travels around the world he often asked forgiveness from native peoples in former colonial countries for the sins of Catholic forebears. In his confession at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome on the first Sunday of Lent, John Paul acknowledged that the church had at times betrayed the gospel by using violence and had not always stood with the poor and oppressed.

The unprecedented apology drew complaints from Catholic conservatives who said it undermined church authority. But other commentators noted that the pope did not say the church itself sinned, because it always remains holy. In that regard, some Jewish leaders and others said the pope’s confession did not go far enough.

Likewise, the pope did not meet some Jewish and Palestinian expectations in his Holy Land visit. Yet the six-day pilgrimage was carefully orchestrated to show concern for both sides, and was recognized generally for what it was—one Christian's way of bringing prayers of peace to the cradle of Christianity.

Another goal achieved is the No. 8 story on the list: Full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was approved in July by the Episcopal convention. Last year, ELCA delegates endorsed the "Called to Common Mission" document, although pockets of resistance remain in the heavily Lutheran upper Midwest.

Effective on New Year's Day 2001, the accord will be formally inaugurated January 6 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., led by the presiding bishops of both denominations. Not a merger of the 5.2-million-member ELCA and the 2.4 million-member Episcopal Church, the accord represents an agreement to cooperate in a variety of ministries and in sharing clergy under certain circumstances.

The Episcopal Church agreed to allow current clergy and bishops of the ELCA to have equal standing with Episcopal clergy—as if the Lutherans had been ordained by a bishop whose line of succession claims to go back to the apostolic days of the church. All future ordinations of ELCA clergy, however, are expected to involve bishops of the historic tradition.

Our No. 9 story involves two medical practices that received a go-ahead from the U.S. government in 2000, both of which focused moral debates on the status of fetal life. The National Institutes of Health decided to allow research on stem cells found in human embryos, and the Food and Drug Administration approved the drug mifepristone, often called RU-486, the so-called "abortion pill" for terminating early pregnancies.

The NIH research guidelines, announced in August, permit work only on discarded embryos resulting from in vitro fertilization. The research holds the potential for possible cures and new treatments for diabetes, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, scientists said.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have called the research "immoral and illegal," while the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice lauded the step, saying it would be immoral to raise the status of an embryo above that of sick, dying or injured human beings. The FDA's approval of RU-486 in late September was greeted by one

Catholic official as “the latest in a series of capitulations to abortion advocates” and an official of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice as a “victory for women as moral decision-makers.”

Canada’s three largest Christian denominations faced growing fears during the year of huge cutbacks and financial losses because of the costs of more than 6,000 lawsuits alleging abuse at federally funded, church-run residential schools for native peoples.

The Catholic and Anglican dioceses as well as the United Church of Canada told the federal government in the summer that they don’t expect a bailout, but they hope for a fair agreement in order to avoid a succession of bankruptcies. About 350 lawsuits have been filed claiming cultural, physical and sexual abuse at Canada’s 100 now-defunct residential schools. Although the outcome is still uncertain, the dire straits faced by the churches came to greater public attention during 2000.

In other news: The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that school-sponsored prayer before football games at public schools is unconstitutional. But by the same margin the high court ruled that the government can provide computers and other equipment to religious schools. The year also featured legal battles over the posting of the Ten Commandments on public property.

In Indonesia, Muslim-Christian violence took hundreds of lives. In China, many Christians, especially in the underground Roman Catholic Church, faced increased repression, and followers of the Falun Gong spiritual movement continued to be arrested or detained under the charge of being a menace to public order—and 85 died in police custody. In the Sudan, Christians reiterated pleas for the world to address the slaughter of innocents taking place in that country, which for almost two decades has been torn by strife involving the Muslim-dominated government in the north and rebel groups in the predominantly animist and Christian south. And in southwestern Uganda, more than 900 people died in a mass suicide/murder by fire and strangulation in a Doomsday cult prayer house and nearby compounds.

In the U.S., the usually routine naming of a chaplain for Congress sparked controversy and charges of religious and political bias after a committee’s recommendation of a Catholic priest was overruled and a Protestant pastor nominated. Eventually, the Protestant nominee withdrew his name and a Catholic priest from Chicago, Daniel P. Coughlin, was named as chaplain—the first Catholic

chaplain for the House of Representatives.

Good news from Washington for churches was the approval of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, which is expected to ease zoning restrictions on congregations and to aid in the free religious practice of persons confined to prisons and nursing homes. Religious lobbyists also celebrated congressional approval for global debt relief, with the U.S. government providing \$435 million as its share.

In another milestone for women clergy, the African Methodist Episcopal Church elected its first woman bishop, Baltimore pastor Vashti McKenzie.

Deaths: Eberhard Bethge, friend and biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer; John W. Deschner, United Methodist theologian; Charles Hartshorne, religious philosopher; Ellwood "Bud" Kaiser, Paulist priest and film producer; C. Eric Lincoln, historian of black religion; Metropolitan Alexander Mar Thoma, head of India's (Orthodox) Mar Thoma Syrian Church; James McClendon, Baptist theologian; Richard A. McCormick, Roman Catholic moral theologian; Cardinal John O'Connor, archbishop of New York; Robert Runcie, 102nd archbishop of Canterbury; Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, leader of the Reform movement of American Judaism; Charles M. Schulz, creator of the theologically literate cartoon strip *Peanuts*; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, world religions scholar; David M. Stowe, United Church of Christ missions executive; Marlin VanEldren, ecumenist, author and editor; Hosea Williams, civil rights activist and deputy to Martin Luther King Jr.

Some notable books: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, by Robert D. Putnam (Simon & Schuster); *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.*, by Michael Eric Dyson (Free Press); *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, by Garry Wills (Doubleday); *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion in Our Shared Life*, by Martin E. Marty and Jonathan Moore (Jossey Bass); *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* (Eerdmans); *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, by Judith S. Wallerstein et al. (Hyperion); *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, by Victoria J. Barnett (Greenwood Press); *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, Brian Wren (Westminster John Knox); *The Priest's Crisis of Soul*, by Donald B. Cozzens (Liturgical Press); *Joan of Arc*, by Mary Gordon (Viking Penguin); *Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality*, by Thomas Lynch (Norton); *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, by Christoph Wolff (Norton); *Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century*, by Jackson W.

Carroll (Westminster John Knox); *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, by Frances Fitzgerald (Simon & Schuster); *Who Is Jesus? History in the Perfect Tense*, by Leander E. Keck (University of South Carolina Press).