

## **“Top Ten Religious News Stories of 2015”**

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.*

*Be not afraid.*

*Because this is what we are about:*

*We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.*

*We plant seeds that will one day grow.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*

*We cannot do everything,*

*But we can do something.*

*So forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.*

*That is how the light gets in.”*

The Pulitzer-Prize winning columnist Dave Barry, who is way funnier  
And often more insightful than just about any columnist you can read,  
Began his annual year in review by saying that he’s heard the critics  
That say the news always focuses on the negative,  
And instead was going to start with the Top Ten Good Things that happened  
In 2015...which went like this:

*1) We didn’t hear much about reality TV child-star Honey Boo Boo.*

But when he got to #2 Barry stopped, saying he couldn’t think of anything else  
Because 2015 was so negative.

*“It’s like we’re on the Titanic,” he said, “and it’s tilting at 85 degrees in the air,  
And we’re dangling over the cold ocean trying to tell ourselves:*

*“Hey, at least there’s no line for the shuffleboard courts!”*

But along with Barry I've heard and felt the critics – I've been one myself –  
Who feel we miss noticing the long arc of love because we're so rapt  
With the latest horror show right in front of our eyes.  
So this year I'm inviting us to adopt a mood of what I'm calling  
*'Willful Hope'* as we look back over the year's top religious stories,  
Remembering as we do so that when it comes to religion, as with all things,  
It's far easier to be ironic or sarcastic or cynical  
Than it is to be affirming, hopeful, loving.

So deep breath in, deep breath out,  
Remembering as we share my Top Ten Religious News Stories of 2015  
That mine is a free pulpit and yours is a free pew,  
Which means I get to speak my heart and you, should you be so inclined,  
get to disagree with me,  
Because that is how we grow a soul...we learn from and stretch each other.

### **10) But You're Too Pretty to be a Nun!**

In a year when the Pew Forum for Religion – that regular predictor  
Of demographic gloom and doom about all things churchy –  
Reported that more young adults than ever have given up on organized  
Religion, saying the institutions have failed them,  
Guess what one of the most-read blogs on Huffington Post was this year?  
Was it some mockery of the Kardashians, you ask?  
Was it some tongue in cheek essay about Lindsay Miller, the Lowell resident who  
appealed to the MA DMV to wear a spaghetti strainer on her head, saying  
It was part of her beliefs as a member of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti  
Monster..., mocking all religion in the process?

Surprisingly no. In an age of the spiritual but not religious,  
 And when I'm often asked to apologize on behalf of all religion when  
 Someone learns what I do,  
 one of the most read blogs was, in fact, written by Angela Svac,  
 A 27yr1-old Illinois native who used to work for cosmetics giant Clinique and  
 peruses Pinterest for fashion inspiration, who writes:

*When I tell people I'm going to be a nun, they are shocked.*

*"You're too normal to be a nun," they say.*

*"You're too smart."*

*"You're too pretty!"*

Listen to Angela here:

*Their questions have forced me to confront my self-image. Who do I see in the mirror?  
 How do I appear in God's eyes? How does one affect the other?*

*When I lived with the Poor Clare nuns in Belleville, Ill., I discovered that their  
 monastery has no mirrors. At first, it was a shock for this cosmetics junkie, but it  
 became incredibly liberating. I felt free to be who God designed me to be and more  
 fully attuned to the people around me. I could pour the energy I used to invest in my  
 appearance -- fretting over the reflection in the mirror, trying to alter it -- into my  
 spiritual life.*

*Now I am better prepared to respond when, invariably, someone quips that I'm too  
 pretty for the convent. "Thank you!" I say. "But there is no mold. God calls everybody!  
 It doesn't matter what you look like, where you're from or who you know."*

Why do you think Angela's post was so popular in this age when folks apparently  
 Could care less? Maybe because they see in her an authenticity, and a call to  
 To service and community that is missing for so many.

How might our world be different with more people like Angela?

Here's to more Angela's.

### **9) Never mind, Kim; Never Mind, Starbucks. Meet me in Salt Lake.**

While practically the whole country was getting sucked into  
The attention seeking of Kim Davis, the clerk for Rowan County, Kentucky  
Who claimed to be speaking for God when she refused to sign marriage licenses  
For gay and lesbian folks,  
Or getting their latte's all frothy over Starbuck's decision this holiday season  
To serve blank red cups free of any seasonal wishes, prompting some to  
Say their names were "Jesus" or "Merry Christmas" so the baristas would be  
forced to yell out Christmas-specific lingo,  
Both stories frequently cited as "Religious News" by all the major networks,

10,000 people (how many?) – 10,000 people representing 50 different religious  
faiths met late this fall in Salt Lake City for the Parliament of World Religions.  
Hands raised how many of us heard of it?

Notice mine isn't raised?

Was gay marriage on the topic of discussion? No.

Red cups or not red cups? No.

How pretty nuns are apparently not supposed to be? No.

Instead they gathered to discuss things like responding to violence,

Tackling climate change, and addressing income inequality.

The gathering also featured its first ever Women's Assembly

Addressing religion's role in empowering women to gain more equality world-  
wide.

The story reminds me that whenever someone tells me that all religion does in the  
world is tear people apart

And make them believe six impossible things before breakfast,

I want to ask them: *tell me about the religion you don't believe in, And I'll bet it's not the religion I believe in either.*

The lack of general awareness about Salt Lake tells me we might need to get better Facebook feeds or read different newspapers.

Just because they don't publish the good news doesn't mean it isn't happening.

### **8) Can I Hug You?, said the woman in the hijab.**

What do you do when a protester stands outside your place of worship preaching words of hatred and intolerance?

What do you do when it comes at a time when anti-Muslim rhetoric flares in the United States and Europe as some politicians call for surveillance of Muslims And a ban on Muslim refugees, citing terrorism fears.

What do you do?

In front of the Noor Islamic Cultural Center in Columbus, OH, Police and people who gathered to defend the mosque after Facebook campaign tried to organize picketing at Mosques across the country.

They were surprised to meet with just a single protestor – Annie –

Who held two giant signs that had Islam written in the center, with A circle and red line through each...

That is, until Cynthia DeBoutinkhar bravely went up to Annie and asked Her a daring question - – could she embrace the protestor with a hug?

The answer was a reluctant yes.

Cynthia later wrote on Facebook *“I felt her body go from tense to soft and I asked her to please come inside with me.”*

DeBoutinkhar promised to stay by Annie's side in the mosque to provide comfort and a guarantee of safety—an offer that was quickly deemed unnecessary the

moment the two women stepped into the lobby and were welcomed with a grand applause.

Annie was asked another daring question, and to everyone's surprise she agreed to accompany the group on a complete tour of the mosque. DeBoutinkhar led Annie to the ladies room to watch her take off her hijab, "so she could see that I'm just a normal person under my scarf."

Comfortable with her new acquaintance, Annie confided in DeBoutinkhar the source of her beliefs regarding Islam –a friend from Turkey who told her terrible things about Islam, and cable news.

By the end of the tour, which included classrooms filled with children, and a glimpse of afternoon prayers in session, Annie began to ask her own questions that the president of the mosque answered enthusiastically. He also presented the Annie with an English Quran as a gift.

Let's just let that story sink in, no comment needed except to say Amen.

## **7) Peace on Earth**

I turned 44 this year, so whereas my kids hear all about terrorism and active shooters and sheltering in place,

The fear I remember assembling around in school, the teachers drilling us how

To hide under our desks, while at night I sat with my family and watched

The film *The Day After*, and my next door neighbor stocked

His fall-out shelter in his backyard, 20ft. deep into the ground...

Was what? What fear?.....yes, nuclear war.

So forgive me for not taking the bait and believing with so many others

That the world is going to hell in a handbasket...because now I'm reading

How this summer 350 rabbis sent a letter a to Congress asking them  
To approve the nuclear deal with Iran, this after Netanyahu spoke  
To Congress against it,  
A letter Obama cited when laying out the argument for the deal  
Struck with Iran by the US and five other countries that calls for Iran  
To curb its nuclear weapons program and admit international inspectors  
In exchange for lifting sanctions.

29 leading scientists in the United States, including some of the top experts  
In arms control, say the accord contains more stringent constraints  
Than any previously negotiated nonproliferation framework.

And not only that, because now I'm reading how Pope Francis (more on him in a  
bit)

Once again used his power in a transformative way, helping to broker  
A deal that opens up diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba  
For the first time since 1959 –  
Cuba the setting for the closest the world has ever come to full scale  
Nuclear war when in October, 1962 President Kennedy discovered  
That Soviet missiles were on the island pointed at us.

Oh yes, there is the absence of peace in many places in the world.  
But are we really saying that's the only news...?  
Are we really saying that...when hard-won diplomacy, and  
Religious leadership and persuasion helped solidify peace  
And normalize relations with two places that have been the source  
Of our greatest fears over these last fifty years?

## 6) How Much Would You Bid for Pope Francis' Harley?

Okay, this headline is from more than a year ago, but how did I miss The Vatican's plans to auction off one of Pope Francis' two Harley-Davidson Motorcycles and donate the proceeds to a soup kitchen that feeds the homeless in Rome. The Dyna Super Glide is signed "Francisco" and was a gift from The Milwaukee manufacturer after the Pope blessed a thundering parade to mark the company's 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The real question, though, is: does the Pope ride the other one?

But listen – the Pope has made this top ten list ever since he became Pope Three years ago, and this is because, like the saint he took his name from, Has become a messenger of peace and humility – he visited the America's, challenged the wealthy and powerful in the name of the poor and weak, used his most powerful tool in the encyclical to address climate change (more than later), spoke to Congress, made former House speaker John Boehner cry, prayed at Ground Zero, and greeted, with arms open, a little girl who jumped the fence to approach his motorcade, offering, as the NY Times reported, a vivid example of welcome for children, immigrants, and the forgotten.

**Intermission:** Here half-way through, an intermission:

One best one-liners of the year:

From Stephen Colbert, a devout Catholic himself:

*If you want to know if somebody is a Christian, just ask*

*Them to complete this sentence: Jesus said: I was hungry, you gave me food.*

*I was thirsty, you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you... ”  
 And if they don't say 'welcomed me in,' they are either a terrorist  
 Or running for president.”*

One of the best facts I learned this year that I never learned in seminary:

*Harvard historian Wilfred Smith*

*Likes to talk about the origins of the rosary, the string of beads*

*Used for prayers by devout Catholics (I still have the one given me*

*At my first Communion).*

*Catholics got the idea, I learned, from Muslims, for whom prayer*

*Beads are common.*

*The Muslims got the idea from the Buddhists,*

*Who most likely got the idea from Indian Brahmins, whose 108 beads*

*Account for the requisite number of Hindu prayers.*

Oh how the world might be different if we acknowledged how we borrow

From and learn from each other!

Okay, back to it:

### **5) Courage in Response to Fear**

*This is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.*

*Be not afraid* – These words by Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner

That I begin my sermons with this year, and put at the bottom

Of all my emails...to remind me and you that though our coarsened politics

Surely has and surely will continue to be so expert at keeping

The populace fearful and distraught, there is another way...

A way called opposing hatred and fear with courage.

This way has been led by example all year, though we might have missed it...

In Parisians who opened their homes to strangers on the night

Of the terrifying slaughter there....

And in Charleston, South Carolina, after gunman's rampage at Emanuel

African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the victims' families who said

They forgave the killer.

*"A hateful person came to this community with crazy idea he'd be able to divide,"*

Said Jo Rilely, the mayor,

*"but all he did was unite us and make us love each other even more."*

And in President Obama, who spoke across politics and preached to red and blue

souls everywhere when he spoke at the Charleston church about healing

Racial divisions, then spontaneously began to sing *"Amazing Grace"*

And the entire gathered congregation, and me listening on the radio, and

Maybe you, too, stood and joined him.

How sweet the sound.

Days later, the Confederate battle flag came down at the South Carolina

State Capitol.

How sweet the sound, indeed. Are we listening for the sweetness?

Are we noticing the courage? Are we paying the right kind of attention?

#### **4) We've got the power! And what power is that? The power of protest!**

I have a confession to make. Ready?

My confession is that until this year I have wondered with some ambivalence

About the practice of protest,

Which I'm sure says less about the practice and more about me and my race and class and gender

And sexual orientation not provoking me to protest,  
As well as listening to my parents and their friends at dinners growing up share  
some of their disillusionment over their own protesting days...

But the good thing about growing older is that sometimes you even grow up,  
and you open your eyes to experiences that are not your own.

Such learning doesn't happen all the time, but it happened in me and maybe

In you this year as the Black Lives Matter movement

Spread its message of peaceable resistance,

Drawing support from faith-based groups including Christians, Jews,

Muslims and yes, Unitarian Universalists...

All amid increased scrutiny of police killings of black suspects and racial

Issues in public universities.

The ground-swell of bodies and voices and twitter #'s led to many Southern  
institutions remove displays of Confederate symbols,

And led, in particular, to the resignation of the president

And chancellor of the University of Missouri (my dad's alma mater

And a place that wasn't integrated until 1950!)

After a threat of boycott by the Missouri football team, the Tigers.

We'll leave for another time why it took the threat from a football team

To get the administration's attention.

Meanwhile, protests by workers in 270 cities across the country led

To a minimum wage increase in 14 states, including Massachusetts,

Where at \$10 an hour we now have the highest minimum wage in the country.

A promise here, from me to you, to lead us toward more places  
 Where our religious voice of protest needs to be heard,  
 Remembering as we do that we come from the Protestant - meaning  
*Protest* - tradition,  
 And that our mission together is less about *reflecting the culture* than it is  
 Living *counter to the culture*.  
 Join me.

### **3) Abdullah Kurdi's Christmas Sermon heard in Chicago**

Did you listen to it? Do you know who he is?  
 Well, you might remember his son – 3yr. old Aylan Kurdi,  
 Found face-down on a Turkish beach this summer,  
 One of over one million migrants, many from war-torn Syria,  
 Who poured into Europe by sea and land, stirring right-wing resistance  
 In some countries and compassion fatigue even in countries that welcomed  
 Them.

Which is what led Abdullah to deliver his Christmas message on U.K.'s  
 Channel 4 on Christmas Day, in which he said this:

*"If a person shuts the door in somebody's face, this is very difficult. When a door is opened, they no longer feel humiliated," says Kurdi, who lost another son and his wife the day his toddler died.*

*"We Syrians leave our country due to war; we are all afraid for our children, for our honor," he says. "At this time of year I would like to ask you all to think about the pain of fathers, mothers and children who are seeking peace and security."*

Kurdi now lives in Erbil, Iraq. He told Channel 4 that he wants to found a charity that would open a hospital and a school for Syrian Kurds.

Meanwhile, in Chicago...

It had been a very long and exhausting flight from Cairo for the Syrian family who had fled to Egypt from their war-torn country two-and-a-half years earlier. When the parents and their five children landed this month at Chicago O'Hare International Airport, they were warmly greeted by about 15 people connected to First Unitarian Church of Chicago, including seven children who held welcome signs decorated with hand-drawn American and Syrian flags.

When the parents and their children, ranging in age from an infant to a teenager, arrived at an apartment that volunteers from First Unitarian Church furnished for them, they were presented with a hot meal from a local Middle Eastern restaurant and a refrigerator stocked with culturally appropriate groceries. While one little girl quickly fell asleep in her new room, Richard Farmer, who had launched the congregation's Syrian Refugee Task Force just a few months earlier, taught the 16-year-old son how to use the wi-fi network and TV.

*"Neither I nor the boy spoke a word of the other's language, but gestures and demonstration were all he needed to learn everything,"* said Farmer.

## **2) No witty titles; let's just say it plain: The Supreme Court Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage**

I still remember back in my second year of college in Wisconsin when Paul, One of my best friends then, called a few of us into his dorm room and said He had something to tell us.

Worried, I thought something bad was happening. Was he sick? Did he need to drop out?

*"I'm gay,"* he told us. *"You're the first people I am telling. I haven't told my parents yet."*

And even though I've lost touch with Paul since then, he was among the names And faces I thought of in June when the Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage Was legal, prompting the White House and millions of Facebook profiles to light Up like a giant rainbow,

The news even prompting the Religious News Writers Association to rank it as one of the most important religious news stories of the year, which is quite something in a year that included the migrant crisis, the rise of ISIS, growing anti-Islamic rhetoric, and the papal visit to the East Coast.

In the majority opinion, the justices outlined several reasons same-sex marriage should be allowed. They wrote that the right to marriage is an inherent aspect of individual autonomy, since *"decisions about marriage are among the most intimate that an individual can make."*

They also said gay Americans have a right to "intimate association" beyond merely freedom from laws that ban homosexuality.

Later that summer, at a Pride parade in some Midwestern city, evangelical pastor Adam Phillips picks up a sign and begins walking. It reads:

*As a Christian I AM SORRY for the narrow-minded, judgmental, deceptive, manipulative actions of those who denied rights & equality to so many in the name of God."*

Listen to Adam as he describes his walk:

*It's so incredible to take those steps.*

*Walking down Burnside Avenue, I realized this was not your typical Sunday stroll. I wore my red church pastoral stole (symbolizing the season of Pentecost) and carried that poster in front of me for everyone to see.*

*And I meant it: I am sorry for the legions of people who have said, done, and prayed unimaginable exclusionary and degrading things in the name of God. I am.*

*Anyway, I walked down Burnside and the first parade on-lookers squinted and began to read my placard. I did not know what to expect at first: Did they think I was protesting Pride? Would they accept my apology?*

*I was overwhelmed by the response. People began to cheer. Many asked me to slow down so they could take a picture. Some wiped away tears and simply mouthed “thank you.”*

*I couldn't handle the acceptance. I couldn't handle the forgiveness. I couldn't handle the small glimpses, I witnessed, of healing unfathomably deep hurts. There was only one feeling I had: Pride.*

### **1) Will the world still be here in 2050? She says on the way back from church.**

I've said on many occasions that the real religious dialogue happens for me not in the pulpit, or in the pews, or in my office,

But in the car as we drive our two children to any number of activities,

The two mini-me's and mini-Karyn's probing us with theological questions

Worthy of any religious council. When they were young – *what is a God?*

*What is heaven? How do we there? Do my hermit crabs have souls?*

Graduating to *'Aren't you the boss of everyone at church? Can't you just tell them to do stuff?*

But then this fall, after wild weather here at home and discussions about climate change in science class: the younger one asks, just nonchalantly:

*I'll be, like, 47 in 2050 and you'll be...like really old.*

*Dad, will there still be a world then?*

What does one say? I mean, say with words that a 12-year-old can hear?

At least this year I got to tell her that in Paris – *you mean the one where those people died?* Yes, I say –

The nations of the world came together – 195 of them, perhaps the largest

Gathering of world leaders in history –

To reach an agreement that may yet answer Ella's heartbreaking question

With hope,

Because in the same year that saw President Obama at long last reject the Keystone pipeline,

These things also happened:

Exxon Mobil acknowledges that emissions contribute to climate change.

The United States has also promised to cut carbon emissions by 26 to 28 percent by 2025.

While not setting a target for reducing emissions, India has put together a plan to invest in renewable sources of energy.

China and the United States—two nations that account for over one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions—announced in November an aggressive joint agreement on limiting emissions.

Meanwhile, public and private investment in renewable energy sources such as wind and solar have risen exponentially as their costs have dropped.

Can one sense momentum shifting in the politics of climate change?

I pray so, for our children and their children,

For this world we promise at the end of every worship...

To go forth into the world in peace,

To act with works of love, to affirm each person's dignity,

And to cherish the living earth.

### **(Conclusion)**

And, my friends, my congregation whom I love and that renews me

Again and again,

There are so many other stories of redemption and hope this year  
To help bring some shine to a world that, according to the headlines,  
Can seem dark and muddied.

Darkness is everywhere. Anger and hatred are loud.

The shouting, as the NY Times said this week, drowns out the quiet;  
Tragedy and disaster block the view of the good.

Yet there are always signs of progress toward a better future.

Look, or we may miss them.

Happy New Year.

Amen.

