

Top 10 stories of 2004

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Gibson's *Passion* and Re-election of President Bush tie as top religion stories for 2004

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Stories about faith's role in President George W. Bush's re-election and reports about Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* tied as the No. 1 religion stories of 2004, in a survey of Religion Newswriters Association members released today.

Gibson also was named RNA's Religion Newsmaker of the Year by 51 percent of those voting. President Bush received 40 percent of the votes as runner-up for Religion Newsmaker of the Year.

Gibson's movie, released last February, drew record crowds and DVD sales, spurring discussions about its possible anti-Semitism, violence, faithfulness to Scripture and interpretation of the Atonement.

More recent stories of President Bush's election included the role religion and values played. Some studies credited evangelicals with providing Bush with his margin of victory. The faith commitments of Bush and Democratic candidate Sen. John Kerry stirred many arguments pro and con, as did registration efforts of some churches.

The issue of gay marriage—as reported in court cases, legislation and the mobilization of religious groups—came in third among the nation's top religion reporters.

None of the other 26 religion stories on the list had as much consensus regarding their ranking in the survey as the top three religion stories.

The online survey was conducted Dec. 10-14. Of the 260 eligible RNA members, 41 percent or 108 journalists responded. Members were required to rank their top 20 choices, with no tie votes allowed.

The Religion Newswriters Association is the nation's only association for people who write about religion in the non-religious news media. It supports excellence in religion reporting in the news media by providing education and other resources for its members and by raising awareness of the importance of religion coverage in the secular media.

RNA has conducted the annual end-of-year survey for more than 30 years.

The other top stories and their average "score" on the survey are below. Scores represent the average response value, on a scale of one to 20. Scores were rounded to the nearest tenth. The list with the exact survey phrasing is, in order:

No. 1 (tie)

Religion and values play major role in presidential campaign and then the election; some studies credit evangelicals with providing George Bush with his margin of victory. The faith commitments of both Bush and John Kerry stir many arguments pro and con, as do registration efforts by some churches. (3.2)

No. 1 (tie)

The movie *The Passion of the Christ* draws record crowds, spurs many discussions about its possible anti-Semitism, violence, faithfulness to Scripture, interpretation of the Atonement. DVD sales soar. (3.2)

No. 3: Gay marriages are performed for the first time in Massachusetts, following last year's state Supreme Court ruling; municipalities in other states try to do the same, but the ceremonies are invalidated. Religious groups are mobilized on both sides of the issue. Federal Marriage Act fails to clear the Senate, but 11 states pass amendments on Election Day against gay marriage. (3.6)

No. 4: Several Catholic archbishops and bishops say they will deny Communion to pro-choice politicians, a move believed inspired by the nomination of the first Roman Catholic in 44 years to the presidency, pro-choice John Kerry. A task force of bishops leaves the decision up to the individual bishops. (6.7)

No. 5: The Anglican Lambeth Commission criticizes both liberals and conservatives, pleases neither, and apparently does nothing to heal the rift caused by last year's installation of a gay bishop in New Hampshire. Churches in a number of states leave the Episcopal Church and some affiliate with Third-World dioceses; new network of dissenting churches formed. (7.8)

No. 6: Supreme Court upholds "under God" in Pledge of Allegiance on technical grounds; it earlier upholds by 7-2 the right of Washington State to rescind a scholarship to be used for ministry study. The court also blocks implementation of Child Online Protection Act; agrees to hear case on 10 Commandments displays; declines to hear Catholic Charities appeal from California on being forced to pay for employees' contraceptives. (8.0)

No. 7: Debate continues over role of America in Iraq: some religious groups call for withdrawal, others step up support for the troops. In Iraq, Muslim clerics play various roles in regard to the country's future. Some leaders in American mosques are arrested under the Patriot Act. (8.2)

No. 8: Two lesbian preachers are tried in the United Methodist Church: Karen Dammann is acquitted in Washington State and Beth Stroud is found guilty in Pennsylvania, symbolizing the church's serious rift. Some leaders call for a study about a possible amicable split. Meanwhile, Presbyterian Church U.S.A. General Assembly by just four votes upholds ban against "unrepentant homosexual practice" by its officers; the Rev. Stephen Van Kuiken of Ohio earlier has his conviction for performing gay marriages overturned on appeal because of a wording interpretation. (8.5)

No. 9: The largest settlement in the Catholic sex-abuse cases is reported in Orange County, Calif. The dioceses of Portland and Tucson go into bankruptcy because of such settlements and the diocese of Spokane is considering that option. Lawsuits continue in other states. Meanwhile, former Springfield (Mass.) Bishop Thomas Dupre becomes first bishop indicted in child abuse, but escapes prosecution because of statute of limitations. (8.8)

No. 10: High tensions continue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though there is a decrease in violence from the previous year. Presbyterians call for withdrawing investments from companies

that profit from israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank; some Jewish groups complain. (10.2)

Other top stories for 2004 were, in order:

No. 11: Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* dominate best-seller lists throughout the year; Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now* makes it near year's end. Warren's book becomes the focus of countless study groups; Osteen's is beginning to do so. Brown's novel inspires a number of efforts seeking to debunk his premise. (10.8)

No. 12: Persecution of Christians and other faiths continues in many Third World countries, and six nations are added to the U.S. list of those of particular concern about persecution. A treaty in Sudan does not stop persecution there. In Iraq, a four-person Southern Baptist humanitarian team is killed, and churches are destroyed. (12.0)

No. 13: Unborn Victims of Violence Act signed into law. Meanwhile, the administration finds itself defending last year's partial-birth abortion ban in several states. (12.7)

No. 14: Salvation Army gets \$1.5 billion gift from Joan Kroc, McDonald's heiress. At year's end, Target International bans Army volunteers from soliciting outside its 1,100 stores. (13.6)

No. 15: Florida Supreme Court unanimously invalidates law that kept Terry Schiavo on a respirator; Gov. Jeb Bush has appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Earlier, U.S. circuit court upholds Oregon's Death with Dignity act. (13.9)

No. 16 (tie): Pope John Paul II curtails travel schedule due to his illness, but does make a trip to Lourdes, among other places. He publishes another book, speaks out on traditional marriage and returns two valued relics to the Ecumenical Patriarch. (14.1)

No. 16 (tie): Canada adopts a law making it a crime to spread hate propaganda against sexual orientation. (14.1)

No. 18: Ronald Reagan's faith is celebrated, debated upon his death. (14.4)

No. 19 (tie): Religious minorities rejoice in election of first non-Hindu prime minister in India, Manmohan Singh, a Sikh. (14.9)

No. 19 (tie): Mormons debate book that says there is no DNA link between Native Americans and ancient Israel. (14.9)

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