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Top religion stories of 2012: Predictions by religious think tank

Gays, Israel, persecution in the future for this year?

By James D. Davis

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Other groups listed top religion stories of 2011. The Institute on Religion and Democracy tried forecasting what will be top church news of 2012.

Washington-based IRD is a conservative Protestant think tank, so most of its six predictions revolve around issues familiar to the right: abortion, homosexuality, persecution of Christians, support for Israel. With that in mind, here’s what the group foresees.

**Redefinition of Pro-Life:** The IRD noted that more liberal evangelical Christians have sought to include environmentalism as a pro-life issue.

**Same-sex rites** in the Episcopal Church, likely to come up at the denomination's triennial conference July 5-12 in Indianapolis.

**Islamist boldness** in persecuting Christians. IRD noted the growing number of attacks on Christians in Egypt and Nigeria.

**Shrinking Protestantism:** Mainline Protestant churches could close at an even higher rate than in 2011.

**Moderate Methodism:** The second-largest U.S. denomination will "continue its shift from liberal to moderate," as the more conservative African congregations make their influence felt. The United Methodist Church will hold its quadrennial convention in Tampa April 24-May 4.

**Anti-Israel:** IRD expects both Presbyterians and Methodists to take up "divestment" -- removing investments from companies that deal with Israel. The Presbyterians will meet in Pittsburgh in July.

I bounced all this off Fred Greenspahn, a professor of religious studies at Florida Atlantic University. He offered a few observations.

For one, he says, the predictions simply call for more of the same trends. "Almost every one is already happening. It's like saying tomorrow is still going to be February. It's no trick to predict the past."
On the other hand, as Greenspahn adds, "At one point it stops being February." I.e., new developments have a way of popping up.

One trend that the IRD predictions didn’t include was the direction of Christian conservatism. The group's list hints at one fracture in the movement, with the evangelical left trying to broaden the definition of "pro-life." Perhaps other rifts are opening as well?

"Conservative religious groups, particularly within Protestantism, have a history of being divisive," Greenspahn says. "[The IRD] sounds like they're riding a wave, but they're starting to get uncomfortable. Some members of their own community starting to head out."

Not that Protestants are alone in this, the professor notes. Many American Catholics respect their priests and bishops but don’t follow their moral teachings. Many young American Jews don’t enshrine Israel as their elders do.

"What you hear in conservative groups across the board is fear," Greenspan suggests. "They don’t know what will happen, and they’ll fight like crazy to keep it the same."

How about you? Do you see any religious trends for 2012?