

Another moment of reckoning

By [Lillian Calles Barger](#)

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American Christianity has faced theological-political crises before. Repeatedly, visions of what is possible for the nation have fallen short of reality. In the past, periods of change pushed faithful people to reconsider what they believed, not only about the nation but also about the meaning of God's call to justice. In each critical moment, for good or ill, Americans altered their religious views, and the horizon of what was possible expanded or contracted.

In revolutionary America, disunity resulted from debates over whether faith required obedience to the king or a revolt. In the 19th century, slavery drove apart both the nation and the churches. Theological weapons were launched on all sides. The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison hurled insults against the "spirit of slavery" that had "infested every pulpit" and "invaded every sanctuary." Garrison believed that the world could be different and that slavery was not divinely ordained. For many others, however, the end of the Civil War did not settle this dispute.

At the turn of the 20th century, the pressures of an industrial boom found workers on the verge of a new form of slavery, which instigated the social gospel among the working class. Walter Rauschenbusch articulated a vision of the kingdom of God against the "wedge of inequality" that divided comfortable middle-class churches from workers.

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement sought to complete what the abolitionists had started and what Reconstruction had left undone. Martin Luther King Jr. called upon faithful people to free themselves from the "deadening status quo" and become a "guide and the critic of the state" who insisted on justice. In the 1970s, liberationist James Cone followed, declaring that God was not found in the halls of white power but in the ghetto, "where men are enslaved and trampled underfoot."

Claims to racial, gender, and class justice persuaded many that neither Christian pragmatism nor withdrawal from the world would suffice any longer as an ethical guide. Fidelity called for risky engagement with the messiness of culture and

politics. Late in the century, evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics divided along new ideological lines. Caught in the tumult of a culture war, they lost hope among themselves of a practical ecumenism. Their view of God was a bondservant to partisan politics. Engaged Christians on both the left and the right learned the limits of state power and political action.

Americans today are at another historic crossroads, deciding what kind of society they want. They are again hearing the voices of those excluded from the promise of freedom and equality. Workers battling low wages and job instability, African Americans facing poverty and mass incarceration, immigrants encountering nativism, and frustrated young people—all are experiencing a kind of unfreedom. More often than not, they are alienated from religion.

A disillusioned middle class feels threatened by the visibility of the long unrepresented. There doesn't seem to be enough to go around. National politics appears to be unraveling, and the apparatus of government is suspected of colluding with those holding the majority of economic power as if by divine right. The neoliberal state is incapable of simultaneously fostering a new politic and preserving itself.

Once again, people of faith are dividing over the direction of the nation. The questions are familiar. What are the demands of justice? What does it mean to be free? What do we owe our fellow human beings?

The ability to answer these questions turns on a critical reconsideration of the relationship between religious faith and the political. People are questioning the foundations of American freedom. This freedom was built on the sanctity of individual economic rights, and it has produced religious institutions that offer a justifying moral shelter to inordinate wealth and power. Healing the breach among us calls for searching deeply into the arrangements of our economic life.

The churches, in proximity to the people, still have an opportunity to reclaim the vitalism of their faith and bring foundational change to local communities. Instead of maintaining monuments to a bygone era of American Christianity, churches, with their material and human capital, can serve as micro-political communities forging new models of life together that may again attract the alienated. Rather than acting as a rearguard in retrenchment, people of faith can live as what the radical theologian Harvey Cox called in 1965 “God’s avant-garde.” How millions respond to

the current theological-political crisis will chart the future of Christianity in America.

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