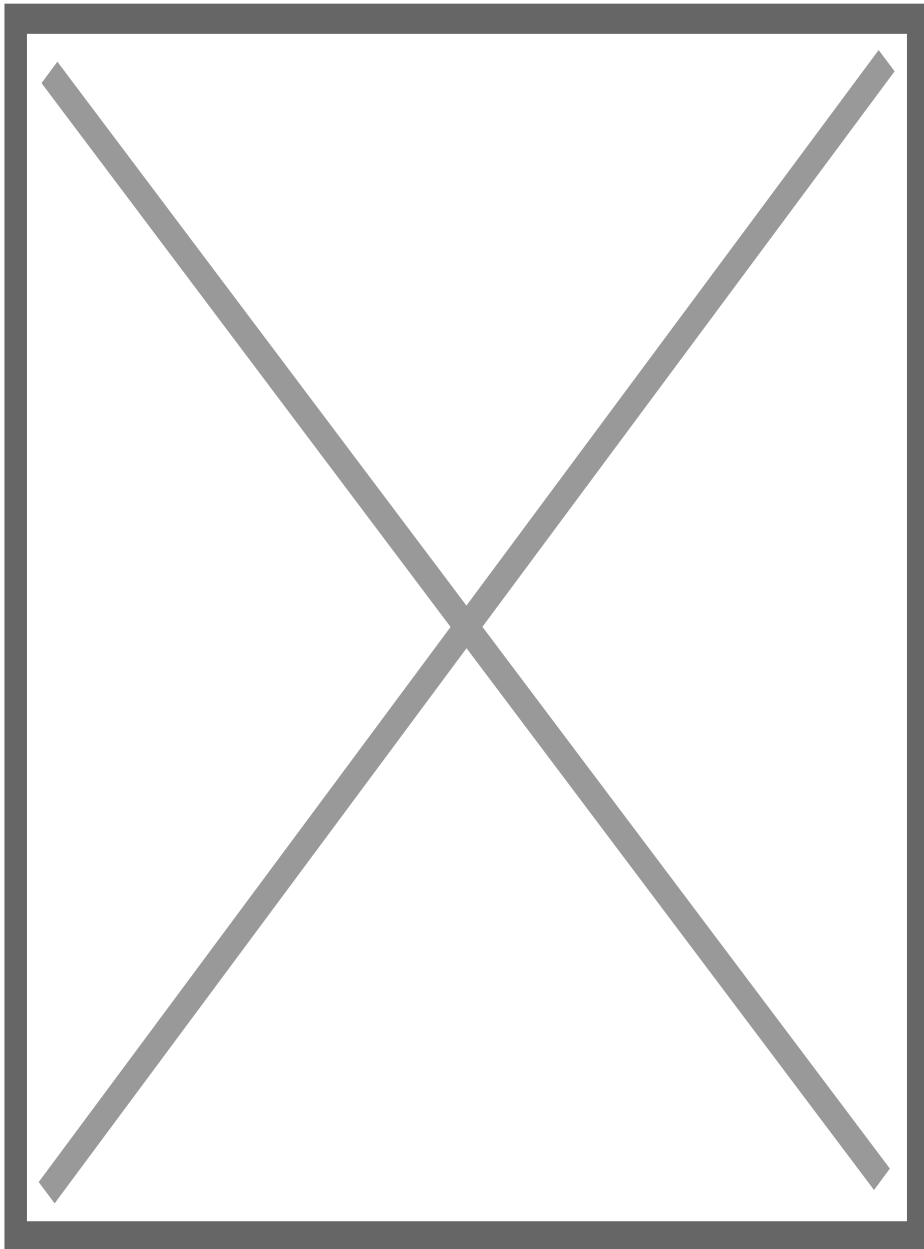


This political moment demands theology

As Christians, we need to protest authoritarianism and support the people it targets. We also need to underscore the deep foundations of this work.

by [Douglas F. Ottati](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue
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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

Last summer, a friend sent me some church statements addressing our current national crisis. I was glad to see them, especially given the pressures that beset ministers and church leaders in these polarizing times. Some stressed justice and quoted Bible passages urging care for the poor, the weak, the sick, and the stranger. Others emphasized trust in God alone and our duties to love the neighbor and reject constricting loyalties to personalities and political parties. But I found myself wanting more.

It is appropriate to march, demonstrate, support the legal defense funds of political targets, and remind Americans of the duties of compassion. But much of what's at stake today also calls for appeals to foundational visions of human life that help us to understand basic institutions in our democratic society. And, though the particular statements my friend sent me didn't lay it out, churches like the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church share just such a theological vision.

John Lewis—activist, congressman, and minister—met the crisis of racial justice with a moral stance firmly rooted in a vision of life before God that answered fundamental questions. Why is discrimination wrong and why do all people have a right to human dignity? According to Lewis, because “we are all children of the same Creator.” Why should we struggle for and participate in the work of justice for all? Because our destiny is to remember that “we are all a spark of the divine.” Why should we clothe ourselves “in the revolutionary work of nonviolent resistance against evil”? Because our calling is not to defeat opponents but to manifest a beloved community of reconciliation.

Lewis showed that public moral crises demand more than calls to action. They also call for appeals to the most complete accounts of life we know.

Times change, and though the nation clearly has not resolved the continuing crisis that Lewis addressed, it now faces another. Donald Trump's second administration has demonized immigrants and refugees, pulled people off the streets and deported them without due process, attacked judges and law firms, intimidated universities, launched investigations into political opponents, bullied the Federal Reserve, asked state legislatures to redraw congressional districts, hinted at changing how the states tabulate votes, and ordered military attacks without consulting Congress. Now it's sending federal agents into US cities to terrorize immigrant communities, with few restraints and no clear accountability. It's a pattern of authoritarian and totalitarian overreach.

For Christians, responding to these crises means appealing to a broad theology that grounds the basic commitments and principles relevant to the specific challenges at hand. Why do all people deserve not to be demonized and to have access to due process? Because before the God of grace, who creates all in the divine image and who bestows the gifts of life, capacities, and moral sensibilities on all, all have worth, and all deserve fair and equal treatment.

Why accord significant powers to government? Because all are sinners in need of grace, all are prone to pursue their own interests inordinately, and government needs to be able to restrain, balance, and sometimes guide powerful people, communities, and institutions. (Think, for example, of reducing the risks posed by monopolies—or by ethnic majorities.)

Why also disperse the powers to pursue certain basic goods among relatively independent institutions? Because differentiated institutions (such as government, corporations, universities, and performing arts centers), dedicated to the effective pursuit of specific goods (such as justice, wealth, education, art, and music), harness human capacities and creativity to advance a broader and complex public good.

At the same time, however, due to sin's corruption, the concentration of the power to pursue these goods in any single institution courts totalitarian suppression, suppression that their dispersal mitigates. (Consider the perils of politically controlled libraries, reading lists, and curricula.) Why insist, as James Madison and other founders of the US republic did, that certain powers within government be separated into relatively independent administrative, legislative, and judicial branches? Because the work of governing must be discharged by people who, like all of us, are prone to corruptions exacerbated by concentrations of power, which the separation of branches helps to check and balance.

Why, then, in view of our chronic corruption and perennial need for restraints, should we keep hope alive and strive for greater social justice and well-being? Because, despite the vicissitudes, corruptions, and ambiguities, the gifts of creativity and moral sensibility endure—and, in the economy of the gracious God's world, we continue to encounter possibilities for truer, more humane communities. (Remember, despite their shortcomings, the GI Bill of 1944 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.)

Christians today need to stress ultimate loyalty to God in Christ alone—along with our responsibilities to the vulnerable and especially to the stranger within our gates. Now is no time to be passive or silent. But we also need to do something more. We need to say how our theological vision of people—as children of God made in the divine image and as sinners graced with possibilities for good—illuminates politics and the workings and organization of critical institutions. We need to tutor ourselves and anyone who will listen in a theologically informed civics lesson that sheds light on the ominous turn Trump 2.0 has taken.