



1968: A Religious Landscape

JENNIFER HORNYAK WOJCIECHOWSKI

There can be no doubt in the mind of even the most casual observer of recent events in the United States that the country is experiencing a crisis more profound than any it has faced since the darkest days of the Depression.¹

The year 1968 was turbulent, to put it mildly. Race relations, politics, and the Vietnam War, among other issues, divided the nation.

The year began with the Vietcong's Tet Offensive and then an increase in American troop strength. March saw the My Lai Massacre (though the public wasn't aware of it until the next year), one of the most horrendous acts of the war. Vietnam was already an increasingly unpopular war, and the events of 1968 would further sway popular opinion against the war efforts. Students and youth, who were most effected by the war, protested, burned draft cards, and fled to Canada. Despite the protests, young men from everywhere in the country were sent to fight and die for something in which they often did not believe. By 1968, "many students regarded the war as the clearest indication of the total corruption of American society."²

¹David J. O'Brien, "The American Crisis and the Catholic Crisis," *Catholic World* 206 no. 1235 (1968): 209

²Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 144.

Sometimes reflections on the past can be influenced by our experience of intervening years. Thus, for a proper understanding of events as they were, it is crucial to hear the contemporary voices of 1968, to understand how Christians back then experienced this period.

Race relations had hit a breaking point in the United States. Protests and riots were prevalent all over the country. After Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April, riots broke out in 172 US cities, resulting in 43 deaths, 35,000 injuries, and 27,000 arrests. The riots were so bad in Washington, DC, Lyndon B. Johnson was forced to call in the military to keep order in the city.³ It was a sad, violent end for a man so dedicated to peace.

Politics were turbulent. Johnson announced he would not seek reelection. Robert Kennedy was assassinated after he won the Democratic primaries, thus adding to the uncertain political climate. In November, Richard Nixon won the White House.

So, what of the church?

Christians may not be *of* the world, but they certainly are *in* the world. How did the church react to such difficult times? American churches were caught up in the events of the era and were as divided as Americans were in general. Issues of race and the Vietnam War dominated mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic publications from 1968. However, there were some other issues of importance to American churches that receive relatively low coverage when examining 1968 from a strictly secular perspective. In addition to race relations, war, and politics, American churches were also contending with the issue of artificial contraceptives, the creation of the country's largest Protestant denomination (the United Methodist Church), and the fourth annual World Council of Churches, which was held in Uppsala, Sweden that year.

American churches were caught up in the events of the era and were as divided as Americans were in general. Issues of race and the Vietnam War dominated mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic publications from 1968.

This article surveys major Christian publications from 1968 in order to paint a general religious landscape for that pivotal year. *Christianity Today*, founded by Billy Graham in 1956, represented the evangelical voice in the 1960s. *The Christian Century*, founded in 1884 and still published today, represents the mainline Protestant denominations. *Catholic World*, published from 1865 until 1996, represents the Catholic Church in America. *The Lutheran*, the publication of the Lutheran Church in America, is also referenced, particularly in regard to the Vietnam War. Between these publications, one is able to derive a fairly representative overview of the diverse Christian positions and beliefs during the year 1968. It should be noted that this year was an eventful one in many other countries around the world, but this article is limited in scope to the United States.

³ Klaus Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray: A History of the Stormy 1960s* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 215.

RACE

I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land. I am not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming Lord.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

Black Power, then, is God's new way of acting in America.

—James Cone⁴

The 1950s and 1960s saw a number of civil rights successes: segregation coming to an end in 1954, beginning with the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education*; the Voting Rights Act of 1965; and the Civil Rights Act of 1968. However, American society was anything but equal. There was a distinct turn from nonviolent marches to a demand for rights at any cost, a cry for a revolution; enough was enough. The Black Panthers and Nation of Islam promoted black power, and many whites were scared. The rise of black theology became the answer for many African Americans who were trying to balance their faith with the blatant oppression (often at the hands of white Christians) they were facing.

Of the three major publications examined, the *Christian Century* was most sympathetic to the causes raised by the civil rights activists. When writing of the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Bill, the *Christian Century* expressed frustration at the slow movement of progress. An editorial lamented the then-current state of racial inequality:

If it took anguish of spirit, the murder of a great man [Martin Luther King Jr.], and near legislative miracle to accomplish such a tiny step forward, then the bill's passage only illustrates how far congress is from opening its eyes to the racial dilemma that endangers our country. . . . Congress has for years attempted to quiet the cries of the black man for justice by passing partial measures which grant him his rights by dribbles. Such a process has served to intensify his rage and desperation.⁵

Not all Christian responses were as sympathetic to people of color, but everyone seemed to understand that something had to give. An article in *Catholic World* announced to its readership that "Black America is saying that it will take—no longer ask for—the power to make or influence the decisions that affect them. The struggle for equality has been replaced by a naked grab for power."⁶ Despite the harshness of the language, there was a sense of resignation in the article. Things were changing; the status quo simply could not continue. So, then how should the church move forward? While more liberal Christians opted to support the change, others were less excited, and sometimes resistant to seeing things change.

⁴James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 61.

⁵"Racism Arrested?" *The Christian Century* 85, no. 17 (1968): 507.

⁶Francis A. J. Ianni, "Teaching Violence as a Means towards Social Justice," *Catholic World* 206 no. 1234 (1968): 160.

Christianity Today, the most conservative of the three publications, was the most pessimistic about the change in direction of race relations: "Americans are awakening to the realization that 1968 may bring the most severe racial crisis in the nation's history. They no longer harbor the optimistic illusion that the violence of the past four summers is a transitory nightmare that will soon vanish in the sunlight of racial accord."⁷ This particular article argued three points that nicely sum up a more conservative Christian perspective on race in the late 1960s. The first argument was that African Americans do indeed have legitimate grievances. The second was that all citizens must examine their attitudes toward other races, and then they must try to rid themselves of racial bigotry. The final argument was that African Americans must repudiate leaders who are calling for violence. It would be a better choice to work within the democratic process.⁸ There is a clear call for the end of violence but also a plea that people work within the system. Unfortunately, people of color felt that the system had failed them, which was why these same people were now looking outside of the system in order to make changes. Another *Christianity Today* article took an even harsher stance on the issue by railing against the entire practice of civil disobedience. The author argued that "calculated civil disobedience, seemingly so innocent, has brought in an era of lawlessness and bloodshed that can plunge our nation into unbelievable chaos." Later that same author stated, "To engage in or condone civil disobedience is to loose a tiger of destruction. The welfare of any nation depends on respect for and enforcement of law."⁹ The fear of change and violence is so strong here it leaps off the page.

It is evident from the wide range of viewpoints expressed that there was no one particular Christian perspective on race in America. Some Christians were sympathetic to new theological forms, especially liberation theology, while others in turn gravitated to traditional Christian ideas concerning the respect for authority and the maintenance of civil order. It should not be a surprise that the more liberal Christian publications pushed for more radical changes while *Christianity Today* advocated gradual change while working within the political system.

It is evident from the wide range of viewpoints expressed that there was no particular Christian perspective on race in America. Some Christians were sympathetic to new theological forms, especially liberation theology, while others in turn gravitated to traditional Christian ideas concerning the respect for authority and the maintenance of civil order.

⁷"Confronting the Racial Crisis," *Christianity Today* 12, no. 10 (1968): 26.

⁸"Confronting the Racial Crisis," 26–28.

⁹L. Nelson Bell, "Civil Disobedience," *Christianity Today* 12, no. 15 (1968): 20.

THE VIETNAM WAR

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder;” and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.

—Matthew 5:21–22

While no journal held an explicitly pro-war stance, there was plenty of variance in opinion on the Vietnam War. *The Lutheran*, the periodical of the Lutheran Church of America, sent out a survey to their subscribers about the Vietnam War in 1968. Over seven thousand readers responded, and the published survey provides a wonderful quantitative view of the war within Lutheranism. There were strong opinions on both sides of the issue—and the comments that people sent in along with their survey demonstrate this point. These comments ranged from calls for total pacifism to complete support of the war effort. Only 25 percent of respondents approved of how President Johnson was handling the Vietnam situation; however, only 31 percent believed that America should immediately and unconditionally stop the bombing of North Vietnam, and 58 percent believed that the United States should use all military strength (excluding nuclear weapons) to achieve victory.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, respondents under the age of thirty-five were more opposed to the war than those over the age of thirty-five.¹¹ The most interesting takeaway from the report is that the Lutheran response was far more against the war than the national opinion at the time. “Of 7171 who returned our recent questionnaire, 5065 registered dissatisfaction with the war effort. This is a considerably higher degree of disapproval than was uncovered by a recent Gallup Poll which found that fifty-four percent of all Americans disagree with the administration’s handling of the war.”¹²

Unlike *The Lutheran*, which discussed a variety of viewpoints, *Catholic World* took a strong stance on the Vietnam War. In 1968, this publication ran a fascinating discussion of the morality of war both in general terms and in the specific case of Vietnam. After a somewhat academic discussion of ethics and just-war theory, the author came down hard against the war. He argued that “the war the United States is presently waging in Vietnam cannot be justified on political grounds; *therefore*, it is immoral. The United States must begin to withdraw immediately from the war in Vietnam by choosing the means that entail the fewest evil consequences for the parties concerned in Vietnam.”¹³ Elsewhere, *Catholic World* published a statement from the American Catholic Bishops on Peace from November 1966: “While we cannot resolve all the issues involved in Vietnam conflicts, it

¹⁰ Howard Stone, “The Vietnam Poll: 7,000 Readers Respond,” *The Lutheran* 6, no. 7 (1968): 18–19.

¹¹ Stone, “Vietnam Poll,” 20.

¹² Stone, “Vietnam Poll,” 18.

¹³ Donald J. Wolf, “Vietnam Morality: Who Judges What, When, How,” *Catholic World* 207, no. 1239 (1968): 110.

is clearly our duty to insist that they are kept under constant moral scrutiny. No one is free to evade personal responsibility by leaving it entirely to others to make moral judgements.”¹⁴ Surely there would have been varying opinion on the Vietnam War among American Catholics; however, *Catholic World* expressed clear dissatisfaction with the American involvement in Vietnam.

Christianity Today has the least to say about the Vietnam War among the journals examined. In fact, one of the only articles on Vietnam, printed during 1968, was a somewhat bizarre piece on the Christian missionaries stationed in Vietnam. The article reports that nine foreign missionaries had been killed by the Vietcong. There is also a special mention of how American servicemen had helped to build churches. The article comes across as insensitive and obtuse. Instead of discussing either the horrors that the people of Vietnam were enduring or the loss of American life in Vietnam, the article focuses on this small number of Christian missionaries killed while in Vietnam. What is of interest, though, is that *Christianity Today*'s main concern was not the war itself but on providing a Christian witness in Vietnam. In other words, the importance was being placed on the salvation of souls over immediate physical needs of the people, which is an essentially evangelical stance to take.¹⁵

ARTIFICIAL CONTRACEPTION

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.”

—Genesis 1:28

The first birth-control pill, Enovid, came to the market in the United States in 1960. What quickly followed was what would become known as the “sexual revolution.” By 1965, five million women were taking the pill.¹⁶ This quickly changed sexual norms in America, with more women having premarital sex, delaying both marriage and motherhood. The Supreme Court ruling on abortion, *Roe v. Wade*, in 1973 would change things even more, but in 1968, abortion was still very much illegal. This entirely new way of viewing reproduction caused a massive disruption in the church. The Catholic Church came down hard against all forms of artificial contraception in the papal encyclical the *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life) in 1968. Protestant churches, for the most part, accepted contraception as the new reality but with concerns of promiscuity, premarital sex, and adultery heavy on their minds.

The truth of the matter was that by 1968 many American women had embraced artificial contraceptives (both Protestant and Catholic), and they were not going to stop using it. Catholic writings at the time express this reality. Peter Riga, a professor of theology at St. Mary's College writing for the Catholic journal

¹⁴ “Vietnam Issues,” *Catholic World* 206, no. 1236 (1968): 262.

¹⁵ David E. Kucharsky, “Viet Nam: The Vulnerable Ones,” *Christianity Today* 12, no. 11 (1968): 16–19.

¹⁶ Nancy L. Cohen, *Delirium: How the Sexual Counterrevolution Is Polarizing America* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 9.

Catholic World, wrote of the many concerns regarding the encyclical. His article is a surprisingly critical assessment of the encyclical, foreshadowing the criticism and long-term backlash that has resulted from the *Humanae Vitae*. He writes:

The Pope's encyclical poses vast pastoral problems for the priest in the field. The fact is that the vast majority of younger married Catholics have already decided in favor of various forms of contraception other than rhythm; and the vast majority of high school and college graduates have simply accepted contraception as part and parcel of their future married lives. How will the Official Catholic Church cope with the problem? As I have suggested, it will either have to consider birth control the lesser of two evils or face a decompartmentalized Catholicism; for large numbers of the faithful will simply go on practicing contraception, no matter what the official policy may be.¹⁷

By 1965, five million women were taking the pill. This quickly changed sexual norms in America, with more women having premarital sex, delaying both marriage and motherhood.

Even the pro-*Humane Vitae* article in the same issue, entitled "In Defense of the Encyclical," asks the question: "Are there things we can do for many of our people who are tormented at this moment by the decision whose burden they must bear with their lives?"¹⁸ The author continued to argue for the need of priests to accept the encyclical; an argument that in itself speaks to the sharp divide and dissatisfaction within the Catholic Church.

Of course, a pronouncement like this coming out of Rome affected the entire religious landscape in America. Both evangelicals and mainline Protestants were quick to comment on this decision. *The Christian Century* began their critical assessment with the biting comment: "The pope's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* condemns—as only a Vatican document can—every action which . . . propose[s] whether as an end or as a means to render procreation impossible."¹⁹ The author summed up the Catholic situation as such: "The intensity of the negative backlash from both clerical and lay sources has come as a considerable shock to those in Rome who only dimly understand the liberalizing forces which Vatican Council II engendered elsewhere in the church. . . . The over-all reaction of North American Catholics to Paul's statement has been one of dismay."²⁰ Since many Catholics were simply going to continue to ignore the encyclical, "the deeper question

¹⁷ Peter J. Riga, "Pope Paul's Encyclical on Birth Control," *Catholic World* 208, no. 1245 (1968): 110–11.

¹⁸ Anthony Padovano, "In Defense of the Encyclical," *Catholic World* 208, no. 1245 (1968): 114.

¹⁹ J. John Palen, "Catholicism, Contraception, and Conscience," *The Christian Century* 85, no. 36 (1968): 1132.

²⁰ Palen, "Catholicism, Contraception, and Conscience," 1132.

is whether concerned Catholics can much longer justify to themselves membership in an institutional church officially committed to policies they by conscience oppose.”²¹ At the end of the article, the author states confidently that the church will obviously reverse its current position. Fifty years later, though, the *Humanae Vitae* still stands.

In November 1968, *Christianity Today* dedicated an entire issue to the topic of contraception and abortion. The issue dealt with a variety of topics, including the Old Testament and birth control, the relation of the soul to the fetus, the New Testament and birth control, a Christian view on contraception, contraception and the single person, and a Protestant affirmation on the control of human reproduction. Whereas the mainline Protestants had a tendency to condemn the *Humanae Vitae* and embrace contraceptives, evangelicals grappled with the issue a bit more. An article entitled “Contraceptives and the Single Person” spelled out the moral questions of allowing single women to access birth control. According to the article, “For Protestants, the greatest tension is likely to be over whether contraceptives should be prescribed for the unmarried girl.”²² From the remainder of the article, the evangelical position is clear: unmarried women really should not have access to contraceptives, and physicians who prescribe them are complicit in the woman’s immoral behavior.

FINAL THOUGHTS

What is striking about surveying these publications from 1968 is how many things are the same here in 2018. Yes, the world has changed in many ways, but in other ways, not. There are articles that could be reprinted today, and readers probably wouldn’t notice they were written fifty years ago. People of color still struggle with both the explicit and implicit racism that runs through American society. Even within the church, Sunday morning remains one of the most segregated hours of the week.

What is striking about surveying these publications from 1968 is how many things are the same here in 2018. Yes, the world has changed in many ways, but in other ways, not. There are articles that could be reprinted today.

While it is true that America is no longer fighting in Vietnam, the US military continues to spend billions of dollars in a number of military campaigns, including in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Many American citizens find these military conflicts to be both pointless and immoral, just as many Americans found the Vietnam War to be pointless and immoral. The biggest difference may be that

²¹ Palen, “Catholicism, Contraception, and Conscience,” 1132.

²² Orville S. Walters, “Contraceptives and the Single Person,” *Christianity Today* 13, no. 3 (1968): 112.

people are no longer drafted to go fight. A small minority of Americans (the men and women who volunteer to join the military) carry the burden of all these wars.

Americans still fight bitterly over the issue of abortion, whether or not women should have access to contraceptives, and who is going to pay for them. *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* in 2014 is a recent example of how the issue of contraceptives still divides Americans, though abortion is a far more divisive topic today than access to contraceptives.

One has to wonder if the writer of Ecclesiastes was correct when he wrote: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). In fact, it may be wise for the church of today to look at what happened in 1968 in order to better understand our current situation. ⊕

JENNIFER HORNYAK WOJCIECHOWSKI is an instructor in religion at Augsburg College and a PhD candidate at Luther Seminary. She also serves as editorial fellow at Word & World.