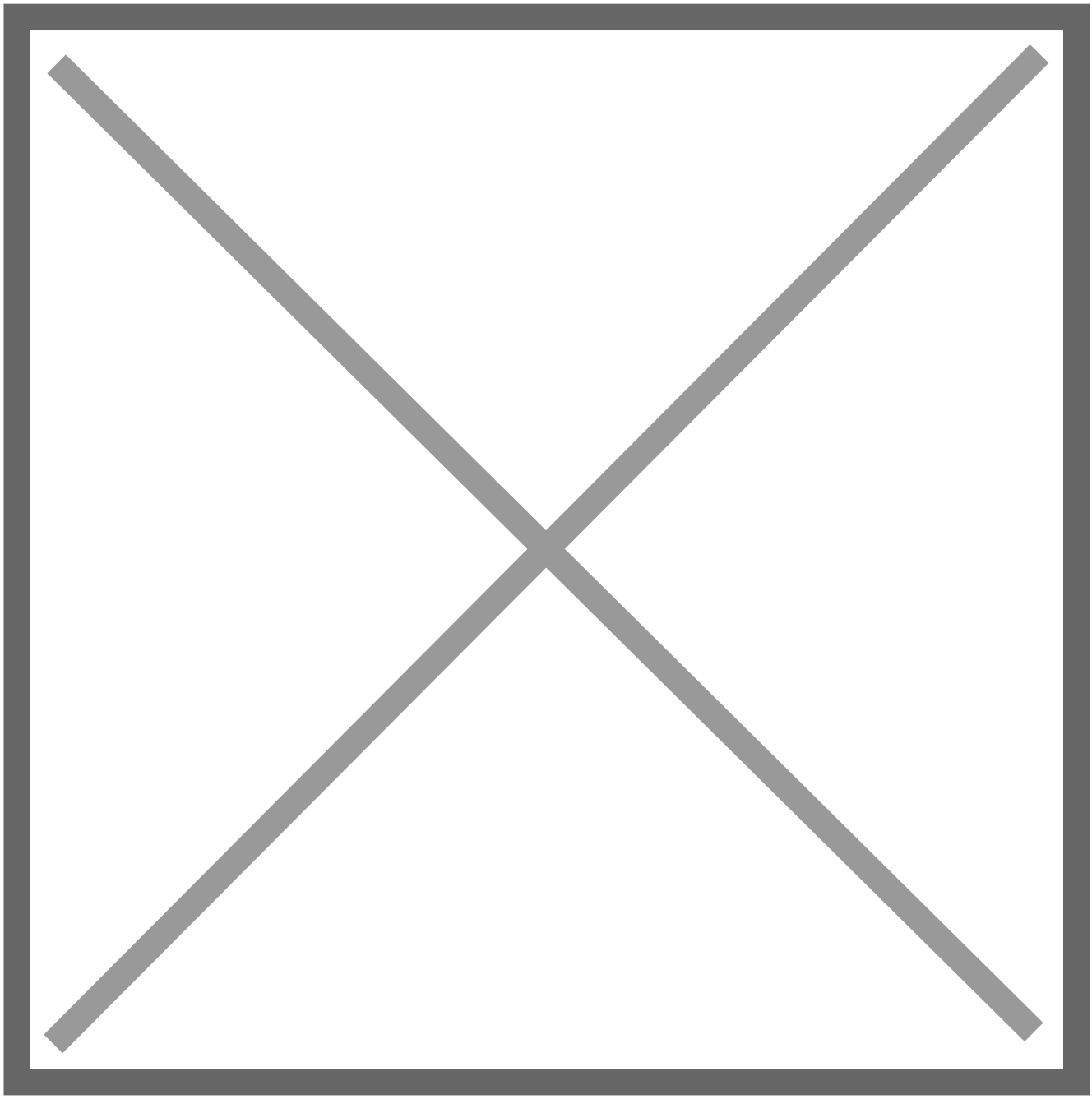
News
Guest Voices



Msgr. Ray East, pastor of St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Church in Washington, speaks during a prayerful protest against racism and police brutality outside the White House June 8, 2020. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Yonat Shimron

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The year 2020 upended U.S. religious life in ways no one could have predicted and in some ways many have.

A devastating coronavirus pandemic led to countless deaths, a shift to online services and, in some quarters, a mostly partisan-driven defiance of public health restrictions.

It was also a year filled with large-scale racial unrest after the deaths of several unarmed Black people, leading to a renewed reckoning with the legacy of white supremacy in American Christianity.

Joe Biden, a Catholic, won the presidential race while white evangelicals continued to throw their support behind the newly "nondenominational" Donald Trump, considered by many as the best hope for protecting religious liberty and opposing abortion — the twin issues that have come to define their politics.

We asked scholars, faith leaders, activists and other experts to reflect on some of the forces they've seen on the religious landscape this year and what they anticipate for 2021.

The views expressed in these submissions, which have been edited lightly for length and clarity, do not necessarily reflect those of Religion News Service (or of NCR).

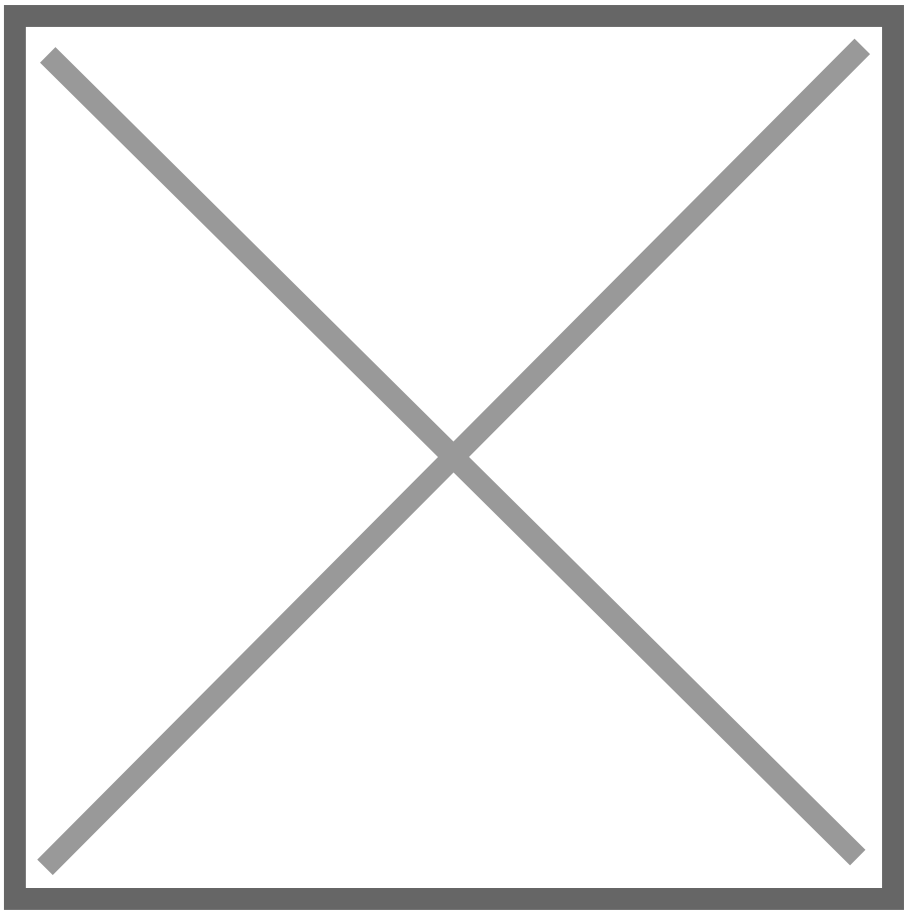
John Fea: Don't expect an evangelical reckoning in 2021

John Fea is professor of American history at Messiah University in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* .

In 2020, American evangelicals had an opportunity to move beyond the kind of one or two issue politics that have defined their public identity for four decades. They failed miserably. As historians look back on evangelical life during this tumultuous year, they will uncover a religious group that mostly ignored racial injustice, preferred individual liberties over care for their neighbors amid a deadly pandemic, and supported a narcissistic president who convinced them Supreme Court justices were more important than truth, empathy and basic human decency.

As local pastors struggled to hold their politically divided congregations together by keeping them focused on spiritual matters, they learned their efforts toward shaping the moral lives of their flocks through sermons about racial justice, neighbor-love and compassionate politics could not compete with the power of conservative media and the loud voices of Christian right activists.

In 2021, some evangelicals will remain citizens of the shadow government Trump is building through the millions of dollars donated to his "election fraud" efforts, while others will assess the damage of the Trump years, try to heal the wounds in their congregations and attempt to restore evangelicalism's gospel witness.



A Sikh man joins a candlelight vigil in the Queens borough of New York Oct. 29, 2018 to pray for the victims of the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Eleven people were killed and six others wounded during the Oct. 27, 2018 shooting at the synagogue. (CNS/Reuters/Jeenah Moon)

Engy Abdelkader: Expect more interfaith solidarity

Engy Abdelkader, a nonresidential fellow with PRRI and the German Marshall Fund, teaches at Rutgers University. She also leads the Rights of Immigrants Committee with the American Bar Association Section on Civil Rights and Social Justice.

Over the course of the last four years, the Trump administration has laid bare the deleterious effects of racism, xenophobia and related intolerance. It has also revealed the manner in which ideologies of oppression — anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia — may also overlap, intersect and interlock. For example, what was initially understood as a Muslim travel ban eventually evolved into an Africa travel ban.

The 2018 attack on the Tree of Life synagogue by a white supremacist showed how anti-Semitism and Islamophobia intersected in the mind of the alleged killer, who posted xenophobic screeds about both Jews and Muslims. And when Trump scapegoated Asians, particularly Chinese people for the coronavirus, the precedent for his inflammatory rhetoric and the subsequent surge in hate crimes was already established. As early as 2015, Trump ran a campaign dehumanizing Latinos and Muslim Americans.

As such, at least one lesson to be learned: An attack on one community's civil rights, reputation and dignity is arguably an assault on all. As such, we should expect even more solidarity efforts across diverse faith groups, including Black Protestants, Jewish Americans, Latino Catholics, Native Americans and Muslims.

Jill Jacobs: The religious left will continue to march

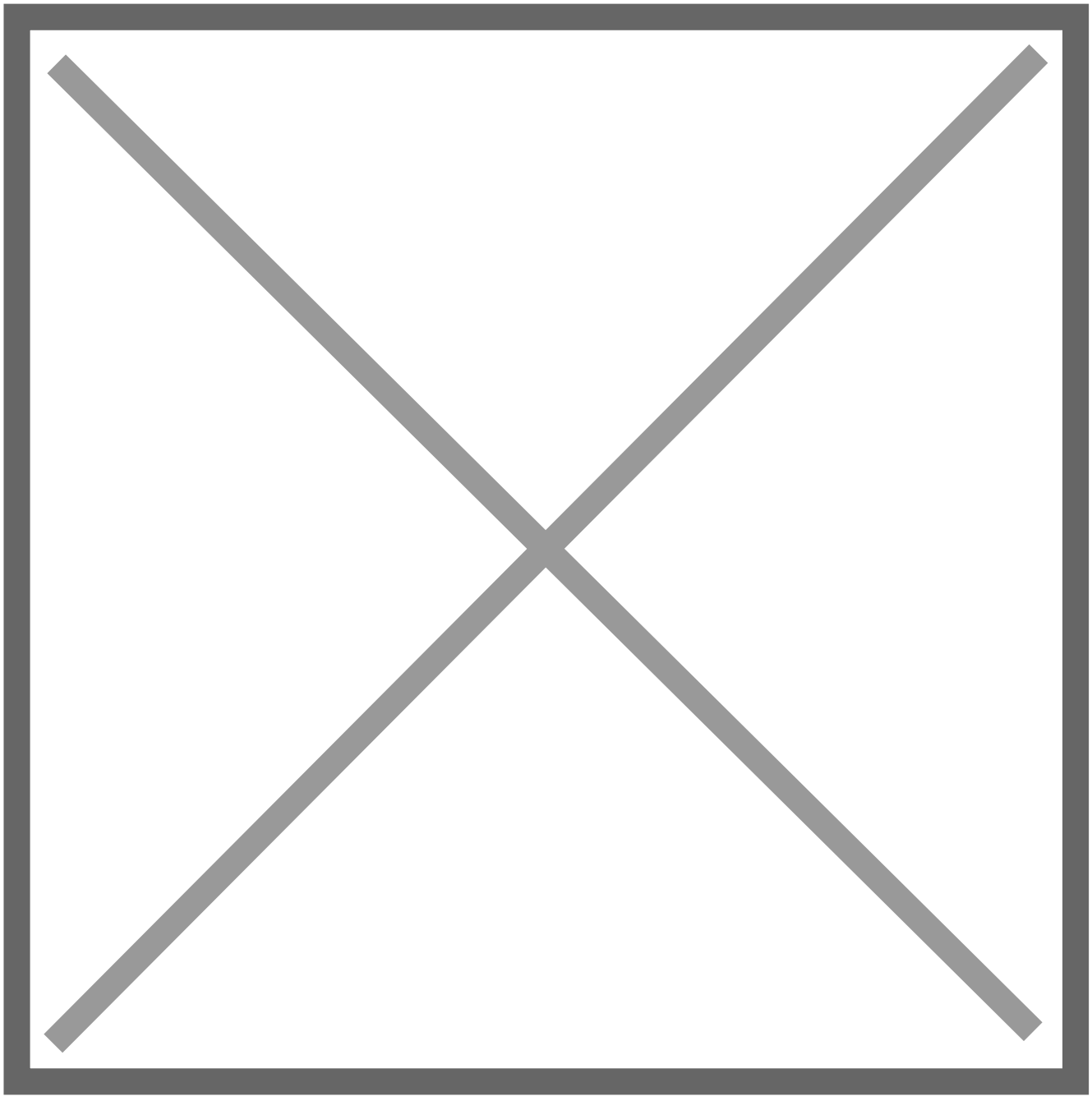
Rabbi Jill Jacobs is the executive director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

On Election Day this year, I donned a fluorescent yellow cap marked "clergy" and made my way to a local polling station to spend the day ensuring voters could perform their civic duty without intimidation. Throughout the country, hundreds of rabbis and cantors affiliated with T'ruah, the rabbinic human rights organization I lead, did the same — as did many, many clergy of other religious traditions trained by Election Defenders, Lawyers and Collars and other groups.

U.S. political discourse often equates "religious communities" with white evangelicals, and reduces "religious" concerns to efforts to limit access to abortion and birth control, impinge on LGBTQ people's rights and impose Christian prayer on others. Mainstream media reporters too often fall into this lazy assumption as well. But our religious traditions devote much more time to insisting on economic justice, on the dignity of every human being, and on care for those in need.

Progressive religious communities and organizations are increasing their prominence and power. These include T'ruah rabbis risking arrest to protest the Muslim ban or joining Black Lives Matter protests along with other religious leaders, members of No More Deaths insisting prohibitions on distributing water violate religious freedom, and participants in the Poor People's Campaign fighting for economic justice. The religious left has increasingly refused to allow white evangelicals to define religion for the rest of us. We should expect that progressive religious people will continue to

exercise our own "religious freedom" and to assert our moral voice in the public sphere.



Protesters are seen near the Capitol in Washington May 21, 2018 to demand elected officials take immediate steps to confront systemic racism. The action was part of the six-week Poor People's Campaign. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

John Inazu: White evangelicals will face a difficult path to racial reconciliation

John Inazu teaches law and religion at Washington University in St. Louis.

Pay attention to the growing divide between those white evangelicals confronting racial injustice and those settling for platitudes. The recent denouncement of critical race theory by the presidents of Southern Baptist seminaries shows one of the growing fault lines.

A similar but less noticed fissure is evident in Greg Thompson's scorching review of Rod Dreher's latest book, *Live Not By Lies*, followed by Dreher's angry response. This is largely a family feud between centrist and conservative evangelicals. But it is infused with racial and generational dimensions, with younger evangelicals increasingly impatient with and dissatisfied by an unwillingness of their institutions and leaders to commit to what Jemar Tisby aptly calls "racial justice beyond hugs, handshakes, and symbolic statements."

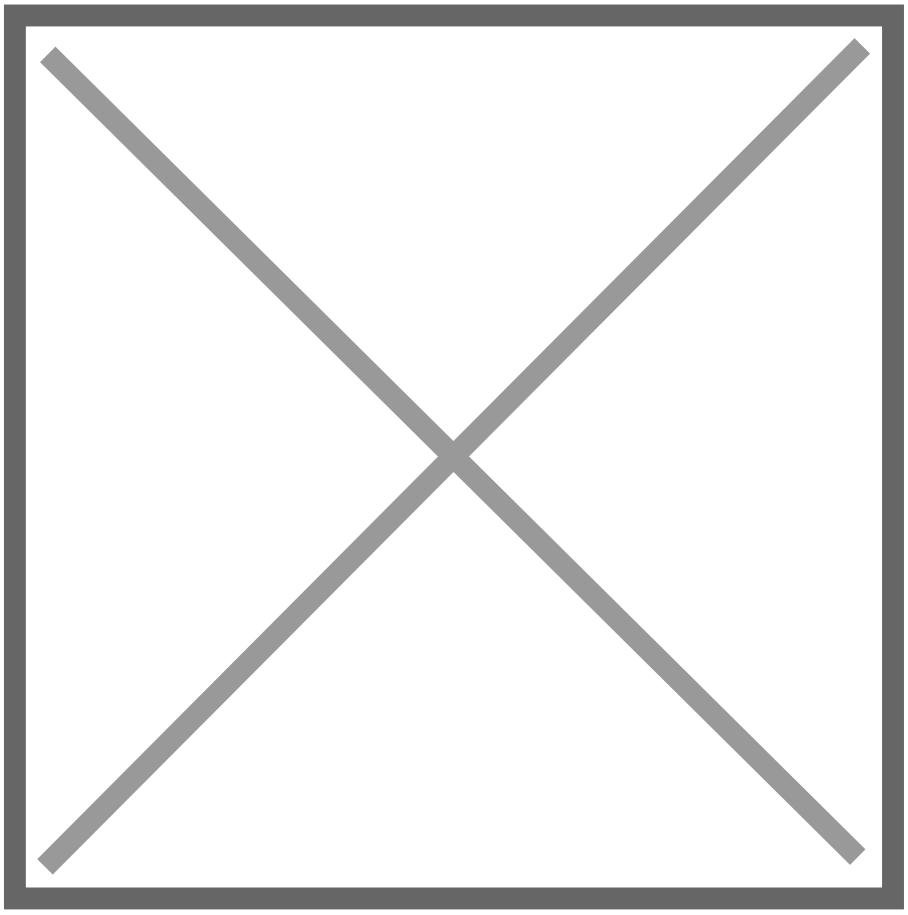
The coming months will see these arguments unfold not only around national events but also in conversations around forthcoming books like Tisby's *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice*, and Thompson's co-authored (with Duke Kwon) *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*. All of this will play out in a post-Trump era in which some white evangelicals wistfully think the damage to their witness and their relationships will just fade away, but others — including many nonwhite evangelicals — anticipate a far more difficult road to reconciliation.

Johnnie Moore: Evangelical influence and reach will continue to grow

The Rev. Johnnie Moore has served as an informal adviser to the Trump administration. He's president of The Congress of Christian Leaders.

Religion will be everywhere all the time. Churches around the world will burst with record attendance on the other side of COVID-19 while online experiences will continue. Globally evangelicals, who already exceed 700 million people, will grow by at least 10%. Religious freedom advocates will achieve victories in courts and capitals around the world, despite ongoing challenges with persecution and marginalization.

Religious freedom will also be a unifying principle for those finally acknowledging China's inexcusable behavior — especially its genocidal persecution of Muslims, Buddhists and Christians. The record 43 million U.S. evangelicals who voted in 2020 may become less of a singular fixation in American politics but will be no less of a potent force in the public square. The smartest leaders will finally see the broad issues of concern to this community as a key to solving long entrenched challenges in American life, resulting in unique issue-oriented alliances. Corporation leaders in LA and New York may descend from their ivory towers and start to see the rest of the country again. They'll find it's a very traditionally religious place.



A woman holds a crucifix as she takes part in a prayerful protest outside the White House in Washington June 8, 2020, following the death of George Floyd. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Gerardo Martí: A Biden administration may give the religious left a boost

Gerardo Martí is a professor of sociology at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina.

With the inauguration of President-elect Biden, a devout white Roman Catholic man dedicated to the Democratic Party, we usher in a new relationship between religious identity and political partisanship. Many white evangelical leaders who supported Trump over the past four years have asserted that being a Christian and being a Democrat are incompatible. James Dobson, for example, implored his followers to "pray for God's deliverance" because " the enemies of liberty and righteousness want to destroy all that is good about America" meaning "your freedoms, your family and your faith."

Such preferential, myopic, specious and arrogant statements on behalf of politically conservative Christians highlight the alignment of the GOP with the religious right. Could a vibrant religious left now emerge? Sociologist Joseph Baker and I analyzed several sets of data and express caution that such activity has been pretty weak.

Compared to the religious right, not only is the constituency of the religious left shrinking, they have been steadily disengaging from political activity in the last decade. It may be that the first year of a Biden administration, one that welcomes rather than resists a progressive religiosity, reverses this trend. That would result in significant growth and diversification of new ways to be an American and a Christian and provide greater recognition of a leftward movement of faith in the United States.

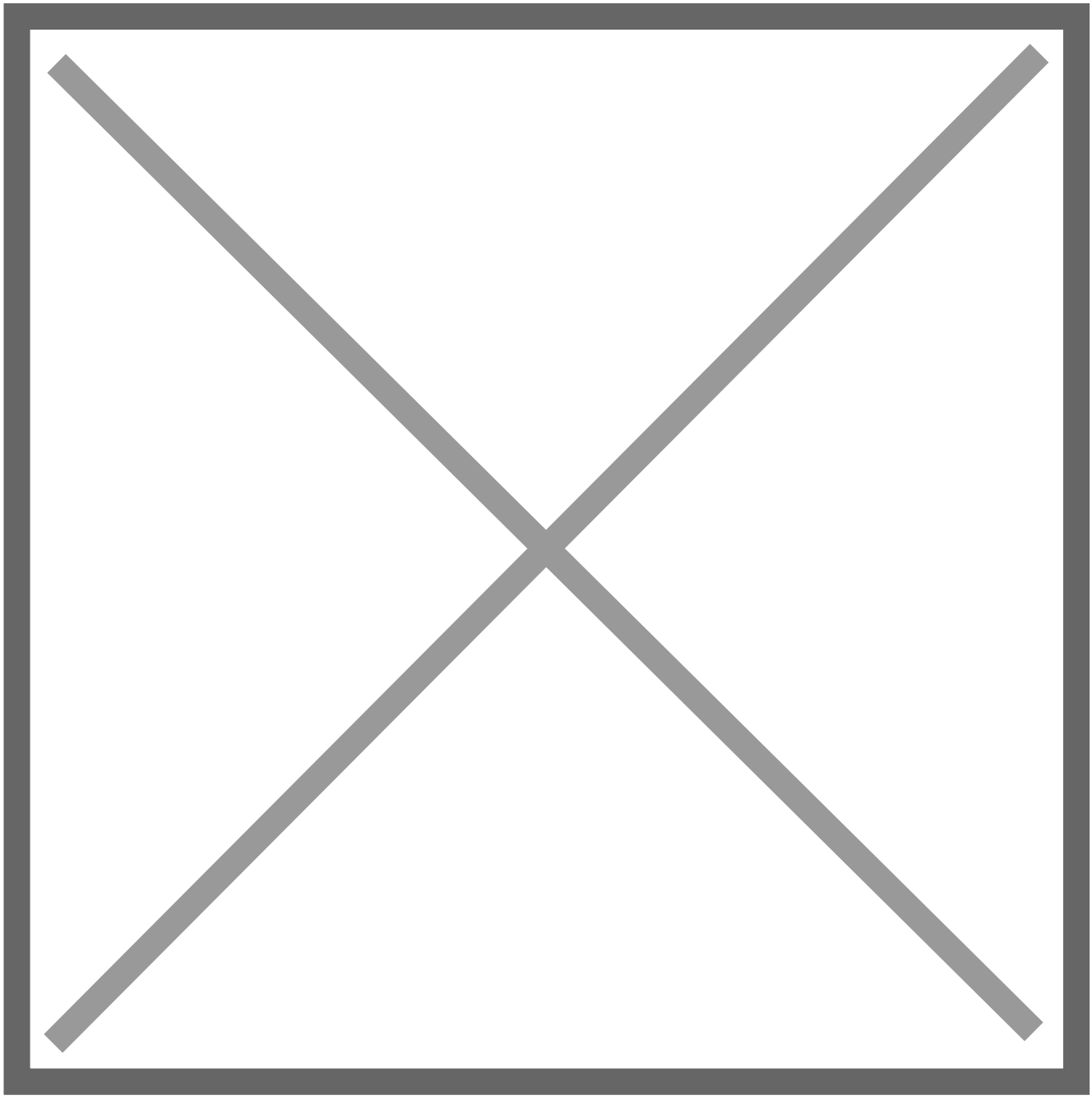
David Gibson: Divisions in the Catholic Church will spill over to 2021

David Gibson directs the Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University and is an award-winning journalist and author.

American Catholics in 2020 were as divided as ever, and over just about everything. As far as the coming year goes, past will be prologue — only more so. The inauguration of the second Catholic president in the nation's history will not unify the church but will instead be a lightning rod for attacks from conservative, predominantly white, Catholics who had a bully pulpit thanks to Trump. They will have allies on the Supreme Court, where six of the nine justices are Catholics, five of them conservatives, two appointed by Trump. Latinos will have a champion in Biden, but still less sway inside the church.

The "Francis Effect" has not yet taken hold in the nation's hierarchy, which means the U.S. bishops will also be divided, with many wanting to battle Biden and others

wanting to work with him. Speaking of Francis, the death (or resignation) of a pope is the open square on every Catholic 2021 bingo card. Francis turned 84 on Dec. 17, and while he seems in good health, if he exits then the conclave and future of his legacy will take this Catholic battle global.



Supporters of President Donald Trump cheer alongside the presidential motorcade at Freedom Plaza near the White House in Washington Nov. 14, 2020.
(CNS/Reuters/Tom Brenner)

Andre Henry: Evangelicals will remain committed to white power

Andre Henry is program manager for the Racial Justice Institute at Christians for Social Action. He hosts a podcast called "Hope & Hard Pills" and writes a column for Religion News Service. He is also an award-winning singer-songwriter.

We'll see some carryover of loyalty to Trump from white evangelicals. They'll continue parroting his narrative that he won the election after he leaves office. Trump set a precedence for authoritarian rule, and if nothing is done to counteract that, we'll probably see that again. Even those evangelicals who admit Trump lost the election will continue to say they're single-issue voters, and a candidate's stand on abortion — and maybe to a lesser degree, religious freedom — will be the only standard they'll consider in future votes.

This year, the idea that evangelicals cannot vote for a candidate who champions abortion rights came under scrutiny from liberals who pointed out the evangelical bloc has been manipulated when it comes to abortion. Black critics have pointed out some evangelicals use abortion as a way to recuse themselves from the movement for Black lives and the injustices that disproportionately harm Black people. The claim of banning abortion often masks a commitment to white power. I'm wondering how that's going to work in the future.

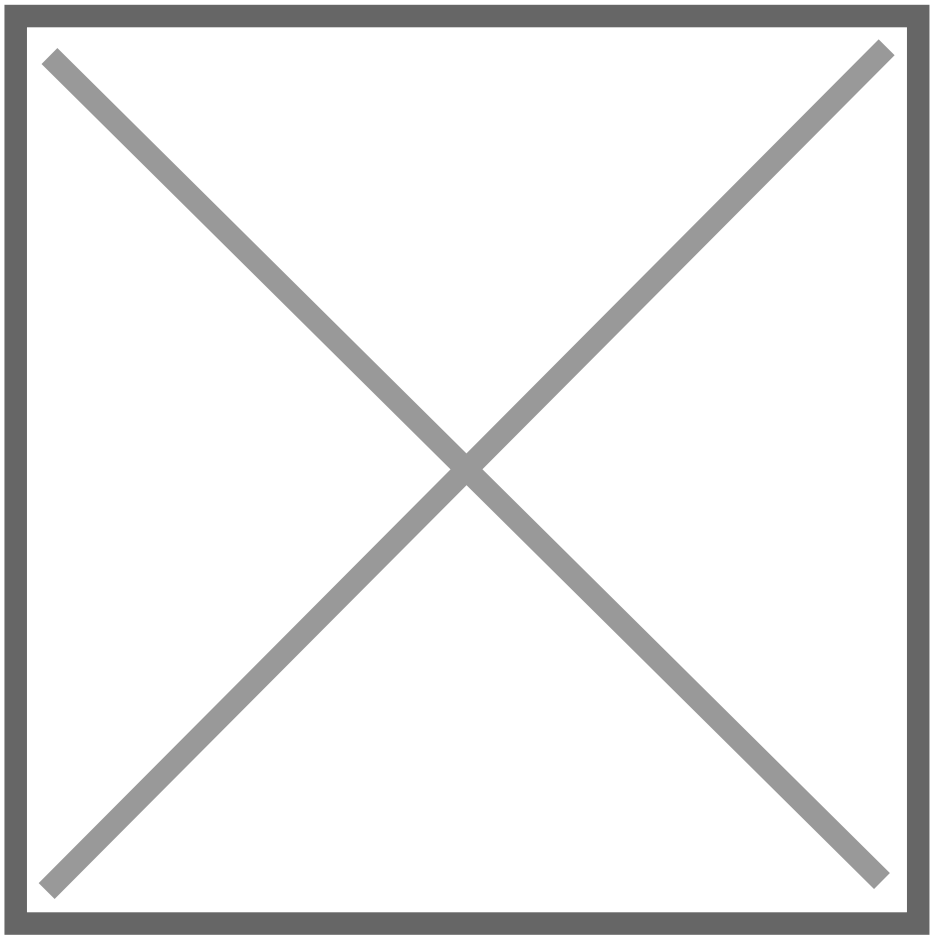
Asma Uddin: Up ahead: A bitter proxy war over religious liberty

Asma T. Uddin is author of the forthcoming book "The Politics of Vulnerability: How to Heal Muslim-Christian Relations in a Post-Christian America."

In 2021, political tribalism will be the biggest challenge to many different areas of American life — and religion is no exception. In fact, religious liberty has for a number of years now been vulnerable to tribalism and matters only seem to be getting worse. Just last month, the Supreme Court issued its first ruling against overly restrictive COVID-19 limits on houses of worship.

Days before the conservative majority delivered the win to the Catholic and Orthodox Jewish litigants, Justice Samuel Alito opined at a conference that the country is experiencing "previously unimaginable restrictions on religious liberty." Then, after the court's ruling, pundits and others painted it as nothing more than conservative justices rubber-stamping pandemic-denying Trumpism. The narratives on both sides position religious liberty as a proxy for a liberal-conservative fight.

With political rifts in the country rising to dangerous new levels, the proxy fight will only become more bitter.



Jenna Kantor, right, and Jackey Good sing with the choir during an annual "Pre-Pride Festive Mass" at St. Francis of Assisi Church in New York City June 29, 2019. The liturgy, hosted by the parish's LGBT outreach ministry, is traditionally celebrated on the eve of the city's Pride March. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Robin Fretwell Wilson: In religious liberty war, the future of foster children is at stake

Robin Fretwell Wilson directs the Institute of Government and Public Affairs for the University of Illinois system and teaches law at the University of Illinois College of Law.

America is at its best when it protects the least among us. As 2020 closes, we face a singular, pressing challenge: how to take children out of the culture war. This term,

the U.S. Supreme Court will decide *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, in which the city of Philadelphia stripped a religious foster care agency of its ability to place children in families unless they would swear to place children in all families, including LGBTQ families. Ironically, the agency had not declined to serve any family.

To be sure, being turned away from an agency is a deep wound. My parents would have walked away and never adopted my sister and me. Equally certain, we need every agency doing their important work because 423,997 children need homes right now. We need every hand on deck. Litigation offers only win-lose answers. But we can neither afford loving couples to be turned away, nor can we afford to shutter agencies that do this important work. Congress can reform our antiquated funding system so these needless clashes do not harm children. As a divided nation, we have countless challenges. Yet the measure of a decent and good society is how we treat our children. Certainly, we can take children out of this culture war.

Jonathan Calvillo: Latino Christian identities will continue to evolve in response to multiple impulses

Jonathan Calvillo teaches sociology of religion at Boston University's School of Theology.

In 2021, I expect to see the following trends among varying segments of Latino Christianity:

Visible, interdenominational coalitions of young Latinos focused on social justice will continue to grow. Younger Latinos will continue to be drawn to Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous-influenced spiritualities. Many Latino Christians will continue to be drawn to sources of perceived "secret knowledge" encapsulated in conspiracy theories and will blend these beliefs with their theologies. Increased online engagement by churches will continue to foster virtual communities of pan-ethnic Latino affinities. Spiritual entrepreneurs with a strong digital presence will continue to exercise influence transnationally via mainstream social media platforms as well as through their own websites. Smaller, working-class churches who have experienced notable losses due to the pandemic will respond mournfully and creatively.

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