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When the World Doesn't Stop to Let You Off

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Alvin Toffler warned us years ago that we were in the throes of "future shock" paralysis: events and changes flooded us at a faster and faster speeds, boggling our minds and confounding our understanding. Message: we would never figure out what was going on as wave after wave of newness crashed in on us.

That plus the swirl of staggering facts leave me stupefied.

We'll number 7 billion citizens on the planet by October, just 12 years after reaching 6 million and zooming toward 10 billion by the 2080s. Space telescopes scan a vaster universe with an estimated 200 billion galaxies. The federal debt is in that unfathomable zone of "trillions."

The swirl of numbing statistics and studies and trends prevents many of us from gaining a foothold on reality. It also means that nobody or no crisis or "historical moment" is likely to grab even 15 minutes of fame. That luxury is vanishing as quickly as last hour's CNN Headline news. Hello and goodbye to Japan's tsunami, to the Haitian earthquake, to Mike Huckabee's candidacy and to the eviction of an Australian bishop.

This cascading scenario relates to a question asked by a friend the other day. Why, he wondered, didn't the churches in America link arms in a march against cutting basic services for the poor? Why did religious leaders emerge at the forefront of civil rights and anti-poverty campaigns in the 1970s and remain so invisible now?

Well, I fumbled, Catholics and mainline Protestants are losing members and influence and most evangelicals don't place social movements on their agendas. Debates over homosexuality have left many churches sorely divided, without sufficient consensus to march for anything. And so on down the line of reasons why so much of American Christianity that might care deeply about the plight of the poor has lost

steam and, in some cases, purpose.

My friend is among the warm hearted atheists who decide mostly on the basis of nothing in particular that Christianity is bunk but still expect Christians to publicly press the cause of justice and mercy. Let the church-going Georges do it.

Though I think that's unfair to the churches, his complaint reminds me that the explanations of relative inactivity (the Catholic bishops and other denominations have filed fervent pleas against the budget cuts) do ring hollow. Responsibility for pressing the prophetic tradition of establishment nuisances like Isaiah and Amos has never depended on the health or power of religious institutions. The tiny band of Quakers spoke loudly on conscientious objection and pacifism. A few British clerics helped bring down the slave trade despite controversies in the Anglican church. African American churches at the disenfranchised fringes of cities produced much of the dynamism in the campaign for civil rights.

But what if Toffleresque streams of impressions and factorums have hampered our concentration to the degree that we cannot effectively join forces?

Passion rooted in conviction has always fired such actions. But those passions have been fixed on particular targets over a period of time, things like exploitation and degradation of certain groups of people. We may have that resolve for a moment but it is soon vitiated by the onrushing array of substitutes.

In Toffler's terms, the frightening possibility is that the stream of change flies by so fast that the churches have lost their ability to see clearly or to focus on any one objective long enough to rally (I believe the current Islamic uprisings illustrate that unanimity can take shape against an overarching target but doesn't apply to the formulation of social or political policy making). Things keep appearing, disappearing and reappearing fleetingly in different forms. If our capacity to understand what we see has diminished and our attention spans have become incapable of observing anything other than flashing instances with dissociated memories, then we have become hostage to rather than the shapers of our futures. We will remain in forgetfulness and shock.

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