

Religious hopes for 2013

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Religion can be a force for good or a tool for oppression.

As a Christian in the United States, we can point to a lot of good things in the last year. Passionate energies arose to assist in disasters, push for gun control, call for immigration rights, struggle for marriage equality, long for racial reconciliation, initiate interfaith dialogue, demand a just budget, work for peace, and fight for farm workers' rights. And the list continues as I burst with gratitude for the work that people have done.

I'm proud to be a part of a movement whose great concern is learning to love your neighbor as you love yourself. And as we move into the New Year, I hope those voices of justice will grow stronger and I wish for some other things as well.

I hope that the Religious Right will drop birth control as an issue. During the political season, the conservative Evangelical case against birth control was loud and clear. I spoke to [Frank Schaeffer](#), one of the founders of the Religious Right, trying to remember my days growing up in a conservative Evangelical household. "I don't remember birth control ever being an issue before. It wasn't tied to the Evangelical pro-life movement, was it? Did I miss something?" I asked.

"No. Birth control wasn't an issue at the beginning." Schaeffer replied. "This is a case of the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

In other words, the Religious Right took up the cause of birth control because the Roman Catholic Church is against birth control. Since the Religious Right Evangelicals and some Catholics could join forces and become more powerful in their shared quest to defeat Barack Obama, then they decided to add birth control as an issue. We began to hear the [pill referred to more as an "abortifacient."](#)

I am now a Progressive Presbyterian, but growing up as a teen in a conservative Christian culture, I read [Passion and Purity](#). I was advised to take the pill for medical reasons and refused because I thought it would make sex more tempting. I also

thought that using a condom would be like premeditated sin, because you would have to have to buy them beforehand and plan on having sex. But there was no sense that birth control was somehow tied to abortion.

I'm hoping that since the Evangelical tie of birth control to the pro-life movement was a [pragmatic political flop](#), it won't affect conservative women who want to decide when they are ready to have a child. There is already a [teen pregnancy problem](#) in red states. We don't need to exacerbate the issue, jeopardizing the lives and futures of young women by demonizing birth control.

I hope that we renew our theological thinking about marriage. Now that same-gender unions are blessed by the state and the church in many areas, this would be a wonderful year to think about our ceremonial customs. I love presiding over weddings, but I often rewrite the liturgy and invite couples to think through our traditions.

Throughout our wedding ceremonies, we often proclaim that marriage is an institution, created by God, so that people can raise children in a loving home. That's hardly accurate when so many couple marry to share their lives and love, not necessarily to have babies. The ceremony is dripping with patriarchy. Why does a father "give away" his 30-year-old daughter to another man? What about those who have found love, apart from any sort of blessing from their parents? Can we think about ways in which the prayers and love can affirm couples, even in the midst of familial discontent?

This would be a beautiful year for theologians, historians, and liturgists to rethink our traditions, not just fighting for what we believe is right in the political sphere, but by putting art, beauty, and poetry behind those longings for gender and marriage equality.

I hope that religious movements will understand Occupy. Perhaps you are not into the whole urban camping experience, you don't approve of pitting poor Americans against rich, you don't like that there were no identifiable leaders, you don't like that the movement was critical of Democrats, you don't like the word "occupy" because of its usage in the Middle East, or you have ten other reasons why you shied away from the Occupy movement--you still have no excuse. People of faith still have an obligation to learn from the movement.

We need to understand how our economic policies have hurt the young, who are overwhelmed with student loans and credit card debts. We need to realize how the lack of medical insurance made them vulnerable to financial ruin. We will need to get our heads around the fact that large swaths of Generation X and the Millennials don't have pensions and won't be prepared for retirement--even as we are expected to live longer.

Churches can get past shaming the young for their debt, rolling their eyes at their "first-world problems," and realize that we have set up a system in which the young can have a difficult time surviving independently or setting up households. Poverty issues are different in this generation, and Christians need to take care to understand what is happening.

It's also interesting to find that the Occupy movement has turned to the Bible as a source of inspiration, setting up a [Rolling Jubilee](#). Many in Occupy have an understanding of community and sharing that we can learn from as people of faith.

Religion can be a tool for oppression or a force for good. As we greet 2013, I hope that we can all work for a more compassionate faith.