

Obama's God is loving. Is this God just?

By [Kathryn Gin Lum](#)

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At the National Prayer Breakfast on February 5, President Obama [urged humility](#) about “a sinful tendency that can pervert and distort our faith” to the point where we commit atrocities, like slavery and Jim Crow, in the name of Christ. Critics quickly [denounced](#) Obama's comments as un-American, while supporters [defended](#) their accuracy. But few have asked why Obama did not also link Christian conviction to the campaign *against* slavery and racial injustice.

His theology is telling. Obama urged humility not just about our past but also before a loving but inscrutable God. Don't be “so confident that you are right..., that somehow we alone are in possession of the truth,” he said. He put Western Christian violence alongside ISIS's brutalities not to condemn but to drive home his theological point: Who am I (who are we) to judge?

Abolitionists had no such qualms about condemnation. They were so confident they were right that they damned slavery as a terrible sin deserving of terrible punishment. While appeals to a loving God also informed Christian opposition to racial injustice, threats about eternal hell carried more shock value. William Lloyd Garrison called his detractors “children of the devil who could not escape the damnation of hell.” His famous denunciation of the Constitution as a “covenant with death and an agreement with hell” outraged his contemporaries more than Obama's comparatively mild comments have done today. Hell was very real to most Americans at the time and telling someone they were going there could be a serious insult. Newspapers across the nation called Garrison a “black-hearted traitor.” But he struck a nerve, which is exactly what he wanted.

The prospect of ultimate justice remained vital in the Jim Crow era, when public lynchings passed for human justice. “There is a just God in Heaven,” Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church thundered, “who, despite the machinations of the wicked, never fails to vindicate the cause of Justice.” The prospect that everyone would face a higher tribunal than the nation's highest courts could be deeply satisfying, especially when earthly courts were sanctioning

segregation and violence. To believe this wasn't to just sit around and wait for final judgment: it was to vehemently urge others to reform themselves and their world—or else.

Hell-talk has largely fallen out of favor in the pluralistic public sphere today. Though [a majority](#) of Americans still believe in hell, many find it somewhat embarrassing. In his controversial book *Love Wins*, former megachurch minister Rob Bell promised that “When your God is love, then you are free from . . . the terrifying, haunting, ominous voice that whispers over your shoulder, ‘You’re not doing enough.’ The voice that insists God is, in the end, a slave driver.” How ironic that a concept once used to condemn slavery here becomes so atrocious that to believe in it is to enslave oneself to a slave-driving God.

Obama also invoked a God of love in his prayer breakfast remarks. “We see through a glass, darkly,” he said, “grappling with the expanse of his awesome love.” But an angry God of radical justice may be resurging among those less in need of political tightrope-walking. Though Ferguson has faded before ISIS in the news, the fires of racial injustice still rage. In a context sometimes [compared to post-slavery lynching](#), perhaps it isn't surprising that some feel a message of love isn't enough.

One need not think of hell as a literal burning pit to call on the moral urgency it evokes. “Make no mistake, our God is a God of justice,” [wrote](#) Christena Cleveland, associate professor of reconciliation studies at Bethel University. “The young black men who launch Molotov cocktails at the police are misappropriating God's justice . . . , but the **rage** they feel is the **rage** that God feels towards injustice.” And when a grand jury failed to issue an indictment in Eric Garner's death, Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, [warned](#) that “the sword of justice is to be wielded against evildoers. . . . We have to acknowledge that something is wrong with the system at this point and that something has to be done.”

Interestingly, Moore also [weighed in](#) on the prayer breakfast, saying that Obama made “an unfortunate attempt at a wrongheaded moral comparison.” Might Obama's comments have been better received had he acknowledged the Christian impact on the abolition of slavery? Perhaps. But to do so fairly would have required more talk of God's justice alongside God's love.

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