

Who watches the watchmen?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I began hearing the question in seminary. It became louder as I started writing. “Who will be the next Reinhold Niebuhr?” In 1948, Niebuhr was on the cover of *Time Magazine*. He commented on politics, and since his death in 1971, his voice has been missing from popular discourse.

In 2014, Barbara Brown Taylor was on the [cover of Time](#), but we’re still asking the question as if Taylor’s appearance never happened. Or as if [William Barber never rocked the DNC](#). I guess because it’s part of a larger query, “How did Christian intellectuals lose their voice?” There are many (interrelated) theories:

- The media ignored Christian intellectuals as their attention became distracted by the clanging cymbal of Pat Robertson and James Dobson. Our 24-hour media cycle is driven by sex and anger. So pure outrage will garner more clicks than a wholesome dose of BBT goodness.
- Christian intellectuals won the culture war, so their voice isn’t needed as much. If Christian intellectuals are saying the same thing as intellectuals, why would they need a spotlight?
- Christian intellectuals are boring. They don’t make the news, because there’s nothing to cover.
- Christian intellectuals have become so entrenched, they become flummoxed when talking to anyone outside the American Academy of Religion's hotel ballroom gathering.

The latest person to ask how Christian intellectuals lost their seat at the discourse table is Alan Jacobs in *Harpers*, in an article entitled [“The Watchmen.”](#) Jacobs didn’t rehash the same reasons. In fact, I was stunned at his answer. It takes a good long while to get there, so I’ll go ahead and deliver the punchline. Jacobs answered the question through the embodiment of Richard John Neuhaus’s career, who was

supposed to be the next Niebuhr:

...things changed for Neuhaus. He did not cease to think that racism was a massive wound at the heart of American life, nor did he cease to believe that the Vietnam War was utterly misbegotten; but he did come to believe that the liberal establishment was neglecting an equally serious moral issue: abortion. For Neuhaus, it was obvious that the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 was disastrous from the perspective of Christian ethics, and he seems for a time to have expected his fellow antiwar and antiracism Christians to join him in denouncing the verdict. In this expectation he was mistaken, for American culture had divided along fault lines that he had not fully grasped. Those who opposed the war and supported King came also, by and large, to support the sexual revolution, which included among its many aspects support for abortion...

When a few people on Twitter said that Jacobs was nostalgic and white male centric, Jacobs refuted the claim, because he pointed to Cornell West and Marilyn Robinson as today's voices. Many other scholars came to his rescue, defending him. In fact, there was a notable pile-on of subtweets by the men of letters. And even though this election cycle has made tweet sniping newsworthy, I can't post them, because Jacobs deleted the tweets and invited people to blog or email him instead. Since there was confusion for the scholarly gentlemen, I'm taking Jacobs up on his invitation.

This is why his words came across with such dissonance for people like me. When I read that paragraph, I hear, "We were doing great, until women and LGBTQs had to screw it all up by demanding their rights."

Why? For hetero-men, the sexual revolution meant "free love." The number of women they had sex with before they got married went up. Woohoo.

For the rest of us, the sexual revolution meant access to affordable birth control. It meant (eventually) not having to hide a same sex relationship and gaining access to all the rights of marriage equality. It meant that a woman could keep her job if she was pregnant. We could begin to think of our bodies and our lives as capable of something beyond our reproductive abilities. We could have careers--serious careers, where we could go to school, use our minds, climb the corporate ladder, or even become pastors.

While Jacobs believes that Christian intellectuals lost their seat because their voice became fractured behind Neuhaus's pro-life views, I think they **didn't listen to women and LGBTQs enough**. The religious voice did reflect Neuhaus, but that stance was so vicious and violent, that attacks and murders against women's health clinics and gay men became commonplace news.

Because the loudest components didn't listen to women, our religious response looked a lot [like this](#): an all male panel, opposing birth control, under the guise of religious freedom. Christians make grave mistakes when they do not appreciate the complexity of those whose lives would be affected the most by the restriction of their rights. One in five women has been a victim of rape or attempted rape. Girls are forced to have sex with their stepfathers or stepbrothers. Pregnant women have to face life and death choices. Women get pregnant and find out that the father is an abuser. Women who get pregnant in poverty can trap themselves and their children into generations of poverty. These are not fairytale situations that happen to a teeny tiny portion of women in our country. Almost every woman I know has been in one of these situations. About one-third of all women have had an abortion. I know the stat has been questioned, but please let that sink in for a moment. These choices are excruciating, and anyone who sits and listens to women's stories knows how complex they are. These decisions should not be made by ideological men who have not listened to the women whose lives are affected or doctors who do not agree with them.

Among Christians who had a voice, there was little compassion, little room for complexity or struggle. There was no room for stories. There was name-calling and shaming, while simultaneously cutting the safety net for poor women and children to shreds.

So when people blame the lack of Christian intellectuals on the sexual revolution, I have to agree with the claims of nostalgia. I don't long for the days when women didn't have access to birth control. I'm not ready to pass out any scarlet letters. I hate that same-sex couples were harassed and beaten. And if that means Christian intellectuals lost their seat at the table, then so be it.