

Who Is Your King? Who Is Your God?

A Meditation on the Eternal Contribution and Challenge to Christianity and to Humanity



Made by The Servant of God The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The following address was delivered between five and six o'clock by Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy on April 4, 1993 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated there at 6:02 P.M., twenty-five years earlier on April 4, 1968. The Lorraine Motel is now the National Civil Rights Museum.

Shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., commented, "While the question, 'Who killed President Kennedy?' is important, the question, 'What killed him?' is more important" Today on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, I think it is important to publicly ask the question, "Who killed Martin Luther King?" because a correct answer to that question may tell something about the workings of this society that could be useful for correcting the evils of poverty, racism and militarism that bedevil it. But, I believe, here at the place where he was slain twenty-five years ago today, it is more important to ask, "What killed Martin Luther King, Jr.?"

Humanity is a historical phenomenon. Every person and every generation are partly the result of the persons and generations who preceded them. Whatever killed Martin Luther King did not first make its appearance on April 4, 1968. Whatever it is that sent that bullet speeding toward this balcony twenty-five years ago has a past that stretches back to the infancy of time. Soon after the first rays of the first sunrise appear over the horizon of history, there is

homicide. In Book One of the Bible Cain kills Abel. Homicide is the first sin outside of Paradise. In the beginning there is death by the hand of another.

Whatever killed Abel, killed Martin Luther King, Jr. Whatever killed Martin Luther King, Jr., killed Jesus Christ. And, whatever killed Jesus Christ, is what killed every person who has ever been shot, stabbed, poisoned, gassed, or burnt to death by a fellow human being. From what demented dimension of the universe, from what polluted place in the soul comes the willingness to destroy another?

The man who was murdered on this balcony twenty-five years ago unreservedly committed his entire adult life to the war against the loathsome spirit of violence. Whatever that perverted reality is that deceived Cain, against that debased spirit Martin Luther King, Jr., was pitted in unrelenting combat. There is no Martin Luther King, Jr., to be remembered, there is no Martin Luther King, Jr., to be studied, there is no Martin Luther King, Jr., to be honored who is not irrevocably vowed to nonviolence.

Dr. King taught that

We must pursue peaceful ends by peaceful means...Many people cry, 'Peace, Peace' but they refuse to do the things that make for peace...The stage of history is replete with the chants and choruses of the conquerors of old who came killing in pursuit of peace.

A world mired in so-called “justified” homicide does not know what to do with the nonviolent Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., no more than Christian churches, imprisoned within a historical spiral of “justified” homicide of their own making, know what to do with the nonviolent Jesus Christ. The prevailing strategy in both cases is to be calculatingly inattentive to the rock-like belief both had in nonviolence. The hope of this strategy is to extoll the person while dismissing his teaching. The problem with this approach is that a violent Jesus or a violent Martin Luther King, Jr., is as much of a spiritual optical illusion as a nonviolent Hitler. Nonviolence is that without which there is no Martin Luther King—there is no Jesus Christ. What entered and took control of Cain never entered and took control of Jesus of Nazareth or of Martin Luther King, Jr.

When we honor a person we automatically honor that to which the person devoted a life. The only Martin Luther King, Jr., is the man who said and lived:

We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, we will still love you. We cannot in conscience obey your unjust laws. Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good.

To separate Martin Luther King from this central piece of his theology is like separating Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. It is to fictionalize him. Human integrity and ordinary decency require that what a person gives his or her life for be united with that life whenever it is called to mind. Dr. King always gave voice to his great truth without equivocation:

I'm committed to nonviolence absolutely. I am just not going to kill anybody, whether it's in Vietnam

or here...If nonviolent protest fails this summer, I will continue to preach and teach it...I plan to stand by nonviolence...(because) only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead toward community where people live together without fear.

In no way was Martin Luther King, because he espoused nonviolence, trying to avoid the risk of suffering. In fact, perhaps, no one can fathom the agony that he endured during those thirteen years from Montgomery to Memphis, for who could possibly know what it must have been like to live twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year with a loaded gun at one's head and at the heads of one's family—and to live that way in public and without recourse to the protection of armed body guards. What Martin Luther King called the “ugly voice” on the telephone and countless death-threat letters were the torture chamber in which he had to daily choose nonviolence. There was no attempt in his nonviolence to escape the risk of suffering.

He accepted this risk because he understood

both violence and nonviolence agree that suffering can be a very powerful social force. But there is a difference. Violence says suffering can be a powerful social force by inflicting it on somebody else, so this is what we do in war...The nonviolent say that suffering becomes a powerful social force when you willingly accept the violence on yourself, so that self-suffering stands at the center of the non-violent movement...There is no easy way to create a world where people can live together...but if such a world is created...it will be accomplished by persons who have the language to put an end to suffering by willingly suffering themselves rather than inflict suffering on others...Unearned suffering is redemptive.

For Martin King, nonviolence, and the vulnerability to suffering it entailed, was not just an external political strategy. It was a moral imperative based on his understanding of human nature, the needs of humanity and the truth of God.

As an axial moral requirement of existence, nonviolence reached into every area of human life. “Those who adhere to or follow the philosophy (of nonvio-

lence)” he asserted, “must follow a consistent principle of non-injury. They must consistently refuse to inflict injury upon another.” This strenuous and ceaseless effort to forgive rather than retaliate, to refuse to return hurt for hurt, to try to overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth was not made, however, merely to be personally righteous before God. Martin King was a man for others and he believed nonviolence was the only way to free people from the iron grip of that depraved spirit that has made history a bloody butchers block. He was convinced that

Humanity is waiting for something other than blind imitation of the past...If we want truly to advance a step further, if we want to turn over a new leaf and really set a new man afoot, we must begin to turn humanity away from the long and desolate night of violence. May it not be that the new person that the world needs is the nonviolent person...A dark, desperate, sin-sick world waits for this new kind of person, this new kind of power.

Unlike the powerless, effete caricatures of nonviolence that are portrayed so often in various media, the nonviolence of Martin King was a nonviolence infused with energy and effectiveness. For him it was self-evident that there was only one reality and therefore what was morally correct could not ultimately be impractical. Dr. King realized with the clarity of the Hebrew prophets that nothing was more powerful or pragmatic than following the will of God, which meant following the way of nonviolent love of friends and enemies. He preached:

We have power, a power that cannot be found in bullets and guns, but we have power. It is a power as old as the insight of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi... The Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence is one of the most potent weapons available...Evil may so shape events that Caesar may occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C. so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name...God is more fundamental than sin or evil. Good Friday must give way to Easter Sunday.

However, it was not without opposition that Martin King stood firm in his commitment to nonviolence. As time passed an unusual crisis occurred: white people and black people, prestigious people and media people, began attacking him, even demeaning him, because he was nonviolent! This happened not only in the context of the Civil Rights Movement but also within the larger society when on April 4, 1967, one year to the day before he was to be murdered in Memphis, he delivered at the Riverside Church in New York City what many consider to be one of the strongest and most cogent denunciations ever made of the Vietnam War. But through it all, Martin Luther King, Jr., never wavered in his adherence to nonviolence. When volley after volley of protest against his position battered him from every direction, he responded:

In recent months several people have said to me: Since violence is the new cry, isn't there a danger you will lose touch with the people and be out of step with the times if you don't change your views on nonviolence? My answer is always the same... Occasionally in life one develops a conviction so precious and meaningful that he will stand on it till the end. That is what I have found in nonviolence." "I have decided I am going to do battle for my philosophy. You ought to believe something in life, believe that thing so fervently that you will stand up with it until the end of your days. I can't believe that God wants us to hate. I am tired of violence." "What kind of nation is it that applauds nonviolence whenever Negroes face white people in the streets of the United States but applauds violence and burning and death when these same Negroes are sent to the fields of Vietnam?"

What Martin King is here communicating, as strange as it sounds to the modern ear, as hostile as it appears to contemporary standards of morality, is nothing other than the undistorted echo of original Christianity. Today the ancient Christian truth of nonviolence sounds impossible, threatening or even evil to the average Christian conscience. Today, most Christian pastors, unlike the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., would prefer to speak on almost any subject rather than confront their congregations with the truth of Jesus' nonviolence. Their avoidance tactics in this area are legion. Yet, the Christian pastor

should be the very one who discerns and champions Gospel truth before others see it or even desire to see it. As Martin King declared in his magnificent anti-Vietnam War speech, “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” But, he was well aware that “the calling to speak is, often a vocation of agony.” One can only conjecture in sorrow what the texture and contour of humanity would be like in our time, if for the last 1,700 years in response to an ever-expanding edifice of justifications for “Christian” homicide, pastors had accepted their “vocation of agony” and spoken as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke, as the original apostles and pastors spoke about violence.

It is a telling fact of history that, while Dr. King declared, “eternal opposition to poverty, racism and militarism” when the roll is called of religious leaders of yesteryear, one will not find many with such a commitment. When one then turns and focuses on the modern era and sees that by the year 2,000 one-third of the minorities in the United States will be unemployable, when one sees tens of millions of black and white people wasting away in carcinogenically drenched ZIP codes of poverty amidst unprecedented affluence and when one sees a military budget that annually devours hundreds of billions of dollars of the best resources a society possesses, one then knows with moral certainty, that on the whole, those who claim contemporary spiritual authority have not, like Dr. King, embraced their “vocation of agony” and vowed “eternal opposition to poverty, racism and militarism.” At this point, one can only recall the soul-chilling words of Martin Luther King, Jr., during the terrible days of the Birmingham campaign:

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking, ‘What kind of people worship here?’ ‘Who is their God?’

Now, it is precisely here, I believe, that Martin Luther King, Jr., has made his greatest contribution to humanity. While he is normally and properly remembered for his colossal role in ending the evil of segregation in the United States, I believe his pre-

eminent contribution to history will be seen to be that he publicly clarified the authentic nature of the Deity for a humanity given over to the blasphemy of identifying the ghoulish god of homicide with the one true God.

God is the heart of the matter no matter what the matter is. If our notion of “what kind of God God is” is wrong, then our ideas on what God expects of us will be wrong. If our understanding of the nature of God is erroneous, then our understanding of the purpose for which we have been given existence will be erroneous.

The God of Martin Luther King, Jr., is the same God as the God who is proclaimed by Jesus Christ and He is a God who rejects what a large part of Christianity and what a large part of many of the other religions of the world teach as acceptable human behavior. When reflecting on what was the nature of the Ultimate Good, Dr. King said: “What is the *summum bonum* of life? I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, ‘God is love.’ He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.” But, for Martin King the New Testament teaching that the Eternal God is Love, Jesus’ teaching that the Almighty God is Abba, carries immediate and imperative obligations toward one’s fellow human beings. It means, he insisted, that

there is no graded scale of essential worth (among people); there is no divine right of one race that differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his or her personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. Every person must be respected because God loves him or her. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God. An individual has value because he or she has value to God.

It was this consciousness that “God is love,” “Father of all,” that produced that two-edged sword of a question to the pastors of Birmingham: “What kind of people worship here?” “Who is their God?” From the Gospel it was obvious to Rev. Martin Luther King that “we love people not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves them.” “Christian” rac-

ism, militarism and systematically-maintained poverty were therefore choices based on a contempt for Jesus and for the God who is love. They were theologies that tried to place the demonic under Divine patronage. They were contorted Christian stances that on the one hand worshiped the Father and Jesus and on the other hand refused to love those whom the Father and Jesus loved as the Father and Jesus taught they should be loved.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s questions, "What kind of people worship here?" "Who is their God?" did not die on April 4, 1968. Today they crisscross the Christian churches of this planet from Johannesburg to Manila, from Sarajevo to Belfast, from Moscow to Lviv, from Washington to San Salvador. And, his questions today do not stand in judgment only at the portals of Christian churches. In a country and in a world where the production and purchase of instruments of human destruction is the biggest business going, in a country and in a world that has by commercial mass media saturated the psyches of people with violent and hostile images, memories and emotions, in a country and in a world choking on legal and illegal homicide all of which is endorsed by some religion or another, in such a country and in such a world Martin Luther King, Jr.'s questions are not only pertinent and pressing for the Christian churches but are also an acute spiritual challenge to the integrity of all religions that, in the name of God, justify for their constituencies participation in the fiendish spirit of homicide.

Ten days before his death, Dr. King addressed the Sixty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly. He was introduced by one of the great Rabbis and one of the most profound spiritual writers of the Twentieth Century—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his introduction Rabbi Heschel said:

Where does moral leadership in America come from today?...Where does God dwell in America today? Is He at home with those who are complacent, indifferent to other people's agony, devoid of mercy?...Where in America today do we have a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign God has not forsaken the United States of America. His mission is sacred. Martin Luther King is a voice, a vision and a way.

Rabbi Heschel knew well the Spirit and the Truth to which Martin Luther King was committed. He knew well that Martin Luther King, Jr., was "committed to nonviolence absolutely" and to a God who loves and values each and every person. But, Rabbi Heschel said to the Assembly of Rabbis, "I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow his way."

Today at the spot where twenty-five years ago this very hour Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, I echo Rabbi Heschel's words and I call upon every Christian pastor, every Christian, to harken to Martin Luther King's voice, to share Martin Luther King's vision, to follow Martin Luther King's way because his voice is the voice of Jesus, because his vision is the vision of Jesus and because his way is the way of Jesus—because his voice, vision and way are the voice, vision and way of God.

Pastors, Christians, must choose between the homicidal and violent spirit of Cain and the Holy and Nonviolent Spirit of Christ. Christians, pastors, must not continue the pretense that they can serve two masters. One must serve either the infernal spirit in Cain or the Divine Spirit in Christ. To choose one is to betray the other.

So on this Palm Sunday, April 4, 1993, when all over the world Christians again hear the reading from the Ninth chapter of the prophet Zechariah,

*Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion!
Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem!
Look, your king is approaching,
he is vindicated and victorious,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
He will banish chariots from Ephraim
and horses from Jerusalem;
the bow of war will be banished.
He will proclaim peace to the nations,
his kingdom will stretch from sea to sea,
from the River to the limits of the earth,*

on this Palm Sunday, I ask you, "Who is your king?" At this most solemn moment, only minutes before the time when, twenty-five years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed on this balcony, I ask you to

consciously decide: "Who is your God?" Today I invite you to give your strength to that Spirit to whom Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his strength. Today I invite you to give your life to that God to whom Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his life.