

Theocracy Alert

Remembering the humanism of Martin Luther King

By Jeff Nall

Online Journal Contributing Writer

July 16, 2005—Today it's fashionable to recall Martin Luther King Jr. as a civil rights hero and passionate reverend. But sadly, amidst his legacy the entirety of his intellectual prowess and vast philosophical wisdom often goes unrecognized. Particularly troubling, King has become a tool for a variety of causes wrongly associated with him, including the attack on the separation of church and state.

In 2003 George W. Bush said, "There's still a need for us to hear the words of Martin Luther King to make sure the hope of America extends its reach into every neighborhood across this land." But considering the president's efforts to combine God and government, it seems that Bush himself is ignorant of King's words and at least two of his salient ideas. King was a *proponent* of the separation of church and state and also one of religion's most ardent critics.

In a 1965 interview with *Playboy*, King was asked how he felt about the U.S. Supreme Court's decision ruling school prayer unconstitutional. In response he said:

I endorse it. I think it was correct. Contrary to what many have said, it sought to outlaw neither prayer nor belief in God. In a pluralistic society such as ours, who is to determine what prayer shall be spoken, and by whom? Legally, constitutionally, or otherwise, the state certainly has no such right. I am strongly opposed to the efforts that have been made to nullify the decision.

In another clear endorsement of church-state separation, King stated that the church "is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool."

Though King's legacy is often inextricably linked to his faith in God, he was hardly a cheerleader for the church as he found it and is best understood as a philosopher and social leader who happened to be passionately committed to Jesus Christ. For example, King believed the church had failed to fight for peace and social and economic justice. He also chided churches across the United States for having done little to fight segregation and racism. "It is to their everlasting shame," he said, "that white Christians developed a system of racial segregation within the church and inflicted so many indignities upon its Negro worshippers that they had to organize their own churches."

King also blamed organized religion for its willing support of violent resolutions:

In a world gone mad with arms buildups, chauvinistic passions, and imperialistic exploitation, the church has either endorsed these activities or remained appallingly silent. During the last two world wars, national churches even functioned as the ready lackeys of the state, sprinkling holy water upon the battleships and joining the mighty armies in singing, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition." A weary world, pleading desperately for peace, has often found the church morally sanctioning war.

By this we see that King didn't advocate that the Christian church take the reigns of government, as the Bush administration seems determined to do. He believed, rather, that "the contemporary church" is "often the arch-supporter of the status quo."

Moreover, King was hardly a proponent of contemporary dogma—the kind that insists on favoring creationism over evolution. King berated what he called *softmindedness*. "Softminded individuals," he said, "are prone to embrace all kinds of superstitions. . . . The soft-minded man always fears change." More specifically, King wrote:

Softmindedness often invades religion. This is why religion has sometimes rejected new truth with a dogmatic passion. Through edicts and bulls, inquisitions and excommunications, the church has attempted to prorogue truth and place an impenetrable stone wall in the path of the truth-seeker.

He goes on to criticize soft-minded persons for having "revised the Beatitudes to read, 'Blessed are the pure in ignorance: for they shall see God.'"

Defending the importance of science, King wrote, "Science keeps religion from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism." This appreciation of science, though hardly acknowledged by most, isn't surprising. In arguing against notions of black racial inferiority, he frequently cited current anthropological research that revealed what he called "the falsity of such a notion." And on more than one occasion, he even lauded "the philological-historical criticism of biblical literature," saying it "has been of immeasurable value and should be defended with religious and scientific passion." We don't hear much today about how King was positively influenced by such atheistic, existentialist philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche and John Paul Sartre. Yet King said, while "finding things to question in each, I nevertheless learned a great deal from study of them."

Yes, Martin Luther King Jr. was much more than just a reverend or just a civil rights champion; he was a learned philosopher who understood the importance of reason and balance in society. Unlike some of the Christian extremists who use his name for their cause and political gains, King valued the pluralism of American society, respected the U.S. Constitution. He never would have supported the corrupt motivation behind continual efforts to unite church and state—particularly the current attempt to pass the so called 'Religious Freedom' amendment, which, according to Americans United for Separation of Church and State, would "allow officially sanctioned prayer in public schools, display of religious symbols at public buildings and other governmental promotions of religion." King would have recognized such an effort as nothing more than a ruse to pour a particular brand of religion into every crevice of secular society.

Moreover, King would have seen the proposed 'Religious Freedom' amendment as yet holy subterfuge, aimed at blinding people from the real problems our society continues to face. There is no doubt that King was a devout Christian man, but unlike today's religious radicals, King understood that his duty was to first care for his fellow humans, his neighbors. As he put before a group of striking sanitation workers, in his last speech, the day before he was assassinated:

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis Tennessee.

Jeff Nall lives in central Florida. He has written for various publications, including the Humanist, Clamor, Online Journal, and Impact Press.

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