

How Religion Inspires Social Justice: Lessons from the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

Curtiss Paul DeYoung

November 2008, Guadeloupe

Three words represent the main points of what I want to say today: religion, reconciliation, and revolution.

The first word is religion. We live in a world where religion is often a source of violence and oppression. We cannot deny this reality. The stories are too numerous and the history is too long. The Rwandan genocide of the 1990s exposed a religion not only incapable of reconciling ethnic tensions in society, but also culpable in horrific violence. The terrorist attacks of the twenty-first century in the United States in 2001, in Great Britain in 2005, and elsewhere around the world remind us of religion's trysts with xenophobia and violence. I could spend all day recounting the ways religion has supported slavery, bigotry, anti-Semitism, oppression, occupation, ethnic cleansing, empire building, and the like. But I have not come to Guadeloupe to tell this story. I admit that it is a true story about religion. But it is not the story of true religion.

I have come to tell a story of authentic religion. This is a story of a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer who witnessed against the genocidal actions of the Nazi government in Germany. This is a story of a Hindu leader named Mohandas Gandhi who protested against the colonial rule of Great Britain in India. This is a story of a Catholic archbishop named Oscar Romero who challenged the oppressive government in El Salvador. This is a story of an Islamic Imam named Malcolm X who spoke for social justice in the United States and became a person of reconciliation after his pilgrimage to Mecca.

This is not just a story of men. Many women have also been at the forefront of the struggle for justice. This is a story of a Christian leader named Fannie Lou Hamer who protested side-by-side with Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. This is a story of a Catholic indigenous leader named Rigoberta Menchú who fought against prejudice and oppression in Guatemala. This is a story of a Buddhist-inspired Burmese leader named Aung San Suu Kyi who calls for democracy and freedom while under a house arrest imposed by the ruling military dictatorship in Myanmar.

These stories are about people who are intimately connected to the true center of their religious traditions. The terrible tales of violence and oppression represent a religion of rules without grace, of form without spirit, and of purity without compassion. All of the major historic religions, if practiced authentically, share a core commitment to justice, reconciliation, and peace.

We are focusing on the life story and legacy of a Christian pastor named Martin Luther King Jr. Even forty years after his death, Dr. King remains an exemplar of how religion inspires a life of activism for social justice. I begin the story of his religious faith late one night in the early days of the 1950s bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. A phone caller, using racial slurs, threatened to kill King and his family if he did not leave town in

three days. Unable to sleep, Dr. King went to his kitchen to drink some coffee. He prayed, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage."

In the midst of King's prayer he felt as if he could hear an inner voice speaking to him: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." He later said: "I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone ... Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared."

Three days later while at a religious service to encourage residents of Montgomery to continue the bus boycott, King was informed that his house had been bombed just as the caller had threatened three days earlier. He immediately went home to make sure that his family was not hurt. Then Dr. King stepped outside at the front of the house to face an angry crowd ready for revenge. He stated: "We must meet hate with love. ... I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop. ... For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us." The crowd dispersed peacefully into the night. Religion was the source of King's commitment to racial justice.

Martin Luther King's Christian faith provided personal encouragement in difficult times. But it was also something more. King declared, "Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial."

The second word is reconciliation. Martin Luther King Jr. was a person of reconciliation. His religion prompted him to reach out in relationship to all kinds of people. As a follower of Jesus, Martin Luther King knew that his religion told him that he was to be good news to people who were poor. He spent time with people who were facing injustice in society in order to learn what kind of good news they needed. Then King would embody the good news of his religion by marching against racial discrimination, going to prison for breaking unjust segregation laws, and living in Chicago slums in solidarity with poor blacks. He later expanded his reconciliation efforts to bridge the gap among all people in poverty in the United States. At the time of his death, King was building a multicultural coalition of poor people that included Native Americans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, whites, and blacks. Martin Luther King lived reconciliation.

Martin Luther King Jr. had empathy for and understanding of those at the margins because he had experienced racism himself. Not only had King's religion propelled him toward reconciliation, his first hand experience of injustice made him sensitive to the experiences of others who were marginalized. The question must be asked, Can whites in the United States, France, and Guadeloupe, who do not directly experience injustice, or elites in other contexts, gain this reconciliation perspective? King noted, "I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action."

Despite King's reservations, I think the answer to this question is yes. A powerful example of the transformation that can occur for elites and whites can be found in the life of one of King's contemporaries, Robert Kennedy. In June we observed the 40th anniversary of his death. He was assassinated while campaigning for the Democratic nomination for

president of the United States. Robert Kennedy was raised in wealth and privilege with little awareness of poverty and racism. As the attorney general in the government of his brother, President John Kennedy, he was assigned to interact with the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, Robert Kennedy invited noted social critic James Baldwin to assemble a group of African Americans to speak honestly to him about issues of race and poverty in the United States. A group that included sociologists, psychologists, activists, and artists met with Kennedy in New York City.

The meeting began with a polite exchange on the state of racism in the United States and Robert Kennedy's own comments about the positive role of the government in matters of civil rights. Then a young civil rights activist named Jerome Smith, who had been brutalized and arrested several times, exploded with rage. He began by saying that he wanted to vomit just being in the same room with Robert Kennedy who had done so little to support the freedom struggle of blacks. In graphic and horrific detail Smith told of the daily suffering he experienced as a black person in the 1960s. As he kept up his relentless verbal assault of Kennedy, the attorney general turned away from Smith and ignored him. This made the others in the room angry and they also began to speak bluntly of the psychic damage they had endured.

Psychologist Kenneth Clark described Robert Kennedy's reaction. "Bobby became silent and tense, and he sat immobile in the chair. ... and you could see the tension and the pressure building in him." Kennedy biographer Konstantin Sidorenko sums up the meeting: "It shook Robert Kennedy to the core of his beliefs. ... It was the most important lesson any American public official had ever received on the anger and frustrations underlying segregation, poverty and the entire black experience. ... Robert Kennedy stayed there until the meeting fizzled out three hours after it began. ... His reaction could have been that the entire issue was futile and a waste of time. Something very different happened. Bobby changed."

Six months later President John Kennedy was assassinated and Robert Kennedy experienced a deep personal grief at the death of his brother. In the midst of his own suffering he continued the journey he began with James Baldwin and others in New York City. Kennedy regularly listened to stories of pain told by African Americans in the rural South and in the urban North, Mexican migrant workers in California, poor whites in the Southern United States, and Native Americans on reservations. At the time of Robert Kennedy's assassination in June 1968 he had been transformed into a reconciler. He was the only public figure in the United States who could reconcile masses of people across the racial divide.

Learning to understand life from the perspective of those who are oppressed or suffering can be a painful process. Yet, unless we eliminate condescension and discard one dimensional perspectives we may never be effective in true social change. True religion pushed Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy to become ambassadors of reconciliation.

The third word is revolution. In October 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a large crowd in Paris. He had recently led the successful protest movement for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, and was beginning to work on issues of race and poverty in the city of Chicago in the Northern United States. He spoke in Paris on the topic, "The Church in a World in Revolution." King's visit followed a visit the prior year by Malcolm X who also spoke on the subject of revolution. At the time, King was developing an understanding of revolution influenced by his religious faith. Revolution needed an ethical dimension. Revolution must be based in values. Revolution influenced by religion does not contradict reconciliation.

The purpose of a revolution is to dismantle the present system and replace it with a new and different one. For King, the outcome of a revolution was a just society. He said, "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values." Martin Luther King Jr. called for a revolution of values. On another occasion he proclaimed, "I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

When King called for a revolution of values he implied that for the final outcome of the struggle to reflect justice and freedom the revolutionary process itself must be imbued with that same sense of integrity. The methods of the revolution have to match the integrity of the end sought. The means and the ends are interrelated. If the ends desired are justice, reconciliation, and peace, then the revolutionary action must represent these values.

Martin Luther King told the truth about racism, materialism, militarism, poverty, and injustice in the United States. He was a moral voice denouncing the evils in society. King called for a revolution of values. He wanted to see the systems change. But he was calling for something more than just a new and different government. He was challenging the very assumptions which guided society in the United States. He was asking that a new foundation for society be built on moral values that demonstrated justice, reconciliation, and peace.

When Martin Luther King was in Paris in 1965 he spoke about the oppressive regime in Rhodesia and the need for change. Revolution came and a new government took power and renamed the country Zimbabwe. If King were here today he would speak about the oppressive government presently in control in Zimbabwe and the need for a change. Zimbabwe is an example of a nation that did not have a revolution of values. The oppressive evil spirit of the old colonial order was not exorcized and has reappeared in the present administration. When we talk about revolution we must speak of change at the deepest of levels. We must call for a revolution of values.

In August 1963, Martin Luther King announced his vision of a new reality. He proclaimed: "I have a dream ... that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood. ... I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. ... I have a dream today!" The call for revolution must come with a vision of the new society.

Where do we go from here? That was the title of the book Martin Luther King wrote the year before he died. It is the right question for us today. I have tried to demonstrate how religion inspires social justice through examining some of the lessons found in the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. I have used three words to accentuate these lessons: religion, reconciliation, and revolution. Where do we go from here? With the election of Barack Obama, many in the United States are hoping for new conversations on race. Any revolution in the way we address racial reconciliation in the United States will require a sustained commitment to the process by individuals, groups, organizations, churches, and the government.

Although I am not resident of Guadeloupe or a citizen of France, I would encourage you to consider new conversations on race. Any revolution in the way Guadeloupeans address racial reconciliation will require a sustained commitment to the process by individuals, groups, organizations, churches, and the government. Such a dialogue in Guadeloupe could be very instructive for the rest of the world. Your conversation includes voices from many cultures and religions. Such a conversation in Guadeloupe could be revolutionary for all of us.

Curtiss Paul DeYoung