

A SLAVE RELIGION?

Martin Luther King, 2006

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By the Very Reverend Dan Edwards

Martin Luther King Sunday
is not a digression from spiritual concerns
into political correctness.

There is, in fact, no Sunday of the year,
that calls into sharper focus
the question of what our religion is about.

Our religion isn't something in the sky,
an abstraction to ponder as in interesting idea.
Our religion happens in real life, in human history.
Moses said, "(God's) command . . . is not in heaven . . .
Neither is it beyond the sea . . .
But the word is very near to you."

Our religion is here.
It is about our real life, with its politics and its history.

As Americans, especially as Southern Americans,
we have a deeply disturbing history to live with,
and a broken, fragmented society as the residue of that history.
Much of our tradition is about honor, faith,
humility, and humanity.

But there is also a deeply troubling strain running through our past.
We have slavery, Jim Crow, KKK terrorism,
and lynchings accompanied by unspeakable
atrocities of mayhem and torture.
As recently as the late 1980's,
African Americans were excluded
from Macon organizations on the explicit grounds of race.
Informal customs still keep the economy and the society
segregated and stratified.

The story of racism in America raises a question
for the Church.
Where is God in this story?

Ante-bellum white clergy
taught that slavery was a Christian duty.
White folks could save souls by enslaving Africans,
converting them to the true faith,
and keeping them converted by keeping them enslaved.
As late as the 1950's, I grew up hearing segregation
justified by the curse of one of Noah's sons.
In short, God was used as the excuse
for injustice and oppression.

If white Christianity was corrupted by racism,
Black Christianity wasn't all good either.
Critics of Black Christianity have called it a "slave religion,"
meaning it was used to pacify Black people,
to keep them passive in the face of oppression.
Slave religion says just be a good slave
and God will make it all good by and by.
Some Black people embraced the faith as a palliative

– not as an empowering hope.

But, Christianity worked another way for most African Americans. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks grew up singing the Negro National Anthem.

James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice And Sing,"
written at the dawn of the 20th Century,
proclaims a God who had been with Black people
in the midst of suffering, who had brought them
along a way of liberation,
and would keep them on the path to a better life.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died.
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed.

Black Christianity, especially in its musical expression,
sustained, empowered, and liberated.

African-American theologian, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan writes:

Spirituals provide the oppressed with a relationship with God
and their sanity amid a brutal, paradoxical . . . context . . .
Spirituals . . . (empower) and affirm African American personhood,
freedom, and God 'with us'
Spirituals signify that freedom is a God-given right.

Black Christianity held up God as a standard of justice and freedom, and a source of hope.

God identifies with the oppressed, not the oppressor.

Paul wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus

. . . who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."

Jesus took the form of the slave, not the form of the plantation master.

God became the God of Israel

by setting them free from Egyptian bondage.

When it came to division of rich and poor within Israel,

God spoke out for the poor.

Amos prophesied:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory

The prophets consistently said that God's voice
demanded justice and mercy for the people
who had been pushed to the edges of society.

The Blessed Virgin Mary praised God
for defending and vindicating the powerless.

(T)he Lord has cast down the mighty
from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

All is not right with the world.
There is injustice – sometimes subtle, sometimes horrendous.
And God is against it.
God upholds the cause of those who endure it,
challenge it, and overcome it.

Now if we are poor and powerless,
if we are the victims of injustice and its historic residue,
that's good news.
It's a message of hope and encouragement.

But what if we are part of the in-group?
What if we are the passive beneficiaries
of the system as it is?
Who is God for the in-group?

God is merciful, forgiving, and reconciling,
not a God of punishment and rejection.
But God does insist that we wake up to reality.
Jesus called the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of Truth,"
the Spirit to look life in the eye without blinking.
Theologian Jon Sobrino describes Christian spirituality
as a fundamental willingness to face what is real.
What is real, Sobrino says, is the unconscionable prevalence
of sorrow, injustice, and need.

When we see through our self-serving illusions
to recognize the real suffering of others,
the truth sets us free from the prison of self,
draws us outside ourselves to act
in life-giving, healing, justice-advancing ways.
When the Spirit raises us to "new life,"
that new life is a life lived for others.

Race remains the largest item of unfinished business on our agenda,

as American Christians.
As Christians in Macon, Georgia in 2006,
 we are called to overcome the racial division
 and stratification of our city.
We may be called to devote time or money
 to the restoration of Beal's Hill or Pleasant Hill,
 to the growth of the Harriet Tubman Museum,
 to volunteer in our public schools
 or serve as mentors to youth at risk.

We may be called to volunteer at Aunt Maggie's Kitchen Table
 or Appleton Youth Ministries.

I would not presume to prescribe what each of us
 is called to do in the struggle for justice and reconciliation.

But I will say unequivocally, that some contribution
 to this struggle is the moral duty
 of each and every one of us.

Amen.

