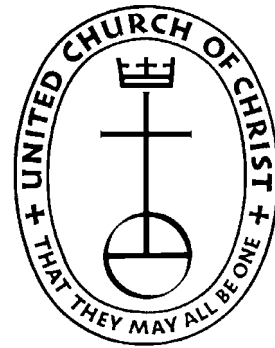


King's God – The Unknown Faith of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A Sermon By —
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Several important aspects of Dr. King's radical thinking have been buried by the stories told about him since his death: his theology was very progressive; he rejected violence, living by Gandhi-style non-violence; and he had great passion for the poor.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Often stories of admirable figures of history are changed to make those heroes more palatable to those who would claim the hero's legacy.

Most current progressive biblical scholars see Jesus as a itinerant Palestinian Jewish peasant sage who sought to reform the Judaism of his day. His teaching focused on the contrast between the values of the Empire of Rome and what he called the Empire of God. For him, people show their love of God by loving their neighbors. How we live out our lives was far more important to Jesus than affirming any sort of correct list of beliefs.

Jesus believed in and prayed to the God of Judaism. Soon after his death, a few small Jewish communities were organized in the "Jesus' Way," trying to incorporate his teachings into the practice of Judaism.

The Book of James near the end of the Christian scriptures is quite consistent with the teachings of the historical Jesus. Probably written by a Hellenistic Jew, it is a series of short sermons about how to live and how not to live.

Listen to the text from James that I have selected for today:

Act on this word – because if all you do is listen to it, you're deceiving yourselves. Those who listen to God's word but don't put it into practice are like those who look into mirrors at their own faces; they look at themselves, then go off and promptly forget what they looked like. But those who look steadily at the perfect law of freedom and make it their habit – not listening and then forgetting, but actively putting it into practice – will be blessed in all that they do.

That's good Jesus theology even though it comes quite a while after Jesus' death.

Four decades after Jesus' execution, Rome destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, and began scattering Jews throughout the empire.

And the movement in Jesus' name shifted to Greek or Gentile communities that rejected any connection with Judaism. The Book of James is an anomaly in that regard. Soon Jesus, the messenger of God's love, was transformed into Jesus the Christ, the message itself. Ultimately early Gentile churches elevated Jesus into God's divine son.

The historical Jesus prayed to God; the early churches began to pray to Jesus. I think they created stories of his miraculous birth, his nature-suspending miracles and his resurrection to alter his life story to match who he had become in their theology. And a new emphasis on belief and dogma replaced his focus on how we should live our lives.

Now in a similar fashion, I think American society today has transformed our collective memory of who Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was. We have done that in order to make his life and words more palatable within an affluent, militaristic American lifestyle.

Poet Carl Wendell Hines wrote of Dr. King:

Now that he is safely dead, let us praise him, build monuments to his glory; sing hosannas to his name. Dead people make such convenient heroes; they cannot rise to challenge the images we would fashion from their lives. It is easier to build monuments than make a better world.

Let me look today at three aspects of Dr. King's life rarely discussed because they make many uncomfortable. And I will replace male language in King's statements with inclusive language, something I am sure he would do if he were here today.

First, Dr. King's actions were rooted in a progressive theology that he said was intellectually respectful and emotionally satisfying. I think his *Letter From The Birmingham City Jail* in 1963 was his finest work. I paid 10¢ for my copy of the letter in pamphlet fashion in 1963. The letter is Dr. King's response to eight religious leaders who had criticized his activism. King was deeply wounded by their comments and wanted them to understand that his actions grew out of his theology.

But what was that "intellectually respectful and emotionally satisfying" theology?

"Be" Scofield is a young activist trying to combine spirituality, anti-racism and social justice. He is not a respected scholar. He is a ministerial student at the Unitarian Universalist theological school in Berkeley. He recently wrote a fascinating article in *Tikkun*, a journal of Jewish social justice in which he pulled together a picture of King's theology coming primarily out of papers Dr. King wrote while he was himself a student preparing for ministry. And what he discovered really surprised me.

Despite coming from a family of orthodox Baptist ministers, King, in Scofield's words, "at a young age demonstrated skepticism about irrational claims of religion, and embarrassment at the emotionalism of his father's preaching." At age 13, in a Sunday School class, young Martin declared he did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Je-

sus. From then on, King said, “doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly.”

King’s religious skepticism continued when he enrolled at Morehouse College at age fifteen. He wanted to be a doctor or lawyer, definitely not a minister like his father. But under the guidance of Morehouse’s insightful president, Benjamin Mays, he began to see that religion could be both “intellectually respectful and emotionally satisfying.” He started reading the Bible metaphorically rather than literally.

Scofield says, “While the ‘shackles of fundamentalism’ broke off during the years at Morehouse, it was at Crozer Theological Seminary, a liberal American Baptist School, that King discovered the insights and potential of liberal theology.” He graduated first in his class and delivered the commencement address. He then went on to Boston University where he received a Ph.D. in systematic theology.

Scofield claims King’s understanding of God, Jesus and the Bible was fairly well laid out during those three years at Crozer Seminary between 1948-1951. It is the papers he wrote for those seminary classes that give us a glimpse into his thinking.

How did he see Jesus?

In “The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus,” a paper written for a class called “Christian Theology Today,” King wrote: “The orthodox attempt to explain the divinity of Jesus ... seems quite inadequate. To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are bid to follow, is divine in an ontological sense is actually harmful and detrimental. The significance of the divinity of Christ lies in the fact that his achievement is prophetic and promissory for every other true child of humanity who is willing to submit to the will and spirit of God. Christ was to be only the prototype of one among many brothers and sisters. This divine quality or this unity with God was not something thrust upon Jesus from above, but was a definite achievement through the process of moral struggle and self-abnegation.”

King saw Jesus as a human figure who because of the way he lived became a model of how each of us can share in that which is divine.

How did he see the Bible?

Quite simply, he believed it was written in a pre-scientific world and used language representative of its era. He flatly rejected a literal interpretation of biblical stories.

In a paper discussing the creation of orthodox beliefs, he wrote about the virgin birth story: “We of this scientific age will not explain the birth of Jesus in such unscien-

tific terms.”

He didn't believe the resurrection was an actual event and he really disliked the notion of a Second Coming. In another paper, "The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope," he wrote, "It is obvious that most twentieth century Christians must frankly and flatly reject any view of a physical return of Christ." What were early Christians trying to convey in predicting the return of Jesus? King says, "Actually we are celebrating the Second Advent every time we open our hearts to Jesus, every time we turn our backs to the low road and accept the high road ... The final doctrine of the second coming is that whenever we turn our lives to the highest and best there for us is the Christ."

Thus, a continual return of Jesus.

Dr. King rejected any notion of a Day of Judgment, and in one of his papers he wrote, "I know nothing about heaven and personally I don't believe in hell." King associated the kingdom or empire or realm of God with the eternal love of God on earth, writing, "When we see social relationships controlled by the principles which Jesus illustrated in life – trust, love, mercy, and altruism – then we shall know that the kingdom of God is here."

For King, readers who accept the Bible literally are faced with impossibilities and deep contradictions, but those who read it as myth encounter "many profound truths which one cannot escape." He said, "The Bible is filled with humanity's deepest devotional thoughts and aspirations."

For Dr. King, the value of biblical stories is not diminished by their mythological nature. Rather, the myth serves to take the reader beyond the idea or thought within the mind.

Now what about other religions?

King wrote in 1948, that "to discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing." King viewed God as an experience not limited to any religion or restricted by any creed, stating, "Of course the true seeker will realize that there is no one way to find God."

What was the purpose of the church for King?

It was not to create dogma but rather "to produce living witnesses and testimonies to the power of God in human experience." Remember that passage from James. King viewed the church's role as promoting a way of life rather than a belief system,

saying, "Jesus always recognized that there is a danger of having a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds." He stated that Christ is more concerned with how we treat our neighbors, our attitudes toward racial justice, and living a high ethical life than with long processions, knowledge of creeds or the beautiful architecture of a church.

How did he see God?

Well, unlike my notion of God as a spirit or force, King held on to a personal God and wrote a paper in seminary about why he disagreed with Paul Tillich's view of God as the Ground of All Being. King saw God as synonymous with justice and believed God was there with him during the civil rights movement.

King's theology was incredibly liberal for the 1940s and 1950s. Does this surprise you? I've certainly never heard anything like this.

Did his views on the Christian doctrines change later in his life?

Dr. Clayborne Carson, director of Stanford's King Papers Project, told Scofield he saw no evidence of a later shift in King's thinking. But he did say King found creative ways to avoid expressing unorthodox views while serving a Baptist congregation.

It should not be surprising then that while Dr. King was in graduate school in Boston, he and Coretta attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation. In fact, Coretta Scott had been attending Unitarian churches for years before she met and married Martin. Scofield says, "He ultimately faced the reality that he would probably not be able to play a role in the civil rights movement in that tradition and thus he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church."

Scofield said, "King was able to express a vision of Christianity that was both meaningful and welcoming of others. His theology was inclusive, tolerant, renewing, and life-sustaining.

I think his theology was consistent with the liberal theology that has been preached in this congregation since 1888. And it was that liberal theology that compelled Dr. King to devote his life to the quest for equal rights for all people.

The second aspect of Dr. King's thinking about which we don't hear much today is his rejection of violence. He lived by Gandhi-style non-violence. He left no wiggle room. He didn't say violence is bad *unless* carried out in the death chambers of San Quentin. He didn't say violence is bad *unless* it is aimed at Al Qaida or the Taliban. King believed in turning the other cheek. I am convinced he would adamantly reject Presi-

dent Obama's "realistic" view of peace.

He said, "Violence is as wrong in Hanoi as it is in Harlem. I am mandated by this calling of Christian ministry to seek peace, and to do it even in the face of scorn."

Of war, Dr. King said: "It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence. It is either non-violence or non-existence. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. There is nothing to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war." Those are words from the real Dr. King, not a distorted legacy. When military units march with their guns in Martin Luther King parades that shows how much of his message we have conveniently forgotten.

And the third aspect of his radical thinking buried by a hero refit was King's passion for the poor. He wanted the world's resources shared among its people.

We rarely hear about the "Poor People's Campaign," King's plan to bring thousands of poor people to Washington, DC where they would camp until the country's elected officials acted on the urgent agenda of the poor. He envisioned that encampment expanding to other cities, forcing folks to deal with poverty. Sadly, he died before he could see this dream through to fruition.

King's words were often sharp: "A storm is rising against the privileged minority of the earth, from which there is no shelter in isolation or armament. The storm will not abate until a just distribution of the fruits of the earth enable people everywhere to live in dignity and human decency."

He said, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged, with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long, desolate corridor with no exit sign." What would King say about what the Long Beach hotels pay their workers? What would he say about the spineless politicians who are passing a health care reform bill that will do nothing to reform health care? What would he say about a President who talks about change but has done nothing to stop American complicity with the oppression and occupation of Palestine?

In the final year of his life, King often attacked American capitalism. He said, "We must recognize that we can't solve our problems until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power. Our economy must become person-centered rather than property- and profit-centered. The evils of capitalism are as real as the evils

of materialism and racism.”

In a previous sermon I quoted a young man from Washington, DC who said, “Several years ago, I was working as a bike courier on Martin Luther King Day. Several of us were discussing King’s life as we awaited our next delivery assignment. Mustapha, a courier who had just emigrated from Africa said, ‘King worked for the poor and people of color, right? So why are the poor and people of color the only ones working today?’ We looked around. No suit-wearing folk were visible anywhere. Most of the working poor experience Martin Luther King day as another day on the job.”

You will hear a lot this weekend about the “I Have a Dream” speech. But you won’t hear much about the radical progressive theology that was the impetus for King’s activism; you won’t hear much about his absolute demand for nonviolence; and you certainly won’t hear much about his critique of capitalism. Yet all of that was central to who he was and what he did. It was what made him a truly worthy Nobel Peace Prize winner. All of that is why he was constantly criticized and scorned. And all of that is a result of his attempt to be faithful to the legacy he inherited from Jesus, the radical voice of an Empire of God.

It is the real Dr. King who is one of my heroes.