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# Religion in American Politics and the Civil Rights Movement as a Unifying Element

*I mentioned to a friend at the Library at the US Embassy that I would be writing an article on religion and democracy as sources for unity or confrontation, and that I would focus on the unifying aspects of religion in the civil rights movement of the 1960's.*

*My friend's immediate response was something like: "Oh, so you are going to be talking about Louis FARRAKHAN and the Nation of Islam."*

*His response made me smile, because he captured in a single sentence a terribly important truth about the matter of religion and democracy: from an American perspective, it really depends on how religion is being used and which religion we are talking about.*

## I. Two Leaders, Variant Visions

Martin Luther KING, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Louis FARRAKHAN, a student of Elijah MOHAMMED (1897–1975) and member of the Black Muslim Nation of Islam, were two icons of the American civil rights movement of the 1960's.

One, Martin Luther KING, Jr. (1929–1968) sought for change in society and larger unity through religious appeal to a common dream and vision of justice for all people based upon shared values from the Declaration of Independence and Southern Black Gospel preaching and worship.

The other, Louis FARRAKHAN (1933–) sought black identity and empowerment through separation and the explicit rejection of the faith traditions of most Americans.

Martin Luther KING, Jr. characterized the separatist movement of the Nation of Islam:

"I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of *somebodiness* that they have adjusted to segregation, and, of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because at points they profit by segregation, have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses.

The other force is one of bitterness, and hatred comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up over the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah MUHAMMAD's Muslim movement.

This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable *devil*.

I have tried to stand between these two forces saying that we need not follow the *do-nothingism* of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest.

I am grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood.

And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as *rabble rousers* and *outside agitators* those of us who are working through the channels of nonviolent direct action and refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare."

## II. A Present Reality

Martin Luther KING, Jr. and Louise FARRAKHAN play out in microcosm the complexity of the situation between religion and democracy: are they sources of unity or confrontation?

The answer, of course, is *yes*, religion is a source of both both, de-

pending on the nature of the religion and the relationship, agendas and priorities embraced by the religious and political leaders involved.

Louis FARRAKHAN and the Nation of Islam raise topics of *identity politics*, where the goal of the confrontation is political power and identity by means of separation and division.

But Martin Luther KING, Jr. demonstrates that confrontation can also be used as a tactic and methodology to highlight an underlying problem with the goal of transformation, seeking a greater and larger unity. His use of religion in American politics in the civil rights movement of the 1960's was a unifying element in American democracy.

This is very relevant to the democratic political process in the United States of America, where religion and politics are officially and institutionally separated by law (the First Amendment of the US Constitution), but where they intersect much of the time in reality.

One has only to look at the current election cycle and the discussions and questions raised around Presidential Candidate Barack OBAMA and Reverend Jeremiah WRIGHT and his former congregation in Chicago to realize that religion and politics are deeply connected in democracy as practiced in the US.

The US is a deeply religious nation. Statistics from the Gallup Polls indicate that Americans have one of the largest individual participation rates in organized religion: for Christians at Church, for Jews at Synagogue, for Muslims at Mosque, of any country in the world.

According to polls, around 76–78% of Americans identify themselves as practicing Christians. According to more recent statistics, Americans are becoming more and more religiously diverse all of the time.

And of course, since September 11 in 2001 and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C., Americans have been forced to expand their understanding of both traditional forms of Islam and the extremists, who have used faith as a pretext for conducting war on Western democracy both in the United States, in Europe, in Bali and in the Middle East.

### III. A Unifying Force?

From an American perspective, religion and democracy can be both sources for unity or confrontation, depending on their use. Martin Luther KING, Jr. was a strong advocate for unity in democracy, but as a leader he did not embrace unity for unity's sake.

As he put it: "Ultimately a genuine leader is not a searcher for

consensus, but a moulder of consensus." (*Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution*, an address at the Episcopal National Cathedral, Washington D. C., 31 March 1968).

The names and the personalities of major religious leaders who were involved in the civil rights movement are *larger than life*: Martin Luther KING, Jr., Andrew Jackson YOUNG (1932–), Rosa Louise PARKS (1913–2005), President Lyndon Baines JOHNSON (1908–1973), Bill Donald MOYERS (1934–), and Elijah MOHAMMED, Malcolm X (1925–1965), and Louis FARRAKHAN and the Nation of Islam.

Of course, Martin Luther KING, Jr.'s methodology of non-violent resistance to unjust and discriminatory laws and practices resulted in many confrontations with civil authorities.

The resistance of state governors, law enforcement, and local political leaders in the South and the violence that Martin Luther KING, Jr. and his followers faced certainly reveals that there was a great deal of opposition.

### IV. Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther KING, Jr.'s justification for civil disobedience in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* April 16, 1963 was a response to complaints from white moderate religious leaders, who were concerned about his actions:

"You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws.

One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are *just* and there are *unjust* laws. I would agree with Saint AUGUSTINE that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.

To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas AQUINAS, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.

All segregation statutes are unjust, because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false

sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin BUBER, the Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an *I-it* relationship for an *I-thou* relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.

So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul TILLICH has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong."

## V. Dreaming Ahead

Martin Luther KING, Jr.'s intent, both from the Jail in Birmingham, but especially in the 1963 March on Washington D. C., was not simply confrontation as an end in itself or as a means to the end of further separation.

Its aim was rather to draw attention to the injustices of segregation and marginalization that were being practiced and enforced by law and to call for a larger agenda and a larger audience to form a consensus around the basic issues of equal rights under the law regardless of race or religion.

Consider the words that Martin Luther KING, Jr. spoke from the steps of the *Lincoln Memorial* about his dream:

"I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. 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 together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state, sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation, where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation, where little black

boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning: 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.'

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

## VI. Future Consensus?

One could argue that this was merely a rhetorical device at the climax of a sermon, but the last paragraph of Martin Luther KING, Jr.'s speech can also be seen as a very real attempt to reach out for a larger consensus across racial and religious divides from his own religious tradition.

Blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics were to join hands and sing a black spiritual. A consensus was in formation around the agenda of equality under the law, mutual respect and gratitude: gratitude to God for the gift of freedom.

One sad historical note, the Nation of Islam of Elijah MOHAMMED and Louis FARRAKHAN were not invited to participate in the March on Washington. There were definite practical limits to the dream of inclusion that Martin Luther KING, Jr. proclaimed so eloquently. His dream of freedom, equality under the law and mutual respect for individuals regardless of race or religion has not been fully realized since then.

The speech that he delivered at the March on Washington has since been characterized as one of the greatest in American history, on par with Abraham LINCOLN's *Gettysburg Address*. Martin Luther KING, Jr. is venerated as an enduring icon of the American civil rights movement, marked by the establishment of a national holiday on his birthday and especially with the recent discussion and current construction of the Martin Luther KING, Jr. memorial in the Mall in Washington D. C.

Thus it is clear that to a great extent Martin Luther KING, Jr. did form the larger consensus around his dream for freedom and equality for all people. And the tools that he used were both religious and civic. They drew on both Judaism and Christianity; they drew on the *Declaration of Independence* and Mahatma GHANDI's principles of non-violent confrontation to achieve transformation of society.

How successful we have been in following through on achieving the goals of this consensus remains to be seen. Presently, the very fact that a black person is a candidate for president of the United States of America, regardless whether he is actually elected or not, is a significant step towards the fulfilment of Martin Luther KING, Jr.'s dream.

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