



King, Faith, and Economic Justice

By David True

The national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. evokes not only memory of King but reflection on his continuing significance. In remembering King, we recall the courage and conviction he demonstrated in pursuing justice, including economic justice. It was King's passion for economic justice, after all, that led him to Memphis. In his visits to that city, he marched and spoke in support of the city's sanitation workers. These workers were struggling to win decent treatment from the city's notorious municipal government. King's solidarity with these workers symbolizes his priorities during the final period of his life. When the end came, King was struggling to organize a movement devoted to seeking economic justice. With the Poor People's Campaign, he hoped to attract media coverage to the economic injustices of our society. The campaign was designed to culminate in a massive demonstration in Washington that would pressure the federal government into redirecting its budgetary priorities from pursuing the Vietnam War to ending poverty.

King's legacy of faith and economic justice stands in sharp contrast to the dominant trends of our day. Economic justice seems to have fallen from our common language and political agenda. While there are rumblings of discontent about the economy, these rumblings are more about the lack of growth and prosperity than injustice. Ironically, these realities have occurred at a time of resurgent religious expression. On the King holiday, then, one cannot help but wonder about the significance of King's religious beliefs for strengthening people of different faiths for the common work of economic justice.

King, Faith, and Economic Justice *continued*

According to King, God is not a distant and remote god, unconcerned with the fate of human beings. Instead, God is actively and intimately involved in human existence. Indeed, God creates and shapes human existence. In creating human beings, God forms us for life in communion with one other. Our common or equal identity as personal or relational beings is part of God's ordering of human existence. This order is analogous to the natural world's predictable patterns of cause and effect, but this order is a moral ordering of social relations from their most intimate to their most complex. The moral order includes our own structure, but the order is also objective to us in the sense that we cannot control it. We operate within its bounds, both its possibilities and limits. To deny the "laws" of the moral order is to court God's judgment in the form of destructive consequences. To abide by them is to encourage God's blessing in the form of human flourishing.

The moral order includes a degree of freedom and contingency. This open-endedness distinguishes human events and history from those of the natural world. The moral order does not prevent oppression. Eventually and inevitably, however, the moral order defeats oppression. "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." King's belief in the moral order of reality, enabled him to claim that segregation's demise was inevitable, even as he refused to predict the timing of its demise.

King believed that God works not merely to defeat evil, but to liberate, transform, and reconcile the world from a place of alienation and oppression to a community of persons. In King's vision of God and God's goal of a community of persons, love and justice are closely related. This belief is evident in King's pursuit of an integrated society incorporating both forgiveness and justice. When critics challenged King's political efforts to use the coercive instruments of government, he responded that true religion and democratic government share the aim of justice.

King lamented that others were content to call for the maintenance of law and order. For King, the cries of the oppressed called not merely for law and order but for justice.

The justice of the integrated society calls for human beings to treat one another as free and equal persons. Such treatment entails both ending oppressive power and initiating genuine empowerment. Persons are to be liberated from oppressive power, but the goal of that liberation is not one of personal fulfillment per se, but of life in communion with others. The bondage of oppression is exchanged for the bonds of genuine community.

King's vision of God serves as a model of how faith can unite rather than divide. The integrated society is a religiously inspired moral vision. For King, that inspiration was primarily Christian, but nowhere did King claim that the integrated society was the exclusive propriety of that tradition. King's religious vision allows for people of diverse faiths to unite in pursuit of justice, including economic justice.

King's vision of God did not directly supply him with a list of labor demands and policy recommendations. These required attention to the details of the context, but King's vision of God supported and sustained the pursuit of the integrated society. In other words, King's vision of God provided an interpretative framework and perspective from which to make sense of the details of the context. King's vision of God and the closely related goal of an integrated society also served as sources of motivation. King's belief that he was working in harmony with the purposes of God sustained in him a sense of confidence and hope. The need for discernment also gave him a sense of humility. The integrated society provided a comprehensive vision of the good society. Such a religiously inspired moral vision offers people of faith and goodwill a much-needed common goal in which our separate struggles can be seen to be part of the same cloth.



Thoughts on Economic Justice from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Throughout his life, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. embraced a philosophy that sought to include every person. He was persistent in his vision of a country united under the banner of justice, love, and hope. For that vision, he found himself threatened with terrorist-style actions. During his sermon entitled “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool,” as quoted in the collection *A Knock at Midnight*, he spoke of being unable to sleep after receiving a late-night call threatening to bomb his Montgomery home. While contemplating whether to go on or give up, he bowed his head at his kitchen table that night, “[a]nd it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘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.’”

The justice, love, and hope the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about included a holistic view for the whole of the earth. He felt strongly that we should be concerned with those in other countries by sharing of our excess. He said:

We have our barns, and every day our rich nation is building new and larger and greater barns. You know, we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food. But I want to say to America, I know where you can store that food free of charge: in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God’s children in Asia and Africa and South America and in our own nation who go to bed hungry tonight.

Economic Justice

Dr. King’s holistic view included economic justice. While he continued to emphasize justice, love, and hope through non-violent protest, he began to focus more on justice by addressing economic inequality. After working for years through sit-ins, he found that the economic plight of African-Americans helped segregation to continue. That caused him to propose a “War on Poverty” that would seek to tackle the growing disparity in incomes amongst African-Americans and other ethnic groups.

It’s all right to talk about heaven. I talk about it because I believe firmly in immortality. But you’ve got to talk about the earth... It’s even all right to talk about the new Jerusalem. But one day we must begin to talk about the new Chicago, the new Atlanta, the new New York, the new America.



“Even though the President [Johnson] said today that we have never had it so good, we must honestly say that for many people in our country they’ve never had it so bad. Poverty is a glaring, notorious reality for some forty million Americans. I guess it wouldn’t be so bad for them if it were shared misery, but it is poverty amid plenty. It is poverty in the midst of an affluent society, and I think this is what makes for great frustration and great despair in the black community and the poor community of our nation generally.”

Dr. King grew anxious as resources for the war in Vietnam threatened the War on Poverty. As he saw increasing amounts of money spent on war and bombs and siphoned away from helping those in large cities, he said, “The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Viet Nam explode at home....”

The Current Picture

To be sure, great strides have been made. Overall poverty is down since the 1960s and improvements in health care quality have assured longevity to many people. However, poverty rates are rising for the first time in ten years. And access to that health care is not equal for all people. When we look at the figures, a bias becomes clear, African-Americans make up 22.7 percent of those in poverty, despite being only 11 percent of the population. Of the 39.4 million people in the U.S without health insurance, 16.4 percent are African-American and 30 percent are Latino.

What You Can Do to Keep Dr. King’s Legacy Alive

- Urge your Congressional Representative and Senators to increase the minimum wage. Go to www.iwj.org and click on “Raise the Minimum Wage” to send letters (or get drafts for ideas).
- Hold a worker rights training in your congregation or agency.
- Pray for low-wage workers and unemployed workers.

Sources

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