Opinion

NCR Voices



A banner for the National Council of Churches is seen among hundreds of signs carried by participants in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Aug. 28, 1963. The march speakers included several religious leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who was a Baptist minister, and Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington, who offered the invocation. (OSV News/Courtesy of Library of Congress)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 15, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In the intellectually sloppy age in which we live, slogans have great currency, especially when they are deployed as an invective. Few slogans have greater currency in this regard than denunciations of "Christian nationalism."

It is the bugbear of the zeitgeist, combining two forms of thought that are easily sneered at in our enlightened, pseudo-revolutionary age. It is deemed a "threat" by some columnists, while others extend the label to persons, such as House Speaker Mike Johnson, for whom the tag is only a partial fit at best.

Those to whom this epithet is typically applied represent a sliver of Christians who happen to possess lousy theology and a soft spot for fascistic politics. If former President Donald Trump reclaims the White House in November, their influence might be large as well as pernicious. That influence would derive more from their sycophancy than from their theology.

None of this absolves the rest of us Christians from thinking about the claims our faith makes on our politics, from crafting our own understanding of Christian nationalism.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, is difficult to understand except as an exponent of Christian nationalism. Take a moment to re-read his most famous speech, on the steps of the Washington Monument in 1963. The words are rich in biblical imagery and cadences, but those images and cadences are not harnessed to a religious objective. They are invoked to sketch a political self-understanding of the American nation.

> It was not the promise of the Gospel that King invoked that day, but the promise of democracy. Yet, that promise could only be achieved by a people who understood themselves as brothers and as 'God's children.'
>
> Tweet this

"Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy," King said. "Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

It was not the promise of the Gospel that King invoked that day, but the promise of democracy. Yet, that promise could only be achieved by a people who understood themselves as brothers and as "God's children."

And this, quoting the prophet Amos: "We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.' "

The language of the Bible was as American as apple pie, shared across racial lines, across age groups, and among most ethnic groups. Invoking the Hebrew Scriptures was not exclusivist. It was American.

"I still have a dream," King said, in the speech's most famous passage. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream." Each of the sentences that followed contain an understanding of America's promise that is rooted in the interplay of liberal and Biblical values:

> 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 the 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 color of their skin but by the content

of their character.

King's vision was a vision of brotherhood, justice and freedom. Each of those characteristics were, for him, rooted and understood equally as Christian and American. King grasped the theological consequences of the Incarnation, the need to inculturate faith, and that part of that inculturation meant informing our politics and our sense of national identity in the light of our faith.

Advertisement

King understood, too, that both the American creed and the Christian creed required a belief in the idea that race, ideology and culture could be transcended. Not obliterated, but transcended. This belief set him apart from so many religious, political and cultural leaders who have followed him. They follow the Herderian idea that cultures are incommensurable. King knew about Pentecost.

It would be good for the country if we returned to his more expansive, more humane and more hopeful dream. No matter how distant it seems, no matter how much we fail to achieve it, no matter how often we turn ourselves into frauds with our failures, we are better when we get up again, and set off again in pursuit of that dream of brotherhood, of justice and of freedom. We are better when we expect great things of our nation and turn to our faith to inspire and inform those expectations.

The charlatans who invoke a racially exclusive Christian nationalism capitalize on the alienation many experience in this postmodern, postindustrial culture that is yet so formless, we define it by what it has so recently moved past. They prostitute the Scriptures. They traffic in resentments and hatreds. They misunderstand both Christianity and the American nation.

It is not enough to denounce them. It is the obligation of every Christian who lives in America to reclaim Christian nationalism from them. There is no better place to start than by reading King's beautiful words.

King's vision was a vision of brotherhood, justice and freedom. Each of those characteristics were, for him, rooted and understood equally as Christian and American.

Tweet this

In 1963, the hope that our nation could overcome its racism was a far less tattered hope than it is today. The experience of the backlash against King's vision, from George Wallace to Pat Buchanan to Donald Trump, has led many to question whether or not America can live out "the true meaning of its creed."

The joy many of us felt on election night 2008 when Barack Obama won the presidency seems at times like it was a lifetime ago. The memory of Michael Brown and Breonna Taylor and George Floyd seem to mock King's dream.

Alongside our hope, then, we must now reckon with another Gospel virtue, humility.

It is a measure of the degree to which our Americanness outstrips our Christianity that all of us, liberals and conservatives, Catholics and Protestants, tend to forget that success is not a name of God. We put our shoulders to the plow in the sure expectation of a fruitful harvest.

King, of course, knew more of suffering than most of us. His commitment to justice did not involve any reduction of the Christian message to ethics. He knew salvation came from above not from below. King was close to the Lord who promised to remain close to the brokenhearted, who forgave his persecutors from the cross, who conquered sin and death in obedience to the will of his father. King transcended, even as he embodied, the best of Christian nationalism.

We need King's understanding of Christianity and his understanding of America, now more than ever. We need his hope and his determination. We still need his dream.