

# **All Heretics Day 2007:**

## **Martin Luther King Jr. and his Unitarian Connection**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, January 14, 2007**

**The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC**

### **Introduction**

Many years ago some young people in my congregation were grumbling that other children had religious holidays that got them out of school, and that it wasn't fair since they didn't have a special day. Remembering that a friend, the Rev. Michael McGee, had recently preached a sermon titled "All Heretics Day," I told them we could declare our own holiday, and that I would give them a letter to take to school when they took the day off. I declared the day to be the second Sunday in January. It didn't help our kids much—they could hardly take off Sunday from school—but at last they had their own religious holiday.

Many UU's consider themselves to be heretics to the predominant religious views in our nation. In celebration of All Heretics Day for the last 30 years, I have told the stories of those whose courage led to our freedom to enjoy our lives and express our beliefs in the way that we choose. Without their heresy, we would not have the freedom we have today. Some of the heretics I celebrate have been UU. Others, like Martin Luther King Jr., were not, but they too lived in ways that opened our world to more freedom and love.

### **Sermon**

It's been nearly 40 years since Martin Luther King Jr. lost his life as a martyr to white oppression, a heretic for human freedom. Few Unitarians know about his Unitarian connection. That association with us made him a heretic at first also to many black Christians.

Some African-American Christians, at the start of King's civil rights work, disapproved of his views that combined Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy with Christian theology. They felt he distorted their faith in doing that. His doctoral thesis compared a Unitarian philosopher's ideas with the teachings of a liberal Christian theologian. The Unitarian's ideas led King to adopt Gandhi's principles of non-violence as the motor-and-brakes of the 1960's Civil Rights movement.

None of us knew about King's studies when we joined him in 1965 in Selma, Alabama to protest the murder there of the UU minister, James Reeb. He had gone to Selma to support King in the voting rights movement. One night there a group of white men jumped Reeb. One swung a club that struck him in the head. Several hours later he died in an Alabama hospital. When word of the murder got out a third of all Unitarian Universalist ministers in North America (over 250 of us) and many clergy of other faiths too, went to Selma to show our solidarity with Reeb and King and the blacks of that city.

I remember my first night there. I climbed the stairs to the crowded balcony of Brown Memorial Chapel, a black Baptist church, and I stood through the long service. I was awed by King's sermon that laced Christian gospel with Gandhi's principles as a way to confront the oppression. He was a spellbinding speaker.

That morning we had followed King from the church to the steps of the county courthouse where he spoke on the rights of black people to register to vote themselves peaceably into a portion of the political power that was rightfully theirs. Almost all the people that morning bowed their heads in prayer as other clergy called on God to bring them deliverance. King didn't bow his head (nor did I)

but he looked straight out over the crowd. His eyes seemed to be searching the nooks and crannies of the square as if he knew danger might lurk there, hidden away from the common view.

Our protests went on for over a week. I was arrested when I answered King's call to carry the protest into a white neighborhood. We went in groups of four to simply walk where we knew the white leaders of Selma lived.

The local police grabbed us and sent us away in squad cars. Sitting in the back seat I heard the voice over the police radio say that we would be charged with being mentally ill in a public place. The trumped-up charges were dropped when no statutes could be found to back them up—but first they held us for hours at machine gun point in the blazing Alabama sun. New groups of arrestees kept joining us until we numbered over 350 blacks and whites, all arrested for the same crime of walking in small integrated groups in the white section of town.

When the flow of arrestees stopped the police marched us into a small African-American community center to use its two toilets. They left us there. Hours later they returned to announce that we could leave. We refused. Our leader told them they had brought us there and we expected them to take us back to where they had arrested us. The police went out but came back shortly to say we had to leave. Again we refused. They left and then returned a third time to say the Ku Klux Klan was outside and they wouldn't protect us unless we went at once with them. Again we refused. When they left that time no one came back, neither the police nor the Klan. If the Klan was there I doubt they would have attacked us. We were a large group and they wouldn't trust us to be non-violent.

The community center was too small for us all to lie down at the same time, so we took shifts all night long standing, sitting or lying close to one another to sleep. The next morning we formed an orderly column and walked with dignity in complete silence back through the white section of the town to the enclave where our African-American hosts lived and were waiting for us.

Martin had inspired us, transforming us overnight into a community of righteousness. He empowered us to conduct ourselves with peace, resolution and love in the face of danger. And he wasn't even with us in the Community Center.

It's difficult to think of Martin Luther King Jr. as a heretic but he was that to the whites whose world he intruded upon, and to some black Christians too. In his book Black Religion, The Negro and Christianity in the United States (Beacon Press, 1964) an African-American author, Joseph Washington accused King of being a "manipulative syncretist" for combining Gandhi's teachings with the traditional Christian faith. The two don't belong together, Washington said, though he admitted they had some common facets. "It is as though Socrates, Thoreau, Hegel and Jesus were all dumped together into one philosophical bowl like tossed salad," he said.

Like most black critics of King, Washington didn't dispute his greatness but he felt that King was distorting Christianity as he identified it with his own social views. "The Christian understands that he cannot interpret the teachings of Jesus as he wishes [but] must interpret them in the light of the cross and resurrection," he said. "The teachings of Jesus are not manipulative principles which can be taken out of the context of faith and used for whatever purposes are at hand."

Washington thought King was using Jesus' emphasis on love as a device to keep black Christians in line, while he taught Gandhi's non-violent politics. He knew King's goal was freedom with peace, not salvation alone. With quotations from Jesus like "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth:

I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34) Jesus has been used to direct people into violence as much as away from it. But not by Martin Luther King Jr.

King didn't come to his syncretism, the joining of diverse ideas into a coherent philosophy by chance. His doctoral thesis in 1955 at Boston University compared the views of two liberal thinkers, the Christian Paul Tillich and the Unitarian Henry Nelson Wieman. Though he rejected both in his thesis as too liberal he later used Wieman's methods to forge his own philosophy.

King chose Wieman because of his great stature in the philosophy of religion in the 1950's. In his dissertation he said "hardly a volume has appeared in the last twenty years in the fields of philosophy of religion and systematic theology which has not made some reference to Wieman's thought." ("A Comparison of the Conception of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman; unpublished dissertation, Boston University, 1955, p. 3).

Few UUs today even recognize Henry Nelson Wieman's name. Even fewer could state the two word formula that describes this great Unitarian theologian's philosophy of religion. Does that tell us something of a failing of our movement, that the overwhelming majority of UUs know nothing about our greatest Unitarian philosopher of religion of the 20th century, not even his name?

King took Wieman's central point seriously, that all intellectual and spiritual progress in the world comes through "Creative Interchange." (That's the two word formula that describes Wieman's philosophy.) Wieman meant by Creative Interchange the dialogue between different traditions and beliefs that brings about a synthesis of new possibilities when people take each other seriously. He called that a "Divine Event," one in which the process of God works in the world, producing unexpected, unpredictable good.

King practiced Creative Interchange when he bound Gandhi's methods to the Christian message. That made him a heretic, one who would use Christianity and whatever else is needed to bring peace, justice and freedom to the world. In celebrating King's heresy we celebrate also the power of Wieman's ideas.

In his use of Creative Interchange, King was a genuine liberal. At one point he said "liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I had never found in fundamentalism." (Hoskins, Lotte, ed., "I have A Dream, Quotations of Martin Luther King, Jr." New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1969, p. 69).

However King was tough on humanists too when he welcomed our support for his movement. He said "believing neither in God nor in the existence of any supernatural power the humanist affirms that Man is the highest form of being which has evolved in the natural universe. Give people a fair chance and a decent education and they will save themselves. This idea, sweeping across the modern world like a plague, has ushered God out and escorted Man in and has substituted human ingenuity for divine guidance.... [But] Man by his own power can never cast evil from the world. The humanist's hope is an illusion, based on too great an optimism concerning the inherent goodness of human nature." (Hoskins, pp 53-4)

At the same time that King said that, he criticized those who expect God to do everything. He said they end up "with a pessimism concerning human nature that leaves Man little more than a helpless worm crawling through the morass of an evil world." King had little respect for such fundamentalism. He said "if God does everything, Man then asks Him for anything, and God becomes little more than a 'cosmic bellhop' who is summoned for every trivial need. Or God is considered so omnipotent and Man so powerless that prayer is a substitute for work and intelligence."

Conventional black religion had other black critics. James H. Cone, an African-American theologian I knew in Florida said in his book "Black Theology and Black Power" (New York: Seabury Press, 1969) that "except in rare instances the black churches in the post-Civil War period have been no more Christian than their white counterparts."

He thought they emphasized the "almighty dollar" and worldly matters in their focus, and that the exception was the work of King and others in the non-violent civil rights movement. Cone was a black radical who believed that "Black Power is the only hope of the black church in America." Admitting that King never endorsed Black Power, Cone said never-the-less "its existence is a result of his work." He wrote his appraisal only a few months after King's assassination.

I had the privilege of standing beside Martin Luther King Jr. once, on the speaker's platform of the California Democratic Council in California a few weeks before his murder, as I gave the invocation before he spoke. He urged the Democrats there to continue their political struggle against the war in Vietnam.

I thought then, and I think now that Martin Luther King Jr. was the greatest American of our time. He represented the best that our culture has produced in the midst of our emphasis upon materialism and technological development. He set his own goals differently, for love, peace, justice and freedom and did as much to achieve them as anyone could. I wish he could have brought himself to openly endorse Henry Nelson Wieman's philosophy of Creative Interchange. He certainly used it and Gandhi's nonviolent teachings in the civil rights movement.

King could have chosen to spend his life in academia where he was very comfortable. When he left the cloistered world of education he went back to the black church where he had been reared and used it as a base to move into every corner of the black community. He was at ease in the streets and pool halls as much as in the pulpit or the seminar room. He never lost touch with his people.

He brought black Americans and white liberals a renewed passion in his call for nonviolence, justice and freedom. It was rooted in his commitment and surrender to God—as the black church speaks of God. Yet he stirred the passions of humanists as much as theists and led us all.

His ability to hold us together and inspire us with a vision of freedom with spiritual depth has been matched by no other American. Martin Luther King Jr. knew the struggle for freedom was everyone's struggle. It remains ours and your children's struggle today.

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