Honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Rightly

HONORING MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. RIGHTLY: A CONFESSIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

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One of the most baffling and bizarre episodes from Christian history is the Church's misadventure with a pair of individuals named Barlaam and Josaphat. The traditional story of Barlaam and Josaphat goes something like this: Josaphat was the son of a wealthy pagan king in India, a king who sought to protect his child from disturbing outside influences.[1] These influences included ordinary matters like sorrow and pain, but also the pesky new faith that was winding its way through the land—Christianity. Despite his father's best efforts, though, Josaphat eventually left his palace and encountered all the sad realities that haunt the human condition. He saw sickness, debilitating old age, and even death. Then, after all this, Josaphat met Barlaam, a Christian hermit who shared the gospel with the young prince. Josaphat embraced this new spirituality with abandon, ultimately casting off the trappings of his regal birthright to live an ascetic life alongside Barlaam, meditating on the truths of God.

It is a good story. So good, in fact, that Barlaam and Josaphat were accounted as saints in both the Eastern and Western Christian churches during the medieval period. The pair were honored in the Roman sanctoral cycle on November 27th, while the Greeks hallowed the memory of their unshakable Christian faith on August 26th, and the Russians did so on November 19th.[2]

There is only one problem with all this. Josaphat had another name in life, a name that many will recognize: Siddhartha Gautama, the man known as the Buddha. Likewise, Barlaam (assuming he corresponds to a genuine historical figure at all) was not a Christian hermit but was likely a Hindu monk; he was the contented monk that the young Siddhartha saw contrasting so very sharply with the suffering all around him in the wider world.

The story of the Buddha's renunciation of temporal power and pleasure in favor of a distinctly Buddhist view of Enlightenment was Christianized over the course of centuries. The Sanskrit *bodhisattva* became the Arabic *Budasaf*, which became the Greek *Ioasaph,* which became the Latin *Josaphat*.[3] The Buddha of history—who felt that the gods (even if they maybe existed) were irrelevant—was massaged and reworked into a figure who made the Son of God the center of his whole life. And, finally, Christians living many years later and many miles away from the original events embraced the doctored legends as legitimate history and crowned the characters saints. Thus the Church unwittingly put a man with decidedly non-Christian beliefs before the faithful as an example to be emulated.

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[1] For the full narrative, see John Damascene, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. G. R. Woodward and Harold Mattingly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

[2] L. J. Engles, "Barlaam and Josaphat," in *A Dictionary of Medieval Heroes,* ed. Willem P. Gerritsen and Anthony G Van Melle, trans. Tanis Guest (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 49.

[3] Monique B. Pitts, "Barlaam and Josaphat: A Legend for All Seasons," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 16, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1981): 4.

Thankfully, some of the churches who blundered into this awkward situation quietly corrected matters when they discovered their mistake. (Some, but not all; the Orthodox Church in America still lauds the "Venerable Joasaph the Prince of India."[4]) But that the mistake was made in the first place is, perhaps, not particularly surprising after all. Certainly Christians long for inspiring examples of faith and fortitude. The Bible itself is keen to refer to the great cloud of witnesses that surround us, urging us all on to greater holiness through their examples.[5] And denominations of all sorts have made saints (officially and semi-officially) of remarkable believers in all ages: Ignatius of Antioch, Augustine of Canterbury, Francis of Assisi, Martin de Porres, Lottie Moon, John Kochurov—the list goes on and on.

This desire to saint or otherwise honor great Christians continues even into our own time, with reference to impressive figures who have passed away within living memory. Pope John Paul II is on the proverbial fast-track to canonization within the Roman Catholic Church. Mother Teresa probably will not be far behind. And some modern figures are venerated by communions across a wide range of theological perspectives.

Martin Luther King, Jr. stands out as a preeminent example of this latter phenomenon. Dr. King is currently listed on the official sanctoral rolls of the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on April 4th and January 15th respectively.[6] In 2000, Roman Catholic bishops in the United States petitioned the Vatican to include Dr. King on the Pope's Jubilee list of 20th century martyrs.[7] Even Baptist voices, with all their historic aversion to ritual and so forth, have called for Dr. King to be honored as an official saint within their churches, most recently in an article entitled "Towards a Baptist Sanctoral?" in the May 2013 issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*.[8] And, in addition to all this, more casual expressions of religiously themed honor for Dr. King are routinely offered by Christian thinkers of all sorts, with the titles "saint" and "prophet" commonly appended to the man.

Of course, the reasons for Dr. King's status among Christians are not difficult to find.[9] In December, 1955, black seamstress Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger in defiance of segregation laws. Almost immediately, the idea of a bus boycott spread among the black residents of the city. The Montgomery Improvement Association was organized to help guide the boycott, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the young local pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, was elected as its president and chief spokesperson. For over a year, the boycott held strong, causing serious financial hardship for city services. Eventually, as a result of the national attention Dr. King was able to bring to the issue, the Supreme Court ruled segregation on public busses to be unconstitutional.

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[4] The Orthodox Church in America, "Venerable Joasaph the Prince of India," https://oca.org/saints/lives/2010/11/19/103329-venerable-joasaph-the-prince-of-india (accessed October 22, 2013).

[5] Heb. 11-12.

[6] Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Theresa* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 154.

[7] Michael Paulson, "US Bishops List King as Martyr Candidate," *Boston Globe*, January 13, 2000.

[8] Andy Goodliff, "Towards a Baptist Sanctoral?" *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 13, no. 3 (May 2013).

[9] For a fuller recounting of Dr. King's life and work, see Taylor Branch's massive three-volume series *America in the King Years*, published by Simon and Schuster over the period of 1988 to 2006.

Dr. King emerged from this episode as a prominent and respected civil rights leader. Energized by the success and effectiveness of the Montgomery boycott, Dr. King and other clergymen formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Its purpose was to capitalize on the recent gains, consolidate efforts, and to promote campaigns across the South that would draw attention to racial discrimination through non-violent direct action.

In 1963, King directed the SCLC to focus its efforts on Birmingham, the most populous city in Alabama, a state whose newly elected Governor ominously proclaimed, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" in his inaugural address.[10] Dr. King considered Birmingham the "most thoroughly segregated city in the United States."[11] Some even nicknamed the city "Bombingham" because of the large number of unsolved bombings of the homes of prominent civil rights figures and predominantly black churches.[12]

Shortly after the Birmingham campaign began, the city's jails were filled with civil rights participants, including Dr. King, who was arrested in April of 1963. King was released after only a week, but when the Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, realized that incarceration would not deter the demonstrators, he chose to deal with them in a harsher fashion. Nearly two weeks after King's release, Connor ordered the use of high-pressure fire hoses—whose force was strong enough to remove bark from a tree—and attack dogs on demonstrators, many of whom were children. Images were broadcast across the globe showing the shocking contrast between the non-violent demonstrators and the heavy-handed response from local police. As a result, while the purpose of the Birmingham campaign was to confront directly the injustice of racial discrimination in one particular municipality, its cultural impact extended far beyond the city limits.

During this campaign, and while Dr. King's was serving his week in jail, eight clergymen, most of whom were from segregated congregations, wrote a letter to a local newspaper criticizing Dr. King's role in the social disruption caused by the demonstrations. They pleaded for order and patience, saying that the time was not right for the changes demanded by Dr. King and his colleagues. While in his cell, Dr. King composed a response, published later in the year as the Letter from a Birmingham Jail. The open letter was a stinging indictment of the injustice inherent in racial segregation and it presented an explicit moral justification for the demonstrations. Although King's response was provoked by the clergymen who wrote to the local newspaper, he intended it to appeal to a much broader audience. He wanted to arouse the conscience of the nation and focus attention on the moral offense of racial discrimination, not allowing one to be indifferent to the injustice of Jim Crow laws. Once attuned to the moral argument, one could not sit on the fence and permit racial discrimination to continue without challenge.

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[10] Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 11.

[11] Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation*, ed. Julie Buckner Armstrong and Amy Schmidt (Athens, GA: University Of Georgia Press, 2009), 181.

[12] Thomas H. Cox, "Birmingham Campaign," in *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1:180.

The Birmingham campaign of '63 further increased the prestige of Dr. King as the premier spokesperson for the cause of civil rights and showed him to be a man of remarkable gravitas. As a result, he was invited to participate in the March on Washington later that year (the largest civil rights demonstration in history) where he delivered his keynote "I Have a Dream" speech. Time Magazine subsequently selected Dr. King as its "Man of the Year" in 1964, and shortly thereafter the Nobel Committee chose him to be its youngest-ever Peace Prize recipient. When the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, Dr. King was invited to attend the signing ceremony. And after he devoted his efforts to increasing voter registration, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was also passed.

Over the course of his public career, Martin Luther King, Jr. became the face of the civil rights movement and a bone fide American hero. Through his marches, his speeches, his letters, and more, Dr. King clearly illustrated and opposed the injustice inherent in Jim Crow laws and the broader cultural attitudes that enabled them to endure. His cause was righteous. And for that reason, when on April 4, 1968, he was shot dead as he stepped out onto his hotel balcony at sunset in Memphis, he became a righteous martyr in the eyes of many.

All these very real, very serious, and very noble accomplishments stand behind the desire to saint or otherwise honor Dr. King in a decidedly religious way. Who can honestly look over his life and what it meant for our nation and not see the hand of Providence at work? Indeed, Dr. King seems to have been anointed by God to accomplish a great and virtuous task in his particular cultural moment—a task that would better our nation as a whole and countless individual lives within it.

Nevertheless, there is an aspect to Dr. King's life and thought that is less well known, an aspect that theologically serious Christians cannot afford to overlook. For all of Dr. King's inspiring speeches rooted in biblical imagery, for all of his seminary education, for all of his service as the pastor of Baptist congregations even, Dr. King rejected many of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. To call his theology "heterodox" would be a profound understatement.

The fact of the matter is that Dr. King denied such *de fide* dogmas as the virginal conception of Jesus, the incarnation of God in Christ, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and the Second Coming. And it should be said, to Dr. King's credit, that he did not seek to conceal his rejection of orthodox Christianity. Rather, he was very upfront about the issues, as can be seen in his writings, helpfully collated and published by the University of California Press in a multi-volume anthology entitled *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Concerning the incarnation, King wrote,

> Where then can we in the liberal tradition find the divine dimension in Jesus? We may find the divinity of Christ not in his substantial unity with God, but in his filial consciousness and in his unique dependence upon God. It was his feeling of absolute dependence on God, as Schleiermacher would say, that made him divine. Yes it was the warmness of his devotion to God and the intimacy of his trust in God that accounts for his being the supreme revelation of God. All of this reveals to us that one man has at last realized his true divine calling: That of becoming a true son of man by becoming a true son of God… 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… So that the orthodox view of the divinity of Christ is in my mind quite readily denied. The true significance of the divinity of Christ lies in the fact that his achievement is prophetic and promissory for every other true son of man who is willing to submit his will to the will and spirit of God. Christ was to be only the prototype of one among many brothers.[13]

When it comes to the virginal conception, King was equally forthcoming:

> First we must admit that the evidence for the tenability of this doctrine is too shallow to convince any objective thinker… A more adequate explanation for the rise of this doctrine is found in the experience which the early Christians had with Jesus. The people saw within Jesus such a uniqueness of quality and spirit that to explain him in terms of ordinary background was to them quite inadequate. For his early followers this spiritual uniqueness could only by accounted for in terms of biological uniqueness. They were not unscientific in their approach because they had no knowledge of the scientific. They could only express themselves in terms of the pre-scientific thought patterns of their day... We of this scientific age will not explain the birth of Jesus in such unscientific terms, but we will have to admit with the early Christians that the spiritual uniqueness of Jesus stands as a mystery to man.[14]

King's view of the Jesus' resurrection followed a similar anti-supernatural bent. Indeed, King declared that he had rejected the bodily resurrection of Jesus ever since he was 13 years old.[15] As an adult, King explained his thinking thusly:

> From a literary, historical, and philosophical point of view this doctrine raises many questions. In fact the external evidence for the authenticity of this doctrine is found wanting. But here again the external evidence is not the most important thing, for it in itself fails to tell us precisely the thing we most want to know: What experiences of early Christians led to the formulation of the doctrine? The root of our inquiry is found in the fact that the early Christians had lived with Jesus. They had been captivated by the magnetic power of his personality. This basic experience led to the faith that he could never die. And so in the pre-scientific thought pattern of the first century, this inner faith took outward form.[16]

Finally, concerning the Second Coming of the Lord, King wrote,

> It is obvious that most twentieth century Christians must frankly and flatly reject any view of a physical return of Christ. To hold such a view would mean denying a Copernican universe, for there can be no physical return unless there is a physical place from which to return. In its literal form this belief belongs to a pre-scientific world view which we cannot accept. Where then do we find the Christian pertinence of this belief?… As Dr. [George] Hedley succinctly states, 'The second coming of the Christ is not an event in space-time, but an experience which transcends all physical

[13] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951,* vol. 1 of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.,* ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 261-262.

[14] Ibid., 228-229.

[15] Ibid., 361.

[16] Ibid., 229-230.

> categories. It belongs not to the sky, but to the human heart; not to the future, but to whatever present we are willing to assign to it."[17]

To be sure, the essays from which the above quotations are drawn were written during King's time at seminary as a young man. But interviewers, such as the distinguished journalist Lee E. Dirks, found Dr. King continuing to downplay and then deny the cardinal tenets of the Christian faith as late as 1963, the same year Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington.[18]

None of this in any way diminishes the immensity of Dr. King's social achievements. The Montgomery bus boycott was no less effective because of Dr. King's deeply unorthodox theology, nor was his signature oratory any less moving. Dr. King is truly deserving of our nation's respect and gratitude. But that respect and gratitude ought to be expressed in ways that are appropriate given what he achieved and, simultaneously, what he believed.

That our nation honors Dr. King with a day of remembrance in our secular calendar, alongside other men of great secular achievement such as Christopher Columbus and George Washington, is entirely reasonable. That cities throughout the country name streets and boulevards after the man is likewise appropriate. Commemorative stamps, coins, monuments like the one in Washington D.C.—all of these accolades are quite fitting. But to give Dr. King the title "saint" or "prophet," to place his name in a sacred Christian calendar alongside the great exemplars of the faith throughout history, to hold him forth as not only a great man generally but also as a great Christian specifically—this all just seems misconceived. To do so would be to repeat the Church's mistakes with Barlaam and Josaphat: it would put a man with decidedly non-Christian beliefs before the faithful as an example to be emulated

After all, the Church teaches its people the truths of the faith not only through formal instruction in abstract doctrine, but also through the less formal methods of approving and disapproving concrete realities. In the midst of our gathered communities of faith, the songs that we sing, the art that we display, and the saints that we crown all inform the hearts and minds of believers just as much as any catechesis class. And the theological downgrade required conscientiously to establish Dr. King as a saint or prophet among us is just too much. It would communicate that a man can deny the virginal conception of Jesus, deny his resurrection, deny his genuine divinity even, and still be considered an exemplary Christian. In other words, such an act would communicate that theology simply does not matter.

No. We can and should honor Dr. King as an influential man whom God used to improve our nation and uplift His people. We can even grant that, in a sense, the Lord anointed Dr. King to accomplish His work. But we should honor him as the Jews honored the anointed (but pagan) Cyrus, not as they honored the anointed (and orthodox) prophets.[19] The Church's awkward misadventure with Barlaam and Josaphat was quite enough, and the blunder should not be repeated in our own time.

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[17] Ibid., 269.

[18] Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 274 n. 145.

[19] Isa. 45:1, cp. 1 Kings 19:16.

Cornel West spoke recently of the importance of remembering Dr. King as the three-dimensional person that he really was, as opposed to a Procrustean caricature of the man. Dr. West stated that that we must "resist the 'Santa Claus-ification' of Martin Luther King, Jr, "I don't want to sanitize Martin Luther King, Jr. I don't want to sterilize Martin Luther King, Jr. I don't want to deodorize Martin Luther King, Jr. And we're not going to domesticate Brother Martin this morning."[20] To this one could add that we ought not to Christianize Dr. King beyond his own confession either.

Let us then salute the memory of Dr. King. Let us remember him with fondness and gratitude and respect. But let us remember him as he actually was—not how we Christians perhaps wish he was. He was not a saint; he was not a prophet; he was an indefatigable hero of social justice and that is how we should honor him.

[20] Cornell West, "Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Address" (keynote address at the Ebenezer Baptist Church during the 25th Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Commemoration, Atlanta, GA, January 18, 2010). Recording available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdusCLR8lSA. Accessed October 24, 2013.