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D.R. Whitt

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# Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture

## “WITH RIGHTEOUSNESS IN HIS SUITCASE”: REFLECTIONS ON THE MINISTRY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

D.R. WHITT, O.P.\*

ON the sixteenth of February, 1956, about two and a half months into the Montgomery bus boycott, one of his former classmates from Crozer Theological Seminary wrote a letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The correspondent was the Rev. Marcus G. Wood, pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Baltimore.<sup>1</sup> His letter was informal, passionate, and familiar. It begins, “Dear Dr. King[,] or Dr. David Crocket[t]”<sup>2</sup>—ironically comparing King to Davy Crockett, the pioneer hero whose Disneyland-inspired popularity at the time connoted personal and patriotic prodigies.<sup>3</sup> The letter continues:

It was one of the happiest moments of my life when I read a few weeks ago of the wonderful work you are doing for your people in the South. I wish I were there to help you. You are becoming as a prophet of this day and age and I hope you will see it through. Be like Isaiah of old[,] walk the streets barefooted until the waters of hate roll back to the ocean of eternity. Fight on till the stars shall reach d[ow]n and take in their nimble hands the s[il]very clouds and wipe the tears from the face of the moon[,] t[e]lling it to weep no more[,] for the Lion King is on the march. Fight on and if necessary ask God to stop the sun or close up the heavens and let no rain or dew fall on the soil of Alabama until

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\* Professor of Law, University of Saint Thomas School of Law. B.A., Loyola College; J.D., Duke University School of Law; J.C.D., The Catholic University of America.

1. See DAVID GARROW, *BEARING THE CROSS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE* 40 (Vintage Books 1988) (1986) (concerning King’s and Wood’s shared experiences in seminary). For the sake of full disclosure, I must note that Rev. Wood baptized me and, until I entered full communion with the Catholic Church, was my own pastor.

2. Letter from Marcus G. Wood, Pastor, Providence Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland, to Martin Luther King, Jr., Pastor, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama (Feb. 16, 1956), in 3 *THE PAPERS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: BIRTH OF A NEW AGE, DECEMBER 1955-DECEMBER 1956*, at 129 (Clayborne Carson et al., eds., 1997) [hereinafter *PAPERS*] (presenting letter of praise and encouragement).

3. See GEORGE BRUNS & TOM BLACKBURN, *BALLAD OF DAVY CROCKETT* (1955) (“Raised in the woods so he knew ev’ry tree; Kilt him a b’ar when he was only three”; “Took over Washin’ton so we heered tell; An’ patched up the crack in the Liberty Bell.”).

judgment shall come to town with righteousness in his suitcase. Fight on till the hills of Alabama skip like a fairy just waking from a long winter nap.

The Ministers here in Baltimore and in other communities across the country are with you. You were the topic at our conference last [M]onday. They ask me to write you to let you know they are praying for you[,] and know of the hardship through which you are passing.

I know you are preaching like mad now. You have thrown Crozer aside and you have found the real God[,] and you can tell the world now that he is a God who moves in a mysterious way. That he will be your battle ax in time of war and preserve you from your enemy. He will send his ang[el]s to camp around you and none shall come nigh unto you. Go on, son, in the name of Jesus you will conqu[e]r.

Kind regards to Mrs. King. Together you all are writing history.

Yours truly,

M. G. Wood<sup>4</sup>

The letter's allusions to the prophet Isaiah and other biblical texts convey a message well-known to its recipient. The prophet's walking barefoot was a sign of destitute humiliation, a proclamation against the people of Judah's reliance on then-existing political arrangements. In other words, the barefoot prophet was God's sign that Judah was exposed by the weakness of Egypt, naked to the wrath of Assyria, with no way of escape.<sup>5</sup> The people of God have no refuge other than the Lord himself and his ways; any other expectation, presumption, reliance—any other arrangement—is in vain. But the barefoot prophet also bears witness that the people of Judah—here read “Alabama”—are bereft of the knowledge of God and his ways:

[Y]our iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things.

No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.

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4. Letter from Marcus G. Wood, in PAPERS, *supra* note 2, at 129-30 (citation omitted).

5. See *Isaiah* 20:1-3 (discussing barefoot prophet and significance thereof).

Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways.

The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.<sup>6</sup>

By the sinful ways in which the white people of Alabama are treating black people there, they have separated themselves from God. The prophet walks barefoot in testimony against the sins of Alabama, its oppression and injustice to the black and the poor: God will not favor the sinful people of Alabama, and they cannot escape his wrath until they heed the prophet, admit their sins, and repent them. Then, “judgment shall come to town, with righteousness in his suitcase,” bringing God’s peace and security, so that blessings will dwell upon them all, equally and truly, black and white together.

There is no doubt Dr. King understood the prophetic allusions and Old Testament references in Rev. Wood’s letter. I would imagine he smiled at least a couple of times at his classmate’s rhetorical turns. But he did not need anyone to explain to him the encouragement the text imparted. He knew what Marcus Wood was talking about because they came from the same place—and I don’t mean Crozer Theological Seminary, once of Chester, Pennsylvania. They came from the same place long before they ever saw Crozer. They came from the same place, even though Martin Luther King, Jr. was a city kid from Atlanta, from a family of Baptist preachers, who had gone to Morehouse, and Marcus Garvey Wood came from a small farm in Virginia and had worked his way through Morgan as a janitor. They came from the same place because they both came from the Black Church.

African-American Christianity has a unique vision, shaped by a particular history and a distinct culture. First of all, before and during the slave trade, the traditional world views, cosmologies, and societies of Africans (then, as now) were permeated by religion, without division between the sacred and secular. For example, in traditional African religions, kings, queens, and chiefs are both political *and* religious figures.<sup>7</sup> African traditional religion is an all-pervasive reality in which a sense of the holy encompasses the whole mystery of life, beginning before birth and continuing after death. For people with such a religious genius, as the Catholic bishops of the United States, among others, recognized, “to live is to participate in a religious drama . . . [and the] people see themselves as

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6. *Id.* at 59:2-4, 7-8.

7. *See, e.g.*, C. ERIC LINCOLN & LAWRENCE MAMIYA, *THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE 199-200* (1990) (discussing African tradition of integrating political and religious leadership throughout history).

totally immersed in a sacred cosmos.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, the people enslaved in North America did not arrive here as “blank slates,” but as human persons already formed in their own traditions and values. And no matter how much those traditions and values may have been lost or forgotten in the traumatic experience of enslavement, we must nonetheless acknowledge that a home-grown, indigenous African-American culture arose in North America—a fusion of elements from Africa, Europe, and the United States—created during the several centuries of slavery and the period of Jim Crow segregation that followed them.<sup>9</sup> The black sacred cosmos or the religious world view of African-Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath.<sup>10</sup> It enabled them to create their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and world views as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests.<sup>11</sup>

Enslaved Africans brought with them to the New World their own traditional concept of the Supreme Being: belief in a divinity who was deeply and continually involved in the practical affairs of their daily lives, but in a different way than the Christian God—especially the one conceived by Protestants.

For Africans believed in a God who was not only omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, they believed in a God, who as Supreme Being, had a radical moral relationship with humanity. This Being was approachable through many intermediaries, especially nature—all symbolic representatives of the living, pulsating environment in which humans subsist and through which we are related to the spirits of natural things and the ancestors, but preeminently with the Supreme Being, the God who is above all gods and who is known as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer.<sup>12</sup>

This was the religious cultural matrix of many Africans and their descendants who embraced Christianity in the United States: this one supreme God, and their belief in this God, helped them to survive. Exposed, for the most part, to Protestant preachers, the slaves responded

8. SECRETARIAT FOR THE LITURGY AND SECRETARIAT FOR BLACK CATHOLICS, NAT'L CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, PLENTY GOOD ROOM: THE SPIRIT AND TRUTH OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CATHOLIC WORSHIP art. 47 (1991) [hereinafter PGR] (citing JOHN S. MBITI, AFRICAN RELIGIONS & PHILOSOPHY (1970); JOHN S. MBITI, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA 1-154 (1970)).

9. See LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 7, at 199-200 (discussing aggregation of influences).

10. See *id.* (continuing discussion of various influences).

11. See *id.* at 2 (discussing shared but unique nature of black and white religious experiences).

12. PGR, *supra* note 8, at art. 50 (quoting GAYRAUD S. WILMORE, BLACK RELIGION & BLACK RADICALISM 22 (1972) (citing MBITI, AFRICAN RELIGIONS & PHILOSOPHY, *supra* note 8, at 15-16, 29-57)).

quite favorably to the preachers' evangelization efforts, establishing the roots of the Black Church within American Protestantism. When they heard Bible stories beginning with Adam, Eve, and the Fall, and continuing through the ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the Day of Judgment, blacks developed a theological vision that spoke directly to their plight:

They concluded that the God of the Bible was the same universal guide and ruler of the religion of their forebears. . . . This God cared for and rewarded all people who were good and punished all who were wicked. This God was not partial to the enslaved or the free; men or women; black or white . . . ; for [as the song says] there would be "plenty good room in my Father's Kingdom."<sup>13</sup>

Entering into Christian fellowship with each other, the slaves set themselves apart from the whites by creating a distinctive style, sensibility, and theology. In the hands of militants and revolutionaries, the sense of being a people apart could lead to a belief that whites were the antichrist, but the universality of the Christian religion, embedded in the intimacy of plantation life, militated against black Christians relying on such an interpretation (though, to be sure, it crossed their minds). For the slaves, whites lived under the same God and were brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>14</sup> In its positive aspects, this sense of brotherhood gave the slaves a measuring rod with which to hold slave owners to a standard of behavior appropriate to their own professions of Christian faith.<sup>15</sup> By its very nature, it forbade slaves from accepting the idea that they had no right to judge their masters; it made judgment a duty.<sup>16</sup> Compelled to see some masters as "good" and some as "bad," the slaves had to admit that a person did not necessarily stop being a Christian by holding slaves, although they did not take this concession to mean that slavery itself was an acceptable order for a Christian society.<sup>17</sup> This belief in human brotherhood strengthened their resistance to dehumanization, and even curbed the self-destructive tendency toward hatred. It left them free to hate slavery but not necessarily their individual slave masters. It left them free to love their masters as fellow sinners before God, and yet to judge their relative sins and virtues as Christians and human beings.<sup>18</sup>

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13. *Id.* at art. 51 (quoting the Negro spiritual from which its title was taken, "Plenty Good Room").

14. See EUGENE D. GENOVESE, *ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL: THE WORLD THE SLAVES MADE* 281-82 (1976) (discussing slaves' acceptance of common religious beliefs with white owners).

15. See *id.* (explaining positive and useful function of belief in human brotherhood).

16. See *id.* (addressing importance of judgment).

17. See *id.* (presenting rationale for judging some masters as good masters and Christians, while also maintaining immorality of slavery as institution).

18. See *id.*

And they did judge them. The enslaved people of African ancestry knew that the God of the Bible was a God of liberation, who set captives free, who sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to "let my people go," and who did not accept slavery any more than sin. Continuing to tell the Bible's story to each other again and again, the slaves more powerfully came to recognize their own story in the Bible. They were a scattered people of many tribal origins, all of them involuntarily enslaved in the service of another nation. They had cried out to the God of their ancestors for deliverance, and they had been answered by a God they did not at first know. They soon learned that this God was the God of their ancestors, and entering their lives, this God constituted them as a beloved people, a light to the nations, and his very own. The slaves decided that if the God of the Hebrew children would work to free them and give them a homeland, and if the God of Jesus Christ so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son to be its Savior, then this same God must love them too, and would not leave them in bondage forever.<sup>19</sup>

The unique encounter of African slaves with a culture that put them in chains is fundamental to African-American religion and what Cornel West calls its "[p]rofound preoccupation with the Christian gospel."<sup>20</sup> In their search for collective identity, African slaves found historical purpose in Israel's exodus out of slavery and personal meaning in Jesus Christ's bold identification with the lowly. Black American religion is decidedly Christian, and christocentric: we listened to the Bible and we believed in Jesus not because of some propositional truth, not because of some antecedent myth about a dying god, but because Jesus's own identification in his death and resurrection with people who were poor, captive, and suffering gives reality to his continuing concern for those who still bear oppression. Jesus did wonders for others; he would do them for us. Not only did Africans in America find Jesus identifying with *us*, we could identify with *him*. In songs and sayings, African Americans make this quite clear, even today: we have stood at the side of the Cross, and can tell the world about it, asking, "Were *you* there when they crucified my Lord?" And just as we did not leave Jesus alone to suffer for us, Jesus does not leave us alone in our suffering; he got up out of that grave and took us out of bondage with him. In Black Christianity, "Jesus Christ is not simply understood as an agent of deliverance, but also a human exemplar of pain and agony. The crucified Christ looms as large as the risen Christ."<sup>21</sup>

Eugene Genovese concluded that the folk dynamic in the historical development of African-American Christianity enabled the slaves to retain enough of Africa to help them create an appropriate form for the new

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19. See PGR, *supra* note 8, arts. 52-56 (presenting way in which slaves analogized their situation to suffering of Hebrews and of Jesus, deducing God's love from their shared suffering).

20. CORNEL WEST, PROPHETIC FRAGMENTS 161 (1988).

21. *Id.* at 162.

culture they were forging, and to contribute to the mainstream of American national culture while shaping an autonomous identity.

Their religion simultaneously helped build an “American” Christianity both directly and as a counterpoint and laid the foundation for a “black” Christianity of their own. That is, [their folk dynamic] made possible a universal statement because it made possible a national statement. But, for blacks, the national statement expressed a duality as something both black and American, not in the mechanical sense of being an ethnic component in a pluralistic society, but in the dialectical sense of *simultaneously being itself and the other, both separately and together, and of developing as a religion within a religion in a nation within a nation.*<sup>22</sup>

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya note that, while the structure of black Christian beliefs are the same orthodox beliefs as those of white Christians, there have always been different degrees of emphasis and valences given to certain theological views. For example, the Old Testament notion of God as an avenging, conquering, liberating champion and his personal involvement in history remains a formidable anchor of the faith in the Black Church. The direct relationship between the holocaust of slavery and God’s promise of deliverance color its theological perceptions and the themes of black preachers in a decisive manner. And throughout black religious history the experience of oppression has found more immediate resonance with the incarnate suffering, humiliation, death, and eventual triumphant resurrection of the Son of God made flesh than with an abstract concept of an impersonal God. Another example of this difference between black and white Christian theological emphasis is the greater weight the Black Church gives to the biblical views of the importance of the human person and human equality implicit in being created “in the image and likeness of God” and “children of God” by redemption. The trauma of being officially defined by the U.S. Constitution as “three-fifths” human, and (mis-)treated in terms of that impious understanding, fueled the struggle of the African-American people to affirm and establish their humanity and their inherent dignity as persons. The Christians who formed the Black Church “knew implicitly that their understanding of Christianity, which was premised on the rock of antiracial discrimination, was more authentic than the Christianity practiced in white churches.”<sup>23</sup>

While their views certainly are not definitive, in 1984 the black Catholic bishops in the United States identified certain characteristic elements of African-American spirituality. It is biblically based, fixed on freedom, and seeks reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> First of all, African-American spirituality is

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22. GENOVESE, *supra* note 14, at 280-81 (emphasis added).

23. LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 7, at 4.

24. See Letter from Joseph Howze, et al., What We Have Seen and Heard, Black Bishops’ Pastoral on Evangelization (Sept. 9, 1984), in 14 ORIGINS 273, 275-77 (1984).



based on the sacred scriptures. For our ancestors, the Bible was not a mere record of the wonderful works of God in a bygone age; it was a present record of what was soon to come. God will lead his people from the bondage of Egypt, God will preserve his children in the midst of the fiery furnace, God's power will make the dry bones scattered on the plain snap together, and he will breathe life into them. Above all, the birth and death, the suffering and sorrow, and the burial and resurrection of Jesus tell how the story will end for all who are faithful, no matter what the present tragedy. For black people, the Bible's story is our story.<sup>25</sup>

Black Christianity is fixed on freedom. A major aspect of black Christian belief is found in the symbolic importance given to the word "freedom," which has found a deep religious resonance in the lives and hopes of African-Americans throughout black history. During slavery, "freedom" meant release from bondage; after emancipation, it meant the right to be educated, to be employed, and to move about freely from place to place. In the twentieth century freedom came to mean social, political, and economic justice.

From the very beginning of the black experience in America, one critical denotation of freedom has remained constant: freedom has always meant the absence of any restraint that might compromise one's responsibility to God. . . . [I]f God calls you to discipleship, God calls you to freedom. And that God wants you free because God made you for Himself and in His image. . . . [This] was a dictum securely anchored in the black [person]'s faith, and indelibly engraved on [the black] psyche. [As the] well-known . . . spiritual affirms . . . :

Before I'll be a slave

I'll be buried in my grave

And go home to my Father

and be free . . . .<sup>26</sup>

Freedom as a condition of spiritual readiness was no less critical to the religious strategies of Richard Allen, Nat Turner, or Sojourner Truth, than to those of Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>27</sup> "Their objectives were the same: freedom to be as God had intended all men and women to be. Free to belong to God."<sup>28</sup>

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25. See *id.* at 276 (observing connection between scripture passages and African-American experience).

26. LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 7, at 4.

27. See *id.* at 5 (providing examples of people for whom freedom was central aspect of spirituality).

28. *Id.*

Because the church community was the only community in which slaves could experience freedom and act out their human equality, the Black Church became the only stable and coherent institutional area to emerge from slavery. As a result, black churches were not only dominant in their communities, but they also became the womb of black culture and a number of other major social institutions: schools, banks, social and political organizations, etc.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, local chapters of the NAACP, the National Urban League, and other secular institutions often were founded with the help and support of black church leaders; their memberships also often overlapped with black church memberships, as they are secular vehicles developed to cope with more complex political, economic, and pluralistic urban environments. In other words, the partial differentiation of these institutions, spheres, and functions did not require complete separation from the Black Church. Indeed, these black secular organizations served also as vehicles for clergy and church members to influence the institutions and political processes of the larger society, without raising church-state issues.<sup>30</sup>

For American whites, freedom has fortified the value of individualism: “to be free to pursue one’s destiny without political or bureaucratic interference or restraint. But for African Americans, freedom has always been communal in nature.”<sup>31</sup> In Africa, an individual’s destiny was linked to that of the family, clan, or the community in an intensely interconnected kinship system. In the United States, black people have seldom been perceived or treated as individuals, but more usually as “representatives” of their “race.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, the communal sense of freedom has an internal African rootedness that has been curiously reinforced by hostile social conventions imposed from the outside on all black Americans as a caste.<sup>33</sup> The jubilant cry of the spiritual—“Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”—echoes the understanding black folk have always had that the Almighty’s impatience with their lack of freedom matched their own. “In song, word and deed, freedom has always been the superlative value of the black sacred cosmos,”<sup>34</sup> and the message of the Black Church is, however inarticulate, *God wants you free!*

And freedom and equality liberate us, not only to be fully human, but to be reconciled with those who misjudged and mistreated us. The black Catholic bishops wrote:

[T]he gospel message is a message that liberates us from hate and calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation. . . . This is a value

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29. See *id.* at 17 (explaining organizational role of black churches).

30. See *id.* at 9 (observing benefits derived from lack of complete differentiation between black churches and secular organizations).

31. *Id.* at 5.

32. *Id.*

33. See *id.*

34. *Id.*

coming from our African heritage and deepened by our belief in the gospel teaching. When in recent years [the rhetoric of “Black Power”] rejected “token integration” for “self-determination,” it was not to choose confrontation in place of cooperation, but to insist on collaboration with mutual respect for the dignity and unique gifts of all. Reconciliation can never mean unilateral elevation of one and another’s subordination, unilateral giving and another’s constant receiving, unilateral flexibility and another’s resistance. True reconciliation arises only where there is mutually perceived equality. This is what is meant by justice.<sup>35</sup>

Albert Raboteau stated it this way:

[T]he identification of Afro-American Christians with the suffering Jesus, inspired compassion, a “neighbor-regarding concern” for all, even the white oppressor, and encouraged active resistance to evil, especially the evil of racism. The most eloquent spokesman for this tradition was, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr., whose concept of agape, the distinterested love of others not because of any merit of their own, but as a product of the “overspill” of God’s love, and concept of nonviolent resistance owed a great deal to his philosophical and theological training. But both concepts also were rooted in his experience of black spirituality. . . . It is the vocation of those who would follow Jesus to discern his presence among the alien, the stranger, and the outcast. But compassion, if it is not to be merely sentimental, demands action. The Christian must reject militarism, racism, consumerism, anything which places things above people. Especially, the Christian must move beyond the barriers of race, religion, and nationality to represent the voice of the voiceless, the face of the faceless, to a heedless society. For in the final analysis, there are no strangers, no aliens, no others, but only sisters and brothers.<sup>36</sup>

I am comfortable quoting black Catholics on this matter—and they were just as much at ease speaking about it—because, as the bishops also said, the Black Church is a result of “our common experience and history” and “it has made it possible for many blacks to understand and appreciate each other.”<sup>37</sup> From the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, African-American believers created a “sacred cosmos” that cut across denominational lines—largely Baptist and Methodist at first, but also Catholic, Pentecostal, and others in later years. Wherever black believers gather in sufficient numbers, the distinct quality of a shared Afro-Christian relig-

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35. Letter from Joseph Howze, et al., *supra* note 24, at 276-77.

36. Albert J. Raboteau, *Down at the Cross: Afro-American Spirituality*, 8 U.S. CATHOLIC HISTORIAN 33, 38 (1989).

37. Letter from Joseph Howze, et al., *supra* note 24, at 280.

ious world view and faith is experienced. Even in predominantly white denominations with a million or more black members (e.g., in the United Methodist Church and the Catholic Church), “the surges and eruptions of the black sacred cosmos [are] constant and influential.”<sup>38</sup> To this day, and regardless of denomination, a qualitatively different cultural form of expressing Christianity is found in most black churches.<sup>39</sup>

It was the Black Church, of course, that produced the Negro spirituals in which black believers expressed all manner of things: their anguish in slavery; their trust in God’s mighty arm; their belief in God’s care; their identification with Jesus’s suffering, a suffering like their own; their belief in the resurrection; their desire for freedom; and their need for constant conversion and prayer.<sup>40</sup> Combining vestiges of traditional African cultural and ritual elements with faith in the God of Jesus Christ, the Black Church produced a new ritual culture, of dramatic prayer, storytelling and teaching, rhetoric and song, poetry and proverb, postures of praise and healing—an oral tradition invoking and disclosing the experience of God. One of the hallmarks of the Black Church is its preaching tradition, using Scripture and storytelling, poetic rhetoric, rhythm and intonation, and call and response to entice and engage the hearers, and call them to conversion.<sup>41</sup> One of the greatest practitioners of the Black Church preaching art was (to bring us back where we started from) the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As I said, there is no doubt Dr. King understood the import of what Rev. Wood had written him in February 1956. He had grown up in the Black Church: the son of a preacher, the grandson of a preacher, the *great*-grandson of a preacher, the only brother of a preacher, and he himself had been ordained a preacher before he had even finished college!<sup>42</sup> He knew his Bible. And the moment he saw the words “prophet” and “Isaiah” in that letter, he knew what his preacher classmate was saying. “What you are doing for your people” requires you to declare God’s judgment on Alabama’s regime of racial segregation: to disturb the security of the Jim Crow system, and to show how there is no escaping the evil it is and does, and how it cannot comport with God’s ways. Preach the Gospel: all men and women are created and saved by Jesus Christ—red and yellow, black and white—each and every one of us is the image and likeness of God Almighty, and brothers and sisters by his grace.

Point out the sins of Alabama: point out the iniquities that separate the people from God, the injustices that make them unworthy of blessing, the duplicities depriving them of grace, and the political oppression that

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38. LINCOLN & MAMIYA, *supra* note 7, at 7.

39. *See id.*

40. *See* PGR, *supra* note 8, at art. 61 (listing examples of spirituals).

41. *See id.* at art. 72 (citing HENRY H. MITCHELL, BLACK PREACHING 196-271 (1979)).

42. *See* GARROW, *supra* note 1, at 38 (explaining that King was ordained a Baptist minister on February 25, 1948, during his senior year at Morehouse College).

flirts with damnation. Bear witness to the faith of Black Christianity, and gain a prophet's reward:

- you will be ignored by those you challenge directly;
- you will be harassed by the police;
- you will be oppressed by those in political authority; and
- you will be rejected by those who best understand what you say.

Less than three weeks before Rev. Wood wrote that letter, Dr. King had been arrested for the very first time; three days after that, someone threw a bomb into his home for the very first time. Then the threatening phone calls began to come in. He had begun to reap a prophet's reward before that letter even suggested he seek it. Despite all his years in the Church, and for all his education, Martin Luther King wasn't sure he could take it. This is how he described the situation:

Something said to me. . . . You've got to call on . . . that power that can make a way out of no way. And I discovered that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down. . . . I will never forget it . . . I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But, Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak." . . . And 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." . . . I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone.<sup>43</sup>

The holiday we keep on Monday surely celebrates the life and vision and ministry of an African American churchman who, in the company of the suffering and victorious Christ, represented and, sometimes, led a movement that brought about a patriotic prodigy: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement galvanized the conscience of this country's white majority—and the attention of the civilized world—with the judgment that America had failed to measure up to its profession of political faith set forth in either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution's Civil War amendments. Confronted with that judgment, the white majority conceded its sins, and sought to put our country on the political path of righteousness: toward equal justice, equal opportunities, equal rights and duties under law for all citizens of the United States, so that blessings will dwell upon us all, truly, black and white, red, yellow, and brown, together.

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43. *Id.* at 58.

But our Monday holiday recognizes not just a splendid minister and ministry, but the vindication of a religious vision. With all due respect to the First Amendment, that means the holiday celebrates the vision and genius and ambitions of American black Christianity.

And for those who wish to disagree, the only other evidence I offer is the face of the Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr., awash with tears of joy on the night Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. He was watching Judgment, finally, starting to unpack.

