

## **"The Spiritual Secularity of Martin Luther King, Jr"**

The Rev Dr Harold Porter

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I was a Pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Southern California when one of my youth of the congregation, his name was Martin, ran up to me and shouted, Martin Luther King has been killed! That Sunday, I announced to the congregation that we have a guest preaching here this morning, and I delivered, word for word, King's sermon, "Strength To Love". Needless to say, it was the most compelling sermon my congregation would hear that year.

In fact, if you really want to know Martin Luther King, read his sermons. They are intelligent, practical, and challenging. Not only did he live them, but they also make clear what a more rational, moral, and joyous Christianity is all about.

This morning, as we celebrate his birthday and national Holiday, I want to explore a side of King that is often overlooked. To do that I would like to lift up something William Barr, our US Attorney General has recently said in an address he delivered at Notre Dame University. Barr is a dedicated Roman Catholic so it was surely a highpoint in his career to be asked to speak at our most famous Roman Catholic University. He is an able speaker.

The last time I spoke at Harbor I mentioned Barr because it was quite obvious that he had miss-interpreted the Mueller Report. Barr stated the report did not find President Trump guilty of obstruction of justice. Of course, that was not true! There is plenty of evidence that the President tried on several occasions to obstruct our federal process in Mueller's report. And today there is a further concern that in several other matters, Barr seems to act more as the President's own personal lawyer, instead of being the Attorney General for the entire country.

But as we examine the content of Barr's speech, really a sermon, it is quite clear that he has strong opinions about many things in our culture but was mostly upset that religion, especially our Judeo-Christian heritage, has been greatly attacked these past 50 years. As one column in the NY Times recently has it, "Bill Barr Thinks America Is Going to Hell." And Barr does make it clear declaring from the pulpit at Notre Dame, "that modern secularists have dismissed our traditional Judeo-Christian moral system...as other-worldly superstition imposed by a kill-joy clergy." And he offers a list of behaviors that he believes undermines the morality of our nation.

And he blames this moral decay on our modern secularists (meaning those non-believers, aka the new atheists) and the so-called religious progressives, (meaning those far-left liberals).

As he is the Attorney General, his voice will carry some weight, but since we all will be facing all kinds political advocacy in the months ahead, I suggest we take a look at what secular means before we paint all secularists with the same negative brush, and also to examine what it means to hold to a progressive religious faith which I suspect most of this congregation does. Why are they both a threat to Barr and others?

The word secular has been defined several ways, but essentially it simply means life is temporal as contrast with eternal. It means worldly in contrast to outside of reality, earthly compared to heavenly. For many it can mean to be non-religious. A secular world view is just that, the belief that the world is naturally itself and not supernatural. Generally, a secularist seeks to advocate for human values rather than religious values.

Secularists tend to look to science and nature and all the cultural arts and human achievements to find meaning, and not to divine revelation or sacred scripture.

Even so, the contrast as to what is sacred or secular, spiritual or ordinary, natural or mystical, is not as easily discernible as it seems. For instance, we often speak of sacred music contrasted to secular music. What's the difference and how do you tell? Who's to say the Gettysburg Address is less sacred then the 23<sup>r</sup> Psalm? I wouldn't.

Those who do claim to have a secular faith or outlook, what they obviously care about is how to be an authentic human being in this world and how respectfully to treat others. To do that many more people today are claiming to be spiritual but not religious. But, then again, spiritual and religious do seem to overlap in our lives, not matter what we claim.

At least we may agree that secular work is our daily effort in this world, caring for one's self and our society at large, whether we believe in another world or not. I have always admired how Thoreau responded when asked what he thought of the make-up of the world after this one? He replied, "One world at a time, brother, one world at a time." That is a secular answer, as well as an agnostic answer, because how can one really tell what comes next except through faith? And this would be my response, as well.

Of course, everything we do has shades of meaning. For instance, a church pastor somewhat frustratedly told me, “When I set up soup kitchens for the needy, they called me a saint. When I spoke out from my pulpit that our present economy excludes the poor and favors the rich, they called me a meddler and to stay out of politics!”

Well, both are secular activities, feeding the poor, and a concern for economic justice. And, yes, both can be understood as spiritual or religious concerns.

In fact, many people who believe in God, however God is understood, may still claim to be secular in outlook because they are working for a better world here and now. They get up every day, face their daily chores and responsibilities, and extend good will to all others, enjoy the glories of a good life, and with a touch of gratitude and humility when their life is over, trust they are in God’s everlasting hands.

Yes, there are secular Atheists, and Agnostics, but there are also secular persons of deep religious faith. I hope to point out that the strong Christian faith Martin Luther King had, was also equally embedded with his strong secular faith as well. In fact, King may have been a more worldly person of faith than an unworldly person of religion. In him, I believe, religious or secular were not opposites but complemented each other.

Perhaps acknowledging that we live under a secular government will help us focus on this slippery word. It is evident to me, that when we revolted from England, we justify our rebellion both on secular and religious grounds. The Declaration of Independence, speaks of our religious faith in our Creator and his Divine Providence endowing us with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and then lists a number of ways the British mistreated our secular existence, our earthly rights.

But when it came to writing the Constitution ten years later, we democratically decided that our government would not be religiously-based but secular, not endowed, or justified, by any particular religious foundation.

Yes, we were, in a sense, baptizing ourselves anew, with a water that contained a myriad of self-understandings and human values, both earthly and heavenly. And no one was sure how we would all come out. We are gravely testing that out this very week on the Senate’s floors, and may the rule of law prevail!

But the founders were not against religion per se. The glorious first amendment did state, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,” but

there is no period after that sentence, only a comma, quickly adding, “or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Over all, what the Constitution makes legally clear is that in this country, everyone is free to live according to their own religious faith or no faith at all. What a gift to each of us that is!

On the other hand, to keep liberty alive the Constitution charges us to promote a secular agenda for this country, not a religious one. And the Preamble declares what that secular agenda is: justice for all, domestic tranquility for all, security for all, and especially the general welfare for all.

With that secular-spiritual task still before us, let me make a sharp turn here and lift up another troubling word as we again consider another election. Socialism!

Right away if you are over forty, you may have just shivered. Socialism was the scary word of my generation. For many it still is. And so it is sort of surprising, since our society has long dumped socialism in the ash can of history, that a new crop of candidates, nationally and locally, are running for office under that label - Democratic Socialists.

First, socialism is a little like that word liberal. Twenty-five years ago, no politician would claim to be a liberal because they would lose votes. In fact, those on the left still prefer the label ‘progressive’, knowing it less threatening. However, even the Progressives remain a threat to Bill Barr and to conservatism generally.

But socialism is even scarier than liberalism, so we need to take an honest look as we enter these election primaries. Obviously, and without endorsing anyone, the best-known advocate wearing the socialist label is Senator Bernie Sanders, of Vermont. More correctly, he describes himself as a Democratic Socialist. He ran so well in the last primary election for President that, the Democratic Socialist of America, which doesn’t describe itself as a party but an association, grew from 6,000 members to well over 60,000 members today, due to Sander’s success.

While it is often thought that a secularist must be an atheist, which is not true, a socialist must be either a communist or an atheist, which, again, is not true. Sander’s is a secular Jew and he also holds to a belief in God.

What may be helpful is to examine what Sanders claims his socialism means. Does he mean the Marxist’s socialism, with the takeover of the means of production by the people, and the elimination of capitalism? No and No.

When asked how he defines Democratic Socialism, Sanders replied: “it stands for a living wage, universal health care, free and complete education, affordable housing, a clean environment and a secure retirement, all democratically decided.” These, he declares, are human rights. And he points to a dozen or so countries where these social programs are actual and happily happening, especially in Western Europe and, in part, in Canada.

Since what he, and others who support him, stands for is not classic socialism, you would think he would be better off describing himself as that of a “good social democrat,” who believes both in democracy and beneficial social programs, such as Medicare, Medicaid, etc.

Even so, he knows the term socialism still carries a lot of baggage and so he often compares his platform to the amazing social programs that FDR and the New Deal brought about, especially of Social Security, and a host of government sponsored work and care programs. No president did more for those forgotten or down and out in our society than Roosevelt. It certainly can be argued that he saved capitalism by the effectiveness of his many secular socialistic programs.

Actively religious, Roosevelt compared his New Deal as a positive response to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount! FDR was a product of the Christian Social Gospel Movement of the early 1900’s which can be described by one of its great leaders, Theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, who said, **“The Kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven**

The Social Gospel movement was largely a Protestant-Catholic liberal revival, bringing the gospel, the good news of Christ’s ethical and humanistic teachings, to confront all the social, economically, political problems in this world. Dorothy Day, now being considered for sainthood was a good example of many strong lay church members of this practical movement. Do not worry about Heaven, was their message, Heaven will take care of itself. It’s the earth that is in need of repair.

And who else does Sanders mention as support for his socialistic secular platform? Well, it’s a man of deep religious faith, who too, is a product of the Social Gospel movement, who led not only the civil rights movement, but who clearly advocated a corrective to capitalism by democratic socialistic means - the man we commemorate today – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sanders often quotes King who said in 1968, “This country has socialism for the rich, and rugged individualism for the poor.”

Yet, King knew, with his full-time effort confronting civil rights and racism, that to confront head-on the disparity of the wealth in America would be touchy even for him.

After all, he had been falsely accused of being a Communist from the very beginning. The FBI’s long file on King, was titled just that – “MLK, Communist.”

Oh, King had done graduate studies on Marx’s socialism, and on communism efforts in the Soviet Union and China, and rejected them all. But as early as 1952 he told Coretta his wife, “you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic...capitalism started out with a noble and high motive...but like most human systems it fell victim to the very thing it was revolting against.” And he added that it must be humanized.

At the March On Washington in 1963, before a quarter of a million of our citizens’ seeking redress for their grievances, King does mention economics in the early part of his most famous “I have a Dream” speech. But he does it obliquely and it is often overlooked.

So, let me highlight that section. “In a sense”, King says, “we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. It was a promissory note guaranteed by our Constitution’s ‘unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ Obviously, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So, we have come to cash this check in.”

Now five years later, after having also taken on the leadership of the Poor People’s Campaign, King still knew money issues were a threat to the rich and the powerful and he was hesitant to antagonize them further. He had already angered President Johnson for speaking out against the war in Vietnam. White moderates were criticizing him for pushing things too fast, and the emerging Black Power movement was criticizing King’s, turn the cheek, non-violent approach, as outdated. Threats to his life were also a daily occurrence. It seemed in 1968, everyone was on his back, instead of protecting it!

Still, he knew he had to make his voice very clear regarding economic justice. And he did! “Call it democracy,” he said before the Negro Labor Council, “or call it

democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth with this country for God's children." "We need a new economic bill of rights." "I am now convinced that the simplest approach to poverty is to abolish it directly (with) the guaranteed income. This program of direct cash would benefit all the poor, including the two-thirds of them who are white. The curse of poverty has no justification in our age." (Andrew Yang, now running for President would certainly agree.)

And the equation between the have and have nots was only getting worse since King. Today the average CEO receives 373 times more pay than average worker's salary, and the average American dying today will be \$62,000 in debt, due to no increase in salary for the last forty years. Only the narrow top percent got a raise. But back to Dr. King.

In February of that same year, the 1300 black garbage workers of Memphis, Tennessee had struck due to the impossible and denigrating worker conditions. Despite working full time, they lived in poverty. They had no benefits, no insurance, and often suffered injuries. They worked all day in filth, but the city of Memphis didn't even provide them with gloves, or uniforms, or even a place to shower. The city refused to update their out dated equipment, or allow the workers to unionize, or give assistance for accidents on the job, and always they were referred to as boys by their white bosses.

King decided to go to Memphis, despite the advice of his board, in support of the sanitation worker's strike and he led several protest marches there, in spite of the abuse the strikers and he received.

As the strike continued, the sanitation workers had managed to unite most of the black citizens of Memphis for city-wide gathering, and had asked if King would come again and be the main speaker. Again, King said yes, again against the advice of his staff. Fifteen thousand gathered in The Temple Church of God in Christ. It was largest indoor meeting of the civil rights movement, and King was touched, testifying, "you are doing in Memphis what I hope to do with the Poor People's Campaign (nationally.)

They sang old hymns, now converted for the labor movement and, of course, We Shall Over Come, which now signaled that by **we**, it meant **we** are the people who are going to bring justice about, as if to say we can't wait for divine intervention.

King long believed we citizens of the USA needed a radical revolution in equality, and that was what the civil rights campaign was all about. Social justice for all. And

now in Memphis, with the garbage workers, he said we need to “shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.” So, like Roosevelt, King attacked those problems at the bottom first. And what was needed at the bottom was a livable wage for the sanitation workers. That was their secular need and it would bring health and respect to their lives.

“No labor,” King knew, “is really menial unless you are not getting adequate wages.”

King was now working for economic freedom for all – a political, secular, healthy economy. He was visioning a new economy, a democratic socialism, that at its heart meant “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs,” which in spirit was a kind of a voluntary socialism practice in early Christianity.

And King also felt more at home with his down to earth secular work effort, feeling more in sync with his life’s original calling. He had chosen the ministry, after all, because as he said, he had “an inescapable urge to serve society. My call to the ministry was not a miraculous, or supernatural something; on the contrary, it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity.”

Early on, after he was ordained in the ministry, he realized regretfully that “many ministers preached only about the afterlife, rather than about what role the church could play in improving present day society.”

Yes, Martin, many of us clergy have been so heavenly minded we have been no earthly good, and we need to get back down in the city streets to work on earth for the common good. Yes, ministers, church members, can certainly still have faith in what ever is beyond this world, but their primary calling is for service in this secular world. That, again, was what the Protestant Social Gospel movement was all about.

And in this secular work, King welcomed all. “I would be the last to condemn the thousands of sincere and dedicated people outside the churches who have labored unselfishly through various humanitarian movements to cure the world of social evils, for I would rather a man be a committed humanist than and uncommitted Christian.”

King sounded like, James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote in his Biblical letter: “What does it profit, my friends, if a person says that they have faith but have not works? If a brother or sister is ill clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to him, go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”



That is also why I felt called into the Christian ministry. I, too, had thought that the first coming of Christ was more than a sufficient revelation for any of us to understand how humanely we must now live out our lives on this earth. What more was needed?

Besides, I held no special keys to the Kingdom of Heaven beyond this world, but I had one current question over these many years in the pulpit - "Are we churches loving this world enough? Enough as did him whose name we bear?"

King and Roosevelt both knew Jesus' moral goodness, his ethical behavior on how we are to love our neighbors, even our enemies, referred not to some supernatural destiny but to everyday living on this earth.

And that's why King decides to return again to Memphis, to be with the poor black garbage strikers. Their secular lives, their bodies, really mattered to him besides their souls. King was exhausted from traveling on behalf of his Poor People's Campaign. Later on, they were to have a massive Poor People's March on Washington. He was probably concerned about that next step as he waited at the airport. The plane to Memphis that he was to travel on was still being delayed and search, because of a bomb threat.

Memphis was also on a tornado alert as well. Twelve had already been killed due to the weather. King had a fever and sore throat, and thought to cancel. But two thousand strike supporters had come to listen to him. As it turned out, it would be his last public speech. The time was 9:30 pm when Ralph Abernathy, his closest friend, introduced him, and without notes, King stood up and said, "Thank you very kindly, my friends."

Go to the internet, to King's last speech. It is easily found there, and it is incredible!!

Let me, in closing, end with a couple of paragraphs from it describing clearly King's spiritual secular faith journey. "Friends," he says,

"It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk, and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

And finally, the wrenching benediction of his last words.

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will, and He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that WE as a people will get to the promised land.”

It is again a secular WE King was declaring, and the promised land meant the beloved community on earth. Not a new Jerusalem, but a new Memphis, and a new and just garbage department, without ‘boys’ working there, only respectful men and women.

The next day Martin Luther King, Jr would be dead at 39. He had stood up to his given faith that we are all made in God’s image, all created equal, and that is why it was without despair, even if it were to be that his life would end here, that he would be murdered while working for the welfare of the garbage haulers of Memphis, I expect, I am sure, that his soul would be at rest. In Memphis, King had fulfilled his ministerial calling, faithfully. He was a religious secularist.

Yet it needs to be said clearly, King would never deny the existence of God, whom he felt was present in all of our lives as a benevolent enabler. As he said, “I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has a cosmic companionship. Behind the harsh appearance of the world there is a benign power.” And it is eternal love.

And so, he remains here with us today at Harbor, with a spirituality fully committed to a secular ministry on this earth. And may there be more like him, all for the sake of this world’s everlastingness. For if we are to responsibly meet the great crisis that our planet is now facing, the world family will have to adopt a democratic socialized work-plan that King envisioned, if we are to be saved. So be it. Amen!

