

Lecture Twenty-Two

From Slavery to Martin Luther King

Scope: It has been said that the songs of African slaves in the United States, often referred to as *spirituals*, provided a way for slaves to survive under intolerable conditions while proclaiming the blatant contradiction between a liberator God and their masters. Beginning with the songs and the courage of those who would “steal away to Jesus” to sing them, we will then turn to the most famous African-American Christian leader, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. King was educated in theology and pastored his entire adult life. His belief that American ideals, if lived out, are consonant with Christian values was guided by his prophetic vision of just how imperfectly Americans lived out the values they professed. Although King borrowed mightily from the example of Gandhi, he incorporated what he learned into his vision of the Promised Land, the peaceable kingdom.

Outline

- I. Beginning in 1619, Africans were imported into what is now the United States as slaves.
 - A. They were not Christians.
 - B. Unlike in other parts of the New World, slaveholders brought about the conversion of their captives to Christianity.
 - C. Over time, slaves came to a view of Christianity that was different from that of the white slave owners.
 - D. We know about some developments of Christianity among African Americans from the songs they sang, which were largely written down after the end of slavery.
 1. While slaves received a white form of Christianity from their masters and their preachers, some slaves who could read had very different takes on Christianity.
 2. A passage such as Paul’s “slaves, obey your masters” may have been part of what slaves heard from whites, but they discovered or found different meanings for Christ’s and Paul’s teachings about human dignity and true freedom.

3. Slaves would sometimes meet in the woods away from the masters and sing and hear about Christianity that addressed who they were. As one of their songs suggested, they would “steal away to Jesus.”
4. They saw in the story of the Exodus that God favors the oppressed and will lead people to freedom from their oppressors.
 - a. The most famous of all the spirituals is “Go Down, Moses,” a hopeful retelling of the Exodus story.
 - b. Songs that refer to crossing over the Jordan River into the Promised Land had historical meaning and signified going to heaven but also suggested freedom across the slaves’ own Jordan, the Ohio. One of the most famous of these spirituals is “Deep River.”
5. Some songs reassured the slaves that God sees and knows all and that the masters will have to face God and be judged for their sins.
 - a. “I Gotta Shoes” suggests that not everyone who talks about heaven will get there.
 - b. “The Welcome Table” even suggests that the slaves will report to God what the masters are up to.
6. Some of the songs are rooted in all-too-common situations that slaves had to endure (for example, “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child”).
7. Slaves identified with the suffering and crucified Christ.
 - a. One mournful song asked, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”
 - b. Still, such stories as the Exodus and, especially, Christ’s Passion brought hope to the slaves. Hence, one song about all the troubles that people experience ends with the words “Glory Hallelujah.”
8. The Christianity of the slaves helped them to live through horrific circumstances while never letting them forget just how intolerable their conditions were and giving them hope for a better future.

II. Separate black denominations were established in the North before the Civil War, and after the Civil War, numerous black churches were established in the South, some with northern support.

- A. For the next century, black churches, especially in the South, provided for much more than the spiritual well-being of their members.
 - 1. Many denominations and individual churches established schools and colleges that offered blacks their best hope for receiving an education and moving up.
 - 2. Many of those colleges still exist, primarily in the South, and are known as HBCUs, historically black colleges and universities; these include such well-known institutions as Fisk University and Morehouse and Spelman Colleges.
 - 3. Black churches established social networks and provided safe places for blacks to meet and discuss important matters beyond the ears of whites.
- B. Although there was a great variety of black churches and some of these churches seemed somewhat comfortable in a world of Jim Crow laws, many churches and their leaders were also often in the forefront of efforts to advance blacks' pursuit of justice, fired by the words of Jesus and the writings and actions of the Old Testament prophets.

III. It is important to remember to what extent the civil rights movement was rooted in the Christian values of dignity and freedom.

- A. When we think of the great leaders of the civil rights movement, many were, in fact, clergy. They include such figures as the Reverend Ralph Abernathy and the Reverend Jesse Jackson.
- B. Further, many churches served as the locations for mass meetings and starting points for marches.
 - 1. The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham are a part of the history of the civil rights movement.
 - 2. Many of us have seen, in such films and television series as *Eyes on the Prize*, the prayer meetings before marches in Selma and elsewhere.

IV. The most famous of the great African American pastors was Martin Luther King, Jr., who had a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University, as well as a divinity degree from Crozer Divinity School, and who spent almost his entire adult life as a pastor and as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

- A. King was born in Atlanta in 1929, the son of a pastor.
- B. His education in Christianity came from being a pastor's son as much as a theology student.
- C. His theological training allowed him to study modern Christian thought and to use such authors as Karl Barth, Walter Rauschenbach, and a host of other Christian writers to articulate and expand the traditions he inherited from his experiences in African American churches.
- D. He also was able to learn from non-Christians, as so many important Christian thinkers in the past, including Augustine, had done. In particular, King employed some of the practices and ideas of Gandhi.
- E. King constantly quoted the prophets of the Old Testament, especially texts about the call for justice.
 - 1. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, he quotes Isaiah when he tells of his dream that every valley will be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low.
 - 2. His most often quoted passage in scripture was probably Amos 5:24: "Let justice roll like a river."
- F. King recognized that Christians must be concerned not only with people's souls but also with "the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them."
- G. For King, peace was more than lack of violence; true peace required justice.
- H. The dream that King spoke about on August 28, 1963, is, as he said, deeply rooted in the American dream.
 - 1. King believed in the basic values of America and called Americans to live them out.
 - 2. Toward the end of his life, he became more critical of the America he lived in, especially the war in Vietnam and the country's gross economic inequalities.
- I. It is important to remember that Reverend King's—Brother Martin's—last public words were: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Essential Reading:

Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., including “I Have a Dream” and the speech delivered April 3, 1968, in Memphis, in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Supplementary Reading:

Noel Erskine, *King among the Theologians.*

Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South.*

Questions to Consider:

1. How can we use songs and other religious expressions (art, for example) to find deep Christian values?
2. How can we imagine slaves being both soothed (there is a balm in Gilead) and moved to action by the words of Jesus and the prophets?
3. Are there still prophets, and should we consider Martin Luther King to be one of the prophets of our era?