

## CHAPTER 3

### THE “REVEREND” IN REV. DR. KING

**B**lack voters, and black women voters in particular, are the most likely voters in the American electorate to vote Democratic. That’s not surprising and is often commented on in our public discourse. Yet when it comes to faith and politics, the American electorate is often broken down by pollsters via a racialized lens into the following subcategories of “Christian”: white evangelical Protestant, white mainline Protestant, Catholic, black Protestant, and other Christians. There was endless, mind-numbing commentary about the 81% of white evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump in 2016, according to exit polls. But of the categories I mentioned, white evangelicals are considered the most loyal religious bloc to any party. Yet, according to a pre-election survey, 90% of black Protestants planned to vote for Hillary Clinton and just 3% for Donald Trump.<sup>29</sup>

American public discourse has a racist tendency to emphasize the religious motivations of white Christians and deemphasize the religious motivations of black Christians. Any discussion of American politics that highlights the “black vote” and the “white evangelical vote” as two constituencies is picking and choosing whose faith matters and is warping our public imagination of Christianity in favor of conservative Christians.

In 2014 a special issue of *Smithsonian Magazine* listed the one hundred most significant people in United States history. In that list was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And along with George Washington, he was the only American leader to have his birthday recognized as a federal holiday. But, curiously, *Smithsonian* categorized King under the heading of “Rebels & Resisters” alongside Robert E. Lee, Thomas Paine, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.<sup>30</sup> While listing confederates in the same category as civil rights activists can make a progressive wince, what is also striking about King in this category is that he was the only clergyperson.

In a separate category listing “Religious Figures,” *Smithsonian* did not list King, but featured eleven white people, among them Mormon leader Joseph Smith, Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, and evangelist Billy Graham. Billy Graham was frequently called “America’s pastor,” which didn’t come with a rebel or resister label, nor did those eleven figures significantly disrupt power systems in the United States.

The Rev. Dr. King is most often viewed today as an activist rather than a religious figure, even though his lifelong profession

was that of church pastor. Erasing King's religiosity isn't some kind of anomaly but part of this racist tradition of whom we label "religious" today. This tradition extends back before King to the time period discussed in the previous chapter.

At the same time as the Rauschenbusch-inspired Social Gospel movement, a parallel but distinct stream in black churches in the United States moved toward developing a black social gospel movement.

Black church ministers drew on the tradition of abolitionist Christianity and asked, "What would a new abolition now be?" According to Union Theological Seminary professor Gary Dorrien, who has written a two-volume series on the black social gospel, "Abolitionism had come and gone. The Civil War had come and gone. Now Reconstruction had come and gone, and now they had to ask, 'What would an abolitionist tradition mean now? Because we're in as terrible a crisis as we ever were. Everything that we dreamed of has already come and gone, and yet look where we are.'"<sup>31</sup>

It is the black social gospel that led directly to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. "First, many people talk about the civil rights movement as though religion is secondary, just an undercurrent," Dorrien said in an interview. "There are ways of telling the story, and they got into the public school textbooks and the media, as though it's basically a political movement. That is just not true. I mean, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference leaders were ministers. They're every-week preachers, and the gospel is foundational for them. King

couldn't have been clearer or more emphatic about what was holding him in his struggle and helping him to go on. It's not some political goal. It's the gospel."<sup>32</sup>

One reason Dorrien wrote a two-volume set of books on the black social gospel is because "it corrects a secularizing way of telling this story, but then it also flips it to another way, with a strong social justice aspect. It's not this comfortable, nice, church world, 'Oh, we're just trying to be nice' kind of 'Christianity.' No, that is not it either. The King that some young people have heard about all their lives is the plaster saint who was a noble idealist. Correcting that has become part of our business as well—just saying, 'No, this is what this movement really was and still is.' It's [also now] the Moral Mondays movement. It's Rev. [William] Barber. He's straight out of this."<sup>33</sup>

Why do we think of religion in terms of whiteness? Racism, yes. But also because the dominant narrative of Christianity as a conservative movement is irreconcilable when we see the civil rights movement as a religious movement as well. Civil rights and social activism—for the dominant conservative Christian narrative—are the province of the "secular left." When such dismissive labels are created, the religiosity of Rev. Dr. King is actively discarded. Meanwhile, in largely secular spaces on the left, we see another layer of ambivalence about religion that doesn't herald the Rev. Dr. King as a religious figure for fear of associating a movement of justice with fundamentalist religion or "backward religious types."

It's simply impossible to study Dr. King and omit the "Reverend" from his title. His doctorate was not in public policy or

critical race theory, but in systematic theology. At fifteen he went to college at Morehouse, then he went to seminary, then he completed his doctorate at Boston University. He was born a preacher's kid, pursued the ministry from an

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early age, and was assassinated as a preacher. The civil rights movement as a whole was fueled by the black church and led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a minister-led organization. The civil rights movement wasn't just the most consequential *activism* of the twentieth century in the United States; it was the most important *religious* movement. And Rev. Dr. King is the most influential clergyperson in American history.

On one hand, Americans downplay King's religiosity; on the other we de-radicalize him. In our public imagination, he and the entire civil rights movement are often reduced to the person who taught white people and black people to get along nicely. King was a radical and a religious radical who rooted his "extremism" in the fullest realization of following Jesus Christ.

Rev. Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a sacred text just like the Pauline Epistles for progressive Christians. In his letter, he expresses that his greatest disappointment lies not with the explicit racist KKK member, but rather with the moderate white Southerners who hold back social progress. And King makes a theological justification against moderation:

Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God."<sup>34</sup>

To some, "extremist" can be a slur, but the degree of devotion to our causes isn't the problem. It's the righteousness of the cause that itself determines the degree of our devotion to the cause. The nature of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Gospels is never a moderate one. Every chance Jesus has to draw a stark line to show what the kingdom of God looks like, he takes the chance. Jesus tells people to leave behind their families and their entire lives to follow him. While many moderate Christians have made excuses in defense of their moderation, they are hard-pressed to find in the Gospels an example of Jesus saying, "I believe in this cause, but only so far as to cost me little or nothing." King rightly places the civil rights movement in the long line of extremism for bringing about the kingdom of God on earth as it is heaven.

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" a rich young ruler asked Jesus (Mark 10:17). Many conservative Christians offer an easy answer for that question, claiming that obtaining eternal life is about "right belief." But Jesus's answer is an extreme upending of a moderate way of life. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). The idea of selling everything he owned to follow Jesus upset the man because "he had many possessions," the Gospel writer tells us (Mark 10:22). This story provides a clue to what the early Jesus movement was encountering: people resisted Jesus's extremist message of love, justice, and peace. They didn't want to upset the status quo. After the rich young ruler leaves, Jesus startles his disciples with this comment: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23).

There is no more radical message than this. Jesus tells his own followers—or his "base," as we might say today—that they need to give up everything or they are not truly following him. In the Acts of the Apostles, the writer Luke gives us a similar message in the story of two early followers, Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of their property to donate the money to the movement, but they didn't give *all* of the money from the sale. The leader of the movement, Peter, responds with harsh words "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this

deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" (Acts 5:3–4). Hearing this, Ananias falls down and dies. Sapphira quickly meets the same fate. To de-radicalize the story, to make it anything other than extreme, is to reduce the clear message of the early church.

Rev. Dr. King's radical message echoes that of Jesus and the movement that followed him. This was the radical love and embodiment of the "Beloved Community" that Rev. Dr. King called the South and the entire nation to embrace. "Jesus Christ was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment," he wrote. "Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."<sup>35</sup>

Not only was the civil rights movement one of the most important progressive religious movements in American history; it also brought about a negative and destructive reaction from conservative Christians. As the civil rights movement advanced, conservative Christians organized against what they viewed as "government overreach," which for them meant the weakening of white supremacy.

Many political observers today portray abortion as the main issue that gave conservative Christians the impetus to organize in the 1960s and 1970s, but that's a severe rewriting of history and covers up the real story of how a reactionary movement against the civil rights movement provided the fuel for the religious right.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was heralded by progressive Christians and many other Americans as a huge advance for social justice, but it didn't satisfy conservative Christians. By the 1960s, conservative

Christians started opening segregation academies, private schools in the South opened by white parents to avoid desegregated public schools like Jerry Falwell's Lynchburg Christian Academy. It was a move by conservative Christians to keep their children "pure" and away from black students, progressives, and those who taught the "anti-God" science of evolution.

Randall Balmer, a historian studying the origins of the conservative Christians' rise in the United States, points to 1969 as a turning point. In May of that year, a group of black parents in Holmes County, Mississippi, sued the Treasury Department to stop three segregation academies from obtaining tax-exempt status. In 1970 President Richard Nixon ordered the Internal Revenue Service to adopt a new policy denying segregation academies tax-exempt status, and a federal court upheld the decision in 1971. Bob Jones University didn't drop its ban on interracial dating until 2000 and didn't regain its tax-exempt status until 2017. Bob Jones University administrator Elmer L. Rumminger told Balmer in an interview for *POLITICO Magazine* that the IRS actions "alerted the Christian school community about what could happen with government interference . . . That was really the major issue that got us all involved."<sup>36</sup>

While explicit racism on the part of conservative Christian leaders came in reaction to the civil rights movement, a less noticed but perhaps even more influential change was the racism of white Americans who fled cities rather than have their children go to school with black children. The "white flight" that built suburban America was also the societal change that built

the evangelical megachurch movement. In the “safe” confines of their all-white neighborhoods and schools, what became known as “evangelicalism” began to build its empire. The megachurch flashy lights obscured the fact that these were churches created as anti-black, conservative suburban retreats.

The religious conservatives’ opposition to the civil rights nature of Rev. Dr. King’s ministry also came into focus during the final years of his life, when he embraced a broader set of issues beyond the civil rights movement’s priorities. Many of his fellow civil rights activists abandoned his efforts, thinking they were harmful, a kind of “mission creep” beyond civil rights. One of the most controversial speeches of King’s entire ministry came not in the South nor about the treatment of black Americans, but at Riverside Church in New York City as he spoke out against the Vietnam War:

As if the weight of such a commitment to the life and health of America were not enough, another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1954. And I cannot forget that the Nobel Peace Prize was also a commission, a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for the brotherhood of man. This is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances.

But even if it were not present, I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me, the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the Good

News was meant for all men—for communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? What then can I say to the Vietcong or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?<sup>37</sup>

King's commitment to respecting the God-given dignity of human life transcended national borders. King's opposition to the Vietnam War was rooted not just in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the United Nations in 1948) but in his identity as a follower of Jesus. His Christian commitment to not valuing American lives or the interests of the United States over people's lives in other countries was just as radical an idea as the commitment to racial justice that King advocated for in the United States.

King was willing to prophetically critique people he partnered with on some issues when they disagreed and was unafraid to keep pushing once he made some gains. He partnered closely with the President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, to pass civil rights legislation. But that didn't cement King's allegiance to LBJ, as his allegiance always remained to the ministry of Jesus Christ. King's critique of LBJ and the Vietnam War lost him much of the popular support he had gained from the civil rights movement. In retrospect, he looks even more like a prophet for making the case.

After King's assassination, his wife and partner in the struggle for freedom, Coretta Scott King, continued to prophetically push forward the work of collective liberation by advocating for LGBTQ rights. When she invited black poet and lesbian Audre Lorde to speak at the twentieth anniversary of the March on Washington, Lorde had this to say:

I am Audre Lorde, speaking for the National Coalition of Black Gays. Today's march openly joins the black civil rights movement and the gay civil rights movement in the struggles we have always shared, the struggle for jobs, for health, for peace and for freedom. We marched in 1963 with Dr. Martin Luther King and dared to dream that freedom would include us, because not one of us is free to choose the terms of our living until all of us are free to choose the terms of our living.<sup>38</sup>

Coretta Scott King also spoke at Human Rights Campaign events to express her "solidarity with the gay and lesbian movement."<sup>39</sup> In 2004, when President George W. Bush made a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage part of his appeal to conservatives, Scott King spoke out: "A constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage is a form of gay bashing and it would do nothing to protect traditional marriages."<sup>40</sup>

Religious radicals, the Kings spent their entire lives pushing for equality and dignity, most prominently for black Americans, but also for the LGBTQ community, for people in other countries who were the victims of the US military-industrial complex, and for the poor.

Emphasizing the Christian-ness of Rev. Dr. King is not an attempt to exert Christian supremacy against other people of faith or people of no faith. It's a corrective to the secularization of the civil rights movement and black political activism that continues today. We can see in King's own activism the religious pluralism he championed. King partnered closely with people of other faiths and modeled interfaith alliance building. One of the most famous examples is the active involvement of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Arm-in-arm with John Lewis, Rev. King, and other ministers, Heschel crossed the Selma bridge.

The Polish-American Rabbi Heschel escaped Poland weeks before the Nazi invasion in 1939 and moved to the United States in 1940. His mother and three of his four sisters died in the Holocaust. Inspired by his study of the Hebrew prophets, Rabbi Heschel's activism in the civil rights movement makes him a hero to many Jewish social justice activists today. He later joined Dr. King in opposing the Vietnam War.

King drew inspiration from Gandhian Hinduism for his emphasis on nonviolence. "To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim," King said during his visit there in 1959.<sup>41</sup> "I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom," he later wrote about his trip.<sup>42</sup>

King modeled a Christian commitment to interfaith activism that continues to inspire activists today. It's perhaps most evident

in the work of Rev. Dr. William Barber II, who has taken up the mantle of the Poor People's Campaign and revived it fifty years after King launched his campaign. Like Rev. Dr. King before him, Rev. Dr. Barber connects the evils of militarism, racism, and poverty to the causes of oppression, and like King, Barber remains deeply rooted in his Christian identity. He also follows King in the tradition of strong multi-faith alliances across Jewish, Muslim, and other religious identities.

During the speech at Riverside Church about the Vietnam War, King called for a "radical revolution of values."<sup>43</sup> It's a revolution we still yearn for and need in the world today. For progressive Christians like King, it's a revolution rooted not in some vague "progressive values" or a generic equality, but in the gospel message Jesus Christ proclaimed. The radical revolution of values is rooted in God's love that we are called to share with others, and its flowers are peace and human dignity. Following King's lead, we join in common cause with people of shared faith, other faiths, and no faith who champion the same values.