**From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King, Jr: Human Dignity & Rights in the Face of Human Greed**

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When Martin Luther King, Jr., marched on Selma, wrote a defense of civil disobedience from a Jail in Birmingham, and proclaimed his dream of racial equality on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, was he acting in any meaningful way in the tradition of his namesake, the 16th century Protestant reformer Martin Luther? Or were their connections to the unfolding stream of Protestant history merely historical accidents or coincidences? Were their protests connected to each other by more than simply the universal human resolve to stand for conviction and truth?

To ask the question more broadly, did the Protestant Reformation play any positive role in the development of human rights in the west? Or did systems of human rights develop apart from, and perhaps even, as some would argue, in opposition too, the influences of Protestantism? The 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses in 1517 is an opportune time to reflect on these questions.

Perhaps the clearest modern point to start at to make the comparison between the two men are not the events at Selma, Birmingham, or the Washington Mall, as important as these events were. Rather, the principled connection between the two men may be best seen in a speech given by King, Jr. at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. Fittingly, that was the year of the 450th anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, and it was then that MLK gave his controversial speech against the war in Vietnam.

The speech was a turning point in MLK’s progression as an activist, as it signaled a shift to applying principles of justice, equality, and brotherhood beyond the black community to problems faced by other people groups. In the following year, the last one before he was killed, MLK moved into working for economic justice, speaking on behalf of multi-racial coalitions of the poor and disenfranchised.

The Riverside Park speech, with his foray into commentary on international politics and his criticism of the Johnson administration, caused him to lose some support in the white community, the media, and the press. But it revealed that the principles he espoused truly were universal principles, not just tools and justifications for the advancement of his own cause and people. The speech is notable for its reliance on arguments about the universal brotherhood of mankind. As he said in its opening paragraphs, the road that led from Montgomery to this speech could be explained simply that:

I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This appeal to the universal brotherhood of men was a theme that he returned to throughout the speech, and again with special force at the end. He mixed this theme with a more negative critique of western capitalism that, unrestrained, caused those in the west to value money and things more highly than people. He noted that the wars in southeast Asia originated from the economic goals of colonialism, and that America was stepping into the shoes of the French who had been the original exploiters of Vietnam.

America, he argued, was also stepping into the colonizers role of using force to protect overseas investments. He called for a “radical revolution of values,” where we “must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

He then brought the speech to a climax by calling again for the recognition of the universal brotherhood of man, based on the principle—not sentiment—of love. “This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. . . . This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This dual concern of MLK, the brotherhood of man, and the corrosive affects of materialism on that brotherhood, provides an interesting parallel with Luther’s efforts in 1517 and the following years. We most often think about Martin Luther in connection with justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, and the centrality of grace. But we probably would not have heard of these concepts in connection with him if he had not wrapped them up in an attack on what he viewed as the corrosive effects of materialism on the spirituality of his age. Historians agree that all Luther’s insights into these theological matters were not original with him, but had been seen and written about by other religious thinkers. But it was Luther’s attack on a corrupt system of finance, power, and spirituality that brought these other issues front and center.

The 95 Theses themselves do not say much about justification, faith, or Scripture. But they do talk a great deal about the corrupting effect of the sale of indulgences on a true understanding of repentance and salvation. “They preach only human doctrines,” he writes in Thesis 27, “who say that as soon as the money clinks into the chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.” Also, “it is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased,” in Thesis 28. Importantly, says Thesis 36, “any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.” As far as those who sell the indulgences, and confuse the faithful about the path of salvation, Thesis 72 urged “but let him who guards against the lust and license of the indulgence preachers be blessed.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

MLK accused the American government of allowing materialism and avarice to interfere with and “poison” the American soul in its relation to universal love for humanity; so Luther criticizes the power structure of his day for allowing the materialism of the system of indulgences to blind church members to the true pathway to God of repentance and grace.

But it is as to MLK’s call to universal brotherhood where the greatest parallel between the two men might lie. Though only implied in the 95 Theses, Martin Luther was developing a powerful idea about the equality of persons before God that is termed the priesthood of all believers. Every person, Luther believed, had the right and duty to approach God directly for repentance, justification, and salvation. As these truths were revealed in the Word of God, everybody had the equal right and duty to study that Word for themselves. As both praying and studying became personal duties, there was no need for the mediating role that the priests and the church hierarchy would play between the believers and God play. The notion of an elite, “spiritual” class and authority, was set aside for a view of fundamental spiritual equality of all believers, and eventually all humanity.[[5]](#footnote-5)

MLK’s views extended the boundaries from all “believers,” to all “humans,” but it was based on the same fundamental notion that as all our the children of God, then all are responsible to Him, and have a dignity that should be respected by all. The foundations of MLK’s thought regarding human dignity lie in the universal truth of the image of God in humanity.

As one MLK scholar summarized it, King built this idea of human dignity on four related points: 1. All persons are children of God and have equal value and dignity; 2. This equal worth becomes the basis of “just and fair treatment”; 3. This dignity brings with it a moral capacity that gives people the ability to make socially good choices, and; 4. This shared image of God provides the “existential common ground” for genuine community building across races, cultures, and ethnicities, making the “beloved community . . . a distinct historical possibility.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

MLK used this shared dignity as the children of God as a platform to argue not just for the rights of black people, but all people around the world. He challenged social institutions and norms, especially collections of financial interests and power, to treat people with the dignity they deserved. In doing so, he echoed the concerns of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, the development of the Priesthood of Believers teaching, and his protest at the Diet of Worms a few years later.

But it is one thing to show historical parallels; it is another entirely to show actual historical, genetic, connections. Can one trace the development of Martin Luther’s ideas in the West, in a way that ultimately connects them with MLK, and the larger movement for international human rights in the 20th century? I believe such a case can be made.

**B. Dissenting Protestantism and the Rise of Modern Democracy and Human Rights.**

Do we have actual, hard evidence that the Protestant concept of dignity has actually contributed to notions of modern democracy and human rights in our world? Robert Woodberry, in his groundbreaking article “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” published in the flagship secular political science journal the *American Political Science Review*, makes the historical and statistical case for this connection between dissenting Protestantism and global democracy.[[7]](#footnote-7) He demonstrates a very strong correlation between non-conformist protestant missions and the implementation of mass education, mass printing, rise of social institutions, and rule of law, all necessary building blocks of functioning democracies. Protestant workers contributed to these factors, Woodberry shows historically, because of their ideology of the equality and dignity of the individual before God.

On the face of it, this seems an ambitious and even audacious claim. Yet Woodberry’s thesis withstood secular and skeptical peer reviewers at APSR, and the larger academic community. The strength of his documentation is causing political scientists and historians to re-think and re-evaluate the causative role of religion in political and social development. Previously it had often been dismissed as a “soft” or secondary factor, itself driven largely by “hard” factors such economic, political, or social class interests. Woodberry makes a compelling case that this is not so, and that religion matters, and often helps shape these other factors.

The paper is too complex to fully summarize here, but the following points are directly relevant to the issues of human dignity and rights.

1. Woodberry notes that it is not just Christianity or Protestantism in general that is associated with the growth and spread of liberal democracy and civil freedoms, but that of what he terms “Conversionary Protestantism,” which overlaps significantly with what I have called “Dissenting Protestantism.”[[8]](#footnote-8) He notes that the positive correlation between widespread education of laity, spread of printing, and resistance to abuse by the commercial and political interests of the colonizers is only connected with non-state connected or sponsored missionaries. So missionaries from state-connected churches, whether they be Catholic or magisterial Protestant churches, did not show such correlations.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Thus, those missionaries that advanced democratic structures were from churches that took most seriously the human dignity of stewardship rooted in the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This belief emphasized the importance of individual Bible study leading to personal belief and faith by all. It led to arguments for the separation of church and state, eventually systematized by Locke’s political philosophy.

As Woodberry’s puts it in his discussion of the rise of mass printing catalyzed by non-conformist, or dissenting Protestant missionaries: They “expected lay people to make their own religious choices. They believed people are saved not through sacraments or group membership but by “true faith in God”; thus, each individual had to decide which faith to follow.” These views “changed people’s ideas about who books were for. According to CPs [Conversionary Protestants], *everyone* needed access to “God’s word” – not just elites. Therefore, *everyone* needed to read, including women and the poor. . . .”[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. Woodberry’s analysis makes clear that it is not just a generic belief in human worth and dignity that spread democratic institutions, but a commitment to helping people actualize that dignity by providing them the educations, tools, and resources to do so. Along with commitments to human equality, the dissenting Protestants engaged in mass education (not just education of the elites as other groups carried out), development and spread of mass printing, the activation of non-state civil organizations, and the promotion of the rule of law (equality before the law). All of these elements contributed to the shaping of a culture where liberal democracy could take root and flourish.[[11]](#footnote-11)  
    Thus, it was not just support of human dignity in the abstract that mattered, or even an implementation of a legal scheme to protect rights. Rather, such a legal structure could only meaningfully operate when these other conditions were in place: an educated populace who could read and write, who could spread ideas and interests in print, organize societies to share and further their views and interests, and ultimately shape political and legal patterns.
2. The programs and assistance of the dissenting missionaries were not such that made persons dependent on their long-term care, or nurture, or support. Rather, it was one that gave people the ability to care, nurture, and support themselves and others in an engaged and active civil society. Indeed, after the catalyzing influence of these missionaries, other religious and secular groups also became involved with mass education, printing, and institution building, often to compete with the Protestant efforts in these areas. Many countries that developed the features of a liberal democracy soon did not require the Protestant involvement to keep it going, and many forgot that they were involved at all. But Woodberry has statistically documented the strong correlation between Protestant missions and the rise of democracy in no less than 142 non-European societies.[[12]](#footnote-12)
3. A significant feature of what made the non-state Protestant Missionaries effective was their willingness to oppose abusive colonial practices by commercial or governmental officials. It was not that the Missionaries were not “racist” in some sense, they were products of their time in many ways.[[13]](#footnote-13) Yet they did possess a commitment to the equality of human dignity as all persons were made in the image of God.

Because CP missionaries were not connected with the state, they were able and willing to fight abuses of natives and locals in a variety of ways, including writing to supporters and newspapers back home, rallying legislative support for proposals reigning in commercial and government leaders, and, in some instances, confronting abuses openly in the field.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In carrying out these efforts to curb colonial abuses, the missionaries made explicit their underlying philosophy of the obligations of stewardship in relation to human dignity. As Woodberry puts it, they “popularized the idea of ‘trusteeship,’ [another term for stewardship]—that the only justification of colonization was the ‘social uplift’ of the colonized people.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

This notion of “social uplift” may have had a paternalistic air to it, and this was undoubtedly reflected in some of their practices. But the missionaries generally did not forget that the social uplift was to put colonized people into a better position to carry out their own roles as stewards of themselves and their countries. Hence, their emphasis on education, printing, and the creation of structures and systems which would give those locals willing to apply themselves the tools to manage themselves and their countries in a world rapidly becoming much more globally connected, industrialized, and commercialized.

This is not meant to be a triumphalistic ode to the virtues of Protestantism. Any religion or even ideology that chooses to take human dignity seriously, in terms of stewardship, can support and produce such results. Protestants that were more paternalistic in their outlook and connected with state churches, the so-called magisterial Protestants, did not have such a politically significant impact in the mission field. On the other hand, at various times in history, both Jewish and Muslim groups have taken this type of dignity seriously, and have had periods of cultural growth and enlightenment as a result. The relative peace and flourishing of Jewish and Christian “heretical” groups in medieval, Muslim Spain is one such example.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In response to Protestant educational and printing efforts, Catholics also made significant contributions to these institutions, in many instances eventually outstripping Protestant achievements. After Vatican II, Catholics also made human dignity and freedom formally a central part of their philosophy of social and political engagement.

The reality is that most religious or even political groups that take this thick sense of human dignity seriously, and acknowledge the stewardship role of helping others actualize their own role as stewards, can promote meaningful growth and protection of human rights and liberties. It is just that during much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the evidence strongly indicates that it was dissenting Protestantism that was the primary vessel for the worldwide spread of these values.

Thus, the lesson that should not be lost on us today is not the alleged superiority of any particular religious tradition, but of the importance of a certain kind of human dignity to the creation and maintenance of a meaningful and robust system of human rights in a society. It must strike the balance between too much, or too mediated, a transcendence, and the absence of any notion of transcendence, the collapse of all values into the subjective, autonomous self.

Further, it must recognize that commitments to the importance of human rights in speech or on paper is insufficient in itself to guarantee that these rights will be protected. Rather, there must be a constant safeguard of the institutions that ensure the implementation of these rights: education for all, a vibrant and free print culture, civic organizations that provide a buffer against state institutions, the checks and balances that provide a meaningful rule of law—and all of this sustained in the popular mind by an ethos of the transcendent dignity of the individual.

The potential paradox or irony this represents is that the dissenting Protestants did their jobs in good part because of their separation from the state. So any attempt to enforce or even promote some kind of minimal civil religion will actually undermine the very spirit and ethos it is seeking to promote. But the state does not necessarily need to become “religious” or promote “religion” to recognize that there is a power greater than itself, a transcendent realm which will limit its own power in dealing with its citizens.

It is also a realm that can provide value and guidance to the concept of stewardship. Rightly defined, stewardship will provide guidance to create a minimal set of common values that provide the stronger and richer in society with obligations to the poorer and weaker; but they will be obligations to equip and empower, rather than to dominate and dictate, either in a hard or soft paternalistic tyranny. Let all people of faith do what we can to recover and promote the transcendent dignity of stewardship as a check and guide to the rising tide of paternalism and tyranny in our modern world.

1. King, Jr., Martin Luther, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” Speech delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, (Viewed on 10/3/2016 at http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0115-13.htm.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Luther, *The 95 Theses* (originally published Oct. 31, 1517, viewed on October 3, 2016 at http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Nicholas Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Richard W. Wills, Sr., *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Woodberry, Robert, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, May 2012, p. 244-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 244, n. 1; “conversionary Protestantism” is an unfortunate label, as it implies that only non-state churches were concerned with conversion. This is not true, as many state church missionaries, including Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists, were concerned with the individual experience of conversion of the believer. Better language would focus on the relation of the church to the state, which often indicates the ability of the church to be an independent actor. Thus, in this article I use the language “dissenting” or “non-conforming” Protestant. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 246-247. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 247-254. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Woodberry notes that, ironically, racism was worse among more educated missionaries, who had absorbed ideas about “scientific racism.” Still, “missionaries were typically far less racist than other colonial groups.” Ibid., 255, n. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 254-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, New York, NY: Back Bay Books (2002). While claims of a “golden age” of toleration may be overstated, Jews, and even certain minority Christian groups, were treated with greater freedom and dignity in Medieval Spain, especially, during the 10th and 11th centuries, than in most other places in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)