

editorial

... A Plea From the Dead!



Last April *Time* magazine printed a letter to the editor in response to the fine coverage it did on the death of Dr. Martin Luther King which to me had a wealth of meaning. The letter pointed out in commenting on many of those who looted and burned in the riotous days which followed that the "spirit of Martin Luther King had long ago died in their hearts"—long before his brutal killing. It would not be too far fetched to say that Christianity has suffered the same fate for many in this country. For at the very core of the racial strife in America lies the dead spirit of Christ who died long before nominal Christian America gave rise to her prophets who have so recently proclaimed that "God is dead."

Martin Luther King's whole life-thrust was to inject Christianity with its hardly passive, but dynamic, elan of non-violence into the very warp and woof of the struggle for civil rights. For many he was the demagogue *par excellence*; to others he was a prophet. But irrespective of whatever labels one considers appropriate, the fact of the matter is that Dr. King's death and life are replete with Christian significance.

To discover that meaning one has to search out and reflect upon the goal to which he aspired. Having done this, I do not believe that Dr. King distorted the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He did not, as so many before him in the history of mankind, take God and harness His name as some sort of auxiliary power in order to ensure the success of his social destiny. He did not see God as a respectable force that would save his movement, ennoble it, or inspire his adherents to a more spirited zeal in achieving its purpose. While it can be argued that the God of the Gospel in relation to the ends of revolutionary justice is more akin to the true God and less ambiguous than an attempt to found a given social order on the Gospel, the fact remains that in either case the revealed God is distorted. The God of the Gospel is a God who is concerned and a God who seeks *conversion*. To my mind, Martin Luther King preached a God who seeks to convert, above all, the heart of man.

Why does the black militant not see on America the face of a people who are mirrors of the God of love? Why does he see white America in terms of power-economic, social, or of more recent vintage, paternal? Perhaps, white America has failed in Christian love—or else how do we yet account for so many closed frontiers and racial barriers? Where are the masses of white Christian Americans who are caught up into the third heaven and are inescapably *involved* in the torrent of universal generosity which flows to them from the God of love

which they call their father? Is Christian the right adjective here for those who are professedly Christians, but who are without a *concerned* love for men who have black skin? St. John lists only one requisite in order that a man be said to know God.

My dear people, let us love one another
since love comes from God,
and everyone who loves is begotten by God
and knows God.
Anyone who fails to love can never have known God.
(I John 4:7-8)

And I might add, if a man has not "known" God, he is *not* a Christian.

For a man to love and know God, he must undergo a conversion, a change of attitude, a "*metanoia*" which shows itself in exterior works. Martin Luther King preached such a change, not so much a change to some particular program, but a transcendent conversion which taught that man needs man no matter what color surrounds him; for God Himself has willed to need man . . . whom He always finds wanting.

It is of interest to note that a more significant number of Americans mourned the passing of Dr. King than had ever contributed their hearts to his dream. In fact, it would be conceivable that an historian of the future in reflecting on the events of last April might write: "Dr. King's death sparked a renewed interest on the racial question in America." If this be so, he might add as a postscript, that Dr. King also died in vain. For the truth is that his passing bespoke more than an "aggiornamento," more than the putting of new wine into old skins, but rather a "kenosis," an emptying out in the deepest evangelical sense of that term, of all that is not love. For the man who cannot need and love his fellow man, be he black or white, will never "talk face to face with God, as with his friend" (Ex. 33:11) . . . as Moses did.

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