

Iran Changes the Regional Dynamic

Israel and – to a lesser extent – Saudi Arabia continue to dictate much of U.S. foreign policy in the Mideast, especially animosity toward Iran. But the Iran nuclear deal may change the dynamic toward a more balanced strategy at least in the long term if not the short, as Gareth Porter explains.

By Gareth Porter

The achievement of “implementation day” of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), when for both sides the central elements of the nuclear bargain went into operation on Saturday, means that it is going to be a fact of life in global and regional politics for many years. But will it have a profound impact on regional politics?

That is the argument both the Barack Obama administration and U.S. allies in the Middle East who have opposed it have made in the past. While Washington has said the agreement makes it more likely that Iran will eventually come to terms with its neighbors, Israel and Arab states have advanced precisely the opposite forecast, suggesting it will inevitably cause Iran to be far more aggressive and uncompromising.

However, especially in light of the dramatic deepening of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the past year, it is now clear that focusing solely on whether it will reshape Iran’s policies is the wrong way to define the problem. Far more important is whether the agreement will create the impetus for realignment of U.S. policy in the region.

Both sides have used their arguments as devices to advance their political interests rather than offering serious political analysis. The Obama administration has argued that by closing off the pathways to an Iranian nuclear weapon, the agreement opens up the possibility of domestic and foreign policy changes in Iran.

In perhaps the most far-fetched expression of that argument, Secretary of State John Kerry suggested [in an interview with Reuters last August](#) that Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had been “counting on this nuclear thing to give them the umbrella of protection over their nefarious activities, and they object to this precisely because it takes that umbrella away.”

That was a poorly conceived self-serving argument: the imagined possibility of having nuclear weapons in the future was totally irrelevant to IRGC involvement with Hezbollah in Lebanon, or to its presence in Iraq and Syria.

The Israelis and Saudis, on the other hand, have insisted that the nuclear agreement would empower the Iranians to be far more interventionist in the region as well as to continue to seek nuclear weapons. The Israelis pushed the idea that Iran would use the additional income gained from lifting sanctions to fund Hezbollah or the Syrian government, making the region more unstable and more threatening to Israel.

Yet the Iranian support for Hezbollah is a fundamental national security investment that has never depended on any additional infusion of resources from the nuclear deal. In fact, the commitment to support Hezbollah troops in Syria was taken in 2012, well before the nuclear negotiations had even begun.

Both Israeli and Saudi officials have suggested that the Obama administration's negotiation of the agreement represented a decision to fundamentally alter its alliance policy by entering into a quasi-alliance with Iran.

The Saudis have carried that theme to a much greater extreme. As F Gregory Gause wrote in late 2013, the Saudis were already expressing the fear that the United States would "ratify Iranian hegemony in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Persian Gulf in exchange for a nuclear deal."

The Saudi fear of an entente between Washington and Tehran may have deepened since the agreement was reached, but Saudi fears of U.S. acquiescence in a regional distribution of power – which Riyadh has found unacceptable – are not really about the nuclear deal itself; rather, they center on Saudi unhappiness with the failure of the United States to go to war in Syria.

Similarly the Israeli objection to the nuclear deal was ostensibly that it wasn't really going to end Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. However, what the Israelis really wanted was to reduce Iran's military and economic power, either through military confrontation between the United States and Iran or through crippling sanctions.

The agreement represents the ultimate failure of that long-term Israeli strategy, but that has nothing to do with the longer-term issues and forces at work in the region.

The agreement is clearly not going to influence regional politics by depriving Iran of nuclear weapons that Iran has had no intention of obtaining anyway. The real issue is whether the process of negotiating has created a new U.S.-Iran political dynamic that can influence the outcomes of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

That is what both the Obama administration and the Rouhani government appear to be hoping for. Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif

both suggested that the new relationship helped to quickly resolve the incident involving two U.S. Navy ships that sailed into Iranian waters. Even so, it is highly doubtful that the agreement will have a very deep impact on U.S. policy in the next few years or affect any of the intertwined conflicts that are reshaping the Middle East.

U.S. policy toward Iran is the product of decades of constant anti-Iran news, official pronouncements and opinions. The idea of Iran as an aggressive threat to U.S. interests has become deeply embedded in the country's electoral and bureaucratic politics.

That assumption has been translated into laws and programs that have created new institutional interests in maintaining the status quo. Not the least of those interests is that Iran has long served as the primary rationale for the U.S. military presence and role in the Middle East, as well as for the sale of weapons and anti-missile systems to regional allies.

Iran has also long become a major focus if not the leading target – of CIA and National Security Agency spying efforts worldwide. Obama's apparent view that Saudi Arabia can serve as a partial substitute for direct U.S. military operations in order to combat terrorism and Iranian influence in the region has added yet another obstacle to the realignment of U.S. regional policy.

Six months after the nuclear agreement was first signed in July 2015, Obama has shown no willingness to break openly with the Saudis on Syria or Yemen, despite the recklessness of Saudi policies in those countries.

The recent moves by the Saudis to raise tensions with Iran suggest that the Saudis are still hoping to force the Obama administration into a more aggressive anti-Iran posture in the region. That may well fail, and in the long run the U.S. may well adopt a more even-handed posture toward Iran to deal with the chaos that has descended on the region.

If and when that happens, the nuclear agreement will not have loomed very large in the decision.

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MLK's Warning of America's Spiritual Death

From the Archive: A year before his death, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. broke with many political allies by warning that the Vietnam War was inflicting a "spiritual death" on America, casting King outside mainstream opinion circles which called his advice naive and irresponsible, as Gary G. Kohls recalled in 2014.

By Gary G. Kohls (Originally published on Jan. 19, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Riverside Church speech was titled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." It was delivered exactly one year before his April, 4, 1968 assassination in Memphis. In the speech, King declared, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

The people who heard that speech recognized it as one of the most powerful speeches ever given articulating the immorality of the Vietnam War and its destructive impact on social progress in the United States. In explaining his decision to follow his conscience and speak out against U.S. militarism, King said:

"I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such."

But King went farther, diagnosing the broader disease of militarism and violence that was endangering the soul of the United States. King said, "I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, my own government."

Poisoning America's Soul

King knew very well that the disease of violence was killing off more than social progress in America. Violence was sickening the nation's soul as well. He added "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read 'Vietnam'." King urged his fellow citizens to take up the causes of the world's oppressed, rather than taking the side of the oppressors. He said:

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. 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.

"We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors.

"If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight."

King pointed to an alternate path into the future: "Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard?"

Signing His Own Death Warrant

By denouncing so forcefully the war crimes that the U.S. military was committing daily in the killing fields of Vietnam, some of King's followers understood that he had just signed his own death warrant. But King, being a person of conscience, was compelled to express his deep sense of moral outrage over the horrific maiming, suffering and dying of millions of innocent Vietnamese civilians in that unjust war that afflicted mostly unarmed women and children and that was going to leave behind lethal poisons in the soil, water and unborn babies that would last for generations.

He knew that non-combatants are always the major victims of modern warfare, especially wars that indiscriminately used highly lethal weapons that rained down from the air, especially the U.S. Air Force's favorite weapon, napalm, the flaming, jellied gasoline that burned the flesh off of whatever part of the burning adult or child it splashed onto.

King also connected the racist acts (of American soldiers joyfully killing dispensable non-white "gooks" and "slants", often shooting at "anything that

moves”) on the battlefields of Southeast Asia to the oppression, impoverishment, imprisoning and lynching of dispensable, deprived non-white “niggers” in America.

King saw the connections between the violence of racism and the violence of poverty. He saw that the withholding of economic and educational opportunities came from the fear of “the other” and the perceived need to protect the white culture’s wealth and privilege with violence if necessary.

King knew, too, that fortunes are made in every war, and the war in Vietnam was no exception. In his speeches, he talked about that unwelcome reality that the ruling class preferred not be discussed. That meant his well-attended Riverside Church speech threatened not only the powerful interests already arrayed against his civil rights struggle but also the interests of the war profiteers and the national security establishment.

War is Good Business

The longer the Vietnam War lasted, the more the weapons manufacturers thrived. With their huge profits, there was a strong incentive for these financial elites to continue the carnage. And therefore the Wall Street war profiteers financed, out of their ill-gotten gains, battalions of industry lobbyists and pro-military propagandists who descended upon Washington, DC, and the Pentagon to claim even more tax dollars for weapons research, development and manufacture.

With that funding secured, armies of desperate jobs-seekers were hired to work in thousands of weapons factories that were strategically placed in congressional districts almost everywhere, with weapons research grants likewise being awarded to virtually every university in the nation. Thus, weapons-manufacturing and R&D soon became vitally important for almost every legislator’s home district economy as well as for the household budgets of millions of American voters who indirectly benefitted from the U.S. military’s killing, maiming, displacement, starvation and suffering of non-white people in war zones.

King’s anti-war stance was based on his Christianity and on the ethics and life of Jesus, but it was also based on his standing as a revered international peace and justice icon. Those factors made him a dangerous threat to the military/industrial/congressional/security complex.

The powerful forces that were working hard to discredit King had already infiltrated the civil rights movement. Their efforts, cunningly led by the proto-fascist and racist J. Edgar Hoover and his obedient FBI, accelerated after the Riverside speech. The FBI ramped up the smear campaigns against King.

Eventually he was “neutralized” with a bullet to the head. [The case for believing that King’s murder was not simply the act of lone gunman James Earl Ray is laid out in many studies, including attorney William F. Pepper’s *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King.*]

King’s Prophetic Vision

Now, almost five decades after his anti-war speech (which was widely kept from the public), it is clear how prophetic King’s observations were. America is indeed losing its soul. Violence, racism, militarism and economic oppression are still American epidemics.

Both upper- and middle-class investors of get-rich-quick schemes in America have succumbed to predatory lenders, cannibalistic corporate mergers and acquisitions, psychopathic multinational corporate schemers, corrupt crony capitalists, and the rapist/exploiters of the land and water by extractive industries all schemes that will eventually burst as part of predictable economic bubbles.

Those busted bubbles regularly wipe out investors (except for the large, deep-pocketed “insiders” who, usually being forewarned, will have sold their holdings just in time, before the publicly revealed “bust”), leaving the taxpayers to bail out the financial messes that were created by the so-called “invisible hand of the market” but are really caused by the cunning work of corporate gamblers.

King was trying to warn us not just about the oncoming epidemic of violence toward victims at home but also about the tens of millions of people around the world who were and are still being victimized by U.S. military misadventures. King was also warning us about the multinational corporate war profiteers whose interests are facilitated and protected by the U.S. military whether they are operating in Asia, Latin America, Africa or the Middle East.

The Pentagon budget averages well over \$700 billion per year, including wars that are often illegal and unconstitutional. That amounts to \$2 billion per day with no visible return on investment, except for the military contractors, the oil industries and Wall Street financiers.

Vast sums also are needed to address the physical and mental health costs needed for the palliative care for the permanently maimed and psychologically-traumatized veterans. Hundreds of millions of dollars more are spent paying down the interest payments on past military debts.

All those potentially bankrupting costs represent money that will never be available for programs of social uplift like combatting racism, poverty and hunger, or paying for affordable housing/healthcare, universal education or

meaningful job creation. Can anyone else hear a demonic laugh reverberating down Wall Street?

King was warning America about its oncoming spiritual death if it didn't convert itself away from military violence. But most observers of the U.S. see America still worshipping at the altars of the Gods of War and Greed. Our children may be doomed.

The vast majority of American Christian churches (whether fundamentalist, conservative, moderate or liberal, with very few exceptions) have failed King's vision, despite the lip service they sometimes give to King on MLK Day. Churches whose members were brought up on the Myth of American Exceptionalism (and the myth of being "God's chosen people") consistently refuse to take a stand against the satanic nature of war.

Past the Point of No Return?

If America is to avert future financial and military catastrophes, King's central warnings about the "triple evils" of militarism, racism and economic oppression must be heeded. That means a retreat from worldwide network of budget-busting military bases. And, if America wants to shed the justified label of "Rogue Nation," the covert killing operations of its secret black ops mercenary military units all around the world must be stopped, as should the infamous extrajudicial assassinations by America's unmanned drones.

If King's 47-year-old warning continues to be ignored, America's future is bleak. The future holds the dark seeds of economic chaos, hyperinflation, unendurable poverty, increasing racial/minority hostility, worsening malnutrition, armed rebellion, street fighting, and perhaps, ultimately, institution of a reactionary totalitarian/surveillance police state in order to control citizen protests and quell rebellions.

In 1967, many Americans considered King hopeful vision for a better future as irrational idealism. He was told that the task was too great, the obstacles were too imposing, and there was no will for even the churches to reverse their age-old, conservative pseudo-patriotism and society's institutional racism. I suspect that many of the churches that called King a communist and therefore ignored him back then wish that they could turn back the clock and give King's (and Jesus's) path a try.

King finished his speech with these challenges: "War is not the answer. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors. If we

do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight.”

And he had these sobering words for the churches that are immersed in a polytheistic culture (the worship of multiple gods, including the gods of war and mammon) and thus are tempted to quietly ally themselves with those gods rather than the God of Love that King was devoted to:

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’”

Today, the task is even tougher, the obstacles much more imposing, but the path that King outlined remains. MLK Day should be a good time to start seriously reconsidering King’s radical message.

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The Battle over Dr. King’s Message

From the Archive: Martin Luther King Day is a rare moment in American life when people reflect on the ideals that guided Dr. King’s life and led to his death. Thus, the struggle over his message is intense, pitting a bland conventional view against a radical call for profound change, said Brian J. Trautman in 2014.

By Brian J. Trautman (Originally published on Jan. 20, 2014)

Most Americans know Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the Twentieth Century’s most revered voices for racial equality, the charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement, who gave the famous “*I Have A Dream*” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Perhaps they even know a thing or two about his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Campaign.

This knowledge, by and large, derives from compulsory education and mainstream media. It is significantly less likely, however, that very many Americans know much at all, if anything, about King’s radical and controversial activities related to the issues of poverty and militarism, particularly the latter.

King highlighted three primary forms of violence, oppression and injustice in American society and across the world: poverty, racism and militarism. He referred to these as the "triple evils," and considered them to be interrelated problems, existing in a vicious and intractable cycle, and standing as formidable barriers to achieving the Beloved Community, a brotherly society built upon and nurtured by love, nonviolence, peace and justice. King posited that when we resisted any one evil, we in turn weakened all evils, but that a measurable and lasting impact would require us to address all three.

King's work to educate about and eradicate poverty was among his greatest passions. In "*The Octopus of Poverty*," a statement appearing in *The Mennonite* in 1965, King observed, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it." Accordingly, "the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."

He strongly believed "the rich nations," namely the United States, had a moral responsibility to care for its most vulnerable populations, noting that such "nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed." King held, "ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation," and maintained that "no individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.'"

In late 1967, King announced the Poor People's Campaign, an innovative effort designed to educate Americans on poverty issues and recruit both poor people and antipoverty activists for nonviolent social change. The priority of the project was to march on, and to occupy, if you will, Washington and to demand the Congress pass meaningful legislation to improve the social and economic status of the poor, through directed measures such as jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, decent homes, a fair minimum wage, and education.

Alas, Dr. King was assassinated only weeks before the actual march took place. And while the march went ahead as planned in May of 1968, it is thought that the lack of substantive change to result was due in large part to King's absence. Still, a positive outcome of the initiative was a heightened public awareness of the nation's growing poor population.

Perhaps most controversial were King's positions on militarism and U.S. foreign policy. In "*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*" published in 1967, King said of war and its consequences: "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped, psychologically deranged, cannot be

reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.” He cautioned that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

King’s most pointed speech against militarism was “*Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*,” delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated. While King’s popularity among political allies and his inner circle was already beginning to wane because of his increasing public criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the growing war in Vietnam, the *Beyond Vietnam* speech was to become his most public dissent of the war to date, a war still largely unopposed by the majority.

To speak out in opposition to the war, he acknowledged, was personally necessitated, asserting, “because my conscience leaves me no other choice.” With such a call to conscience, “a time comes when silence is betrayal.” And in the present day, argued King, “that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.”

In the speech King calls the United States “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” and questions why money is being spent to wage war on foreign lands against foreign people while the war on poverty at home was being neglected, financially and otherwise. The major media of the time denounced the speech and King lost a great deal of support among his colleagues and the American people for it.

We owe it ourselves and our children and grandchildren, as well as our communities and nation to learn and teach about and take up King’s efforts focused not only on ending racism but all three of the evils against which he untiringly stood. Only then will we find ourselves closer to achieving King’s dream of the Beloved Community.

A small but important step toward this goal is to volunteer, as my family and I do, with a charitable and progressive cause on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, a national day of service.

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MLK and the Curse of ‘Moderation’

From the Archive: When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail to focus national attention on the injustice of segregation, he was stung by criticism

from Christian clergy who feared upsetting the status quo and urged “moderation,” prompting his historic rejoinder from the Birmingham jail, as Rev. Howard Bess recalled in 2014.

By Rev. Howard Bess (Originally published on Jan. 24, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr. was my contemporary, a person whom I supported in his demand for full inclusion of people of color in the life of America. Yet, as that history played out, I did not fully realize the greatness of King and the significance of the events of the late Fifties and the early Sixties.

As we look back on those events, there are an endless number of reasons why Dr. King’s statue stands on the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, and why King’s birthday is a national holiday.

I have read his writings, and his “I Have a Dream” speech is etched on my heart and mind. But I believe his letter to clergy, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” is his greatest communication articulating his cause and one of the great documents of American history.

I marvel at the document because it was written from a jail cell where King had no access to reference materials. The date of the letter was April 16, 1963, when the modern civil rights movement for people of color was still relatively young, but the movement was becoming stronger and the opposition was becoming more entrenched.

The letter came from what was stored in King’s maturing mind. He wrote on whatever scraps of paper he could find, addressing the letter to “My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” a group of clergy who had written a letter to King to discourage his coming to Birmingham. These clergy counseled patience and moderation and questioned why King, as an “outsider” had come to their Alabama community.

In the letter, King wrote, “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’” Then, he responded by saying that Negroes had waited long enough and that “moderation” was not useful in righting wrongs of segregation that had been inflicted on African-Americans over generations:

“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.”

In the letter, King called not for moderation or patience but for non-violent and peaceful extremism, arguing that clergymen, the very people who should be at the forefront calling for justice in the name of Jesus, were betraying the Christian gospel by calling for moderation and gradualism. King wrote:

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.”

Disappointing Churches

King’s letter moves on to express his “disappointment with the churches.” King was an ordained Baptist minister, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He had been nurtured and educated by churches and their institutions. He loved the churches, knew church history, and knew that movements to reform society and to deliver society from injustice many times had come from churches and clergy. He wrote:

“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

“I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall

lengthen.

“When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

“In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings.

“Over and over I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?’

“Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”

Pinnacle of a Message

Most reviewers of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. see his “I Have a Dream” speech as the high point of his career. I beg to differ. Birmingham and the letter may have been the pinnacle of his career as he confronted not simply society but Christian churches and their clergy.

The Letter from Birmingham Jail was published in leading Christian publications and in the nation’s most read newspapers. His confrontation with moderation was blunt yet gracious. Segregation and injustice were not his primary targets, rather he turned his searchlight of truth-telling on all those who took refuge in moderation.

Not many of those clergy in Birmingham may have understood the significance of King's rejoinder, but a large part of the nation took note. Many believe that it was the Letter from Birmingham Jail that pushed President John F. Kennedy to initiate civil rights legislation.

Moderation in the face of injustice has been the great disease of Christian churches. The vast majority of Christian clergy are hiding behind the mission of saving souls while ignoring the social teachings of Jesus, the one they claim to serve as their Lord. These clergymen play the game of advocating the cause of social justice but only with great moderation.

Justice was a centerpiece of the life work of Jesus. As Americans we confess that justice is for all, even in the NFL. Yet, "moderates" will never make the dream of justice-for-all a reality. It turns out that the path to hell is not paved with good intentions; it is paved with moderation.

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