



ON THE RIGHT

William F. Buckley Jr.

Martin Luther King

It is curious, and melancholy, that hours after the death of the Rev. Martin Luther King, and one hundred thousand words after the doleful announcement of his murder, not a single commentator on radio or television has mentioned what one would suppose is a critical datum, namely that Mr. King was an ordained minister in the Christian faith, and that those who believe that the ministry is other than merely symbolic servitude to God must hope and pray that he is today happier than he was yesterday, united with his Maker, with the angels and saints, with the prophets whose words of inspiration he quoted with such telling effect in his hot pursuit of a secular millenarism.

Those who take seriously Dr. King's calling are obliged above all to comment on this aspect of his martyrdom, and to rejoice in the divine warranty that eyes have not seen, nor have ears heard of, the glories that God has prepared for those who love Him.

No, it is the secular aspects of his death that obsess us; very well then, let us in his memory make a few observations:

Whatever his virtues, and whatever his faults, he did not deserve assassination. There are the special few—one thinks of Joan of Arc—whose career dictates, as a matter of theatrical necessity, a violent end, early in life. Dr. King was not of that cast. His virtues were considerable, most notably his extraordinary capacity to inspire.

But although the dream that he had seemed to many Americans, particularly the black militants but not excluding many orthodox liberals, less and less useful (freedom now, in the sense he understood it, *was* a dream, mischievously deceptive), it simply wasn't ever required that, in order to reify that vision, he should surrender his own life. In that sense his martyrdom was simply not useful. Because it is plainly impossible that, on account of his death, things are going to change.

The martyrdom he seemed sometimes almost to be seeking commend him to history and to God, but not likely to Scarsdale, N. Y.: which has never credited the charge that the white community of America conspires to insure the wretchedness of the brothers of Martin Luther King.

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And concerning his weaknesses, it would take a lunatic (his murderer has not at this point been apprehended, but he is sure to be one) to reason that Dr. King's faults justified a private assassination. The theory to which most of us subscribe is that there is no vice so hideous as to justify private murder. Even so, we tend emotionally to waive that categorical imperative every now and then. If someone had shot down Adolf Eichmann in a motel, the chances are that our deploring of the assassin's means would have been ritualistic. The only people who were genuinely annoyed by Jack Ruby's assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald were those who maintained a fastidious interest in the survival of Oswald for the sake of the record.

Dr. King's faults, and they most surely existed, were far from the category of the faults of those whose assassination is more or less tolerated, as we all of us more or less tolerated the assassination of George Lincoln Rockwell. Those faults were a terribly mistaken judgment—above all A year ago he accused the U. S. of committing crimes equal in horror to those committed by the Nazis in Germany. One could only gasp at the profanation.

Ten days ago in his penultimate speech, delivered at the Washington Cathedral, he accused the U. S. of waging a war as indefensible as any war committed during the 20th century. Several years ago, on the way back from Stockholm where he received the Nobel Peace Prize, he conspicuously declined to criticize the Ghenye movement in the North Congo, which was

even then engaged in slaughtering, as brutally as Dr. King was slaughtered, his brothers in Christ. But for such transgressions in logic and in judgment, one does not receive the death sentence.

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The sickening observation of the commentators is therefore particularly inapposite. The commentators (most of them) said: How can we now defend nonviolence? Surely the answer is: more fervidly than ever before. It was, need we remark, violence that killed Dr. King. Should we therefore abandon nonviolence?

Those who mourn Dr. King because they were his closest followers should meditate the implications of the deed of the wild man who killed him. That deed should bring to mind not (for God's sake!) the irrelevance of nonviolence, but the sternest necessity of reaffirming nonviolence.

An aspect of nonviolence is subjugation to the law. The last public speech of Martin Luther King described his intentions of violating the law in Memphis, where an injunction had been handed down against the resumption of a march which only a week ago had resulted in the death of one human being and the wounding of 50 others.

Dr. King's flouting of the law does not justify the flouting by others of the law, but it is a terrifying thought that, most likely, the cretin who leveled his rifle on the head of Martin Luther King may have absorbed the talk, so freely available, about the supremacy of the individual conscience, such talk as Martin Luther King, God rest his troubled soul, had so widely, and so indiscriminately, made.

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