

# **Martin Luther King's Religio-Moral Context: The Struggle for Human-being-ness**

**Charles Wm. Ephraim**

King's philosophical and his religio-moral convictions meet as one in his daily practice as a clergyman and a social/political activist. That is, his activism was an implementation of his sermonizing. In the final analysis, he wanted to lead us—America and the world—to a new kingdom, an earthly kingdom, which he has called the Beloved Community, and which he sincerely believed was and is man's best hope for survival as a genuinely human species. In this sense, King's conception of the Beloved Community, a truly human community, has a philosophical antecedent worth noting, namely: Immanuel Kant's idea of a kingdom of ends. Like that of the very great philosopher Kant, King's "kingdom" is a moral kingdom, in which every man *qua* individual must consider every other man as an end-in-himself, i.e., as a person, and never merely as a means. King, like Kant, believed that man is essentially a spiritual, moral and rational being, and nothing less. In this particular respect, then, all men are equal in the kingdom of ends, in this moral kingdom, from which it follows straightforwardly that no man can—or should—be used as a mere instrument or tool to further the interest of another. On the same moral grounds, it follows conversely that no one should use another merely as an instrument to further his own ends, whatever they may be.

From this conclusion, King understood in practical terms, and very correctly, that racial division and discrimination, as well as racial or class exploitation, could never be right, since each of these constitutes a violation of the very meaning of the kingdom of ends, or what he hoped for and was working to help to bring about, namely, the Beloved Community. Each of these, i.e., racial or class exploitation, or oppression, or even the encouragement of race/class antagonism, is a deplorable violation of man *qua* end-in-himself, and hence is morally deplorable. From any abstract theorizing about the kingdom of ends and the Beloved Community, King's social/political activism emerged as a moral obligation—and, indeed, as a psychological compulsion. It was his profound understanding of the social and political realities of his time, in a racist and class-divided society, combined with his own highly developed moral sense, that led to the composition of his marvelous "I Have a Dream" speech, which, in turn, led to his incredible popularity as a black man and an effective activist in white racist America and, indeed, around the world. King, in the growing pains of his philosophical maturity, came to the realization that "civil rights" were, in the final analysis, subordinate to "human rights." His philosophical and religio-moral perspective thereby widened in scope to embrace humanity, i.e., the community of Man. Thus, at one point in his book, *Where Do We Go From Here?* he asserted: "Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools." And then he expanded on his notion of the brotherhood of man, saying: "We are inevitably our brother's brother because we are our brother's brother."

Thereafter, consistent with his faith-guided belief that one day the world's oppressed and downtrodden will be free—will, in fact, win their freedom, eventually—King's radical activism—which became a virtual crusade for universal human rights and human dignity—caused his death, his dream as yet unfulfilled, another black dream deferred. King was, by any mode of evaluation, a redeemer-in-the-making. A dreamer, perhaps, a utopian, perhaps, but with his feet firmly planted upon the *terra humanitas*.

There's a definite affinity here, however, and perhaps surprisingly, between King, the devoted religionist from a paternal lineage of religionists, and Karl Marx, the avowed atheist and principal philosopher of what Marx himself has named the "new materialism." Both recognized the terribleness of the proletarian struggle as a consequence, primarily, of senseless greed, whether this be for material wealth or for a sense of self/race superiority as an ontological imperative. Both recognized the universality of oppression and exploitation and ultimate degradation and dehumanization based on race and class in a race-conscious, class-conscious world. Both men believed that a revolution of some kind was a necessary condition for the possibility of overcoming the oppression and exploitation and wholesale degradation of man by man. Indeed, the conclusion I've reached here seems to be both a logical and practical consequence of, e.g., Karl Marx's Xth and XIth theses on Feuerbach. The Xth thesis reads simply:

The standpoint of the old materialism is "civil" society; the standpoint of the new is *Human* society, or socialized humanity.

Now, how are we to construe this? In contemporary times, beginning somewhere in the 1980s or thereabouts, the designation, "civil society," has come to take on an adulterated meaning and to suggest, unless I'm mistaken, that there is a sort of *unbridgeable* and *near-ungovernable* gap between the proper business of the State, with its cumbersome machinery and responsibilities, and the *rest* of society, including merchants, entrepreneurs, even loafers etc., which is now called "civil." On an admittedly extreme or crazy interpretation of "civil," the "civil society" defenders would perhaps wish to suggest that a thoroughly *laissez-faire* world might just be "the best of all possible worlds," a world in which the so-called "Government" would have no power or authority in the business of a "free" and enterprising people. Indeed, however, the rights and responsibilities and obligations of the State constitute its very essence, its reason for being. In the first case, it is the right and obligation and responsibility of the State to write the laws that govern society, and its obligation to punish those who do wrong to themselves or to others as well as to come to the succor of those in need. One need only remember Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* to recognize that it was the peoples' fundamental need for protection and securities in their lives that gave rise to the State—precisely to safeguard them in their rights to protection and security, thereby reducing their level of existential anxiety. Without the State, on Hobbes' view, human life would be "poor, nasty, brutish and short." For, as Hobbes taught, without the existence of the State with its power and authority and multiple responsibilities and obligations to the people who *demand* it, there would, given human nature, be a perpetual "war of all against all," so

to speak. It is crystal clear to this writer that the so-called nihilists and anarchists have not yet learned this lesson.

Very clearly, however, one may argue, e.g., that within capitalist society as it is presently constituted, there's hardly anything that is "civil" about it in the proper sense of the term, since "civil," in its original connotation, entailed being "civilized." Given the contentions of Marx and King, even from different and often conflicting ideological positions, any capitalist society's claim to general civility on its part is clearly false. A society that fosters the practice of exploitation of man by man—for personal gains as a way to *self-aggrandizement* only or primarily—can hardly be said to be civilized. A society that is, or seems to be, a lawless, dog-eat-dog world can hardly be said to be "civil." Indeed, for both Marx and King, capitalist society, when clearly and fully examined, is a paradigmatic expression of narcissistic uncivility. This is the great and tragic irony of our "blessed" Christian civilization, namely: that our once-cherished Christian "civil society" has manifested itself as a rapidly encroaching barbarism, as a consequence, many believe, of an insidious, lightning-paced capitalism with its unappeasable appetite for wealth, which, generally and for the most part, entails a neo-colonialist re-enslavement of the already-downtrodden peoples and, by pseudo-legal means, a possession of their lands and natural resources, while feeling guiltless, since in the generality capitalists tend to take it for granted that the whole world is their private domain. The Nigerian scholar, Cheik Anta Diop, must have known this truth when he wrote his magnificent book, *Civilization or Barbarism*. And now this brings us to a reasonable construction of the term "civil" in Karl Marx's Xth thesis on Feuerbach, as stated above.

As used there, "civil society" designates the "old materialism," which would give way to the "new" materialism, which, in turn, would give rise eventually to a "human society or a socialized humanity." This, on Marx's view, would be an improvement over the old way of existence, which became increasingly "uncivil" with the rise of capitalism. In this case, Marx would maintain that the "human society or socialized humanity" will, in due time, overturn the old "civil society," by way of a dialectical movement as this unfolds in the concrete, the *living history* of man. The new will overcome the old as its antithesis by way of a revolution of the "sacred values" of so-called civil society. This will be the meaning and intention of Marx's *dialectical materialism*.

Notwithstanding the sometimes turgid dialectical contours of Marx's argument, King would certainly agree with him that what the world needs now—and urgently—is a transvaluation of values such as is recommended—and even urged by Nietzsche's Zarathustra. This transvaluation of values, for King, would however be in the realms of morality, spirituality, and economics. For King was genuinely concerned, genuinely pained by what he observed as a radical devaluation and pauperization of morality, spirituality, and human life itself—all, he thought, as a consequence of a rapacious capitalism. This transvaluation, which is nothing other than a *revolution of values*, would bring about something altogether new, like a resurrection of man. In precisely this sense, both Marx and King desired something new, brought about by a revolution of some kind. They both wanted, in different ways and by different means, a resurrection of the human

species, or man's species-being. Yes: the religio-moral-idealist and visionary, and the radical atheist as the cardinal philosopher of the "new materialism," desired, in their fundamentally different and often contradictory ways, the same revolutionary consequence, namely: a risen man, a "born again man," as it were, from the slimy miasma of a world corrupted by greed and governed by the all-pervasive practice of oppression, suppression, depression, exploitation, and ultimate dehumanization.

That Marx and King, in different ways, thought of a revolution—of some kind—as the necessary condition for the possibility of the resurrection and rejuvenation of man, can be shown by an examination of Marx's XIth thesis on Feuerbach, which contains the seeds of King's argument for a revolution that, some day, and hopefully very soon, will present the world with what we might properly call a de-dehumanized man. Marx presented his illuminating thesis as follows:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.

The seeds of revolutionary change are properly located here in the proposition as stated, which says more than meets the eye. Merely to "interpret" the world as we find it, Marx is saying, is in some sense to pay lip service to the *status quo*. That is, to *do nothing* is to accept the world as we find it; it is to say either that the world as we find it is all right, or that we can do nothing about it, *nothing to change it*, even if we interpret the world as in some sense *intolerable*, for that's just the way things are. In so doing, however, *we surrender to the tyranny of what is*. And this attitude, whether it be purely intellectual or ideological, is for Marx a decided No-No.

In regarding and interpreting the modern world, as we find it from the empirical standpoint, and as we interpret it, is very largely capitalist. It is a world reigned over by the theory and practice of capitalism, the *human consequences* of which, *as we find them and interpret them*, are horrendous for the vast majority of the peoples of the earth. As we find and interpret it empirically, this is a world sadly lacking in *human* compassion, a world in which *humanity itself* is an unmentionable, an inexpressible idea, a world that both Marx and Martin Luther King found to be *willfully destructive* of human potentialities. It is a world conspicuously overburdened with grinding poverty and preventable diseases which constitute the life conditions of the vast majority of the peoples of the earth, who are *forced to work, forced to toil*, literally, in Malcolm X's very telling phrase, "from can't see at morning till can't see at night" for a mere pittance, or less. But it is a world that narcissistically shows its other face, a face manifesting sumptuous well-being, a face backed by vast wealth and unprecedented power, and ever-ready to defeat and put to rest any and all challenges to its preeminence as appointed Master of the Earth. This is the face of the purely self-regarding system that controls the world's wealth and that rules over the vast majority of the world's peoples, dividing them into vicious, antagonistic races and classes, thereby promoting the old tried-and-true strategy of "divide and conquer." This is the face of the anti-human monster known as capitalism with a capital C. It is the face of what some have called "barbarism with a human face." This "human face" is, as history has revealed, a ruse, an immense pretense.

This face, with boundless wealth earned by the suffering and death of the “WRETCHED OF THE EARTH,” pretends to be bringing “humanitarian blessings” to the world’s oppressed and exploited masses while, at the same time, increasing for them the degree of oppression and exploitation. Both King and Marx easily saw through the mask, the “human face” of the oppressor, and understood that exploitation and oppression—the lot of the world’s masses—were *necessary consequences of the system of capitalism*.

Recognizing this, both King and Marx hated the system of capitalism with a vengeance, for despite great philosophical and ideological differences they both were defenders of the human ideal, defenders of the path to genuine human growth. Now, whereas Marx, speaking primarily in *economic* terms, eschewed *moral* categories explicitly, one cannot help thinking that Marx himself, like King, *understood*, in a visceral sense, that the *deliberate and programmatic* dehumanization and exploitation of man by man *is* vicious and antihuman, and hence, is fundamentally immoral. From which it follows that any attempt—by word or deed—to throw off *or destroy* the process of dehumanization, the practice of exploitation is, *in a strictly moral sense of the term*, a praiseworthy effort. The point here is that it is not *simply* the *economic* mode of exploitation Marx sees as wrong, despite his *prima facie* materialist interpretation. It is, rather, that *visceral anger and rage* mentioned above which propels Marx to espouse a revolutionary course of *corrective action*. And indeed, it is clear that his XIth thesis on Feuerbach points in this direction. If Marx is serious in urging that “the point...is to change [the world]” as we find it and interpret it, then it is because the world—as we interpret it—is, in the final analysis, seriously out of step with what we *think, or believe, or know* is right. It is precisely for this reason that Marx so passionately believed in the necessity—even inevitability—of revolution. This passion is, I suggest, a measure of the *depth of his moral feelings about the wrongness* of the capitalist system of callous exploitation of human beings, or, as he called them in his *1844 Paris Manuscripts*, our “species-being.” As a matter of fact, Marx held that the vindictive and direful consequences of capitalism were perhaps the major cause of *alienation* among species-beings. Capitalism necessitated—and, as long as lasts—will continue to necessitate a virulent form of classes and class-consciousness, and hence an abiding source of unmitigated misery for humankind. To get out from under capitalism was, for him, the beginning of the road to humanization. This would, of necessity, entail a class war, but a justifiable one, since in the end the world’s dispossessed would become free from the tyranny of exploitation. The “wretched of the earth” would then be able to claim or reclaim their human selfhood.

At this point, to unpack the latent meaning of his Xth thesis on Feuerbach is to get a deep sense that Marx’s aim was nothing short of the universal humanization of man, in so far as this is possible. Notice with care the distinction Marx makes between old-fashioned materialism and the new materialism, of which latter he is presumably the chief proponent. Whereas “civil” society constituted the essence of old materialism, “*human society or socialized humanity*” becomes the essence and focus of his new materialism. This, I’m suggesting, is the centerpiece of Marx’s *new humanism*, as Erich Fromm and others have so persistently and persuasively argued. The thrust of this new materialism, then, is humanization of man. If this is not possible, then class struggles will be endless and ominous, and our life as human beings, as a “species-being,” in the full existentialist

sense of this term, will be futile and “absurd.” This humanization aim is nothing if not a fundamentally moral aim, since the end of human life, the end or purpose of the species *Homo sapiens*, could hardly be a life of futility and absurdity. This is why, for Marx, class struggles will have to *end* at some point if the human species is going to be saved. To borrow a very fine metaphor from Nkrumah’s *Neo-Colonialism*, we might say that if capitalism, that “Wall Street octopus” continues to grow, stretching its gigantic and hungry tentacles to the ends of the earth, as it seems bent on doing, there will be no end to the class war, except in what Marx has called “the common ruin of the contending classes.” And conversely, since capitalism thrives on class struggles, the end of class struggles will be the demise of capitalism. The *Communist Manifesto* asserts self-confidently, and famously:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf...in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Marx/Engels, *Selected Works*, 1970: 35f).

In an analogous way, Martin Luther King reached essentially the same conclusion, when he said that either we must come to live together in peace, or we will die together. King’s idea of living together in peace entails the cessation of the race/class wars; dying ingloriously together *means* exactly what Marx means by “the common ruin of the contending classes. In his *Where Do We Go From Here?* King asserted:

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

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.

So here we have the religious-idealist-moralist, King, and the materialist-atheist, Marx, conjoined in a nearly identical vision of the future of the world, the future of man—a world riddled through and through with intensifying race/class conflicts. Each man envisions the very real possibility of “common ruin of the contending parties.” Both men believe, and with much justification, that at the heart of the conundrum is the gargantuan rapacity of the bloated capitalist system. Whereas Marx sees capitalism, with its deliberately built-in mechanism of economic exploitation and the consequent *material* degradation of man, *simpliciter*, King adds to this man’s moral and spiritual degradation, man’s modern “fall from grace,” so to speak. Both men, in the end, wanted the self-same object, the self-same conclusion, namely, an end to the existential madness that characterizes our times, i.e., the capitalist *ethos*, and a return to some semblance of sanity

by way of the end of the capitalist economic tyranny which strangles and stifles the lifeblood of the great masses of mankind.

Both men differed principally as to the means to the end of the humanization of man. Any real effort to bring about the humanization program, however, would be unwelcome, would be met with the greatest hostility and violence by the super-militant forces, led by State Power, including the military. Both Marx and King understood this, and spent their whole working life battling against it. For this same reason, both men were hated and despised by those whose ontological grounding consisted in maintaining the *status quo* of class and economic privilege. Although I speak of race/class struggles, they are not exclusively distinct. Though the American middle-class is predominantly white and the lower-class predominantly black, there are some poor whites (the so-called white trash), and a relatively small handful of middle-class blacks (the so-called “uppity niggers”). Eventually, then, the class/race struggles, when properly considered as simply the oppressed and depraved, the suppressed and downtrodden—in sum, when they will have achieved the consciousness of their self-same reality in degradation as the “wretched of the earth,” made wretched by the same enemy of man, namely, the system of capitalism, then will they rise up and throw off the yoke of oppression—but not before the realization of this bonded consciousness of the sameness of treatment that binds them

In sum, and very ironically, thus taught both Karl Marx and Martin Luther King, Jr., though from observably different pulpits, at different epochs in the travail of human history.