

# BIPOC\* Faith 60 Years On

Adapted from Brad Jersak's "Out of the Embers"

\*BIPOC: black, Indigenous, people of color

*"I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."*

—Martin Luther King Jr.

*"Be love."*

—Bernice King

## OVERCOMING INJUSTICE WITH LOVE

Reading or listening to Martin Luther King Jr. (or his daughter Bernice, who speaks in the same spirit), I recognize that the relentless struggle for the love he preached never passively accepted injustice to maintain pseudo-peace with people who look and live like me. Nor did he buy into those voices who espoused the necessity of using hateful or violent means to bring about true justice for all.

Rather, following Paul's exhortation, "*Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil with good*" (Romans 12:21, GWT), Dr. King taught us that *love seeks to actively overcome injustice through nonviolent resistance* against:

(1) *external oppression*, inequity, exclusion and oppression, and

(2) *internal enslavement* to fear, deception, and hatred (so said King's mentor, Howard Thurman, in *Jesus and the Disenfranchised*).

King and Thurman's interpretation of Jesus is best verified by their proximity to the Cross and its expansion of the Passover Exodus in their own history (as per James Cone's book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*).

## HONORING KING VERSUS "VIRTUE-SIGNALING"

As a white-skinned brother in Christ who rejects the assumptions of white supremacy, I realize that whatever I say to honor MLK's memory will no doubt appear *performative*—also known as *virtue-signaling*—as if the popular label "*ally*" is some heroic identity badge I could ever claim for myself.

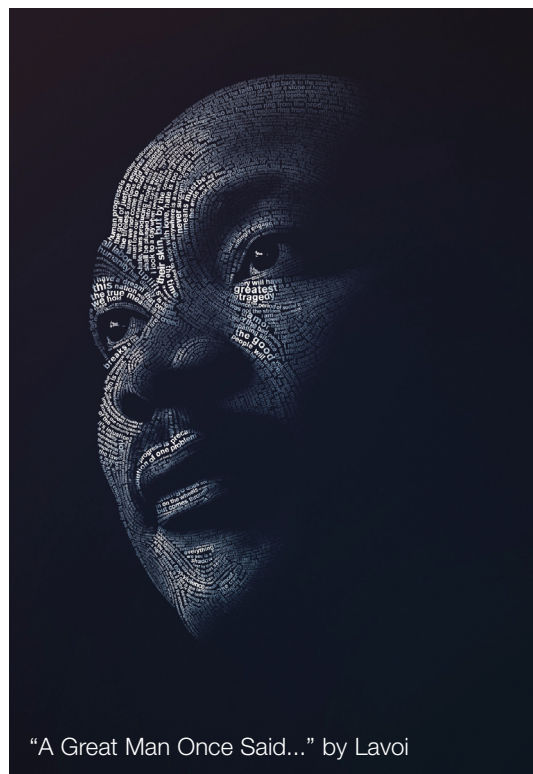
But let us at least avoid turning our engagement with civil rights into hypocrisy. Let's not co-opt King's own words to oppose his call to the work of justice. His vision of cross-shaped love included public opposition to all forms of death-dealing, whether via racism, war, or state-sponsored executions.

Better, perhaps, for folks like me to practice quiet repentance rather than massaging my guilt with platitudes. But far better still that I would hear and heed God's voice through Jesus' black

prophet of unbending love—and not merely on one token day per year.

I welcome readers to once again consider King's gospel, forged in the furnaces of Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and America over millennia. While our cynical despisers cheer the end of Christian faith in the West, I would ask, since when did the faith of the black community not count? And why would they hope for and serve in its erasure? How "*progressive*" is that?

Rather, Rev. Thurman and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "*religion of Jesus*"—the gospel of nonviolent justice and other-welcoming love—feels to me like



a beacon of *the Jesus Way* amid the church's broader meltdown.

## STOP SHAMING BIPOC FAITH

But beyond the church, I am witnessing a sharp increase in boldness among antagonistic secularists who shame BIPOC people (black, Indigenous, people of color) for their faith in Jesus Christ. I've been watching their public rebukes online and in social media, scolding black and Indigenous people of faith with condescending slogans like "*Learn your history*," accusing them of betraying their own race and heritage by naively adopting the faith of European slavers, settlers, and residential school abusers. With dripping scorn, they patronize Jesus-following people of color, presuming to correct them for being so ignorant, so unenlightened, so poorly informed of their own history that they've somehow stumbled into the colonized religion of their oppressors.

Such contempt and arrogance imagines it will cleanse our brothers and sister of religious brainwashing by, what?

*By colonizing them all over again!* And to what? White European progressivism? Godless rationalism? Anti-faith materialism? Real history tells us it was these same bourgeois elite who actually *expanded* the slave trade across three continents while condemning *all* spiritual traditions (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Black and Indigenous alike) as a "primitive" blight to be erased wherever it is found.

Yes, someone does need to

learn their history. And it is not Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., nor any of our contemporary BIPOC Jesus-followers of good faith.

## A MORE CHRISTLIKE NARRATIVE

Here's another narrative, truer to history and more respectful of our neighbors. The magnificent heritage of vivacious black preaching, spirituality, gospel music and worship were NOT derivative of their white masters—their faith in Jesus is NOT a colonial disease to be derided and expunged. History reminds us that some of Christianity's leading teachers and theologians were born and raised in North Africa!

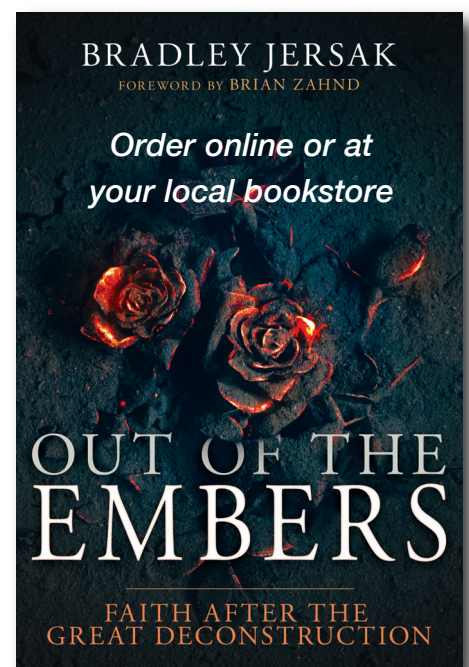
Despite the corrupt pseudo-faith of European Christendom, BIPOC people of faith resonated deeply with a more ancient tradition: the story of Hebrew slaves who overcame their oppression and made their exodus out of Egypt; Judean refugees who returned home after a long exile in Babylon, and the faith of Jesus Christ in Rome-occupied Galilee. They worship a Savior who endured state-sanctioned execution and rose on the third day to embody liberation for all, even from death.

BIPOC Christianity, in fact, bypassed European Imperialism to directly identify with the olive-skinned Jewish Jesus of occupied Palestine. His message rings true to marginalized people everywhere who suffer under a tyranny like what Jesus suffered, and they hear him announce a

Way—a strategy of liberation—that frees them from the inside out. Certainly, for the black church, the Lamb crucified and risen shaped their Blues-Gospel liberation culture. They didn't learn it from some colonizer ruling over his plantation.

To now say, "Let that go! Be done with Jesus! Be like us enlightened white modernist skeptics," is a tragic kind of hubris that does further violence to the BIPOC soul.

For the spiritually illiterate, King's historic speech was, first of all, a sermon. The man was a prophet and preacher, not an ideologue. His words echoed the voices of Isaiah, Micah and Amos. And his message of doing justice was ultimately deeply rooted in *the Jesus Way* of love and reconciliation.



*This article was adapted and edited for CWRm from Bradley Jersak's most recent book, Out of the Embers: Faith After the Great Deconstruction. □*