

## Plural Politics as Christian Discipleship: A Response to Ian S. Markham

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Ian Markham offers a suggestive proposal for public theology that speaks within Christian particularity while allowing that witness to be informed by pluralistic contexts. For Markham, Christians engage the public square as part of Christian discipleship, expecting that such engagement will form them into more faithful citizens of God's kingdom. This engagement inherently takes place amid pluralism, but this need not worry the Christian. In fact, Christians embrace pluralism because differing voices speaking of the divine is part of the giftedness of God's creation.

These two affirmations in Markham's public theology—Christian particularity on the one hand and embrace of pluralism on the other—constitute the most promising aspect of the proposal. Christians work “within the parameters of the Christian tradition,” Markham says, while also “engag[ing] with the pluralism of the public square out of [Christian] integrity, willing to listen, learn, and be shaped by the insights of other traditions.” In this response I highlight two potentially overlooked aspects of this proposal. First, because Markham's narration has a certain irenic quality, I highlight how difficult and contested the process of incorporating outside material into the Christian tradition can be. It is generally unclear in the moment whether such outside influences will prove a faithful incorporation into the tradition or not, and so such incorporation through public theology is a risky affair. Second, I discuss briefly how we might read this process of incorporation theologically by asking how the Spirit moves amid such contested processes.

To ground this discussion in concrete experience, let us examine Markham's own examples of faithful Christian public theology. In his opening paragraph, he cites the civil rights movement. While

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Markham does not explicitly advocate that approach in this essay, elsewhere he does speak with appreciation for the movement and for Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology and social action.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Dr. King is a paragon of what Markham describes: King speaks out of his own Christian tradition while engaging the increasingly pluralist and secular context of civic life in mid-twentieth century United States. What is often overlooked in King's work is the fact that his pluralistic encounters shaped and reshaped how he articulated Christian social witness. King was, in Markham's words, "shaped by the insights of other traditions."

King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech exemplifies this instinct. The speech is a careful synthesis of various ethical, religious, and political traditions, including but not limited to Christianity. King cites the biblical prophets, dreaming that "one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low." He draws from the spirituals of the black church when closing the speech: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" Beyond the Christian tradition, in the speech and elsewhere he employs Gandhi's nonviolence, drawn in part from Hinduism: "Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." Finally, he appealed to the tradition of American democracy. Segregation and racism, for King, undercut the founding ideals of the nation, Enlightenment ideals like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

On the one hand, one might simply say that King is playing to his audience; he knows that the varying constituencies that made up the civil rights movement did not necessarily share discrete ethical traditions, and so he draws upon a wide variety of sources, from Christianity to Jeffersonian democracy. His speeches appeal to a wide variety of people by giving each constituency something familiar. On the other hand, there is something more taking place. King's own interpretation of Christianity shifts *through* these plural engagements. The more King reads and absorbs Gandhi, the more his own Christianity becomes reinterpreted. Gandhi is not just an appendix to King's existing Christian thought and action: King's own political theology is being enhanced by other sources like Gandhi's nonviolence. Jesus taught King to love his enemies, but Gandhi gave him some very practical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Dean's Commentary," Virginia Theological Seminary, January 17, 2017, <https://www.vts.edu/page/deans-commentary-detail?pk=1081263&fromId=230709>.

advice on how to do that. Implementing that advice in turn informed his understanding of Christianity and its public implications. Plural encounter reshaped King's theology.

Liberation theology, Markham's primary example of public theology, engages in similar synthesizing enterprises. Not only does liberation theology borrow heavily from Marxism, its theologians often expressly encourage synthesizing Christianity with indigenous beliefs and practices of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. For liberation theologians, Marxism's emphases upon the material conditions that lead to poverty and oppression—and its recognition that those who hold the means of production often have a vested interest in not dispersing those means to laborers—sharpens Christianity's existing emphases on caring for the poor and needy. Also, like Marxists, liberation theologians refuse to wait for a future just society enacted solely in heaven, instead seeking to transform public life today. Liberation theologians furthermore synthesize indigenous beliefs and practices in their own contexts. In an essay defending syntheses of indigenous Brazilian practices with Catholicism, Leonardo Boff writes, "To trust in the religious experience of indigenous peoples is to surrender oneself to the Spirit who is wiser than all ecclesial prudence and who knows the true paths far better than the theological search for the purity of Christian identity."<sup>2</sup> Many liberation theologians foreground such indigenous syncretism, emphasizing this far more than they emphasize Marx. Liberation theologian Jean-Marc Éla rarely speaks of Marx, however much Marx might inform his work; yet Éla constantly speaks of his theology being informed by "peasants" in the communities where he worked.<sup>3</sup>

For King and for liberation theologians, such synthesizing proved highly controversial. Many Christian pastors criticized King for his nonviolence as well as his engagement with Gandhi.<sup>4</sup> Many theologians of European origin dismissed liberation theology, saying its use of Marxism polluted Christian theology.<sup>5</sup> (Marxism, of course, had

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<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, trans. John W. Dierscksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 107.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> See the editor's note in Boff's *Charism and Power*, which highlights Boff's encounters with Cardinal Ratzinger.

taken some of its own affirmations about resisting oppression from Christianity and Judaism—in this sense liberation theologians were returning neglected Christian affirmations to Christianity.) King and liberation theologians are now accepted within mainline seminary curricula, but when their works were first written it was far from clear that this would become the case. To relate this to Markham's arguments, in the moment when Christians are "being shaped by the insights of other traditions," it is far from clear how and whether those outside sources will become incorporated into the tradition. Markham's distinction between process and content recognizes this point, and it is important to highlight its conflicted difficulty.<sup>6</sup> Today, theologians tend to recognize and celebrate the content of King and of liberation theologians, yet it is easy to forget how difficult the process of their incorporation was at the time. While process and content are distinguishable, knowing the fullness of such content usually requires knowing the conflicted processes within concrete history that led to that content.

Narrating the process of incorporating outside sources into the Christian tradition is no easy matter. One option, which Markham notes in his *Theology of Engagement*, is Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of speaking a "second first language."<sup>7</sup> Situated within one tradition, an intellectual learns a second tradition so well that they can speak and reason fully within that tradition. At that point, the intellectual can coherently incorporate outside material into their home tradition. Yet human reasoning is rarely quite that tidy—we tend to synthesize new ideas with existing ones in our minds rather than retain clear distinctions between traditions.<sup>8</sup> Instead of speaking a second first language, humans tend to forge a new Creole in the moment of pluralist

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<sup>6</sup> Markham engages this difficulty in more detail in his *Theology of Engagement* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) and *Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Markham, *Theology of Engagement*, 17, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Cognitive scientists Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier write, "In blending, structure from input mental spaces is projected to a separate 'blended' mental space. The projection is selective. Through completion and elaboration, the blend develops structure not provided by the inputs. Inferences, arguments, and ideas developed in the blend can have effect in cognition, leading us to modify the initial inputs and to change our view of the corresponding situations." Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier, "Conceptual Integration Networks," *Cognitive Science* 22, no. 2 (1998): 133.

encounter rather than cleanly moving between one discrete language and another.

At this point, some theologians become a bit uncomfortable, especially those with the postliberal or Barthian perspectives Markham highlights, for such Creole potentially distorts the grammar of Christianity or the distinctiveness of God's revelation. And yet, some of the most significant Christian political action of the twentieth century came from mixing Christianity with sources seemingly outside the tradition and speaking a kind of Creole—whether King's use of Gandhi or liberation theologian's use of indigenous religions or, to add one more example, South African pastors like Desmond Tutu using *ubuntu* philosophy when fighting apartheid. Indeed, engaging the public square turns out to be one of the primary arenas in which Christians encounter other traditions. It is also the place where Christians often experiment with other traditions in the process of forming public constituencies, as King did in his own speeches. Processes of political engagement will shape Christianity's content, and articulations of content in new political circumstances will in turn generate new processes.

For those concerned with the cohesion of the Christian tradition, what do we make of such contested incorporation of outside sources into Christianity? Put differently, how do we make a case for engagement with pluralism as an act of Christian discipleship? Rowan Williams's essay "Trinity and Pluralism" provides a theological approach for interpreting the work of the Holy Spirit amid pluralistic encounters like those forged in public theology. What grounds a Christian response to pluralistic encounter is the unfinished aspect of God's revelation in Christ. Christian discipleship is a life of expectation, one in which Christians anticipate discovering more of the divine Logos across history through the work of the Spirit. "To the extent that the relation of the Spirit to Logos is still being realized in our history," Williams says, "we cannot ever, while history lasts, say precisely all that is to be said about Logos."<sup>9</sup> As the body of Christ continues to take shape in history, Christians learn more of the divine Logos.

Yet Christians do not discover more of the Logos simply by reflecting upon the tradition as it has existed heretofore, for Christianity demands engagement with strangers. Throughout history the Spirit

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<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism" in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 178.

is binding more people into Christ's body—people who are not like us, whoever we define “us” to be. As certain aspects of human culture that first appear outside the Christian tradition become taken into it, they become recognized as fruits of the eternal Logos at work, even in cultural locations not identified as Christian. These become incorporated not simply for the sake of intellectual coherence, as MacIntyre might say, but through the work of the Spirit herself.

Pluralistic encounter then becomes part of the process of discovering more of Jesus. While Jesus in Palestine was the definitive revelation of God—that is, Christians do not expect to discover something that does not accord with Jesus as the head of the body—Jesus's body is still taking shape amid diversities of culture and history. Son and Spirit are “working now to realize that form [of Jesus] in a diversity as wide as the human race itself.” What Christianity “*will* finally be is not something theory will tell us,” Williams writes, “but something only discoverable in the expanding circles of encounter with what is not the church.”<sup>10</sup> Given Christianity's own history with colonial dominance, the church does not overtake these seemingly outside aspects—King's use of Gandhi was respectful and careful; it was not cheap appropriation. Rather, Christians' pluralist encounters recognize the incompleteness of Christians' own comprehension of Jesus. Engaging politics amid pluralism is not simply a strategy for advancing certain legislative aims; it forms more faithful Christians. It pushes Christians to recognize things about Jesus that Christians would not recognize if they only talk to other Christians. In the contested realm of the public square, Gandhi improved King's Christianity. Marxists showed liberation theologians aspects of the church's political and economic witness that it had neglected. Amid the struggle against apartheid, Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy gave pastors like Desmond Tutu insights into human interconnectedness that nineteenth-century British Victorian missionaries could not have articulated.

There are all sorts of difficult questions here, the most significant ones relating to how Christians decide which outside sources enrich what we see of Jesus and which do not. Just as King synthesized his Christianity with Gandhi's teachings in ways generally accepted today, so have many white supremacists synthesized Christianity with white

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” 180.

nationalism in ways most churches have rejected.<sup>11</sup> Judgments have to be made, and how Christians make such judgments is a substantive topic for another conversation. What King's use of Gandhi, liberation theologians' use of Marx, and South African Christians' use of *ubuntu* indicate is that the pluralism inherent to public engagement pushes the Christian tradition in unforeseen directions. The Christian tradition is a dynamic set of discourses and practices, not a static object passed along from one person or community to another. As tradition is "handed on," it grows in the process of being given and received in a new time, place, and political circumstance.

I have highlighted challenges for Christian discipleship within Markham's suggestive proposal for a public theology informed by pluralistic encounter. This difficulty produces new insights that emerge not necessarily from speaking a second first language, but rather from a new Christian Creole that forms out of such encounter. This formation, following Williams, is itself the work of the Spirit building up knowledge of the divine Logos across history. Engaging theology in pluralist contexts becomes a means of discipleship. Through our encounter with others in the contested realm of public life, we find our tradition being stretched. Oftentimes, it is being stretched because there is more of Jesus for us to see.

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<sup>11</sup> See Charles Marsh's chapter on Sam Bowers in his *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).