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## CHRISTIANITY AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Micah 4: 1–4    1 Peter 2: 18–25

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It is impossible to talk about dignity without talking about Christianity. Certainly, some of the senses of ‘dignity’ that we recognise nowadays – that dignity is a matter of elevated status or that to be dignified is to be measured, serious and self-possessed in demeanour – do go back to a time before Christianity, but we can’t understand what they mean for us without appreciating that Christianity fundamentally transformed them on the way. The idea of the reversal of status – ‘the last shall be first’ – is essential to Christian social thought. Sometimes that has led Christians to reject dignity (understood as worldly status) in the name of other, spiritual values, while at other times virtues such as humility are themselves identified as the true dignity. Ruskin expresses this thought beautifully. Christianity, he writes, ‘[recognizes] in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognizes its value; it confesses its imperfection, in only bestowing dignity upon the acknowledgment of unworthiness.’<sup>1</sup>

But I am not going to spend my time tracing this semantic history. Instead, I want to present to you a single episode in the early history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in which Christianity and the idea of dignity became fused together in what I shall call ‘the politics of dignity’. The bus boycott that took place in the city of Montgomery, Alabama in 1955–56 in protest against segregation was fundamental in breaking the logjam that had blocked social progress for African-Americans for nearly a century. Its organization was largely in the hands of the existing leaders of the African-American community – which, unsurprisingly and overwhelmingly, meant the pastors of the many black churches who ministered to this highly religious population. Most prominent amongst them was a very, very remarkable man: the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, the most original and important African-American political figure in history.

African-Americans in Montgomery were extremely dependent on the bus company for transportation. In that segregated world, jobs for African-Americans, when they had them, were very often as domestic servants and thus located far from their own homes. Moreover, African-American political activity could hardly be said to take place under the protection of the rule of law. The law contained a number of vaguely-framed public order provisions that were interpreted as giving the (white) police force a more or less free hand in intervening to control African-Americans who were felt to be stepping out of line. In the circumstances, a bus boycott was a very costly and courageous action.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ruskin *The Stones of Venice, Vol. II: The Sea Stories* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 159.

Dr King left behind a record of the Montgomery bus boycott in his book *Stride Toward Freedom*.<sup>2</sup> *Stride Toward Freedom* is a political and spiritual autobiography as well as a narrative history. I am struck by how naturally Dr King uses the language of ‘dignity’. By my count, the word is used 23 times in the book, and there are also four references to ‘indignity’. For example, the boycott’s famous starting-point – Mrs Rosa Parks’s refusal to move to the back of the bus – was, according to King, ‘her intrepid affirmation that she had had enough. It was an individual expression of a timeless longing for human dignity and freedom’.

King relates in particular detail his speech to the first public meeting of the ‘Montgomery Improvement Association’, the organization that co-ordinated the boycott. He had decided in advance, he said, that he would try to combine two apparent irreconcilables:

I would seek to arouse the group to action by insisting that their self-respect was at stake and that if they accepted such injustices without protesting they would betray their own sense of dignity and the eternal edicts of God himself. But I would balance this with a strong affirmation of the Christian doctrine of love. (*STF*, 58)

In the course of his speech, as he recalls it, both elements did indeed play an essential role. Referring to Jesus’s injunction to his followers to love their enemies, he called on his audience not to let their mistreatment make them bitter and end up ‘hating our white brothers’. ‘Then’, he says, ‘came my closing statement’:

If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historian will have to pause and say, “There lived a great people – a black people – who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.” This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility. (*STF*, 61)

King’s core idea is that human dignity (our inner, personal worth) creates a claim of recognition – a claim that applies both to us (we must act on our own sense of self-respect in relation to ourselves) and to others. It is a claim of recognition, not on the basis of any special characteristics (in particular, not those of so-called ‘race’) but on the basis of mere humanity. Thus to talk about a longing for dignity should be understood as the longing to have that claim of recognition accepted by others. If others fail to respect our dignity – if they demean or diminish us, as they do most obviously if they treat us differently merely on account of our skin colour or ancestry – then that is not something to accept passively or to ignore.

The failure to respect dignity (depriving someone of dignity, to put it loosely) creates, King believes, a challenge, one that morally requires the individual who has been demeaned to respond. Yet what form should that response take? Dr King was not someone who believed that severe material inequality did not matter, but he saw clearly that, in the case of African-Americans, material and symbolic harm went together.

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<sup>2</sup> New York: Harper, 1958.

A symbolic or expressive harm requires, King saw, a symbolic or expressive remedy. But what form should such a response take? For King, there was a further requirement. Not only should the response to expressive harm be effective in neutralizing the symbolic disrespect, but it should be reparative, not destructive or aggressive itself. So, effective though it might be in one way, it would not be permissible simply to meet disrespect with disrespect: to demean those who demean one.

This creates a complex situation for King's 'politics of dignity'. The first step is that the denial of dignity must itself be denied. The boycott was not just a way of depriving the bus company of income; it was also an expression of the message that the harm – material and symbolic – that the practice of segregation inflicted on African-Americans was refused. One of the ways that it expressed this was through the material sacrifice itself that the boycott involved. As King put it, the achievement of the boycott was that the African-Americans of Montgomery 'had come to see that it is ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to ride the buses in humiliation'. (*STF*, 40)

But what is it to walk the streets 'in dignity'? On one level, it is a matter of the reason why one walks the streets. The campaigners walked rather than rode as a way of showing publicly that the humiliations of riding on segregated buses were unacceptable to them. Yet there is also a question of *how* they walked. Here the complex semantic legacy of the word 'dignity' comes into play. To behave with dignity does not mean to ignore humiliation. Yet to be dignified requires that someone show an ability to bear suffering without complaint and show self-restraint in the face of provocation. In accepting material suffering and walking the streets undemonstratively, but with proper self-respect, the participants in the boycott were able, at the same time, to express their rejection of segregation's indignities in their demeanour.

Let me in conclusion reflect a little on what we have seen. In general, the politics of dignity was part of the assertion of a claim for justice in a context of injustice. That assertion was a collective one – it could only succeed with the support of the African-American population of Montgomery as a whole. It had that support, not unanimously, of course, but in overwhelming degree. There was an instrumental aspect to the movement (the need to create economic pressure on the bus company) that required sustained shared sacrifice on the part of the participants and this created a strong web of mutual reliance that reinforced the movement as an exercise in collective self-assertion. On the other hand, the politics of dignity required reticence – above all, the refusal to counter injustice with a corresponding counter-attack. The demeanour of dignity was expressive of reticence and self-control, not anger and aggression.

In many ways, a politics of dignity represents an exemplary response to injustice in the form of discrimination and humiliation – it asserts and creates self-respect in situations where respect is denied. Still, there are difficulties. The politics of dignity, as practised by King, was part of an absolute commitment to non-violence. Yet what if we find ourselves facing forces that are so brutal or fanatical that they recognize no limits in their treatment of the weak and helpless? Of course, one answer – that of Gandhi and, I think, King himself – is that one has no right to assume that anyone is deaf to the appeals of brotherly love,

whatever the provocations and evidence to the contrary, and to act violently is to close oneself to that possibility. Yet, as Orwell points out in his essay on Gandhi, is it really one's moral duty to leave the sheep to the wolves in the hope that the wolves will have a last-minute change of heart?

But I don't think that we have to regard the politics of dignity as just a strategy for extreme moral purists. Whatever we might think of it as a way of responding to a monstrous evil that stands completely outside any moral community, it has great power in a situation in which the ideals of justice are not completely extinguished. The injustices of segregation were taking place in a state built on an overt declaration of human equality, one that was presenting itself internationally as the defender of freedom and democracy against communism. The Montgomery campaign brought home the discrepancy between the United States's announced principles and its practice.

What is most remarkable about King's politics of dignity is that he found a way to assert the claims of justice actively and even confrontationally without introducing the negative and corrosive forces of aggression into that process. In that respect, King certainly remained true to the Christian injunction to 'love one's enemies' and even someone who does not share his faith cannot fail to be moved by the extraordinary way in which he did so.