

**DREAM ON**  
**By Forrest Church**  
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Forrest Church is Sr. Minister of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church of New York City. He is serving his 27<sup>th</sup> year at All Souls. He was educated at Stanford University and Harvard Divinity School. He is 56 years old and has written or edited 22 books, including *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, and *God and Other Famous Liberals*. His most recent books are *The Separation of Church and State: Writings on a Fundamental Freedom by American's Founders* and *Freedom From Fear: Finding the Courage to Act, Love, and Be*. His next book will be *So Help Me God: Religion and the Presidency* (due in 2007).

I heard him preach only once, I and at least 200,000 others, spread far as the eye could see across the great Mall in Washington. My 15-year-old friends and I went for the music as much as for the speeches. Joan Baez, Odetta, Peter, Paul and Mary singing Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." It was a beautiful, late summer day, the flag encircled Washington Monument gleaming in the sun; the Lincoln Memorial set like an alabaster jewel in a living ring of humanity. Broadcast live by all three major networks on national television—the first mass rally ever to be aired on the nation's airwaves and until the advent of CSPAN the last—Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 March on Washington was a watershed moment marking the beginning of a sea change in American history.

By the time the program itself began, no one there could help but feel a new level of moral urgency. Even the music went up a notch, bringing us together as one people in a way that some of us had never experienced before: Mahalia Jackson with a wrenching spiritual; Marian Anderson singing, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Finally, King rose to speak. It began as a speech. By the end, from the best pulpit he would ever have, it became the sermon we have heard so many times over the intervening years. Dr. King threw away his prepared remarks and his words began to soar, in ringing cadence evoking the prophets of old:

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.*

All flesh shall see it together. The gospel of Universalism. A saving faith. This is our hope (he went on). This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

Forty-two years have now passed since that memorable day—and 37 years since the day he died, a martyr to his dream. Two generations have come of age and much has happened over the intervening years both to extend and to impede his glorious vision for America. Overall, progress has been made. The circle of justice continues to open, if

fitfully, in concert with Dr. King's dream. In civil rights today, this nation is truer to its original manifesto, which King invoked so often, than it was back then.

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights."*

By almost every measure, the original American ideal is at least a little closer to a reality for all Americans than it was more than four decades ago. Yet Martin Luther King's dream remains achingly far from fulfillment. Efforts at inclusion again increasingly meet with the prejudice of entrenched interest. Though his birth, at long last a national holiday, is celebrated respectfully, with patriotic tokenism, throughout the land, his values too often are not embraced with the same respect. Our challenge remains that of saving our newest holiday from sentimental trivialization that it may again recall us—as King himself did, in the highest moral tradition of our nation—to answer to the “better angels of our nature.”

King's memory is threatened from both sides, by the way—as much from the secular left as it is from the religious right. We mustn't conveniently forget how deep the spiritual foundation of Dr. King's message was. He took his script directly from two fonts: the scriptures and the script of our nation's founders, especially the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. In his final Sunday sermon, preached two weeks before he died, King proclaimed "We're going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands."

In 2006, the King holiday comes during an American Election year. Two years ago, during a presidential election year, this made for strange echoes and even stranger bedfellows. Watching the news back then, I glimpsed a shot of Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary singing on the Campaign Bus with Senator John Kerry—this just after seeing footage of President Bush lay a wreath on Dr. King's grave.

But most confusing, at least for those who stood with Dr. King and the many others of us who cheered him on, is to contemplate the way in which religion and politics meet in today's America, so differently than they did in his own day. Given how central religion was during the 2004 presidential election and the election rhetoric—and how it may be showcased during the elections to come this year--this is a subject I will no doubt return to. But with the footage of Dr. King's prophetic call to justice so fresh in our minds, with today's candidates playing and (sometimes) badly misplaying the faith card, and following the spate of recent opinion pieces exploring the right relationship between religion and politics, today seems as good a time as any to begin.

Let's start by returning for a moment to 1965. Here is what a young, pre-politicized Jerry Falwell had to say about the hundreds of clergy from all around the nation who marched with Dr. King in Selma, Alabama.

*"Preachers are not called to be politicians but soul winners. Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals. The gospel does not clean up the outside but regenerates the inside."*

Among the religious right, Falwell was far from alone. Throughout the Bible Belt, fundamentalist Christians took to their pulpits and decried the unholy incursion of religion into politics.

Ten years later, as founder of the Moral Majority, Falwell and thousands of Right Wing Christian pastors had changed their tune. In the political wars of the late '70s and '80s, during which the nation took a hard right turn, Falwell called the local church "the organized army equipped for battle, ready to charge the enemy. The Sunday School is the attacking squad. The church should be a disciplined, charging army. Christians, like slaves and soldiers, ask no questions."

His bellicose rhetoric then grew even starker:

*It is important to bombard the territory, to move out near the coast and shell the enemy. It is important to send in the literature. . . . It is important to have all those external forces being set loose on the enemy's stronghold. But, ultimately, some Marines have to march in, encounter the enemy face-to-face, and put the flag up.*

A new religious march had clearly begun.

*I'm speaking of Marines who have been called to God to move in past the shelling [to move] past the bombing and the foxholes, and with bayonets in hand, encounter the enemy face to face and one-on-one bring them under submission to the gospel of Christ, move them into the household of God, put up the flag, and call it secured. You and I are called to occupy until He comes.*

To liberal America, in ten short years, religion and politics—once so blessedly wed—had become a dangerous couple.

Falwell's rhetoric was far in spirit from the non-violent resistance championed by Dr. King, yet both men saw themselves as leading a religious march to reform America and save the nation's soul. And like King before him, Falwell ultimately succeeded in securing many of his objectives. (As a personal example, Forrest Church mentioned that his father, Frank Church, was defeated in his 1980 bid for a fifth term in the U. S. Senate, a loss he attributed in large measure to the political power of the Religious Right.)

As the former Sen. Frank Church said:

*The Fundamentalist preachers who occupy the pulpits of the new movement see themselves as the dominant force of the future, [one] destined to determine the nation's political, economic, social and religious agenda. The apparatus they command is commensurate with their ambitions: thirty-six religious TV channels, 1,300 religious radio stations, and dozens of gospel TV shows on commercial stations that reach 50 million viewers weekly. In short, the largest media network in the country.*

This is what makes the new movement so alarming (my father continued). Our history is replete with episodes of political intolerance produced by religious fanaticism, from the days of the Salem witch trials. But now, in an age of instant mass

communication, it is no longer a single community, but entire nations that can be victimized.

So where does all this leave us as we return once again in 2006 to the thorny question of religion and politics? For years now, religious liberals have been crying foul, even as Jerry Falwell once did, at the unholy perversion of government by faith. We invoke the founders' strong injunctions against any admixture of church and state, yet almost never allude, as King constantly did, to their equally firm insistence that the nation was founded on sacred principle: namely, "the laws of nature and nature's God" that all "are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights." Rather than advancing our moral values with this spiritual witness, religious liberals today strike a wholly defensive posture, in hopes of stemming the moral tide of today's prevailing faith.

If today's religious liberals can manage to come out from our defensive crouch long enough to do so, the questions we might pose ourselves is this. First, "How, especially during an election year, can moral issues be addressed in a religious nation without demonic consequence? Without unholy division? And then, "What positive contribution might we ourselves make to advance this process?"

To answer these two questions, we must first be as clear as possible about the difference between the separation of church and state and the separation of religion and politics. In bringing the full force of his moral convictions to the fore, Martin Luther King, Jr. was never shy to infuse his political convictions with his core faith values. Even to imagine doing so would have been impossible to him. In fact, anyone of deep religious conviction would find it impossible to compartmentalize his or her faith from his or her politics. I'm certainly not suggesting that religious liberals must be Democrats or that religious conservatives must be Republican—we know that's not the case—only that the moral foundation upon which an individual's faith is established cannot be wholly divorced from his or her political values.

On the other hand, to be faithful to the principles on which the nation was founded, while citizens may try to reshape the government according to their moral ideals, they must always be precluded from designing that same government according to their personal religious strictures. When the incursion of religion into politics leads to an invasion by the church on the state, our nation itself is in jeopardy.

Both parts of this equation—the admixture of religion and politics and the separation of church and state—are explicit from the beginning of our experiment in democracy. The nation was founded on a set of spiritual principles, unique in the history of statecraft. The founders' goal, long in the making and unfinished still, was to establish a moral government, one grounded in the laws of nature and nature's God that would accordingly (and as a spiritual mandate) extend liberty and equality to all its citizens. By the same token, to ensure such liberty and equality, the founders insisted upon a clear line of demarkation between church and state.

Freedom of religion—including freedom from religion should one so choose—is the cornerstone of American democracy. For this very reason, the United States is not and cannot be a Christian nation. Nonetheless, to remain true to the founders' spiritual vision, it must certainly aspire to be a moral nation and for this, active spiritual values are not only fitting but sometimes necessary.

In short, those citizens who base their moral understanding on the Scriptures—and they do constitute a majority—cannot be expected to divorce their faith from their

politics nor should they be made to feel that the admixture is in any way inappropriate. But neither may they be given to believe that they will one day be able to impose upon this nation their religious will. By definition, such an imposition is and will always be un-American.

Herein lies the most striking difference between King and Falwell. King, a universalist Christian, sought to establish a set of laws more just to all regardless of their faith in order to reconcile American ideals and American practice; Falwell, a fundamentalist Christian, sought to impose his faith upon the nation. To save the nation's soul, he would instead have destroyed it.

As we judge this year's candidates in local and state elections, the criterion, therefore, should not be whether or not this or that aspirant employs religious language in his speeches. The criterion should be instead, to what end does he employ such language. Does she do so in the spirit of E Pluribus Unum, "out of many, one"? Does he do so with respect for those who may differ with him in their own deep-seated beliefs? In short, does her faith inspire her to unite this country or to divide it? Candidates on both sides of the political aisle have proved themselves capable of both these things—capable of drawing from their moral depths to unite our nation at a higher lever and, in other instances, of imposing their moral convictions in a judgmental way only to divide an already dangerously divided people.

As we assess the religious rhetoric over the coming months—and there will be lots of it—the thing to watch for, even to demand, from our leaders, is the spirit of inclusion.

Inclusion is absolutely key. One need not be a person of great faith to invoke this spirit. In fact, some narrowly pious individuals sometimes have a harder time embracing differences than do their more secular neighbors. But one can be divisive from both the left and the right. What all our combatants might remember (if they can seize half a moment for reflection) is that inclusion, religious and political, is the American sacrament.

The stakes could not be higher. If this year's elections resemble anything similar to the contentious, divisive presidential election of two years ago -- when rather than "Out of many, one" our nation was reduced to "Out of many, two" -- it will be an American tragedy.

To avoid this tragedy, we need not remove religion from politics, which would not only be impossible, but also condescending. Instead, even as we continue to man the wall of separation between church and state, we might endeavor to inspire our own political witness with the highest values of our own moral and spiritual tradition, one based on an explicitly Universalist gospel placing mutual love and respect above all other human virtues. In fact, to re-establish the right relationship between religion and politics, we could do far worse than to recall the model fashioned by Dr. King.

*"With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."*

Amen. May God bless us all.