



Journal of Religion & Society

Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 21 (2020)

Religion and Justice

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Zachary B. Smith

Introduction

Ronald A. Simkins, Creighton University

For Martin Luther King, Jr., God is on the side of justice, and this gave him great hope in his non-violent resistance against segregation and racism in 1950s and 60s America. Though the battle against racism continues to be fought, long past the end of his life, he was assured of victory because “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (14). This was not King’s own formulation, though it has been so associated with him that it is inscribed on his memorial in Washington, D.C., King did not claim it as his own, but put quotation marks around it in his initial citation and treated it as if it were a well-known aphorism. Perhaps it was. By 1918, the present form of the saying was attributed to Theodore Parker, an abolitionist Unitarian minister and American Transcendentalist of the nineteenth century (Holmes et al.: 18), but it is uncertain whether Parker uttered these words in precisely this form. It had possibly already become an aphorism. The original content for the saying appears to have come from his sermon on “Justice and Conscience,” which can be found in his 1853 collection:

We cannot understand the moral Universe. The arc is a long one, and our eyes reach but a little way; we cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by

the experience of sight; but we can divine it by conscience, and we surely know that it bends toward justice. Justice will not fail, though wickedness appears strong, and has on its side the armies and thrones of power, the riches and the glory of the world, and though poor men crouch down in despair. Justice will not fail and perish out from the world of men, nor will what is really wrong and contrary to God's real law of justice continually endure (84-85).

As with King, Parker sees God on the side of justice, which may be contrary to the powers and riches of the present world. Justice belongs to God, and thus is certain, though it requires for both Parker and King, labor on behalf of justice – for Parker, in the work of abolition; for King, in his resistance against racism (Smith).

In recent history, Barack Obama popularized the quote, attributing it to King, and even had it woven into a rug in the Oval Office. Not everyone agreed with the aphorism or with Obama's use of it. Justice has become relativized. For some, King's *theological* use of the saying – that justice will win out because of God – belies Obama's *political* use of the saying – that his progressive stance on political or social issues is what is just. Some rejected the historical determinism of the aphorism, especially when used in political contexts, while others simply challenge what is considered justice. Witness how the reference to “social justice” is maligned especially in conservative circles as nothing but a pretext for liberal or progressive values (see Novak and Adams). The debate, however, is not simply between religious and political uses of justice. Conservative radio commentator Glenn Beck characterized social justice as a “perversion of the gospel.” He previously warned his audience:

I beg you, look for the words “social justice” or “economic justice” on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes! (transcribed in Beiler).

Justice itself has lost much of its content when it can be dismissed as contrary to the religious faith on which it is purportedly based. This is to the detriment of all.

Justice is integral to religion, in both belief and practice. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, justice is an attribute of God – the same God worshipped in all three traditions – and so justice can be a basis for dialogue between the religious traditions. This link between God and justice is why King, and Parker before him, could express such confidence in justice's ultimate triumph. But today, justice is contested, even within religious traditions. When people within a single religious tradition disagree over justice, are they then also expressing their disagreement over conceptions of God? Or does God even come into the understanding? Does a religious tradition entail a particular understanding of justice? Or the corollary, does justice in the public square require a particular political form? In any case, it seems that political sensibilities have become the arbiter of what constitutes justice, and religion is often left out of the equation. The essays included in this volume on religion and justice¹ will address these and other questions, exploring the many facets of justice, its relationship to religion, and its consequences for political, social, and even religious issues.

¹ Originating in the Kripke Center's annual symposium, held February 14-15, 2019, at Creighton University.

Bibliography

Beiler, Ryan Rodrick

- 2010 "Glenn Beck Responds: Social Justice 'is a Perversion of the Gospel.'" *Sojourners* (March 11). Available online at <https://sojo.net/articles/glenn-beck-responds-social-justice-perversion-gospel>.

Holmes, John Haynes, Harvey Dee Brown, Helen Edmunds Redding, and Theodora Goldsmith, editors

- 1918 *Readings from Great Authors: Arranged for Responsive or Other Use in Churches, Schools, Forums, Homes, etc.* New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

King, Martin Luther, Jr.

- 1958 "Out of the Long Night." *Gospel Messenger*, Church of the Brethren 107, 6 (February 8): 3-4, 13-15.

Novak, Michael, and Paul Adams (with Elizabeth Shaw)

- 2015 *Social Justice Isn't What You Think It Is*. New York: Encounter Books.

Parker, Theodore

- 1853 *Ten Sermons of Religion*. Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company.

Smith, Mychal Denzel

- 2018 "The Truth About 'The Arc of the Moral University.'" *Huffington Post* (January 18). Available online at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4.