

# In One Another's Light: Reading King and Stringfellow

*By Bill Wylie-Kellermann*

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**Ed. note:** The following article is based on a presentation made at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker on April 3, 2005.

I want to set two important theological texts before us. One is the reflection of William Stringfellow at the first Conference on Religion and Race at Chicago in 1963. The other, from Martin Luther King, Jr. (who also addressed that conference), is his major speech at Riverside Church, April 4, 1967, wherein he went on record against the war in Indochina, precisely one year before his martyrdom. We gather on the eve of that speech, that martyrdom. We can be grateful that Dr. King's birthday is remembered officially and in public action, but in the church it is the day of his death, the day of his crossing over to God, which is his feast.

Likewise, during Lent of this year, March 2, 2005, we also marked the feast of Stringfellow -- twenty years since his passing in 1985. His birthday, by the way, is April 26 -- he would have been 77 this year. For those unfamiliar, a brief introduction may be in order: Stringfellow was a Harvard-trained lawyer who went straight from law school in 1956 to East Harlem where he improvised street law, before there really was such a thing. He is crucial theologically, for being the one in the U.S. to bring the "principalities and powers" back on to the map of ethics and ministry. This language, found largely in the letters of Paul -- "the rulers and authorities," the "princes, thrones and dominions" -- comprise terms which had been hermeneutically inaccessible to the church, virtually since the conversion (so-called) of Constantine in the fourth century. Stringfellow would reference that same event, actually, as the conversion of the church to empire. Since that time, all these New Testament terms, so explicitly political and tied largely to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, came to be read as little more than wispy distant things, impertinent hierarchies in spiritual outer space.

It took certain historical crises, such as the rise of National Socialism in Germany, to bring people to a rereading of these texts, to see them with new eyes and reclaim the language of the powers. In that case it was the Confessing Church -- Bonhoeffer, Barth, and others. Christians in Germany said: Where does Nazism come from and what does it mean? Are we to be subject to these authorities? In the U.S., the crisis was the struggle for racial justice on the one hand and the war in Southeast Asia on the other. These same kinds of questions were being asked about the structures of American apartheid and the Pentagon. What are these raging powers, biblically and theologically?

Stringfellow claimed it was the people of East Harlem who put him onto the powers, simply by the way they talked of "the Man," or the cops, or the mafia, or the welfare bureaucracy, or the real estate landlords -- as though they were predatory creatures arrayed against the community, eating it alive. It was they who sent him scurrying for the biblical texts. But the 1963 Religion and Race Conference took their concrete application to a new level. Though his remarks were controversial on a number of scores, it was this theological take which provoked the biggest response. He said, in part:

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From the point of view of either biblical religion, the monstrous American heresy is in thinking that the whole drama of history takes place between God and human beings. The truth, biblically and theologically and empirically, is quite otherwise: the drama of this history takes place amongst God and human beings and the principalities and powers, the great institutions and ideologies active in the world. It's the corruption and shallowness of humanism which beguiles Jew or Christian into believing that human beings are masters of institutions or ideology. Or to put it a bit differently, racism is not an evil in human hearts or minds: racism is a principality, a demonic power, a representative image, an embodiment of death over which human beings have little or no control, but which works its awful influence over human life.

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Some people found this a bleak assessment. In fact, the Hebrew scholar and prophetic mystic, Abraham Heschel, to whom he was a respondent, retorted, "Mr. Stringfellow, if my people had believed as you do, we would still be making bricks for Pharaoh." That is how dark a word some were hearing in these remarks. Benjamin Mays, who chaired the conference, wrote in his autobiography that at the time he felt Stringfellow was preaching despair, but he later came to believe that he was right.

This was obviously a very unconventional take on racism. It was racism understood as more than prejudice and more even than an institutional structure. He was contending that racism has a spiritual reality to it, such that you could dismantle the legal apparatus of apartheid in this country, that is, repeal Jim Crow and . . . end of racism, right? No, it rises up and reconfigures itself in some more subtle and guileful forms, but every bit as demonic. This is a very potent spiritual reality, [with a structural dimension that is always incarnated]. That is what Stringfellow means in calling it a power.

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He doesn't, however, stop there. We best read just little bit further. This is the power with which Jesus Christ was confronted and which at great and sufficient cost he overcame. In other words, the issue here is not equality among human beings but unity among human beings. The issue is not some common spiritual values nor natural law nor middle axioms. The issue is baptism. The issue is the unity of all humankind wrought by God in the life and work of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of that unity of all humanity in God.

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Here we are offered a concise snapshot of Stringfellow's theological method, his radical sense of paradox. He says: it is worse than you think it is and you are freer than you think you are. The powers are raging beyond your control and they are already overcome in Christ. The division is an uncrossable spiritual chasm and it's been crossed. Each of things is true irrevocably and at once.

Notice moreover that by his lights, racism is the very power that Christ confronted. To say that baptism is the issue renders racism not simply a social problem, but fundamentally a gospel matter. This encounter comes close to the very heart of the good news. In that sense he anticipates what came to be in South Africa where apartheid was declared a heresy. It was understood as outside of the gospel, verily an affront to it. Stringfellow was already saying much the same by vesting the issue in baptism. Yet notice -- read closely -- he says that baptism is the sacrament of the unity, not of all Christians, but of all of humanity. This is important: he contends that baptism alters your relationship to all of humanity, well, ultimately to all of creation. These are no small theological potatoes. Turning to Dr. King's momentous speech (also uttered with Abraham Heschel standing over his shoulder on stage), he says:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Hereby Martin King names the principalities and powers; he's singling out the three reigning powers in American life. Now in Dr. King's work you are not going to find so much the language of the principalities. I suspect that is in part because the writings of Paul are not prominent in the African-American canon, for two reasons. One, because of the household codes in Colossians and Ephesians: "Slaves be subject to your masters." And two, because of the cultural preference for narrative in the African-American church for its preaching and Bible study and music. In story, the focus is on Jesus, the Exodus account, and the prophetic narratives. The powers are certainly present as characters in the narrative forms -- Go tell Pharaoh, whose army gets drowned -- but not the specific language of powers and principalities. Yet, in this address, Dr. King comes very close to employing that language. He certainly puts his finger on what we would call the ruling ideological powers, and virtually suggests what Walter Wink calls the domination system, where the powers coalesce into a systemic configuration. Just as Stringfellow's neighbors saw the powers arrayed against their Harlem community, so in Dr. King's speech we recognize the powers that are arrayed against human community in American life: racism, militarism and materialism.

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Between the conference on Religion and Race in 1963 and his death in 1968, Martin King was growing ever more radical. In this period he was trying to bring together movements already at work against each of these forces in American life. The Riverside Church speech attempts to connect the anti-war movement and the freedom struggle. The Poor Peoples' Campaign to come would pull these strands together with movements for economic justice. It was, in effect, his success in making these connections that got him killed. Little wonder that when he links these dominating powers and their countervailing movements, it is actually over the advice of his friends and political companions. A lot of people urged him not to make those connections: other civil rights leaders, the Urban League folks. His own board at SCLC (except for James Bevel) said: Don't do it. Don't jeopardize foundation funding; don't diffuse the focus. Never mind complaints of his erstwhile political ally, Lyndon Johnson, or the darker threats of J. Edgar Hoover. Don't look deeper, they all say. And above all, don't go deeper.

Hence, Martin King speaks of the "vocation of agony" his decision provoked. He acknowledges that "silence is betrayal" and identifies seven reasons for which he is compelled to speak. His first three reasons are these:

1. that the war is an attack on the poor, dismantling programs of support in order to fund it,

2. that it is a racist war, sending young men in brutal solidarity to burn huts in Vietnamese villages who wouldn't be able to live next door in Detroit, and
3. that he couldn't preach nonviolence to young people on the street without opposing the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today -- my own government." Notice that these are precisely materialism, racism, and militarism. Dr. King is viewing the war as an expression of the giant triplets, the ruling powers of domination!

His fourth reason is literally pivotal, dynamically cutting two ways. Backward to the list of powers and forward to his vocational identity. On the latter, the voices of constraint would hold him back with a narrowing definition of his calling: "Aren't you a civil rights leader?" But even that compels him, since from the beginning the motto of SCLC had been, "To save the soul of America." He understood the nation as a spiritual power, albeit a fallen one, but with a constitution and a vocation that could be called upon. He cites Langston Hughes: "O, yes/ I say it plain/ America never was America to me/ And yet I swear this oath -/ America will be!" In his "concern for the integrity of life in America." Dr. King could lead a march walking the nonviolent way of the cross, and carry the flag along in train -- summoning the best of the American tradition and so its hope. Later in this address, however, after naming the giant triplets, he comes to a very strong point: "Any nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

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It's interesting to set Stringfellow alongside King here. He, too, could point to the constitution, to invoke its remedies against tyranny -- the power of impeachment for example, or to size up the times by the public assault on its rights and protections. But his biblical radicalism led him increasingly to identify America with Babylon, to see it as the greatest purveyor of death in present history. Stringfellow wasn't at the Riverside speech (he was actually in Los Angeles that day), but he had himself by then visited Saigon, and saw the war as exemplifying in America "death as social purpose." Spiritual death indeed.

Dr. King's reasons are also related to his "vocation," however agonized. The broadening and deepening of the sequence is noteworthy. Starting again with the fourth reason listed above -- he does base the opposition on his work as a civil rights leader and the task of healing the nation's soul. But further (reason five), he feels it incumbent upon him because of the Nobel Peace Prize, which he accepted as an internationalizing commission. It laid upon him a task of global nonviolence. And thirdly, reason six, he is compelled as a minister and disciple of Jesus. That is no small thing. For some, most religious, that would be the pinnacle of vocational cause, but Dr. King goes another step deeper: it is finally his connection with all humanity as a child of God. He speaks out of his vocation to

be truly and fully human. In this he couldn't agree more with Stringfellow on the meaning of vocation in baptism: it is the sacrament of the unity of all humanity in God. Such humanity is both reason and response to war in an imperial time. In our own, let us pray to live such a sacramental ethic: living humanly, as fully and freely as these two brothers.

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