

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING ON THE TRIPLE EVILS OF POVERTY, RACISM AND MILITARISM



“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

--Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
“Beyond Vietnam:
A Time to Break Silence”
Riverside Church, New York City
April 4, 1967



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Annually, we celebrate the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a national holiday. While Dr. King’s achievements as a civil rights leader are recognized, the fact that he spoke out against and acted to defeat what he called the “triple evils” is often ignored. We forget — or are deliberately not taught — that he passionately condemned the Vietnam War and that he literally died supporting a group of sanitation workers who were striking for fair wages and working conditions. Below is a synopsis of Dr. King’s thoughts on the interconnection among the triple evils of poverty, racism and militarism. Written in 1967, Dr. King’s words are even truer today.

TRIPLE EVILS

The Triple Evils of poverty, racism and militarism are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle. They are interrelated, all-inclusive, and stand as barriers to our living in the Beloved Community. When we work to remedy one evil, we affect all evils...

Poverty: unemployment, homelessness, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, infant mortality, slums. “There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. The time has come for an all-out world war against poverty ... The well off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for ‘the least of these.’”

Racism: prejudice, apartheid, ethnic conflict, anti-Semitism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, ageism, discrimination against disabled groups, stereotypes. “Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the out-group.”

Militarism: war, imperialism, domestic violence, rape, terrorism, human trafficking, media violence, drugs, child abuse, violent crime. “A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’ This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped, psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

Source: “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1967. (With thanks to Art Laffin of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, D.C.)

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