



**SERMON ON THE MALL:
MOCKING SAVIOR, SYMBOL AND THE PEOPLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Even with the religious trappings of prayer and professions of faith; confessional tears and talk of visits, voices and visions from heaven; and the gathering of the message-seeking, like-minded multitudes, the recent sermon on the Mall in Washington was clearly not what it seemed or sought to be. Indeed, it was in a real sense, a mockery of the Savior whose teachings and faith it claimed to foster; a mockery of the symbol of a movement whose message it claimed to mirror; and a mockery of the people who embrace the faith, mirrored the message and made the man-symbol and the movement possible.

Indeed, neither Jesus, the Christian Savior, nor Dr. Martin Luther King, the symbol of the civil rights movement, was truly and rightfully represented in their message or meaning for this country and the compelling issues of our time. Nor was rightful homage paid to the people, African Americans, who brought King into being, who shaped and shared his faith, gave meaning to his message and was the cause and core of the Movement that made him possible and great. Thus, in spite of trying to shake the image of the ramblin', rantin' radio host, hawking racist wares and wild views, and to assume a racially and religiously repentant posture, Glenn Beck did not succeed.

In spite of his appeals to "meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus," it was a Jesus and Christianity redefined and different from the faith of King and of my father and mother. Indeed, the country was offered a Jesus without clear and consistent concern for social justice, a Lord without preference and priority for the least among us, and a Savior disassociated from his teachings on light and love for "all who are

in the house," and good works and will for and towards all in the world.

At this Mall and media-supported sermon, crafted to emulate or suggest the Sermon on the Mount, Dr. King would ask, where were the praise and presence of the meek and the merciful, the peacemakers and those that preach or even try to practice love or at least tolerance toward real or imagined enemies? Indeed, it was not a Christianity of the humble or peacemaker. It was a Crusader Christianity championed there with concerns for the warrior, not for the weak or the vulnerable; claims of guidance from God; deference to man-and-moose hunters and calls for more honor, respect and funds for warriors. And therefore, there were no questions or concerns about the promise and work of peace and the welfare of the people made poorer by war or other injustice.

The holding of the rally to coincide with the date of the historic Black Freedom Movement March on Washington was, in a real sense, a violation of the memory and history of King, the Movement, and the people who made both. The claim Beck makes on King and the Movement is neither religiously, rationally or morally sound. To embrace King's legacy one must learn, understand and appreciate it, and ultimately live it. It is a legacy deeply rooted in the history and culture of his people and cannot be separated without disrespecting them and distorting truth. At the heart of King's mission and meaning is racial and social justice, love and peace, and the righteous struggle to achieve these goals; not personal development and a "turning to God" exempt from work against the suffering, oppression and injustice in the world.

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King criticizes America for bouncing bad checks and depriving Black people of “the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” He condemned racism, militarism and poverty in the midst of riches and war and its waste of human life and resources. And he advocated a love that embraces, even enemies, as brothers and sisters, and worthy of respect as sons and daughters of God. He would defend freedom of religion for both Beck, the Mormon, and also the Muslims and would not remain silent in the face of attacks on Muslims, their faith, and their sacred text. And he called a religion that claims to be concerned about the human soul and not with the social conditions that scar the soul, a “dry as dust” and “moribund” religion.

Lacking the internal capacity to create a moral foundation for his emerging movement, Beck has decided to appropriate ours to give his project a moral veneer he would otherwise not have. He has said “Black people don’t own King,” so he’s reclaiming him. However, he is not simply claiming King, but lifting him out of the context of his coming-into-being in order to deny Black people, both the man and their history. King belongs to and emerges out of Black history and culture, in the same way Moses does out of Jewish history and Confucius out of Chinese history, and his message, as all great messages, is both particular to his people and universal in its relevance for the world.

Likewise, our Movement is particular to us and yet it has relevance for the world. That is why it is a model and has meaning for oppressed, marginalized and struggling

people everywhere. Beck also asserts strangely that he, company and kind, will “reclaim the civil rights movement” since, he says, “we were the people that did it in the first place.” This is racially arrogant, rationally absurd and intellectually untenable and dishonest. Again, Beck seeks a source of moral grounding he does not find of similar weight and worth in his own history, but he obviously finds it difficult to give due credit to Black people. And the presence of Blacks among “the multitudes” to endorse and entertain does not in any way disprove this.

Beck’s claim of our history, our struggle and social justice tradition comes easier when we, ourselves, cast them off like no-longer-needed clothes and he picks them up and uses them as a costume to give moral meaning to his message and movement. However, King was in no way uncertain or timid about expressing the unique and central role Black people played and must continue to play in the radical transformation of America. He affirmed that “(Black people) bring a special spiritual and moral contribution to American life—a contribution without which America could not survive.” And he asked us at the outset to struggle in such a way that “when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to say ‘there lived a great people, a Black people, who injected new meaning and dignity in the veins of civilization’ ”. Indeed, he said, “this is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility” regardless of the difficulties, obstacles and absurdities we encounter along the way.

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