

The Selective Remembrance of Those Whom We Celebrate

Reza Aslan's recent book, "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth," has gotten much attention. Aslan is Muslim, and he argues that Jesus was allied with Jewish elements in first-century Palestine, called Zealots, who not only opposed Roman occupation but were inclined toward violent revolution.

Aslan's thesis is neither new nor compellingly argued, but it points to an important phenomenon regarding seminal thinkers, especially political radicals and social revolutionaries. If such persons are remembered, their message, their critique, and their vision tend to be diluted, neglected, or otherwise made much more palatable for general consumption.

Someone once commented to me that one of our country's more conservative groups is the DAR, the Daughters of the American Revolution. Most DAR members are anything but the revolutionaries they claim to honor as their forebears. Wholly unlike Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and the other "patriots" who defied authority and risked their lives to found our nation, they have largely domesticated their forebears' spirit of revolution.

Likewise, as Aslan's book attests, Christians have largely domesticated Jesus' radical teaching. Jesus may not have been a Zealot, but he was certainly radical in his presentation of the claims of God to the people of his time and place, calling for an uncompromising allegiance to his God. His critique of this world's principalities and powers surely got him killed. Throughout the centuries, the Christian Church has typically preferred to celebrate the person of Jesus with honorific titles rather than to explicate and embody the message he proclaimed.

Much the same thing has happened in our time with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The more radical things he said have largely been ignored, while his earnest message of peace, equality, and justice for peoples of all races has been domesticated as a contemporary mantra of what we Americans say we believe has always been the true spirit of our nation.

There are reasons why the FBI kept tabs on King and tried to subvert his work. King was no communist, but he called for radical social transformation, beyond anything we have seen to date. He spoke powerfully against the psycho-social violence of racism, but also against the economic violence of class and the physical violence of war. He deeply angered the powers-that-be. And he paid the price. In honoring him, let's not forget the cutting edges of his critique and vision.

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