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These are tough and divisive times. We’ve lived through a pandemic, riots, social unrest, and an often-toxic winner-takes-all political culture. There are those who seek to divide us by race, religion, political tribe, or even vaccination status. Civil disagreement — the quaint notion of viewing ideological
opponents as decent neighbors who happen to disagree in good faith — is in short supply. No one seems to extend grace or the presumption of good intentions to the other side, and certainly not to one’s own critics.

Martin Luther King Day brings us a timely reminder that we have made it through much darker days. The fruits of that historic moment prove that there are better paths to overcoming our differences. And King’s writings remind us that religion — and religious liberty — are central to that story.

Reverend King once explained that in “the quiet recesses” of his heart, he is “fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher.” And it was as a clergyman that he wrote his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail to answer critics of his nonviolent demonstrations against segregation. Although King of course lived in intensely divisive times, he opened the letter by explaining that he believed his critics were “men of genuine good will” whose “criticisms are sincerely set forth” and thus would be answered in what King hoped would be “patient and reasonable terms.”

Rather than demonizing or mocking those critics, King instead appealed to what he called “the interrelatedness of all communities and states.” He urged passive supporters of the movement to see suffering blacks as “your brother.” He emphasized that allowing for peaceful, nonviolent activity was the best path to avoiding bloodshed in the streets.

Religion — and religious liberty — are central to the letter. King invokes St. Augustine’s distinction between just and unjust laws to explain his conduct. He noted that “everything Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal,’” but that King would have broken the law to comfort his “Jewish brothers even though it was illegal.” Had he lived under communism where Christianity was suppressed, he said, he would have “openly advocate[d] disobeying these anti-religious laws.” King emphasized that progress would come only when people are free to engage in “persistent work” to be “coworkers with God” in bringing about justice.
King also showed himself unafraid to mix the best of American principles with religious ones, as he saw them both aligned toward justice. In his letter, he invoked both “the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God” as pointing the way toward freedom and equality. A few months later, in his “I Have a Dream” speech, King would describe “the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” as a “promissory note” to all Americans such that “all of God’s children” would enjoy freedom and equality. King rightly thought that core American values and core religious values could help bring us together.

Today, as we seem so divided by our disagreements, we would do well to remember Reverend King’s words, and to try to emulate his effort to deal civilly even with critics and civil opponents. This is a message that the Supreme Court has lately been trying to convey in a variety of cases dealing with religious liberty. Although the members of the Court often disagree with one another, a broad cross-section of justices recently explained that the “Religion Clauses of the Constitution aim to foster a society in which people of all beliefs can live together harmoniously.” In another case, the justices reached across the typical political divide to agree that the promise of the free exercise of religion — in King’s words, the ability of people of different faiths to try to be “coworkers with God” — lies “at the heart of our pluralistic society.”

As King’s letter continues to demonstrate 59 years later, that type of harmony does not require a watering down of religious beliefs. In fact, he yearned for churches that would not be simply a “thermometer” that recorded or reflected popular opinion but instead a “thermostat that transformed the mores of society.” But civil peace does require respecting the shared humanity of those who are different from us, both to see them as brothers and address their suffering, and to give them space to be “coworkers with God” as they best understand that task.
King ended the “I Have a Dream” speech by saying that, with faith, “we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony” and build a world in which “all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands” and know that there is far more that unites us than divides us.

If we can keep those lessons in mind as we continue into 2022, then this can be a year of greater peace, unity, and civility than those that came before.