Title of Lesson: Martin Luther King Jr. and Christianity
Lesson By: Christopher R. Mason

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Middle School Social Studies (could easily be adapted for High School)
Class Size: 25 (ideally)
Time/Duration of Lesson: Approx. 5 class periods

Guiding Questions:

- How did MLK view and/or interpret Christianity?
- How did his interpretation of Christianity inform his work in nonviolence and Civil Rights?
- How did Dr. King interpret Christianity? Was it strict or fundamentalist version of Christianity that he believed in or was it a more “liberal” interpretation? (This more “liberal” version may not necessarily have been followed by many clergy in the United States during the 1950’s, 1960’s or even today.)

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson focuses on what different religions or denominations within a religion choose to believe. It may also be useful as a part of an examination of the Civil Rights struggle or even a discussion of the “separation of church and state.” The intent is to help the students better understand that religion is not static, nor is it exclusive to any one person or group. When people begin to understand belief systems from this perspective we can better understand one another. In this specific case, better understand the struggles that Dr. King encountered and how he approached his ideas to help end prejudice and segregation.

Lesson Content:
This lesson is about helping young people understand several things. One is that religions are not static entities. For example, it strikes me that many people in our world today have a fixed notion of what religion is and its role(s) in the world. A comment from a web posting, made originally in 1998 and still easy to find, is instructive. The comments are about Martin Luther King Jr.: “…This man was not our brother in Christ. Whenever he mentioned Jesus, it was along with mere mortals like Socrates or Gandhi. In his jailhouse letter he lumped all religions into the same class. I could not find one “sermon” where he preached (about) Jesus Christ…. What I saw is that this man “preached” a social gospel…. (www.jesus-is-lord.com). It may be obvious that this quotation does not come from a scholarly journal, but perhaps more accurately describes one perspective from an everyday person. This is an essential ingredient in this lesson because one of its fundamental purposes is to examine how Christianity is viewed by people in the context of their daily life. It is certain that this quote does not reflect the views of all people and an argument about what percentage of people may agree with this sentiment, is in the end superfluous. What is significant is that many of us lack the broad knowledge to understand religion in its various interpretations. This leads directly to disharmony and conflict, as one group may assert that it is “right” while other interpretations are “wrong”. Christianity in this context, can be, and is, interpreted in
many different ways.

While it may be interesting to discuss some of the language or ideas that exist behind the formulation of these constructs, that is for a different place or lesson. The point here is that there exists a spectrum or continuum of how different people view religion and it is extremely important to address this with our students so that they can understand the variations more clearly. Understanding leads to compassion and that was at the heart of Martin Luther King’s work. “The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But the way of nonviolence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community.” (p. 134 Autobiography). One can see in this quotation, the importance which King placed upon understanding and compassion. These human attributes cannot exist in a framework that does not allow for a discussion of Christianity (or any faith for that matter) in an open forum. A major component of any such forum would be to acknowledge that different people can and do view Christianity differently.

I created a short document within the context of my classroom to help explain basic tenants of how humans approach these interpretations: Interpretive: People who tend to think along this path say: “We’ve got different ways of looking at ideas, beliefs or religions and it is OK—you believe your way and I believe my way, it is not going to be a real issue” Strict: People who tend to think along this path say: “The rules are the rules—there is not much room for different opinions or points of view here, simply because the rules exist to be followed.” Extremist: People who tend to think along this path say: “I am always right! It is my way or you can hit the highway. There is ABSOLUTLEY no room for different ideas or opinions here BECAUSE I am so sure that I am right.” (Mason, C., see Appendix A)

There are few individuals who exemplify the ideas of understanding and compassion better than King. Interestingly enough, they spring in main part from his faith. When he said, “I hear many Christian religious leaders tell the people of their church to go along with the de-segregation of their schools because it is the law. But I would rather hear them say follow this path of integration because it is the right and moral thing to do and the black person is your brother.” (p. 200 Autobiography), it came directly from how he viewed his faith. It did not matter to him how any one else may have looked at it. But he was insistent that his view be heard as a part of any discussion of how Christianity ought to be understood or practiced. One does not have to agree with his view of Christianity that is up to each individual. In fact, many religious leaders disagreed with King’s views on Christianity and consequently the work he was attempting to do in establishing equality for all people in the South.

There was a group of interfaith and interracial leaders from Birmingham Alabama who wrote a public rebuke of King. Among the things they said, “…We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that [sic] decision of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed…. Hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions, we also point out that such actions [nonviolent protests] as incite to hatred and violence,
however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems....” (Statement 8 Alabama Clergymen) These eight men of God implied that King was flouting basic tenets of Christianity by “inciting violence and hatred”. Nothing could be further from the truth, in King’s view. However, the truth must be researched and sought out by students so that they may come to a compassionate and equitable understanding of what people do and say as well as why they take action. That is the purpose of this lesson. Before the Birmingham Campaign had even begun, King in speaking to his congregation in 1962 said, “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and not concerned about the city government that damns the soul, the economic conditions that corrupt the soul, the slum conditions, the social evils that cripple the soul, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood.” (Kuruvila, M., SFChronicle, www.sfgate.com) King believes that the common or widespread view of Christianity as expressed by these 8 clergy requires a counterpoint. That is to say, it is necessary to introduce other views of what Christianity is and how it should be practiced into the public discourse. He did this through the implementation of many nonviolent campaigns, his public speeches and his writing.

What King is trying to convey here, is that faith is instrumental in the lives of human beings. That if black people and white people are ever going to come together and live side by side in harmony. Then for Christians at least, Christianity must play a significant role in that reconciliation. Moreover, within the context of how he views the Christian faith, King seems to pull much of his interpretation from The Sermon on the Mount. “We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flout the central teachings of Jesus; brotherly love and the Golden Rule.” (p. 9 Autobiography) What King desired and what his work attempted to create was a world in which the primary tenants of Christianity (as King saw them) would be honored. The struggles of African-Americans during his time were created by men and of this he was acutely aware. He therefore utilized his view of Christianity to address and correct these issues. “In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.’ And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, unbiblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.” (p.200 Autobiography) In King’s view, this separation of the human needs of people from what people need spiritually was a mistake. Therefore, he chose to focus much of his teachings upon the social teachings of Jesus as found in The Sermon on the Mount.

Martin Luther King Jr. examined Christianity and he came to the conclusion that it must address the suffering of humans here on Earth, every bit as much as caring for our souls after departing this life. His demonstrations and actions to establish equality were designed to change the status quo, but they were not violent in and of themselves. In his famous Letter From the Birmingham Jail, King addresses this point by asking how one could advocate for the breaking of some laws, while choosing to follow others. His answer was that people need to critically examine the difference between good and bad laws. “The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust…. A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God….An
unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.” (p. 193 Autobiography). In order to confirm this belief, he sought out Christianity. Rather, he sought out particular views of Christianity, ones that were commensurate with the goals of his work. He found them in the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say unto you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also…” (The Sermon on the Mount, http://www.lifeofchrist.com) Whether or not other Christians, or even those from other walks of life, agreed with his interpretation, was up to those individuals. He did often respond to their criticism of his views, as exemplified by his letter from the Birmingham Jail. It is vitally important that we help young people understand and make distinctions about these differing views of the Christian faith. I believe that Martin Luther King was correct, that we have the ability and the right to openly discuss public social issues in the religious domain. My purpose here is to provide young students with some knowledge so that they may better accomplish that task.

State Content Standards:
North Carolina 11.02 Examine the basic needs and wants of all human beings and assess the influence of factors such as environment, values, and beliefs in creating different cultural responses.

Materials Needed:
• Power point presentation
• Spectrum of Understanding”
• Short excerpt from San Francisco Chronicle
• Excerpts “Was Martin Luther King Jr. a Christian?”
• Public Statement from the Eight Alabama Clergymen
• Excerpts “Sermon on the Mount”
• Excerpts “Letter From the Birmingham Jail”

Suggested Teaching Activities:
1. Show power point “MLK and Christianity”
2. Introduce students to ideas contained in “Spectrum of Understanding”
3. Show students excerpt of website “Was MLK a Christian?”
4. Read & discuss short excerpt fro SF Chronicle
5. Read & discuss “Public Statement 8 Alabama Clergymen
6. Read excerpts of “Sermon on the Mount” and “Letter From the Birmingham Jail” and construct Venn Diagram

Bibliography:

APPENDIX A

This appendix is intended as a suggested tool for helping students, particularly Middle School students, better understand that belief systems can be understood as lying on an "interpretive scale". In other words, no two groups of Christians or Jews or Muslims will understand their faith in exactly the same manner. One manifestation of these different interpretations is that some groups choose to focus on “literal meanings” of text, while others may choose to “read between the lines” when looking for meaning within a text. This is precisely why we see so many different denominations of each of these faiths throughout the world today.

A Continuum OR Spectrum of Understanding

Interpretive

When interpreting a faith in this context people may say something like:

“We’ve got different of looking at ideas, beliefs or religions and it is OK—you believe your way and I believe my way, it is all good!”

Strict

When interpreting a faith in this context people may say something like:

“The rules are the rules—there is not much room for different opinions or points of view here, because one NEEDS to follow the rules, if you are to be a good follower of the faith”

Extremist
When interpreting a faith in this context people may say something like:

“I am always right! It is my way or you can hit the highway. There is ABSOLUTLEY no room for different ideas or opinions here BECAUSE I am so sure that I am right! Not only am I SURE I am correct in my interpretation, I am willing to DO most ANYTHING to ensure that others follow my interpretation….BECAUSE it is the ONLY CORRECT WAY to view the faith.”

It is IMPORTANT TO REALIZE that people that tend to think in this “extremist” way often ignore those parts of the belief system or religion that they don’t like or find inconvenient—they choose which parts to follow and believe in and IGNORE the rest.