

LET JUSTICE ARISE AMONG THE PEOPLE

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Socio-Political Activism

Almost half a century has passed since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Though the efforts of King and his fellow organizers ushered in an era of racial justice, the United States of America still encounters the rhetoric and violence of its past. The progress codified by the activism and collective resistance of the Civil Rights Movement is tempered by the reality that, irrespective of past victories, some ghosts never leave. At the time of this writing, American citizens recently elected an egotistical, proto-fascist candidate, who throughout his campaign regularly heightened racial and political tensions, and has given every indication of undoing systemic advances won by activists over the last forty years. As such, the question now becomes whether or not American citizens are willing to face the ghosts of recent history in order to actualize justice for black Americans, or any other marginalized community. Will they heed the call for justice, or return to the ways of the past? Current movements for racial justice and economic liberation—most notably that of BlackLivesMatter—represent new iterations of the struggle for human freedom. King's socio-political activism provides insight into how he might have perceived current movements for civil and economic justice—namely, that such movements are indicative of a systemic social ill and, provided they remain nonviolent, can incite the widespread social change seen in the civil rights movement of King's day. This paper will analyze elements of King's theological and political methodologies, and offer brief commentary on BlackLivesMatter in light of the preceding analysis.

Martin Luther King, Jr. represents a unique approach to socio-political activism, one that found grounding in a particular theological paradigm and was actualized through organized, nonviolent resistance (civil disobedience). Collective, nonviolent resistance was the lifeblood of King's methodology, and it was the only methodology which he believed possessed any power to both *challenge* preexisting authority structures and also *actualize* justice. "Today the choice is

no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. The Negro may be God's appeal to this age—an age drifting rapidly to its doom.”¹ In King's mind, the survival of the black community depended upon their ability to organize and resist abusive authority structures using nonviolent means. As French sociologist and Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul wrote, “Biblically, love is the way, not violence...Not using violence against those in power *does not mean doing nothing*.”²

However, before ascertaining the particulars of King's methodology, we must understand the preexisting social conditions which gave credence to his theology and politics. In the decades leading to King's activism, the legal, economic and political mechanisms in place were systematically utilized to exclude, disenfranchise, and in many cases murder people of color. “King described black people as the most battered, bruised, and defeated group in the American society...King flatly rejected all explanations of his people's plight that ignored the brutality and the traumatizing effects of the slave system.”³ To be black in post-WWII America meant carrying the baggage of historic, widespread, systemic abuse. Conversely, to be black also meant truly understanding the gravity of their socio-political predicament—irrespective of how “comfortable” their livelihood might become, the system itself had no true interest in their individual or collective well-being. King understood that although the effects of racism and systemic oppression are felt individually, they are fundamentally communal in focus. In other words, the Negro is intricately connected to the plight of a larger community, which in and of itself has potential to actualize change (provided they grasp this reality). As Cornel West notes, “For King, the struggle against the legacy of white supremacy was never a strategic move to

¹Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 235.

²Ellul, Jacques, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 13.

³Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 46.

tactical afterthought; rather, it was a profound existential and moral matter of great urgency.”⁴ Political or cultural victories were not an end in themselves, but instead represented tangible steps in the emancipation of the black community from the ills of systemic oppression. The goal, for King, was not simply to win, but to heal the existential wounds of the black community through socio-political activism. Racial superiority or dominance was the furthest thing from King’s socio-political sensibilities—what mattered is the restoration of civil rights and economic well-being for black communities.

King’s socio-political activism was grounded and sustained by a rich theological methodology—it is impossible to separate the two. King was influenced by his upbringing in the black church and his seminary training, where he encountered Protestant liberal theology (e.g. Walter Rauschenbusch and Anders Nygren) and a hybrid of personalist-existential philosophy (e.g. Paul Tillich and Harold L. DeWolf). While his seminary education was certainly more formative in terms of future activism, the dominant theme throughout his entire theological journey is the inseparability of love and justice. His dissertation engaged with the work of Paul Tillich and Henry N. Wieman, arguing that love and justice “should not be looked upon as two distinct attributes of God.”⁵ If God is love, then justice is the natural extension of love; a just God must be a loving God, and vice versa. If justice reigns, it will be actualized out of love; if love reigns, justice will be the fruit.

In addition to this ontological-metaphysical understanding of God’s nature and the relationship between love and justice, King emphasized the importance of *agape* love. In King’s view, influenced by the work of Anders Nygren on the three Greek words for love, *agape* love is the “redemptive power” that can “transform enemies into friends and make reconciliation

⁴Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 6.

⁵John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2000), 8.

possible.”⁶ Central to this understanding of *agape* love is King’s emphasis upon the interrelation of human existence. The actions toward one person affect us all, even indirectly. “To choose to ignore an evil is to become an accomplice to that evil. *Agape* requires that we be our brother’s keeper.”⁷ Those who release themselves to *agape* will not only be able to experience the fullness of God’s presence, but will also be enlightened to the plight of their neighbor, and therefore be in a position to offer aid. King looked to Jesus for the model of such selfless love, culminating in his death at the hands of his enemies, whom he forgave. Christ represents, for King, the connection between teaching and action. Walter Brueggemann unpacks this connection, albeit in a context separate from King’s legacy: “The teachings cannot be separated from the actions, for it is the actions that give concreteness and reality to the teachings. The teachings, like the actions, are shattering, opening, and inviting. They conjure futures that had been closed off, and they indicate possibilities that had been defined as impossibilities.”⁸ The social ethic of Christ, seen fully in his nonviolent actions in the face of injustice, represented for King the template for translating theology to the practical.

Finally, the “social gospel” of Walter Rauschenbusch connected these two ideas—the inseparability of love and justice, and the transformative, Other-centered power of *agape* love—and provided King a foundation upon which to sustain his socio-political activism. Rauschenbusch noted that the socio-political implications of the gospel are thoroughly *revolutionary* and *materialistic*. Individual regeneration (salvation) is not *for the individual alone*, but ultimately for the renewal of society (common good). In other words, salvation is not simply a matter of individual piety before God, but a commitment to social renewal and material well-

⁶John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2000), 34.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 109.

being. Through the transformative power of agape love, justice will reign as we love others and seek the common good. John J. Ansboro writes:

King maintained that Christian belief regards the body as sacred, and that any realistic conception of man must involve a concern about his material well-being...Religion must seek not only to change the soul of the individual so that he can be one with himself and with God, but also to change the environmental conditions so that the soul can have a chance once it is changed.⁹

In the encounter with divine love, the individual is transformed from the inside outward, becoming aware of his friendship with God, and the necessity of working in solidarity with the Other to actualize the transformative power of *agape* for the good of society. King, in contradistinction to Rauschenbusch's optimistic view of human progress, was decidedly "realist" in this perception of human depravity, noting that humankind will never have "a perfect social life" in light of the propensity for evil.¹⁰

King's theological foundation—commitment to actualizing material well-being in light of the inseparable demand of love and justice—gave rise to his socio-political activism. As mentioned previously, the two are inseparable, however his activism finds root in his theology. As King emphasized the importance of individual renewal before God and Other-centered *agape* love, his activism took form through the paradigms of *nonviolent resistance* and *opposition to capitalism and imperialism*. As such, his activism never fully aligned with either Republican or Democratic politics, both manifestations of liberalism dependent upon free-market capitalism. Given King's predilection toward Rauschenbusch's social gospel, and available letters and sermons in the years leading to his public appearances in the Civil Rights movement, it is clear that King was, at the very least, sympathetic to the aims of democratic socialism. Marxist theories of labor value and the collective power of the working poor were substantial influences

⁹John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2000), 170.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 172.

on King's political sensibilities. As Thomas F. Jackson notes, "He [King] increasingly recognized the state as a central site of struggle, where power was already stacked in favor of the privileged but where the powerless could, with imaginative leadership and creative tactics, force concessions from their oppressors."¹¹ The work of Reinhold Niebuhr (in combination, as mentioned previously, with the philosophical-theological writings of Paul Tillich) was especially formative for King's understanding of democratic organization, and the need for black unity to present a resistant front to the established order. In opposition to Kennedy-Johnson liberalism, "King agreed [with Niebuhr] that injustice resulted from 'the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a relatively small wealthy class'...Free markets could not create housing for the poor, and squads of social workers could not address systemic injustices."¹² Due to King's theological background and awareness of the "baggage" carried by the black community, preexisting social structures were immediately suspect. It was clear to King that an economy ordered to serve the interests of the market, and not the community, could never substantiate the material liberation necessary to raise black individuals (and, by proxy, black communities) out of systemic poverty. Moreover, in light of King's commitment to nonviolence, he contended that war, imperialism, and violent revolution were all incompatible with Christian living and the material well-being of the oppressed; none of these could achieve or substantiate peace, given that they rely upon bloodshed in order to achieve a desired end. Democratic socialism, or communitarian politics, represented for King the closest political pathway to achieving black liberation, even if King never formally identified with a particular political party in the interests of remaining theologically grounded.

¹¹Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 44.

¹²Ibid.

It is important to note that, although King's socio-political activism was decidedly "unorthodox" in comparison to the milieu of American Christianity at the time, his impetus was remaining obedient to God while not neglecting the state of the world. In King's view, nonviolent resistance to the established liberal and capitalist order represented the orthodox response of love and justice. To *be* Christian is to seek love and justice. Economic order and political authority which substantiates the oppression of a particular segment of society is therefore *unloving* and *unjust*, requiring Christians (or anyone else, for that matter) to act accordingly.

This analysis is, admittedly, a brief, generalized overview of King's methodology. However, the essentials cannot be overstated. Dr. King's socio-political activism was fundamentally *theological*. With a belief in God marked by the inseparability of love and justice, and the transforming power of Other-centered *agape* love, the reality of systemic oppression necessitated a decisive, organized, nonviolent response. As King notes in his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," "There is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism...the whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."¹³ The fight for justice can only come through mass movements of democratic organization and nonviolent resistance—Dr. King's actions demonstrate this to be true. The testament to the Civil Rights movement was its commitment to nonviolent, faithful resistance and organization to achieve justice.

What, then, shall we make of current movements for racial justice, such as BlackLivesMatter (BLM)? In light of the preceding analysis, let me offer a brief reflection on BLM. It is easy to universalize King's methodology or activism, thereby depriving his legacy of

¹³Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: IPM, 2002), 82-83.

its revolutionary impetus. Dr. King and BLM would share similar concerns for the liberation of black communities from the systemic oppression of neoliberalism and capitalism. BLM, following in Dr. King's footsteps, also draws upon Marxist economic theory to substantiate its resistance to the established economic order. In addition, they would both agree that the fight for black liberation must be primarily a *black* movement, organized within black communities and unapologetically black in identity. For both, the underlying conviction is that *black lives do indeed matter* — *individual lives and communal lives*. The individual black life matters because all black lives matter; this is not linguistic sleight-of-hand, for the individual is *inseparable* from the community. As mentioned earlier, King noted that human existence is necessarily interrelated. “King held that humans are not *individuals* who are completely self-sufficient but *social beings* who find authentic existence through social contact and social relations under the guidance of a personal God who works for universal wholeness.”¹⁴ The liberation of the community requires the organization and direct action of the community; individualism has no place within such a movement, something Dr. King and BLM would agree upon.

Criticism of BLM typically centers on its relationship to violent protests or retaliations against police. Critics argue that the rhetoric of BLM incites violence, and there have been documented instances of individuals in BLM demonstrations calling for violence against police, or in the case of the shootings after the BLM protest in Dallas, Texas, where perpetrators claimed direct allegiance to BLM as justification for their actions. These cases cannot be overlooked, but they must be placed within a larger context. BLM leadership has never once called for violent action as a method for inciting social change, and in instances where violent rhetoric came out during protests, prominent BLM leaders were quick to disassociate themselves with such actions.

¹⁴Lewis V. Baldwin, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 252; emphasis in the original.

As it relates to the legacy of Dr. King, who explicitly eschewed violent revolution as a tactic, would we blame the Civil Rights movement at large for the violent actions of revolutionary factions, such as the Black Panthers? Would the overarching call for justice and material liberation by a particular movement be deemed null and void if, out of thousands of peaceful activists, a handful of unsavory individuals acted out, in opposition to the movement? To reject the impetus for social change because a slim minority within a larger movement acts “out of character” in comparison to the movement as a whole is intellectual and moral foolishness. This does not mean, however, that all elements of a particular movement for social justice deserve automatic and uncritical affirmation—it is plausible that Dr. King, if he were still alive today, would be uncomfortable with the quest for transgender and queer sexual liberation common to leftist political movements—but our reflective, critical attitude should be matured enough to isolate “lone wolves” from the organization of a distinct movement.

Dr. King’s legacy, as mentioned previously, represents a unique methodology grounded in theology and social awareness. Its markers were solidarity, democracy, and organization. For King, spiritual renewal was inseparable from social activism, and as such, represented the actualization of both love and justice. Our current socio-political climate is in dire need of voices for love and justice, and BLM represents one of many burgeoning movements dedicated to the continued fight for racial liberation. The next four years in particular will be an opportunity for distinctly Christian activism and resistance to the likely abuses of an authoritarian executive branch. However, in order for the country at large, or the world as a whole, to see love and justice reign, we must face the ghosts of our past and commit to walking in the path of God—let justice arise among the people, by the people, and for the people.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ansbro, John J. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2000.
- Baldwin, Lewis V. *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Baldwin, Lewis V. *To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Ellul, Jacques. *Anarchy and Christianity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard. New York: IPM, 2002.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *The Radical King*. Edited by Cornel West. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015.
- Jackson, Thomas F. *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.