

THE CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Easter 2008

With and Without Honor The Prophetic Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and American Response

Andrew M. Manis

Americans love lists. To a talk radio host, nothing can generate more arguments than a list. So in 2005 the Discovery Channel invited its viewers to participate in an online poll to name “The Greatest American.” Flannery O’Connor and Robert Shaw didn’t make the list. But Tom Cruise, Ellen Degeneres, Hugh Hefner, and ninety-seven others did. Placing in the top five was Martin Luther King Jr. Benjamin Franklin ranked fifth. Finishing fourth was George Washington. King was number three. Abraham Lincoln came in number two. And the title of Greatest American of all time went to Ronald Reagan.

Americans do love their lists, and this one is bound to spark some lively conversations. Heaven knows it is easy to quibble about who should be where on the list. Perhaps some of those on the list are questionable calls. Perhaps they should be replaced by others more deserving. Perhaps the list suffers from a presentism that puts some on the list merely because they recently had been in the news. (Lance Armstong at number twenty springs immediately to mind.) Perhaps the applicant pool is simply too shallow and the pickings get very slim down around ninety, ninety-one, etc. Perhaps the list generates some healthy philosophizing about what exactly makes a Great American. At the very least, if this is their best historical judgment, clearly our fellow Americans can still use a few good history teachers. Perhaps academic historians like me should just lighten up and be glad the list sparked some conversations about American history or about what it takes to be a Great American, and that Paris Hilton or Britney Spears didn’t make the list.

THE CRESSET

And what about the surprising ranking of Martin Luther King, Jr? Any Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep in April 1968 would be shocked. Anyone who can remember the stories—some apocryphal, some not—of the celebrations that greeted King’s assassination in much of white America might be surprised to find him on this list at all, much less at number three. In my home town of Birmingham, Alabama, I could hardly avoid hearing some sickening celebrations. I’m sure my Little League baseball coach, who couldn’t quite fathom all the fuss over “just another dead nigger,” would be surprised to learn that King made the short list. Taking into account public opinion at the time of his death, its inclusion of King in some ways takes us by surprise.

In other ways, however, it’s not surprising at all. Given what some would bemoan as “political correctness,” no such list could dare leave King off. And given the Hollywood way we depict our civil rights history, King has to be not only in the cast, but the lead actor in a script that goes like this: Martin Luther King was a nobody until he was plucked from obscurity by people who decided he’d be the best leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, then he exploded on the scene and became a prophet to the nation, and America is such a good and moral country that we listened to him



Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964. (Library of Congress)

and fixed what was wrong, and we all lived happily ever after. If that’s the story line, he has to be on the list.

But let’s ask a different question: Would King have made the list if Americans had the slightest inkling of King’s radically prophetic theology? That is very doubtful given the right turn in our nation since the 1980 “Reagan Revolution.” Since then, American policy has largely been the robust Republican faith in military solutions abroad and in unfettered free market capitalism at home—two items of faith King vigorously opposed. Ironically, in an era during which the word “liberal” became a

THE CRESSET

four-letter word, King was elevated to the status of civil religious saint by the national holiday commemorating his birthday. This annual public ritual uses important symbols to unify Americans under the myth that America eventually repented of its racism, followed King's Dream, "lived out the true meaning of its creed," and finally became a nation where all men (and women) really are created equal.

Would that things were so equal; would that the nation were so unified. But anyone who has lived through the "culture wars" should know that the bar racial equality must clear is set at different heights, depending on whether one mentally lives in a red or blue state. Liberals set the bar rather high, looking beyond the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act for housing and economic equality. For this reason, among others, African Americans are twenty-five percent as likely as whites to tell pollsters that they believe the economic playing field is now level (Manis 403). Noting that these 1960s laws ended segregation and protected black voting rights, conservatives believe America has cleared the bar and, in the words of one of its spokespersons, reached "the end of racism" (See D'Souza). Thus, conservatives, most of whom opposed and many of whom vilified King during his lifetime, recently have scurried over to the right side of history, and now celebrate his birthday and claim that his Dream was theirs all along.

But only by a very selective reading of King's writings and protest activities could conservative politicians commemorate (desecrate?) his birthday by inveighing against affirmative action, as President Bush did in 2003 for example, while intoning out of context King's famous line about all Americans being "judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Thus, conservatives have domesticated King by appropriating the safer elements of his message—the "dream" of racial inclusion with which everyone but neo-Nazis or neo-Klansmen now agrees—while ignoring his radically prophetic message to America. A thorough reading of King suggests that rather than being voted the third greatest American, he deserves a higher title. In particular, King's writings reveal him to be number one: The Greatest American Prophet. As I unpack this assertion, I will also attempt to clear away certain other common misconceptions about King.

King's Role: African-American Prophet

How many times have you seen journalists refer to “slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?” Doubtless this will always be understood as his most important role, but in his latter years he rejected the designation “civil rights leader” as too limiting. Especially was this the case after he “desegregated” his moral concern to include criticism of the Vietnam War. He often asserted that his primary role was that of a Christian preacher. “I am first and foremost a minister,” he told *Redbook* in 1961, adding, “I love the church, and feel that civil rights is a part of it. For me, at least, the basis of my struggle for integration... is something that began with a religious motivation” (Quoted in Cone 120).

His theological and educational pilgrimage took him through Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and the Boston University School of Theology, from which he plucked different emphases from which he eventually composed his prophetic Christianity. His essay, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” originally a part of his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, noted the young preacher’s progression from his family’s “strict fundamentalistic tradition” to the rational theological method of Protestant Liberalism to Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Christian realism” to the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. As a fulltime pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, King later noted that he had grown more interested in social ethics, which he viewed as a “return to concerns” he had developed growing up in Atlanta. He appropriated from Rauschenbusch an intellectualized expression of the black Baptist social consciousness he had known experientially as he came to maturity in a racially segregated South.

With his most important theological roots firmly sunk in the black church, King “grew up abhorring segregation, considering it both rationally inexplicable and moral unjustifiable...” Reading Rauschenbusch through African-colored lenses, he naturally asserted:

Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only of the vertical plane but also on the horizontal.... [T]he Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a

THE CRESSET

chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind that Marxists like to see—an opiate of the people. (King 1958, 36)

King was, however, more black than Baptist. His *racial* background clearly had more influence on his theology and ethics than his denominational tradition. “When speaking of King as a black Baptist,” argued James Cone, “it is important to note that the word ‘black’ was more important in defining his faith than the word ‘Baptist.’” His views of church-state separation, as evidenced in his acceptance of the 1962 *Engel v. Vitale* ruling against prayer in public schools, seems to reflect a historic Baptist emphasis. So did his use of young people as demonstrators in the 1963 Birmingham protests, where he accepted the reasoning of his associate James Bevel that children old enough to be baptized into church membership were old enough to act on behalf of freedom. Apart from these, however, finding legacies directly traceable to his Baptist roots is difficult at best.

African Americans, however, cobbled together a distinctive trans-denominational version of Christianity. Or we could understand it as a gumbo from a base or roux (a spirituality from African traditional religions) and various doctrinal ingredients from Evangelicalism, cooked together over the fire of racism, slavery, and segregation in America. Together their African background and their tragic experience in America drove them to appropriate the Evangelical ingredients they discovered in the Great Awakenings in the service of a prophetic consciousness convinced that God’s Kingdom meant justice “*on earth* as it is in heaven” or it meant nothing at all. Again, as Cone noted, “It was a black faith that emphasized God’s will to make right what white people made wrong, so that the rule of love would be established among all races” (121–22).

Like most pastors, King began his prophetic ministry within his own congregations. He called the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to a self-critical moral responsibility. Viewing self-criticism as a “sign of maturity,” King advised his congregation, “We must not let the fact that we are the victims of injustice lull us into abrogating responsibility for our own lives” (King

THE CRESSET

1957a). Later, once pulled into the civil rights movement by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King reminded black Americans of their prophetic, even messianic, role in America and the world. Lewis V. Baldwin viewed this black messianism as “a fundamental component” of King’s thought. In a sermon on “The American Dream,” King asserted that “the Negro is God’s instrument to save the soul of America.” African Americans challenged white America to understand the “true meaning of American democracy” and called the nation “back to the noble principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Judeo-Christian heritage.” In one of his final writings, he argued that “the whole nation has for a decade given more inquiry to the essential nature of democracy, economically and politically, as a consequence of the vigorous Negro protest” (Baldwin 230, 234; King 1961; 1967a, 4).

Indeed, for King this prophetic role was to function in relation not only to the United States but to the entire world. He told black Montgomery that because of their protests future historians would write that “there lived a race



Martin Luther King Jr. meets with President Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House Cabinet Room.
(Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum)

THE CRESSET

of people, of fleecy locks and black complexion, who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights, and thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.” Almost ten years later, embarking on his trip to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, he told reporters: “This may be the most significant fact in the world today — that God has entrusted his black children in America to teach the world to love, and to live together in brotherhood” (King 1955, 1964; quoted in Baldwin 229).

As early as his 1960 book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, in which he explained the Montgomery movement, King saw in the prophetic strain of African American Christianity a “new spiritual dynamic” (later he would call it “a new soul force”) by which blacks would “so challenge the nations of the world that they will seriously seek an alternative to war and destruction.” King believed that their roots in both “white civilization and the non-white nations of the world” had qualified African Americans to serve as a bridge between the two groups. Color connected them to Africa, King explained, while education and upbringing brought African Americans under European influence. Hence, he argued, “out of the universality of our experience, we can help make peace and harmony in this world more possible” (King 1958, 224; 1968a, 318).

Thus the early civil rights phase of King’s career was a product of his prophetic Christianity. His most famous writing, “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” told ministerial critics he had come to their city “because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century BC left their villages... so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.” From the same prophetic tradition, however, came his decision—controversial to his friends as well as to his enemies—to denounce America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

In a 1967 sermon, he answered his critics: “I cannot stand idly by and not raise my voice against something that I see as wrong. Now there are those who say, ‘You are a civil rights leader. What are you doing speaking out? You should stay in your field.’ Well, I wish you would go back and tell them for me that before I became a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the Gospel.” He ignored expediency to speak out against the violence of American foreign policy when strategic silence on that issue might have carried favor with Lyndon B. Johnson, the president who had largely got-

ten onboard King's civil rights agenda. This opposition to the war, therefore, marked the purest prophetic statement of his career (King 1963, 290; 1967b, 7).

King's Goal: "Beloved Community"

Another contemporary misunderstanding of King pertains to America's fixation on his "Dream," best illustrated in the astronomical number of times the word is uttered like a mantra in typical King Holiday events. Still worse, America's overuse of this concept is exceeded only by our tendency to reduce its meaning to the mere idea of racial integration. Most politicians and pulpiteers who extol "the Dream" distort it into an oversimplified short hand for harmony between blacks and whites. In so doing, America transforms Martin Luther King, Jr. into a more sophisticated Rodney King or into the incredible shrinking prophet muttering a more theological version of the plaintive question, "Can't we all just get along?"

In 1963, it was a Dream "deeply rooted in the American dream." By his latter years, however, it was clear that the Dream grew out of a deeper, more radical concept of a Beloved Community. James Cone has accurately interpreted the Dream as a metaphor strategically designed to appeal to the material resources and moral capacity of white America, in essence shaming whites to practice what their patriotic nostrums preached. Just months after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Watts Riots both soured white America's already limited support for the civil rights agenda and moved the political goals of the movement in a more leftward direction. King himself even moved cautiously toward democratic socialism, as events between 1965 and 1968 increasingly convinced him that embodying the Beloved Community would require radical changes in America's soul as well as its social structure (Cone 67 and 223).

After Watts, with its some four thousand arrests and thirty-four deaths, King committed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to taking the civil rights movement to the urban North. After Watts, he realized that the 1964 Civil Rights and the 1965 Voting Rights Acts would accomplish nothing for African Americans mired in urban ghettos. Urban blacks had long since enjoyed these blessings in the supposedly integrated North. Yet at Watts they protested segregated housing and discrimination in employment. Watts convinced King not only to take the movement

THE CRESSET

north, but that its message must now focus on economic justice. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” King preached, “but if a man doesn’t have a job or an income he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness.”

Thus SCLC’s momentous 1966 campaign in Chicago targeted open housing and fairness in employment but elicited a response from whites fully as vicious and violent as any King had encountered in the South. Saying it was a sad day for Chicago when people called nuns “bitches,” he told reporters, “I have never in my life seen such hate. Not in Mississippi or Alabama” (Fairclough 105–7; King 1968b, 217).

In analyzing white America’s reactions to the mid-1960s civil rights legislation and its backlash against the black agenda after Watts and Chicago, King paradoxically despaired that the white majority had not truly been converted to the idea of racial justice but remained hopeful that the Beloved Community might still be an attainable goal. Indeed, King’s Beloved Community terminology refers to the actualization of the Kingdom of God, a society in which persons live “as children of God should live... [in] a kingdom controlled by the law of love.” King understood the Beloved Community to be based in Christian eschatology. Just as biblical scholars and theologians long had characterized the kingdom of God as “already, but not yet,” so King viewed the Beloved Community as a paradoxical reality, simultaneously “post-historical” yet also “right now, as an inner power within you.” Moreover, King’s goal of actualizing the Beloved Community required more than just “getting along across racial lines”; the radicalism of this goal required the creation of a society marked by love, economic justice, anti-poverty, and peace (Cartwright 165–7; Fairclough 35 and 138).

After Watts and Chicago, King marveled at the white backlash and the naïve belief that all the nation’s race problems automatically had been solved. “I am appalled,” he told a Montgomery mass meeting in early 1968, “that some people feel the civil rights struggle is over because we have a 1964 civil rights bill... and a voting rights bill. Over and over people ask, ‘What else do you want?’ They feel that everything is all right. Well, let them look around at our big cities.” A month later he told a Los Angeles audience that after Birmingham and Selma, white Americans had taken “a stand for decency, but it was never really a stand for genuine equality for the black man. That will cost the nation something.... It’s much easier

THE CRESSET

to integrate lunch counters than it is to eradicate slums. It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee an annual minimum income and create jobs" (King 1968c; 1967a, 133; 1968d).

After Selma, King argued, the civil rights movement had entered a new phase. The earlier phase, which had focused on ending segregation and protecting black voting rights, had brought whites around to treating blacks with decency but not necessarily with equality. In his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here?* King wrote:

White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation, or all forms of discrimination. The outraged white citizen had been sincere when he snatched the whips from the southern sheriffs and forbade them more cruelties. But when this was to a degree accomplished, the emotions that had momentarily inflamed him melted away.... When Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of the white allies had quietly disappeared.... But the absence of brutality and unregenerate evil is not the presence of justice.... Negroes felt cheated, especially in the North, while many whites felt that the Negroes had gained so much it was virtually impudent and greedy to ask for more so soon. (1967a excerpted in Washington 557)

King also blamed riots in the north on "white moderates who are more concerned about order than justice." White society created the conditions of discrimination, slums, unemployment, and poverty that led to the riots. "It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes," King acknowledged. He added, however that these were "derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society." Riots were the product of a white power structure "still seeking to keep the walls of segregation and inequality substantially intact" while African Americans intensified their determination to break down such walls: "The white society, unprepared and unwilling to accept radical structural change, is resisting firmly and thus producing chaos because the force for change is vital and

THE CRESSET

aggressive. The irony is that the white society ruefully complains that if there were no chaos great changes would come, yet it creates the circumstances breeding the chaos” (King 1957a; 1967c, 8–9).

The challenges of nationalizing the civil rights movement and the violent reaction of the North both depressed King *and* radicalized his prophetic prescriptions for America. In November 1966, King convened the SCLC staff on the island of St. Helena, South Carolina for a planning retreat. In a lengthy talk, King presented a radical reflection on the future of the movement. Human survival, he asserted, depended on solving the problems of “the inseparable triplets”: racial injustice, poverty, and war. Their voices, he argued, should not be intimidated into withholding criticism of the Vietnam War. Moreover, accusations of communism should not silence their critique of capitalism. “Maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism,” he suggested, noting: “If you read [Karl Marx], you can see that this man had a great passion for social justice. You know Karl Marx was born a Jew, [and] had a rabbinic background.” He lectured them on the Hebrew prophets’ early influence on Marx, before he later moved to a belief in economic determinism and rejected individual liberty. “Now this,” he added, “is where I leave brother Marx and move on toward the kingdom” (Branch 2006, 552–56).

This informal talk eventually became the outline of King’s final and most radical published writing, *Where Do We Go from Here? Can America pay close attention, not only to King’s Dream Speech but also to writings from his last two years, even in conservative times like the post-Reagan era? In these writings King called on America to go beyond even Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty to a systematic attack on the problem. Citing multiple roots of poverty, King advocated a coordinated effort to address these causes simultaneously. Housing measures, he argued, fluctuating according to legislative whim, had been “piecemeal and pygmy.” Educational reform had stalled through lack of economic commitment, while family assistance had stagnated. He further argued:*

At no time has a total, coordinated and fully adequate program been conceived. As a consequence, fragmentary and spasmodic reforms have failed to reach down to the profoundest needs of the poor. In addition to the absence of coordination and suf-

THE CRESSET

iciency, the programs of the past all have another common failing—they are indirect. Each seeks to solve poverty by first solving something else. (1967a, 614–16)

As a coordinated solution, King called for a combination of government jobs programs aiming at full employment alongside an even more radical remedy: a guaranteed annual income.

Elaborating on this proposal, King cited the conditions for a guaranteed income. First, rather than being tied to the lowest income level, it should be pegged to the median income. Second, the income must be dynamic, automatically rising as incomes rise as a whole. Without such safeguards, King argued, “creeping retrogression would occur, nullifying the gains of security and stability.” King also accepted the price tag estimated by liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith—\$20 billion a year, the equivalent of what the nation was then spending on the Vietnam War (1967a, 616–17).

King the preacher thus compared America to Dives, the name traditionally given to “the rich man” who ignored the needs of his impoverished neighbor Lazarus in Jesus’ famous parable:

Dives didn’t go to hell because he was rich; Dives didn’t realize that his wealth was his opportunity... to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother Lazarus. Dives went to hell because he passed by Lazarus every day and he never really saw him. He went to hell because he allowed his brother to become invisible.... Indeed, Dives went to hell because he sought to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty. And this can happen to America, the richest nation in the world.... This is America’s opportunity to help bridge the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. The question is whether America will do it. There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will. (1968b, 216)

Out of this sociological and homiletical analysis, King and his staff planned what would be the last protest effort of his life, the Poor People’s Campaign,

THE CRESSET

which would attack economic problems by calling for “an economic bill of rights,” guaranteeing a job to all who wished to work and an income for all who were unable to work (1968e, 65–66).

King had become convinced that justice for African Americans would require “radical changes in the structure of our society.” In a posthumously published essay called “A Testament of Hope,” he challenged white America to recognize that “when millions of people have been cheated for centuries, restitution is a costly process.” Cumulative problems of inferior education, poor housing, chronically high unemployment, and inadequate health care all had originated in racial discrimination and each would require billions of dollars to correct. Desegregating public facilities and protecting black voting rights had been achieved at “bargain basement prices,” but “justice so long deferred has accumulated interest” and would be very costly (1968a, 314–15).

Recognizing blacks’ long legacy of discrimination, King fully supported affirmative action programs. In contrast to providing a proof-text for contemporary conservatives who quote him in their denunciations of affirmative action, King called for a federal program for blacks analogous to the GI Bill of Rights, which was indeed a compensatory program seeking to help veterans regain an economic position they would have attained had they not been called into the nation’s service during World War II. As had been provided for veterans, such programs would enable blacks to buy homes without cash and at lower repayment terms. They would provide business loans or grant blacks special points in competition for civil service jobs. In cases of physical disability, medical care and long-term financial grants could be made available. Moreover, such government programs would contribute to a more favorable social climate encouraging preferential employment of the disadvantaged. Again the analogy of veterans’ programs would prevail, as after the war, King noted, “there was no appreciable resentment” of veterans. Instead, he argued, “America was only compensating her veterans for their time lost from school or from business” (King 1965, 367–68).

By the end of his life, therefore, King’s radical prophetic message was pushing America well beyond mere racial amity. Integration was only the beginning of the demands of racial justice, to which any real solution involved the much more difficult work of creating a reality very much like

THE CRESSET

Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God. King's goal of creating a Beloved Community required much more of white America than would mere integration. Likewise the black revolution was more than a struggle for the civil rights of African Americans. King asserted: "It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced" (King 1968a, 314–15).

Exactly one year before his death, in a speech at New York's famed Riverside Church, King gave a speech denouncing the Vietnam War, which he believed was robbing the nation of the means of dealing with its intricately interconnected domestic ills. This controversial stance not only widened his prophetic message beyond his role as "civil rights leader"; it also enlarged his soul beyond that of an American preacher to that of a prophet to the world.

King's Soul: The World

Impressed into prophetic duty by a 1955 bus boycott, King had graduated to prophet of a broadened American civil religion within eight short years. Winning the Nobel Peace Prize widened King's soul to focus on a universal message of peace. King had long and often spoken of the interrelatedness of all persons: "As long as there is poverty in the world, no man can be totally rich even if he has a million dollars." The Nobel Prize deepened his universalism and commissioned him "to work harder than I had ever worked before for 'the brotherhood of man.' This is a calling which takes me beyond national allegiances...." (King 1961; see also 1967c, Chapter 2).

In reality, however, both his understanding of the Kingdom of God (Beloved Community) and his black messianism had long since begun moving him beyond national allegiances. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, coupled with Paul's Christian mission to the Gentiles, led naturally to the New Testament writings, virtually all of which see Christianity as a universal faith that transcends national and cultural boundaries. The Roman Empire's uneasiness with and at times persecution of early Christianity sprung in great part from its proclamation of "a king greater than Caesar"

THE CRESSET

and of a kingdom whose loyalties transcended those to Rome. Martin Luther King came out of this “subversive” tradition. The Nobel Prize merely deepened his belief that American blacks had a universal teaching role. He thus told a Canadian audience that peace on earth depended on transformed loyalties:

Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world.... we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools.... We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (King 1967c, 68)

The message of the later King remained “deeply rooted” in the American civil religion. Despite America’s imperfections, he continued to reflect African American Christians’ long-held views of American exceptionalism. On 4 July 1965, he told the Ebenezer Baptist Church that God had commissioned America for a special task “for mankind and the world.” With many racial groups and national backgrounds together in one nation, “America is the world in miniature and the world is America writ large.” For King, America remained the testing ground for whether the entire world might learn to live in peace with its diversity (King 1961, quoted in Carson and Halloran 92). But King also broadened America’s civil religion by pointing Americans beyond their own national loyalties. This led him into the dangerous thicket of the antiwar movement, where he displayed his greatest moral courage despite intense pressure to conform to super-patriotic support of all of America’s military adventures. In the contexts of an ongoing war and Cold War anti-communism, King’s decision to oppose the war jeopardized his status as a moral leader of the country.

For many reasons, almost all of King’s advisors implored him not to involve himself in protests against the Vietnam War. Not the least of these was the certainty of alienating President Lyndon Johnson so soon after he had largely embraced the civil rights agenda in his Great Society and War

THE CRESSET

on Poverty programs. Others pragmatically worried that a seemingly unpatriotic opposition to the war would alienate potential donors to his civil rights work. King's conscience, however, like his namesake Martin Luther, was "captive to the Word of God." He was also increasingly troubled that such an expedient silence showed both a lack of courage and a misunderstanding of his prophetic role. Thus, on 4 April 1967, King made his famous statement against the war at New York's Riverside Church.

Questioned on whether his role as "civil rights leader" gave him proper credentials for wading into a foreign policy matter, he began his address with seven reasons why the road from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church had led to the Riverside Church and his critique of America's role in Vietnam. First, he had come to believe that Johnson's commitment in Vietnam had "broken and eviscerated" the president's commitment to end poverty and racial injustice at home. As long as Vietnam consumed massive and valuable resources, he concluded, the nation would never invest enough of them to address the issues of the Great Society. Second, he was repulsed by the irony that black Americans were disproportionately fighting overseas, ostensibly to provide a freedom to southeast Asians that America had even yet not guaranteed to them. Third, America's reliance on violence in Vietnam undermined his calls for nonviolence in America. "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos," he reasoned, "without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government." Fourth, his calling "to redeem the soul of America" required that America "can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over." Fifth, he reiterated that his Nobel Peace Prize had made more obligatory his work for universal peace. Sixth, at base his ministry was in the name of Jesus, who had embraced nonviolence enough to die for his enemies. Finally, speaking against the war grew out of his vocation of universal sonship and brotherhood. Thus, defying the patriotism at the heart of the American civil religion, he saw himself as "bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions" (King 1967d, 139–142).

King's advisors accurately predicted that their leader's opposition to the war would undermine his support among white Americans. Undeterred, King powerfully answered his critics a month later in a sermon at Ebenezer:

THE CRESSET

There is something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that would praise you when you say, “Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark,” but will curse and damn you when you say, “Be nonviolent toward little brown Vietnamese children!” (1967e, quoted in Branch 604)

Thus, by 1967, as he stepped up his criticism of the war in Vietnam, he suggested that African Americans “may be the vanguard in a prolonged struggle that may change the shape of the world, as billions of deprived shake and transform the earth in their quest for life, freedom, and justice” (1967c, 16–17). Again, in *Where Do We Go from Here?*, his most radical public writing, he warned:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes while the profits of the employers remain intact, and say: “This is not just.” It will look across the oceans and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: “This is not just.” It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: “This is not just.” The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: “This way of settling differences is not just.” (1967a, 630–31)

In their struggles for equality with whites at home, African Americans could not “ignore the larger world house” in which they also lived. “The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools” (1967a, 617 and 620). Fixing the world house, King advised, was where the civil rights movement should go from there.

THE CRESSET

Repairing the larger world house required systematic, interrelated attention to the “inseparable triplets” of racism, poverty, and war. First, racism must be understood as an international phenomenon perennially allied with economic exploitation and neo-colonialism. King did not view prejudice and racism as synonyms. All persons or peoples could be prejudiced against outsiders to their group, but racism included economic exploitation based on racial difference and could only be exhibited by groups with political or economic power. Ending racial exploitation within and among western countries, King argued, would aid in the contest with communism: “Nothing provides the communists with a better climate for expansion and infiltration than the continued alliance of our nation with racism and exploitation throughout the world” (1967a, 621–22).

Second, the United States and other wealthy nations must address the international problem of poverty, viewing it as a moral obligation to provide capital and technical assistance to underdeveloped areas of the world. He called for a massive, international Marshall Plan for Asia, Africa, and South America, with wealthy nations devoting two percent of their gross domestic products to the project for ten or twenty years. “No individual or nation,” he preached, “can be great if it does not have a concern for ‘the least of these’” (1967a, 622–23).

Finally, to fix the world house America must lead the world in finding an alternative to war. In King’s latter years his commitment to and passionate belief in nonviolence, having proven successful on the civil rights stage, deepened and was applied to Vietnam and international relations. He called on the United States and other nations to “pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means,” recognizing that peace was not only humankind’s distant goal but also the means by which to arrive at that goal. He mourned, however, that America’s leadership seemed to be moving in the opposite direction:

When I see our country today intervening in what is basically a civil war, mutilating hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese children with napalm, burning villages and rice fields at random, painting the valleys of that small Asian country red with human blood, leaving broken bodies in countless ditches and sending home half-men, mutilated mentally and physically;

THE CRESSET

when I see the unwillingness of our government to create the atmosphere for a negotiated settlement of this awful conflict by halting bombings in the North and agreeing unequivocally to talk with the Vietcong—and all this in the name of pursuing the goal of peace—I tremble for our world. (1967a, 626–28)

Today we prefer the dreamy Martin the Evangelist who revived us again into a nation as good as we think we are. It is a historical myth that historian Timothy Tyson characterizes as “soothing, moving, politically acceptable, and has only the disadvantage of bearing no resemblance to what actually happened” (319). But after just fourteen years of public ministry, King transcended his racial and his national loyalties to become a prophet to the world. In 1968, America was ill-prepared to hear his radical prophesying—and is even less willing to hear it now.

But despite a heavy spirit caused by this nation’s backlash against his message, as well as by his own personal failings, King yet summoned an unworldly optimism based in his deep, biblical hope. So in one of his oracles, “A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” he could say:

[T]oday I *still* have a dream. I have a dream that one day men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers. I *still* have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country, every colored person in the world, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character rather than the color of his skin, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.... I *still* have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise up against nations, neither will they study war any more. I *still* have a dream today that one day the lamb and the lion will lie down together and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. (1967a, 76–77).

Let us hear the real and radical Martin Luther King—once a prophet without honor, now a favorite son of Georgia with the world and the Beloved Community on his mind. If ever anyone held up a mirror to force the soul

THE CRESSET

of America to see its own reflection, it was King. If we consider playing that dangerous prophetic role to be a sign of true greatness, then King's third place ranking may be a little low. ✠

Andrew M. Manis is Assistant Professor of History at Macon State College. He is author most recently of *Macon Black and White* (Mercer, 2004).

Bibliography

Baldwin, Lewis V. *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King Jr.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Branch, Taylor. *At Canaan's Edge: American in the King Years, 1965–68.* New York: Simon & Shuster, 2006.

Carson, Clayborne and Peter Halloran, eds. *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner, 1998.

Cartwright, John H. "The Social Eschatology of Martin Luther King Jr." In *Martin Luther King Jr: Theologian.* David J. Garrow, ed., vol. 2. New York: Carlson, 1989.

Cone, James H. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare.* Maryknoll, Orbis, 1991.

D'Souza, Dinesh. *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Fairclough, Adam. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. "A Testament of Hope." In *Washington, A Testament of Hope*, 1968a.

THE CRESSET

- _____. "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," 1968b. In Carson and Halloran, eds., *A Knock at Midnight*.
- _____. Speech at mass meeting, Montgomery, Alabama, 17 February 1968. King Center Archives, 1968c.
- _____. "Sickness in America." Address given in Los Angeles, California, 16 March 1968. King Center Archives, 1968d.
- _____. "Showdown for Nonviolence." 1968e. In Washington, *A Testament of Hope*.
- _____. *Where Do We Go From Here?* Unpublished draft. King Center Archives, 1967a.
- _____. "To Serve the Present Age." Sermon delivered at Victory Baptist Church, Los Angeles, California, 25 June 1967. King Center Archives, 1967b.
- _____. *The Trumpet of Conscience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967c.
- _____. "Beyond Vietnam." Speech delivered 4 April 1967, at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City. 1967d. In David Howard-Pitney, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004.
- _____. "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," Sermon presented at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 30 April 1967. King Center Archives, 1967e.
- _____. Interview with Playboy. 1965. In Washington, *Testament of Hope*.
- _____. "Statement to the Press Regarding Nobel Trip." Sheraton-Atlantic Hotel, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 4 December 1964.

THE CRESSET

_____. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." 1963. In Washington, *A Testament of Hope*.

_____. "The American Dream." 1961. In Washington, *A Testament of Hope*.

_____. "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." 1960. In Washington, *A Testament of Hope*.

_____. *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. New York: Harper and Row, 1958.

_____. "Some Things We Must Do," Sermon delivered at Holt Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 5 December 1957. King Center Archives, 1957a.

_____. Speech to Real Estate Brokers, San Francisco, California, 10 August 1957. King Center Archives, 1957b.

_____. Address to the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association, delivered at the Holt Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 5 December 1955. King Center Archives, 1955.

Manis, Andrew M. *Macon Black and White: An Unutterable Separation in the American Century*. Macon: Mercer University, 2004.

Tyson, Timothy. *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story*. New York: Crown, 2004.

Washington, James Melvin, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Harper and Row, 1986.