

The Political Philosophy Of Martin Luther King Jr.

Joe Mannath ■

"Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice."¹

"It is better to die on the highway than make a butchery of my conscience."²

"A time comes when silence is betrayal."³

1. Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an African-American pastor who led the civil rights movement in the United States from 1955 up to his violent death on 4 April 1968.⁴

Since 1985, King has been the only African-American, indeed the only twentieth century American, to be honoured by a public holiday in the United States. According to many historians, the Civil Rights move-

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¹ Martin Luther King, *Where Do We go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 37.

² James Bishop, *Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York: J.B. Putnam 's Sons, 1971), p.386.

³ King, "A Time to Break Silence," in James Melvin Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p.231. This book will henceforth be quoted as *Testament*.

⁴ For those who are unfamiliar with expression "Africa-American": The older word "Negro" was rejected by the group as offensive and substituted for some time by the term "Black" (especially by proponents of Black Power). The currently accepted term is "African-American," That is , an American of African descent.

ments made more gains in the thirteen years of King's leadership than in the previous one hundred years.

Martin Luther King was the recently appointed pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery when he was thrust into the leadership role of the Civil Rights movement through a series of coincidences.⁵ King's committed and visionary leadership, combined with his great eloquence, helped to coalesce the movement into a powerful force. Under his guidance, African-Americans chose the path of "militant nonviolence," eschewing both the passive resignation of some of the community and the use of violence proposed by the advocates of Black Power. His militant nonviolence was inspired, as he himself explicitly admitted, by his Christian faith (and its explicitation during his theological studies), as well as by the example of Mahatma Gandhi. He visited India to study Gandhiji's thought and impact personally. He called the trip a pilgrimage.

King was no armchair theologian or philosopher who elaborated a political theory from the safety of the lecture hall. As we shall see in part two of this paper, his theory was born out of a very demanding and painful praxis - a series of commitments which brought him opposition, imprisonment, and verbal as well as physical violence that culminated in his death at the hand of an assassin at the age of thirty nine. Some of his best known and most quoted writings were speeches at rallies. One was written from prison (the highly acclaimed "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"). Others were responses to critics.

⁵ King's earlier life which is not of direct interest to us here, can be sketched as follows: Born in Atlanta Georgia, on 15 January 1929, to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr, and Mrs. Albert Willings King, he was ordained a Baptist pastor in 1948. He did Bachelor's degrees in sociology and in divinity, and went to complete the doctorate in systematic theology at Boston University. He married Coretta Scott of Marion, Alabama in 1953. In 1954, he became the pastor of the prestigious Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama. The Black churches of the South will play a crucial play in the Civil Rights Movement. Many meetings took place in churches.

For more details, see the detailed biography (xiii+561 pages): Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); or the shorter study: Mary Craig, *Candles in the Dark: Seven Modern Martyrs* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), pp.61-102: "Martin Luther King, Jr."

King won extraordinary recognition even in his lifetime. He was the most influential African-American of his time, taken seriously by both blacks and U.S. administration. He was the youngest person in history to win the Nobel Prize for peace (in 1964, at the age of 35). He was given nearly four hundred other awards, including several honorary degrees from prestigious universities.

But it is not the awards for which Martin Luther King wanted to be remembered. "Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral.... What is it that I would want said? .. I don't want a long funeral... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize... That I have three or four hundred other awards; that is not important... I had like somebody to mention that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others ..tried to love somebody..did try to feed the hungry... Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice;... a drum major for peace.. for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind...I just want to leave a committed life behind."⁶

To understand the political philosophy of such a man, we have first to examine what he did, and how he responded to the human drama building up around him. His committed life must be understood before we can grasp his theory. This we propose to do in the next section.

II. Stages of King's Political Involvement

Martin Luther King learned political leadership and refined the art of militant nonviolence in the crucible of experience. It started in an unexpected and dramatic way in 1955, in the Southern town of Montgomery. We shall have a look at the journey that began there, and at the clear steps that followed: formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The Prayer Pilgrimage to the Capital, the Student Sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the campaigns in Albany and Birmingham, the March on Washington, the letter from the Birmingham Jail, the struggle in St.

⁶ *Testament*, p. 267. This is from the speech, "Where do we go from here?" King's last, and most radical, SCLC presidential address.

Auguatine, the issue of the ballot, the Selma agitation, the action in Chicago, the question of Black Power, critique of the Vietnam War and King's radicalization, the Poor People's Campaign in Washington D.C., and the involvement in Memphis, during which he was killed.

How did the pastor of an affluent Black church in Montgomery become the leader of the American Civil rights movement and the main proponent of militant nonviolence after Mahatam Gandhi? Like many other mass movements led by remarkable men, the Montgomery agitation started with an apparently insignificant event.

1. Montgomery: the Walking City, 1955-56

On 1 December 1955, Mrs Rosa Parks, a 42-year-old black woman, refused to yield her bus seat to a white man. She was booked for violating the law. That very evening a number of leaders of the black community started discussing what should be done. They also telephoned Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Over the years, blacks in Montgomery had suffered repeated indignities and abuses while riding segregated buses. They constituted 70 per cent of the passengers on the Montgomery City Lines, and 50,000 of the total city population approximately 130,000. White racism permeated Montgomery, as it did the entire South.”⁷

Colaiaico describes the bus segregation as follows: “Blacks were seated in the ‘colored’ section at the rear of the bus, while the front ten seats were reserved exclusively for whites. If White passengers already had already filled the front reserved seats and more whites boarded, blacks in the unreserved section immediately behind were legally obligated to give up their seats to whites who were left standing. Even if a bus were crowded with blacks alone, they were prohibited from occupying the first ten seats. Black passengers were also required to pay their fare at the front of the bus, and then get off and enter at the rear. It was not uncom-

⁷ James A. Colaiaico, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Apostle of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 5.

mon for a bus to drive off before a black person had re-boarded. Even while obeying the law, black passengers were frequently subjected to racial slurs and physical assaults from white drivers.”⁸

The leaders of the black community met in churches to plan their strategy. Their decision was to boycott the buses, till the demands of the black community were met. In one of the first meetings, King said “ There comes a time when people get tired . We are here this evening to tell those who have mistreated us so long that we are tired- tired of being segregated and humiliated, tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression”⁹

He concluded with these words, which were to set the tone for the whole movements: “ If you will protest courageously , and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say , ' There lived a great People - a black People -who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our responsibility.”¹⁰

Under King’s leadership, the blacks made their demands known: courteous treatment by drivers, the seating to be on a first- come, first-served basis, and the employment of black drivers. They walked or organized car pools. King received threats daily. His house was bombed (on January 30, the anniversary of Ganshiji’s death !). His response was : “We must meet violence with nonviolence. Remember the words of Jesus, ‘He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword’”.

The bus boycott produced scenes of white prejudice and violence, as well as greatness of soul in many blacks. The feelings of the black community are reflected in the words of a poor, uneducated elderly woman.

⁸ Ibid., p.6.

⁹ Ibid., p.9.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Towards Freedom : The Montgomery Story*(New York: Harper and Bothers, 1958), pp.61-63.

¹¹ Ibid., p.137.

Asked whether she was tired after several weeks of walking, she replied, "My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest".¹²

For the first time in their history, an entire black community of a town resisted an unjust law, and did it peacefully. For 381 days, thousands of them walked to work, some up to twelve miles a day. It led to victory; the supreme court declared the segregation laws unconstitutional. More than that, it was a great psychological victory. It affected the consciousness of the African-American community. They now knew that they could achieve things, and do it peacefully.

2. *Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington*

The nonviolent movement spread quickly in the South. To coordinate their activities better, its leaders formed a new organization in 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and elected King president. In most of the Civil Rights struggles of the next decade, the key group would be the SCLC, and its most respected leader and spokesman Martin Luther King.

One of the main reasons for the powerlessness of the blacks was that very few of them were registered voters. To press for the ballot, King and the SCLC organized a "Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington" on 17 May 1957. It was the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of the United States until then, and drew some 15,000 to 37,000 persons (estimates differ). King appealed to the federal government for legislation to protect the right to vote: "Give us the ballot and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights... Give us the ballot and we will fill our legislative halls with men of good will... Give us the ballot and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of 17 May 1954".¹³ Result? The Civil Rights Act of 1957.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p.125

¹³ *Testament*, p.6.

3. Student Sit-ins

To speed up the pace of legislation and desegregation, groups of students sat in at segregated lunch counters, asking to be served. When denied service, they would politely refuse to leave. Sit-ins spread throughout the South in the late 50s and up to 1961. This too had a noticeably positive outcome: nearly 200 cities began to desegregate. King encouraged and supported the sit-ins. He insisted that without direct action, nothing worthwhile would be achieved (a belief he shared with his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi). Without nonviolent protest, he felt, the changes would be too late. "At this rate," he said, "It will be at least another generation before the major forms of segregation disappear. All of Africa will be free before the American Negro attains first-class citizenship."¹⁴

The urgency of the ballot reform will become clearer to us if we look at these figures: Even as late as 1964, only 40 per cent of the black population of the South were qualified to vote, as compared with 70 per cent of adult whites.¹⁵

4. Freedom Riders

On 4 May 1961, an interracial group of 13 "Freedom Riders" boarded two interstate buses, to challenge segregation in the South (buses and bus terminals). There were violent reactions in several towns. The Riders offered no resistance. In Montgomery, a savage mob started beating up the Riders. There were no policemen around. Among those injured was a well-known person who was knocked unconscious while trying to rescue two white women Freedom Riders in his car.¹⁶

¹⁴Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p.36

¹⁵Colaiaco, p.33.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p.36

King explained the basis of nonviolent civil disobedience in these words. "It is a matter of conscience and morality. They must use their lives and their bodies to right a wrong. Our conscience tells us that the law is wrong and we must resist, but we have a moral obligation to accept the penalty." When Attorney General Robert Kennedy tried to dissuade him, he replied, "It is difficult to understand the position of oppressed people. Ours is a way out-creative, moral and nonviolent... You must understand that we've made gains without pressure and I hope that pressure will always be moral, legal and peaceful".¹⁷

White racism showed its ugly face in other ways, too. When James Meredith attempted to become the first black man to enrol in the University of Mississippi, the Governor of the state tried to prevent it. President Kennedy had to send federal marshals to the university to accompany Meredith. Violence erupted nonetheless, because of a rioting white mob.

5. Albany, Georgia, 1961-62

This was a town which practised segregation in so many areas of daily life. King and his group initiated nonviolent action to desegregate common places, e.g., lunch counters. Because of tactical errors and poor planning and execution, the campaign was not very successful. The best part of this campaign was that it showed the readiness of the blacks to come together for nonviolent direct action to get their rights. For a people oppressed and pushed into passive resignation for over three hundred years, that was no mean achievement.

6. Birmingham, 1963

Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the South. King chose it to focus the attention of the nation on the atrocities committed on the black community. His tactic was to choose a particular place or issue, engage in direct nonviolent action challenging the unjust law, mobilize masses of people in peaceful protest, and hope for a strong reaction from the white supremacy group, which would expose the reality of

¹⁷ Edwin Guthman, *We Band of Brothers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.155, as quoted by Colaiaco.

the situation before the nation. Birmingham filled the bill wonderfully. Out of the black population of 80,000, only 10,000 were registered to vote. Most blacks held menial jobs, and were victimized by whites. Black churches had been bombed. The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, had declared in his inaugural address. "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation for ever".

King launched his campaign with lunch counter sit-ins. Next came marches. What helped to stir the conscience of the nation was the brutal treatment meted out to the marchers by the police led by its chief Eugene Connor. Fire hoses and dogs were used against peaceful demonstrators. One of the crucial decisions in the campaign was to involve children. Television brought the violence used against them and against adults by whites: the brutality, the police dogs, the miserable living conditions.

The Birmingham campaign brought in Federal intervention for desegregation. This had great impact on the blacks. Their cry became: "Freedom Now!" There were protests all over the U.S.—1412 separate demonstrations during the summer of 1963. The goals of the protests were much broader than before—not just desegregation of transport and schools, but fuller social, political and economic changes.¹⁸

7. March on Washington, 28 August 1963

In this well-known event, some 250,000 persons from all over the country took part, including 75,000 whites. The highlight of the March was the moving speech by Martin Luther King, who was presented to the crowd as "the moral leader of our nation". This oration, the quoted among all his speeches, has many passages worth quoting:

"We've come today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men,

¹⁸ Colaiaco, pp.69-70

yes, black men and well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that American has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro People a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds". ...And so we've come to cash this check, a check that give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice".¹⁹ King went to describe his dream for America. We shall return to it in part three.

8. *Other Campaigns*

For want of time and space, I shall barely mention other campaigns, with their agonies and victories: (a) St. Augustine (a town in Florida): a notoriously racist city where King successfully led a desegregation campaign, at the end of which President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, against the segregation of public accommodations. (b) Ballot registration, with the help of white volunteers from the North. Blacks had been prevented from voting in three ways: the poll tax, literacy tests and intimidation. At the end of these campaigns, King not only was the most accepted leader in the black community; he also became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace (October 1964). He gave the prize money (54000 U.S. dollars) to the civil rights movement. (c) Selma, Alabama: The SCLC's final campaign in the South. The issue was voting rights. King's words were clear and courageous: "We are not on our knees begging for the ballot. We are demanding the ballot".²⁰ Here again, there were marches, white intimidation, violence (including the murder of a white volunteer, mother of five children, by the Ku Klux Klan) federal government intervention, and finally, on 6 August 1965, the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by the president. (d) Chicago, 1966: The issue was the black ghettos of the city. King's interventions were stalemated by Richard Daley, the shrewd and powerful mayor of the city.

¹⁹ *Testament* p.217

²⁰ David J. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 39.

The campaign did not prove successful. King and his collaborators became also more deeply aware of the prevasiveness of white racism in America. With the apparent ineffectiveness of nonviolent action in some case, Black Power (a movement among African - Americans that proposed violent revolution as the method, and separation, non integration, as the goal) gained more and more adherents. Their spokesmen, Carmichel and Malcolm X, openly differed from King's ideology and tactics, and proposed violence as the answer. (e) King became more and more critical of American capitalism and American foreign policy, which he described as a new form of colonialism. He was vehemently opposed to America's war in Vietnam, for many reasons. One reason was that it took away money needed to remove poverty in the U.S. He felt the need of organizing the poor people of America to demand their rights. The protest would take the form of a Poor People's March on Washington, planned for the spring of 1968.(f) Memphis: While preparing for the Poor People's March, he was asked to support the sanitation workers' strike in the town of Memphis in the state of Tennessee. It was there, while planning a peaceful protest rally, that he was shot dead at 6 pm, on 4 April 1968.

The brief description of Martin Luther King's main campaigns between 1955 and 1968 does not give us an adequate picture of the extraordinary amount of work he put in and his impact on civil rights legislation and on the self-image of the black community. According to *Time* magazine, in 1963 alone King travelled about 275000 miles and made more than 350 public speeches.²¹

Martin Luther King was thrown into the vortex of the civil rights movement as a young pastor of twenty-six years, gave himself to the movement with deep commitment, and brought to it his strong belief in militant nonviolence. He met with violent hatred and widespread respect. He paid for his beliefs with his life. Our next question is: What is the theory he elaborated during the years of struggle? What are his main tenets? Apart from the example of a committed life, does he have something to offer us by way a valid and convincing political philosophy?

²¹ "Man of the Year", *Time* (3 January 1964), p.27.

111. King's Political Philosophy

Martin Luther King's political thought evolved as he responded to situations that faced him. As he himself used to say, Christ taught us the path of love, and Gandhi showed us that it works. What taught him the meaning of militant nonviolence was his own experience. He did not have the time or the setting to make a systematic or academic presentation of it. He rather preached, taught, wrote or gave interviews to magazines on his beliefs and strategy as crisis after crisis developed, in the thick of political battles. The subheadings that follow are simply an attempt to make our grasp of his thought easier, they are not topics under which King himself organized his political thought.

1. Analysis of the New Situation Facing the Black community

King reflected on the situation of his Negro brothers and sisters and saw that changes that had taken place. "Many Negroes lost faith in themselves. They came to feel that they were less than human. So long as the Negro maintained this subservient attitude and accepted the "place" assigned to him, a sort of racial peace existed".²²

King went on to list several new factors in the condition of the blacks: (a) the movement from rural to urban areas, which brought many of them in contact with a larger and different world; (b) higher levels of education; (c) stronger economic clout (the total income of the black community in the U.S. being almost equal to the economy of Canada); (d) the impact of the liberation movements of Asia and Africa; (e) the Supreme Court's decision outlawing segregation in public schools.²³

These factors, King said, make the blacks more determined to resist segregation. He also saw that the whites responded to this determination "in the subtle and skillful method of truth distortion". Since they could not any more quote religious reasons (namely, that slavery or seg-

²² Testament, p.6.

²³ Ibid., pp 145-146. This is taken from a speech he gave on "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness." It was published in *YWCA Magazine*, Dec. 1960, pp.4-6

These factors, King said, make the blacks more determined to resist segregation. He also saw that the whites responded to this determination "in the subtle and skillful method of truth distortion". Since they could not any more quote religious reasons (namely, that slavery or segregation was ordained by God), they used cultural and sociological arguments (namely, that Negroes were not ready for desegregation).

King refused to accept that the racial problem was merely a regional issue. It is a "national problem. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Therefore, no American can afford to be apathetic about the problem of racial justice".²⁴

Attacking the apathy that was prevalent in his community, King insisted that the primary responsibility in achieving first class citizenship rested with the blacks. No group gives up privileges willingly; it is up to the oppressed to fight for their rights and win them. The blacks, according to King, must work on two fronts: (a) "We must resist all forms of racial injustice. The resistance must always be on the highest level of dignity and discipline". (pp.148-149). (b) "The Negro must make a vigorous effort to improve his personal standards. The only answer that we can give to those who through blindness and fear would question our readiness and capability is that our lagging standards exist because of the legacy of slavery and segregation, inferior schools, slums, second class citizenship, and not because of an inherent inferiority". (p.149). Prodding his community to take responsibility for their own failures, King went on to add: "We cannot ignore that fact that our standards do often fall short. One of the sure signs of maturity is the ability to rise to the point of self-criticism...Some have lost that creative something called initiative. So many have used their oppression as an excuse for mediocrity. Many of us live above our means, spend money on nonessentials and frivolities, and fail to give to serious causes, organizations and educational institutions that so desperately need funds. Our crime rate is far too high". (P.50.).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.147-148.

He called on his community to join him in the pursuit of a dream: "A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character, a dream of a place where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity, the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare to live together as brothers—that is the dream". (p.51)

King will return to the theme of this dream again, in other speeches and writings. Note that, like Mahatma Gandhi, he criticized the failings of his own community and spoke openly to them. In *Stride Toward Freedom*, we read: "Our level of cleanliness is frequently far too low... We are often loud and boisterous, and spend far too much on drink. Even the most poverty-stricken among us can purchase a ten-cent bar of soap; even the most uneducated among us can have high morals... Since crime rate often grows out of a sense of futility and despair, Negro parents must be urged to give their children the love, attention and sense of belonging that segregated society deprives them of".²⁵

King challenged the black middle class to get more involved in the struggles of their poorer brothers and sisters. He asked them to contribute more money to the cause of freedom, and to realize that their salvation depended ultimately on the salvation of the Negro masses.²⁶ He repeatedly contended that silence and indifference in the presence of injustice is a greater problem than the cruelty of the wicked. "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of good people". (P.227)

²⁵ Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, as quoted in *Testament*, p. 489.

²⁶ John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr., The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), pp.226-227.

lieved, is not only unethical and against the teachings of Jesus; it leads to greater violence and destruction. Echoing Gandhi, he would say that what he aimed at was not a victory over the whites, or their destruction, but a society where blacks and whites would live together in harmony. While the proponents of Black Power wanted to overthrow white rule violently (Malcolm X: "if the man puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery"), King's position was: "The alternative to violence is the method of non-violent resistance. This method is nothing more and nothing less than Christianity in action. It seems to me to be the Christian way of life in solving problems of human relations."²⁷

He goes on to describe nonviolence in the following way. The thinking is very close to Gandhi's. First, it is not a method of cowardice or passivity. It does resist. Secondly, it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is bitterness. Thirdly, the attack is directed to the forces of evil, rather than persons caught in the forces. As he said in Montgomery, "The tension in this city is not between white people and black people. The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice... We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may happen to be unjust." (pp.86-87). Fourthly, the method of nonviolence avoids not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of spirit. "Along the way of life, someone must have enough sense and morality to cut off the chain of hate by projecting the ethics of love into the center of our lives." (pp. 87-88).

The love intended here is the Christian notion of *agape*. King had investigated this notion during his theological studies, and he had been inspired by the Bible, and theologians such as Nygren, Tillich and the personalists. "This means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate; it means understanding, redeeming good will for all men, an even-owing love which seeks nothing in return. ...It is the love of God operating in the human heart. When we rise to love on the *agape* level, we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed, while hating the

²⁷ King, "The Current Crisis in Race Relation," In *Testament*, p.86.

deed that the person does". (p.88). A fifth and final trait of the nonviolent method is the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. Hence there is an underlying optimism in the midst of the struggle.

In replying to his critics, King spoke about the futility and the undesirable consequence of violence. He was aware of the impact of the impact of the book *The Wretched of the Earth* by black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who advocated the path of violence. Black power agreed with Fanon and moved away from King. Their position did not convince King, who considered violence immoral and impractical.²⁸

Volunteers who took part in demonstrations were given training in the use of nonviolent methods. They also made a pledge to meditate daily on the teachings of Jesus, not to retaliate with violence and to behave courteously. In fact, in the Montgomery bus boycott, each participant carried a card with these pledges. In his "letter to America" King explained the four steps of a direct nonviolent campaign: (a) the collection of facts, to determine whether injustice existed; (b) negotiation; (c) self-purification; (d) direct action, including boycotts, sit-ins, marches and civil disobedience.²⁹

There is, however, a paradox, in the use of nonviolence. It was most effective when it provoked racist violence. In fact, according to one of King's articles written during the Selma protests of 1965, the four parts of a successful nonviolent direct-action campaign would be these: (a) Nonviolent demonstrations; (b) Violent reactions by racists; (c) Americans who see it personally or on TV, demand federal intervention; (d) the government, under pressure, acts. (pp.137-138). It is a fact that those campaigns where police brutality was at its worst (e.g., Conner's police dogs and fire hoses), were most successful in bringing about federal intervention in favour of the blacks.

When King was accused of fermenting violence, he replied that his campaigns exposed the violence that already existed in the unjust situation. He distinguished between a negative peace which exists when the

²⁸ Ansbro, pp. 231-236.

²⁹ Colaiaco, p.80.

oppressed do not protest though the condition is one of great injustice, and positive peace which exists when justice and brotherhood have been established. A situation which looks peaceful, or is defined as such by the oppressor, may in reality be very violent.

Note also that (as in Mahatma Gandhi's case) nonviolence is often understood to mean passivity. Or meek submission to injustice. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Both Gandhi and King advocated direct action. In fact, nonviolent activists would say that it has more in common with war than with pacifism. It is the moral equivalent of war, and demands greater courage, since it requires its practitioners to endure rather than inflict harm. (pp.139-140). That nonviolence has nothing to do with passivity is clear from the following passage. "We will take direct action against injustice without waiting for other agencies to act. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do this peacefully, openly, cheerfully because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to the truth as we see it"³⁰

Paraphrasing Gandhi, King wrote. "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. Do to us what you will and we will still love you". (p.485). In his understanding of militant nonviolence, King acknowledged repeatedly his debt to Mahatma Gandhi. The influence is clear to any one who studies both these apostles of nonviolence.

3. *Justice and Injustice*

Since King was often accused of breaking the laws of the country, he defended himself by distinguishing just and unjust laws. A just law is according to God's law and according to natural law. He found prece-

³⁰ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, quoted in *Testament*, pp. 484-485.

dents in history for disobeying unjust laws. He offered theoretical justification for his position from the writings of Thomas Aquinas. When a numerical or power majority demands from a minority what it does not impose on itself, then that law is unjust and must be resisted. This was the case with segregation. He agrees with St. Augustine that an unjust law is no law at all. A couple of quotations may make his position clearer: "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority".³¹ He therefore questions the validity of laws made by governments which deprived the blacks of their voting rights. How could the laws made by such a group be binding?

As for breaking unjust laws, King holds a very Gandhian view. "One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law". (p.86)

4. Involvement of All Categories of People

One reason for the success of King's nonviolent action was the support he received from the vast majority of the black community. Three groups must in particular be singled out: the churches, the youth, and poor people.

First, the black churches of the South. It was in the churches that the blacks met, listened to King and to other leaders, prayed together, took decisions. Without the church, there would hardly have been a Martin Luther King or his nonviolent movement (at least in the way it developed). Many of the movement's leaders, right from the beginning, were

³¹ Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 85.

pastors, just as King was. At some of the crucial moments in his campaign, he appealed to fellow pastors in the neighborhood or all over the nation. They did not always support him as much as he had expected, but he did receive strong backing from Christian pastors (black and white).

Secondly, the black youth: Many young people found a cause worth fighting for. They got involved in the marches, in the peaceful sit-ins and other demonstrations. King was aware of the alienation of youth in contemporary American society, and of the need for direction. He spoke of the rising unemployment and crime among the youth; of the impact of the Vietnam war, of the pull of materialism that influences the majority.³²

Thirdly, the poor and the dispossessed: Like the elderly woman affectionately called Mother Pollard who said, "My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest", many other poor and illiterate men and women joined the marches, took part in rallies in spite of police brutality, and went to jail in support of their cause. A 1963 poll conducted by *Newsweek* magazine showed that King had an 88 per cent approval rating among ordinary blacks, and a 95 per cent rate among the black leadership.³³

5. "Why We Can't Wait"

That is the title of one of King's best known writings. In it he explained that the pace of reform was far too slow, that tokenism was not the answer, that legal litigation would give blacks too little and too late, that direct action was needed. He spoke eloquently of the humiliation and suffering of his people and why they could not wait. He spoke of the insults suffered, the inferiority that is fostered in black children, the violence that was a part of everyday life. He went on to conclude: "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair".³⁴

³² These ideas are found in : Martin Luther King, *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), *passim*.

³³ Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p.111.

³⁴ King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 83-84.

This letter, one of King's most moving writings, was written from a Birmingham jail. It was a reply to the critique made by a group of pastors who felt the agitation was "unwise and untimely". The clergymen advised the blacks to pursue their demands "in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the street". The letter from the jail became a chapter in his book, *Why We Can't Wait*.

King expressed his disappointment with his fellow pastors and with white moderates, he said he wondered, as he walked past white churches, what sort of worship went on there, if the whites colung to such cruel and unchristian behaviour. He also rejected an interpretation of Christianity which made religion an affair of the soul and a future life, with no social or political consequences. He rejects too the idea that time will bring solutions, if oppressed people wait patiently. He concludes his letter saying that he is happy to be considered an extremist. "Was not Jesus an extremist in love?... Was not Amos an extremist for justice?..."³⁵

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One of the moving passages in the letter is the following:
"We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait'. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mother and father at will and drown your sister and brother at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society, when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer to a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you, when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "White" and "colored"; when you are first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John", and your wife and mother are never given the respectable title "Mrs"; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when.."

6. *His Vision for America*

King proposed a new and challenging vision for America—not just for the black community. As he said in his famous “dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”.

The American dilemma, as Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal said, is to how to reconcile its ideals of democracy and equality with the practice of segregation. King felt that the Negro problem was America’s opportunity.

But for this America needed new values, not the capitalism and materialism that triumphed there. The country needed to address the problem of poverty within, as well as aggression and exploitation abroad. Hence his trenchant (and unpopular) criticism of the Vietnam war.

7. *King’s Critique of the Vietnam War*

King was convinced that justice at home could not be divorced from justice abroad. Against the opinion of many of his supporters, he took a bold stand against the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. This made him a target of the U.S. government. The FBI went all out to destroy him.

King opposed the war for a number of reasons: because of the violence it involved; because of the danger of escalation; because it was inconsistent to speak for nonviolence at home and tolerate violence abroad; because it sucked the resources needed to tackle poverty in America (“the bombs in Vietnam explode at home; they destroy the hopes and possibilities of a decent America”); because it was particularly tragic for young blacks (considering their proportion in the population, there were twice as many blacks as whites in Vietnam and twice as many blacks had died

in action); because he wanted America to stand as a moral beacon for the world; because, as a Nobel Prize Winner, he had a moral obligation to speak for peace; because of his faith; because of the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination.³⁶ He attacked American foreign policy as a new form of colonization.

8. *The Secret of King's Influence*

Part of the reason was that the time was ripe for change. There was so much pent up anger and frustration that people were waiting for an expression. In some sense, King came along at the right time. He himself (using a Hegelian term) spoke of the *Zeitgeist*, the mood or spirit of the era, which moved ordinary people like Rosa Parks to protest.

His extraordinary oratorical skills certainly were a tremendous asset. He had a way with words that moved the crowds and brought the message home powerfully. We could give quote after quote in support. His "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and "I have a Dream" speech have become classics of clarity and style. His call to the blacks to join the nonviolent protests was couched in memorable words. He said future historians will say that there lived a people who "injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization". Rejecting a type of Christianity that had no serious social commitment, King wrote, "Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion."³⁷ Or again: "America, you must be born again!" "America is deeply racist, and democracy is flawed economically and socially". (Colaiaco, p.187)

Oratorical skills alone would not have won him the trust of so many. They knew that he was deeply committed, that he took risks, that he forgave those who bombed his house, that he did not become rich on the cause.

How did King himself look at his work and its mixture of frustration and triumph? He remained an optimist, in spite of death threats and

³⁶ Ansbro, pp.256-265.

³⁷ King, *Stride*....,p.91.

violent opposition. Towards the end of his life, he said: "But it really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountain top. Like anybody I would like to live a long life...But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people *will* get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I have a dream that the brotherhood of man will become a reality. With this faith I will go out and carve a tunnel of hope from a mountain of despair. With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new day, when all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics—will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old, 'Free at last, Free at last, Thank God Almighty we are free at last'.³⁸ These words of the spiritual were carved on King's tombstone.

IV. Conclusion and Assessment

How do we assess Martin Luther King's achievement? What did he contribute? Where and how did he fail? Some of King's achievements were highlighted in Part Two. Most of his campaigns focussed the nation's attention on the evils of segregation, and won federal intervention in support of blacks. The legal barriers to equality were largely removed, thanks to King's work. Many blacks have been elected to public office.

King's great achievement lies not only in what was accomplished, but in the method. Two comments are in order here. One: He steered a middle path between black apathy and black violence. Neither passivity nor bitterness were answers to the desperate situation of the majority of the blacks. The middle path was passionate, active and demanding—the path of militant nonviolence. He insisted that the means we use be as pure as the ends we seek, because the means we employ determine the end produced. Two: He made intelligent use of the media to draw the attention of nation to the problems of the blacks. His use of television, the pulpit, the press, and mass gatherings was very skillful. In the words of

³⁸ *Testament*, p.287.

James Colaico, "King and Gandhi were successful because they realized that nonviolent protest is basically an art — and they were quintessential artists. By inspiring and leading a mass following, by carefully selecting their protest tactics, by creative use of the media and by making themselves integral to the overall strategy, King and Gandhi orchestrated dramatic moral confrontations with their adversaries, compelling them to make reforms in the interest of justice. In 1961, two years prior of King's triumph in Birmingham, Alabama, Indian writer Ved Mehta predicted in the *New York Times* magazine that when the twentieth century came to a close, King and Gandhi would be judged the influential men of our time, neither because 'they were religious leaders, nor because they achieved political success, but because they were imaginative artists who know how to use world politics as their stage'".³⁹

What were King's failures? The answer depends on the political orientation of the one who answers, as well as on how much we expect one leader to achieve.

For those who admire Black Power representatives such as Malcolm X, King was ineffective. Even King's awards would be seen as signs of his failure, signs that he did what the white establishment wanted. Malcolm's reaction to the news that King had been awarded the Nobel Prize for peace was an attack: "If I am following a general and he is leading me into battle, and the enemy tends to give him rewards, I get suspicious of him. Especially if he gets a peace award before the war is over".⁴⁰

But then, they differed on the goals, on the methods, on their vision of the ideal society. For Malcolm, the white man was the enemy. Part of Black Pride was to work for a separate black identity and culture. It was a war, with no truce. Malcolm expressed the anger and frustration of many blacks. King, instead, believed in integration, not separation. He held that the future of the blacks and the future of America were interlinked. The two could not be worked out in mutual opposition.

³⁹ Colaico, p.2.

⁴⁰ Peter Ling, "More Malcolm's Year than Martin's", *American Visions*, IX (August-September 1994), p.14.

Both agreed on the need for direct action, and on the need to promote self-esteem. King perceived the class conflicts that stood in the way of economic justice more clearly than Malcolm. Hence his opposition to the war in Vietnam. What was needed was a war on poverty and the willingness to redistribute wealth more equitably.

The questions and the problems remain. There is in America today a terrible divide between whites and blacks. There are two societies, unequal and mutually suspicious. Violent crime among blacks has escalated. So has unemployment. According to Ling, "Black Americans remain more likely than whites to be poor and jobless; to live in blighted neighbourhoods; to suffer debilitating disease; to leave school or become pregnant or die prematurely; to go to prison and to die violently".⁴¹

So, depending on our point of view, we will judge Martin Luther King, Jr.'s achievement extraordinary, mediocre or negligible. To stimulate discussion, I would prefer to conclude with three questions: (1) *What is the best way for an oppressed minority to get its rights? (Is there such a thing as the best way?) How do you make the choice?* (2) *Is militant nonviolence always the best? Why or why not?* (3) *Persons like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. are often venerated as good human beings. How far are they also models of a practical strategy for achieving justice?*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*