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The Sixtieth Anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

"The Fierce Urgency of Now": The Example of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Abstract
The year 2023 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the March on Washington that featured civil rights leader, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This article focuses on King's critique of racism, poverty, and militarism, and his commitment to justice, love, and hope.

Keywords
democracy, dissent, economics, freedom, hope, love, poverty, racism, violence, war

> Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel;
> so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.
>
> Ezek 33:6

> Where there is no prophecy, the people perish.
>
> Prv 29:18

Sixty years ago, on August 28, 1963, approximately 250,000 people assembled in Washington, DC, and marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln

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Memorial. Early in July of that year, labor leader A. Philip Randolph called for a rally in Washington, DC, to dramatize to the federal government the deleterious impact of racial discrimination on the lives and livelihoods of the nation's Black citizens. Randolph asked Bayard Rustin to develop plans for a large-scale, national nonviolent action that would involve thousands.[1] The organizers of the March called for "an end to racial segregation, fair wages and economic justice, voting rights, education, and long overdue civil rights protections."[2] To ensure maximum attention and engagement, Randolph and Rustin built an alliance of major civil rights, labor, and religious organizations.[3]

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1. Bayard Rustin was the principal architect of the March on Washington and a valued collaborator with Randolph. Rustin is remembered as a brilliant organizer and strategist, a man steeped in nonviolence through his Quaker upbringing and appropriation of Gandhi's protest practices and principles. Rustin was also openly gay, and because of this, was frequently pushed to the background by civil rights leaders. See *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* (2003), the prize-wining biographical film about Rustin that was directed by Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer; see also the biography by John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
2. "The March on Washington," NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., https://www.naacpldf.org/march-on-washington/#:~:text=On%20August%2028%201963%2C%20a,long%20overdue%20civil%20rights%20protections.
3. Brian Bennett, "March on Washington, 1963," in *Protest, Power, and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolent Action from ACT-UP to Women's Suffrage*, ed. Roger Powers et al. (New York: Garland, 1997), 313. Participating major civil rights organizations and leaders included the following. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), formed in 1909 by an interracial group including W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary White Ovington, and Moorfield Storey. At the time of the March, Roy Wilkins was executive secretary. The National Urban League grew from the 1910 protest efforts of an interracial group; in 1963, Whitney Young was executive director. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was organized in 1925 and led by A. Philip Randolph. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded in 1942 and led by James Farmer, but represented at the March by Floyd McKissick, national chairman. Farmer could not attend because he was imprisoned in Plaquemine, Louisiana, for protesting police brutality. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was founded in 1957; Martin Luther King Jr. was chairman. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) emerged in 1960 from the freedom rides and lunch counter sit-ins orchestrated by college students. John Lewis was SNCC's national chairman, the youngest speaker at the March, and from 1987 until his death in 2020 represented the 5th District of Georgia (nearly all of Atlanta) in the US House of Representatives.

   Religious leaders from seventy-eight denominations and interfaith communities (Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) participated in the March, including Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Rabbi Joachim Prinz, President of the American Jewish Congress. Catholic layman Mathew Ahmann, founder and executive director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ) in 1960, served as the Catholic chairman of the March. Asked by the March organizers to identify a Catholic bishop who would become involved, Brendon Duffy writes that "Ahmann eventually succeeded in getting

The success of the March may be disclosed in its abiding influence on federal legislators who engaged in bristling debate and overcame fractious filibuster to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[4] The concluding address to the marchers was given by the then 34-year-old Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the most widely recognizable of the major civil rights leaders. Standing in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, and reportedly prompted by gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, King gave one of the most powerful, galvanizing, and memorable, if misunderstood, speeches in the canon of American oratory.

The focus here is not the "I Have a Dream" speech, but the example and challenge King's social ministry offered and continues to offer not only to *all* religious believers, but to all women and men of good will. Throughout the thirteen years of his public Christian social ministry, King so attuned himself to the Word of God as to recover and to exercise the biblical vocation of prophecy for our nation, indeed, for the world. Like the prophets of old, he was a "watchman," scrutinizing the signs of the times in order to witness to and speak God's justice and providence in an oppressive and anguished world.[5] As a Christian, as an ordained minister, as a theologian, King was motivated by the "conviction that [all human beings] are made in the image of God, and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact," he said, "we cannot be content to see [them] hungry, to see [them] victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them."[6]

King raised his voice to denounce injustice and put his body on the line in disciplined nonviolent civil disobedience. He responded to the demand of conscience to

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Patrick O'Boyle, the Archbishop of Washington, to offer the invocation at the March. In addition to Archbishop O'Boyle, five bishops, one archbishop and numerous priests and nuns attended." See Brendon Duffy, "Acting on Faith," *Saint John's Magazine* (Summer/Fall 2013): 24–31 at 28, https://issuu.com/csbsju/docs/2013_full_st__john_s_magazine_pdf/27?e=1392978%2F4500150&fbclid=IwAR09zn7elP31lkYn9dzcR9doLODEXf3NWgHRuARq9FQiJIyFFnlSMwHAQN0/. Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, instructed his followers not to participate in the March on Washington, although Malcolm X did attend.

4. On July 2, 1964, the US Congress passed House Resolution 7152 known as the Civil Rights Act, which is "to enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes." United States Senate, "Landmark Legislation: The Civil Rights Act of 1964," https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1964.htm.
5. See George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 97–129, and Luther D. Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).
6. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 180.

proclaim a new social vision grounded in faith in God, a social vision that upheld the basic goodness of all humanity, that affirmed the spiritual, cultural, and social (i.e., political, economic, technological) potential of the United States to dedicate itself to the common human good. To this end, King's example challenges us all to respond to urgent problems of racism, poverty, and extreme materialism, war, and violence. Moreover, given the propaganda, disinformation, war, and violence that continue to upend the political and sociocultural patterns of national and global communities, consideration of King's gospel-bound social commitment to human flourishing and the common good remains crucial.

The title of this piece, "The fierce urgency of now," comes from the final paragraph of King's *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Arguably, in this work, King thinks and strategizes as a practical-political theologian:[7] he analyzes the egregious material, cultural, and spiritual conditions of those among us who are marginalized and excluded—Indigenous people, Black people, *all* people of color around the world, and poor white people—children, youth, women, and men of every racial-ethnic cultural group and religion. In this work, he explains Black frustration and anger at grudging white liberal resistance to change in the status quo; interrogates questions of Black identity, class status, and social responsibility; importunes the federal government to give immediate attention to housing, education, employment, and poverty; and urges *all* Americans to develop a global perspective.

How, King asks, are we to change these death-dealing conditions? Love. "Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."[8] To unlock the door of that transcendent possibility to be made immanent in *our* common human living, we as individual women and men must undergo religious, intellectual, and moral transformation. For only as transformed loving persons responding in love to the command to love the neighbor shall we be able to transform our crass and tattered national mores, our racist and exploitative social structures, our acquisitive materialism, our cruel and

7. I am thinking of a *critical political theology* that grasps and analyzes seriously the mutual conditioning, reinforcing, and interlocking oppressions of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and debility; that takes culture seriously and is willing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with ordinary women and men and join with them in "nitty-gritty" hermeneutics—that is, the reading and interpretation of the body of practices and assumptions, norms, habits, and expectations that shape and enclose the cultural, political, economic, technological, and societal matrix in which we live; that is attuned to the vernacular, and absorbs street smarts as well as critical theory, knows funk and reggae and rap, jazz and blues and baroque. I am thinking of a theology that is "riddim wise and Scripture smart." D. J. N. Middleton, "Riddim Wise and Scripture Smart: Interview and Interpretation with Ras Benjamin Zephaniah," in *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean*, ed. Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 257. I am thinking of a theology that esteems subjugated knowledges, the exigencies of method, epistemology, and metaphysics; of a theology that values self-criticism and collaboration in multiple forms.

8. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 190. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 Jn 4:7-8 NRSV, used throughout).

vindictive political and economic policies, decisions, and actions. King's practical-political theology teaches and calls for a *praxis* of love and solidarity in concrete action and hope in the *here-and-now* in order to realize justice, to bring about beloved community.

Like so many other prophets, priests, and preachers, Martin Luther King Jr. was a wounded and flawed human being. The poet John Dixon reminds us that "[King] was never perfect in wisdom, nor ever pretended to be. He was never perfect in conduct, nor free from temptations nor ever pretended to be. But holiness is not perfection; it is transparency to the grace of God."[9] Martin Luther King Jr. lived a life in response to God's grace, a life of "committed empathy with *all* oppressed" in response to "divine dissatisfaction with *all* forms of injustice."[10]

King's example, his commitment, holds the power to teach us about our various roles and tasks in responding to the nearly intractable problems of racism, poverty, rampant materialism, war, and violence—in struggling to bring about justice. In what follows, I explore King's thinking about those three issues and draw out some lessons for us as we confront those problems today.

Racism

The concept and experience of racism are highly charged and difficult to negotiate: most often we tend to reduce racism to individual acts of malice or hatred, carried out by a single "bad" or "rogue" individual.[11] Because of this, the judgment that racism is a manifestation of social sin remains difficult to comprehend. Certainly, negotiating individual or personal experiences of racism are depleting, demoralizing, and dehumanizing. The social institutions or structures that we construct encode racism subtly and overtly as these mirror the collective values, (mis)understandings, preemptive

9. Cited in Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008 [1996]), 36. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8-10).

10. Martin Luther King Jr., "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," *Freedomways Magazine* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1968): 104–11 at 110 (emphasis in original). This address was delivered on February 23, 1968, at Carnegie Hall, New York City, at an event sponsored by *Freedomways Magazine* to honor the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois.

11. Recall that nine Black women and men were murdered during prayer at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015; forty-nine people, many of them Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican, as well as part of the LGBTQ community, were murdered in Pulse nightclub, in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016; eleven Jewish women and men were murdered during worship at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 2018; six Asian women, one white woman, and one white man were murdered in spas and massage parlors in Atlanta and Cherokee County, Georgia, on March 16, 2021; and ten Black women and men were murdered in Buffalo, New York, at a supermarket on May 14, 2022.

judgments, and decisions of our society.[12] Such structures sinfully impede the very existence, life, and human flourishing of others simply because they are of Native American or African or Asian or Mexican or mixed racial-ethnic descent. Perhaps, no lone individual can be singled out as blameworthy, but all members of American society are complicit in the discriminatory and demeaning consequences that some children, women, and men are continually forced to endure.

King writes: "Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future."[13] Moreover, he argued, racism entails cognitive, affective, and social dimensions: racism involves acquired affective or emotional reactions, cognitive (mis)apprehensions and (mis) understandings, and is embedded in social patterns. In other words, racism is learned behavior: it is based on learned (mis)information, learned irrational fear and anxiety.

"The roots of racism," King argued, "are deep in America. Historically it was so acceptable in the national life that today it still only lightly burdens the conscience."[14] In a speech delivered at a voter registration rally in Louisville, Kentucky, on August 2, 1967, King stated: "I am sorry to have to say that the vast majority of white Americans are racists, either consciously or unconsciously."[15] With this critique, King alerts us to the notion of unconscious racism. Unconscious racism refers to our complicity in and with what political philosopher Iris Marion Young identifies as those "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, [embedded] in the assumptions underlying [our] institutional rules and the collective consequence of following those rules.. . . [Entrenched

12. See James Lee Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 147–48: "Racism is systematized oppression of one race of another. In other words, the various forms of oppression within every sphere of social relations—economic exploitation, military subjugation, political subordination, cultural devaluation, psychological violation, sexual degradation, verbal abuse, etc.—together make up a whole of interacting and developing processes which operate so normally and naturally and are so much a part of the existing institutions of society that the individuals involved are barely conscious of their operation."
13. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 70. In his discussion of racism, King draws on and refers to works by theologian George Kelsey, *Racism and Christian Understanding* (New York: Scribner, 1965), and anthropologist Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York: Penguin, 1959).
14. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 68–69.
15. Martin Luther King Jr., "Which Way Its Soul Shall Go," cited in Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 40. Access to this speech is limited to its physical archival location: Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers (Series I–IV), Box 122, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia. This remark accords with King's critique of the "white moderate" in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 295–96.

as well as in our] unconscious assumptions and reactions in ordinary interactions, [in] media and cultural stereotypes, and [in the] structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life in [our] well-intentioned liberal society."[16] In this way, "racism functions as an ethos," writes Black Catholic moral theologian Bryan Massingale, "as a pervasive symbol system of meaning, identity, and significance."[17]

King knew well and acknowledged repeatedly that "many white people have, through a deep moral compulsion, fought long and hard for racial justice." But he

16. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41; see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), chs. 6, 7, 18–20. All human beings are susceptible to bias as it distorts and inhibits our conscious activity and behavior in ordinary daily living by blinding or blocking our understanding, stunting our emotions or affect, and damaging our achievement of community. Bias may occur in any of four principal ways—dramatic, individual, group, and general bias. *Dramatic bias* disrupts healthy psychological and emotional or affective development, impairs the exercise of personal autonomy, and debilitates effective behavior and action. *Individual bias* expresses itself in egoism, in selfish self-regard; *group bias* expresses itself in selfish regard for and protection of the privileges and prerogatives that ensure the prominence and dominance of "my" particular group or social class or race at the expense of other individuals, other groups or social classes or races—in fact, at the expense of the common good.

    Simply put, *racism is power + prejudice*. Prejudice literally conveys pre-judging—that is, coming to judgment about something or someone *prior to* experience or knowledge of or encounter with. Because prejudice stems from ignorance, from intellectual and emotional immaturity, it may be corrected, earlier judgments revised. But the refusal to accept correction, the refusal to revise judgments, the refusal to incorporate corrected information and new judgments into our repertoire may be understood as bias: that is, the more or less conscious and deliberate choice to be *incorrect, to repress* or *to deny* the surfacing of further questions or insights, the more or less *deliberate* refusal to think, act, and live attentively, intelligently, rationally, and responsibly. For a discussion of these issues on a global scale, see Ramon Grosfoguel, "What is Racism?," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22, no. 1 (2016): 9–15, http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2016.609.

    > Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally, and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the "capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system" (Grosfoguel, 2011). The people classified above the line of the human are recognized socially in their humanity as human beings and, thus, enjoy access to rights (human rights, civil rights, women's rights and/or labor rights), material resources, and social recognition of their subjectivities, identities, epistemologies, and spiritualities. The people below the line of the human are considered subhuman or nonhuman; that is, their humanity is questioned and, as such, negated (Fanon 1967). In the latter case, the extension of rights, material resources, and the recognition of their subjectivities, identities, spiritualities and epistemologies are denied. (Grosfoguel, "What is Racism?," 10.)

17. Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 33.

insisted upon the "necessity to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country is . . . freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists."[18] White America, he contended, manifests a "schizophrenic personality on the question of race. [The nation] has been torn between selves—a self in which [it] proudly professed the great principles of democracy and a self in which [it] sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy." Because of such vacillation, whites have never taken a firm, "unified and determined thrust to make justice a reality" for Black Americans.[19] Hence, Blacks are continually met with white backlash: "the same prejudices, hostilities and ambivalences . . . the same search for rationalizations, the same lack of commitment that have always characterized white America on the question of race."[20]

The Christian church did not escape King's indignation: "No one observing the history of the church in America," he wrote, "can deny the shameful fact that it has been an accomplice in structuring racism into the architecture of American society. The church, by and large, sanctioned slavery and surrounded it with the halo of moral respectability. It also cast its mantle of sanctity over the system of segregation."[21] King acknowledged the involvement of Christian and Jewish religious groups in the struggle for civil rights. But, he declared, as a whole, the church has been all too negligent.

> [The church] has too often blessed a status quo that needed to be blasted, and reassured a social order that needed to be reformed. So the church must acknowledge its guilt, its weak and vacillating witness, its all too frequent failure to obey the call to servanthood. Today the judgment of God is upon the church for its failure to be true to its mission. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.[22]

True to the ideals and teachings of Judaism and Christianity, King believed that "every [human person] is heir to a legacy of dignity and worth,"[23] ideals and teaching "diametrically opposed"[24] to racism. Indeed, for Jews and Christians, racism is idolatry and heresy: for racism seeks to replace the One God with an idol of human making and human visage. King asserted: "So long as the Negro or any other member of a minority group is treated as a means to an end, the image of God is abused in [him or her] and consequently and proportionally lost by those who inflict the abuse."[25] Racism damages both the person who is abused *and* the person who inflicts the abuse. "Every human life," he maintained, "is a reflection of divinity, and every act of injustice mars

18. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 68–69.
19. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 68.
20. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 68.
21. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 96.
22. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 96.
23. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 97.
24. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 100.
25. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 97.

and defaces the image of God in [the human person]."[26] Thus racism stands as both personal sin and social disorder, entailing not only individual prejudice but the exercise of religious, historical, cultural, social (i.e., political, economic, technological) power to keep one race privileged and secure and other races disempowered and vulnerable. Yet, as King wrote: "Racism is a tenacious evil, but it is not immutable."[27] Transformation, change in human persons, and change in our social order are possible.

Poverty

Poverty is the chronic inability to consistently meet basic vital needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medicines, education, and cultural enrichment. Structural poverty is violence; it breeds fear, silence, and suffering in the absence of flourishing, and anxiety, powerlessness, and despair in the absence of a future. On a global scale, poverty evinces greed and gross inequality between nations. "Poverty is not caused by fate," Gustavo Gutiérrez writes. Poverty "is caused by the actions" of those who, out of avarice and acquisitive materialism, manipulate political, economic, and technological systems to their advantage.[28]

"The curse of poverty," King declared, "has no justification in our age. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty."[29] On his analysis, the nation's previous attempts to deal with poverty were "fragmentary and spasmodic," and did not reach the "profoundest needs of the poor," failing whites and Blacks alike.[30] King took note of the many psychological and emotional consequences of poverty—conflicts between spouses, conflicts between parents and children, loss of self-esteem, distortion of personality, and crushing anxiety. He held that the dignity of impoverished persons would flourish when they themselves possessed the monetary resources to meet their needs.[31] "We must create full employment," he wrote, "or we must create incomes."[32] What he proposed was (and remains) controversial: a guaranteed income—a consistently progressive, dynamic measure, pegged not to the lowest level, but to the median income of society and increasing automatically in relation to the growth of the national total social income.[33] Such a program, King asserted, "would benefit *all* the poor, including the two-thirds of them

26. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 99.
27. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 152.
28. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Poverty: Solidarity and Protest," in *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, The Making of Modern Theology, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), loc. 5098 of 5835, Kindle.
29. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 165–66.
30. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 162.
31. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 162.
32. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 162.
33. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 164.

who are white."[34] And, he added: "I hope that both [blacks] and whites will act in coalition to effect this change, because their combined strength will be necessary to overcome the fierce opposition we must realistically anticipate."[35]

In support of this proposal, King cited the opinion of John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the leading economic authorities of the time, who estimated that $20 billion a year would effect a guaranteed income. This, Galbraith said, is "not much more than we will spend the next fiscal year to rescue freedom and democracy and religious liberty as these are defined by 'experts' in Vietnam."[36] Neither King nor Galbraith confused guaranteed income with welfare; neither advocated welfare, but both recognized the profound impact of poverty on human and humane life.[37] There are, of course, several objections to this proposal, chief among them being a guaranteed income would discourage work and encourage indolence. Galbraith anticipated this objection observing, "Idleness we do know to be demoralizing. But even here there is a problem. Why is leisure so uniformly bad for the poor and so uniformly beneficent for the moderately well-to-do?"[38]

Above all, King urged us to confront our "cognitive and behavioral distancing" from the poor.[39] How readily we dismiss responsibility for the poor, he asserted, by

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34. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 165.
35. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 165. Shrewdly, King pointed out that since 1925, two groups in our society had enjoyed guaranteed incomes: the wealthy who own securities and the poor on welfare.
36. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 165. Here King cites John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Starvation of the Cities," *The Progressive* 30, no. 12 (1966): 14–16 at 16: "We can easily afford a floor income. It would cost about twenty billion dollars to bring everyone up to what the Department of HEW considers a reasonable minimum. This is a third less than the amount by which personal income rose last year. It is not so much more than we will spend next fiscal year to rescue freedom and democracy and religious liberty, as these are defined by the experts, in Vietnam. (Admittedly these problems grow more acute the farther one gets from home.) And there is no antidote for poverty that is quite so certain in its effects as the provision of income." A basic income has five characteristics: it is periodic (paid at regular intervals); is a cash payment—not a voucher or in-kind; is paid on an individual basis, not to head of household; is universal, paid without a means test; and is unconditional—no requirements for reception.
37. The idea of a guaranteed income or universal basic income (UBI) is not new; periodically it surfaces not only in the US but also around the world. The Province of Ontario, Canada, has experimented with guaranteed income. See David Noonan, "Is Guaranteed Income for All the Answer to Joblessness and Poverty?," *Scientific American*, July 18, 2017, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-guaranteed-income-for-all-the-answer-to-joblessness-and-poverty/. In 1968, Galbraith, James Tobin, Paul Samuelson, and 1,200 economists signed a document calling for Congress to introduce a system of income guarantees and supplements; see Jyotsna Sreenivasan, *Poverty and the Government in America: A Historical Encyclopedia* (San Francisco: ABC-CLIO, 2009).
38. Galbraith, "The Starvation of the Cities," 16; see Chuck Collins, *99 to 1: How Wealth Inequality is Wrecking the World and What We Can Do about It* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012).
39. Bernice Lott, "Cognitive and Behavioral Distancing from the Poor," *American Psychologist* 57, no. 2 (2002): 100–10, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.57.2.100.

"brand[ing them] as inferior and incompetent."[40] Nor did King shrink from criticizing, the, then, small Black middle-class:

> It is time for the Negro haves to join hands with the Negro have-nots and, with compassion, journey into that other country of hurt and denial. It is time for the Negro middle class to rise up from its stool of indifference, to retreat from its flight into unreality and to bring its full resources—its heart, its mind and its checkbook—to the aid of the less fortunate brother.. . . The salvation of the Negro middle class is ultimately dependent upon the salvation of the Negro masses.[41]

At the same time, he insisted:

> As we work to get rid of the economic strangulation that [Blacks] face as a result of poverty, we must not overlook the fact that millions of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Indians, and Appalachian whites are also poverty-stricken. Any serious war against poverty must of necessity include them.[42]

In the spirit of the prophet Amos, King concluded: "Our economy must become more person-centered than property- and profit-centered. If democracy is to have breadth of meaning, it is necessary to adjust this inequity. It is not only moral, but it is also intelligent. We are wasting and degrading human life by clinging to archaic thinking."[43]

King likened poverty on the international scale to "a monstrous octopus [that] stretches its choking, prehensile tentacles into lands and villages all over the world."[44] As a "moral obligation," wealthy nations must provide capital and technical assistance to underdeveloped nations; indeed, King challenged wealthy nations "to initiate a massive, sustained Marshall Plan for Asia, Africa, and Latin America."[45] Moreover, such a plan, he argued, "must not be used as a surreptitious means to control the poor nations. Such an approach would lead to a new form of paternalism and a neo-colonialism which no self-respecting nation could accept.. . . Money devoid of genuine empathy is like salt devoid of savor, good for nothing except to be trodden under foot."[46] Further, he recognized the ways in which neocolonialism ("racism in its more sophisticated form") sustained "corrupt aristocracies" that refused to invest in their own countries throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America.[47] King contextualized the

40. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 165.
41. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 132.
42. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 132.
43. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 132, 165.
44. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 177.
45. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 178: On King's account, wealthy nations such as the United States, Britain, Russia, Canada, Australia, and the countries of Western Europe have a "moral obligation to provide capital and technical assistance to the underdeveloped areas" (King, 178).
46. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 178–79.
47. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 174–75: "Everywhere in Latin America one finds a tremendous resentment of the United States, and that resentment is always strongest among the poorer and darker peoples of the continent. The life and destiny of Latin America are in the hands of United States corporations."

civil rights struggle in the larger world perspective: "Equality with whites," he maintained, "will not solve the problems of either whites or [blacks] if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war."[48]

War

King wrestled strenuously with his conscience over taking a public stand regarding the war in Vietnam. Eventually, he decided that as a Nobel laureate, but above all as a Christian and a Christian minister, he was obliged to stand for peace. On April 4, 1967, speaking at New York's Riverside Church, King presented a rationale for his dissent that was, fundamentally, theological:

> I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men [and women] the calling to be a son [and daughter] of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them.[49]

For this act of conscience, King incurred the insults of President Lyndon Johnson, harsh public criticism from Black leaders, white politicians, ordinary Black and white citizens, and the national press including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times, Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.[50] Many Americans deemed King's leadership on civil rights to be incompatible with public opposition to government foreign policy.

In this speech, "A Time to Break Silence," King urgently, passionately, fiercely protested his country's involvement in the war, calling attention to gratuitous assaults against civilians, destruction of families and villages, napalm bombings, careless and casual arrogance, and racist imperialism. His criticism of the war was rooted in an unyielding belief "that the good news [of the Gospel of Jesus Christ] was meant for all men—for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative."[51]

At the same time, King decried the national government's cruel manipulation of *all* those who are poor: "We have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools."[52] We would do well to remember that in many Northern cities in the 1960s these same young Black and white men could not live in the same neighborhood, nor could young Black men wearing the

48. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 167.
49. Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 234. This speech is sometimes listed as "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence."
50. Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 57.
51. King, "A Time to Break Silence," 234.
52. King, "A Time to Break Silence," 232.

uniform of the United States Marine Corps feel safe from physical assault in white Southern towns. Young Black men were asked to sacrifice their lives for freedoms in Southeast Asia that they could not enjoy at home in the United States.[53] In the spirit of the prophet Micah, King denounced war "as filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically [damaged].. . . [Such war] cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love." He concluded: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."[54] Hearing or reading these words today, we are challenged to contend with our own casual forgetfulness of the young men and women of all racial-ethnic cultural groups, most of whom are impoverished and/or working class, who fight our wars, who risk their physical and mental well-being for what we are told is a more secure and safe homeland.

King called for a revolution of values that would rouse us "to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies . . . to look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth . . . [and] with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity and injustice."[55] He urged the United States to form the vanguard in a global revolution of values. "There is nothing, except a tragic death wish," he argued, "to prevent [the United States] from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war."[56]

What Might *We* Learn

Taking Matters Seriously

In order to resist the recrudescent racism and cultural imperialism that have shaped our daily common human living, we must take race, racial formation, and racism seriously. To take race, racial formation, and racism seriously requires us to reject any reduction of race to a morally irrelevant category and of racism to personal prejudice. To take seriously race, racial formation, and racism demands that we uncover, engage, and educate ourselves about our nation's racialized and racist history of continuing oppressions, brutalities, and exclusions. We have concealed our persistence in social

53. Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 61. According to Michael Dyson's analysis, studies of the Vietnam war conducted in the early 1970s pointed out that in 1964, 18.8 percent of eligible whites were drafted, compared to 30.2 percent of eligible Blacks. In 1967, only 31 percent of eligible whites were inducted into the military compared to 67 percent of eligible Blacks. "These numbers," writes Dyson, "substantiate King's claim that black soldiers were being asked to sacrifice their lives 'to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they hadn't found in America.'" Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 61.
54. King, "A Time to Break Silence," 241.
55. King, "A Time to Break Silence," 240–41.
56. King, "A Time to Break Silence," 241.

sin beneath self-promoting narratives of manifest destiny, of cultural heritage, of racial and national exceptionalism.[57]

Human Persons as Persons

We must *embody* and *enact* a more profound understanding of *human persons as persons*—not as "statistics," not as "problems to be solved or fixed"—but as human persons *as we are* human persons. Certainly—in a historical, cultural, and social matrix dominated by racism, poverty, acquisitive materialism, violence, war, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, nativism or hatred and fear of immigrants, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia—authentic openness to human persons who are different from us may be difficult, yet the risk of encounter and engagement with others remains necessary. For such encounter and engagement brings about change in *us*, transformation of our minds and hearts and behaviors. Our response to the structural evils that plague our human relationships ought not to be rooted in pride of trumping evil, but in humility, love, and hope. In this way, we acknowledge and witness to the *oneness of human creatureliness* and honor the richness of human diversity as the most basic feature of that oneness, even as we situate human life within the ordered beauty of God's creation. For King insisted that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.[58]

Reclaiming the Church's Prophetic Mission

King argued that the Christian church had a social mission rooted in its prophetic task and fidelity to the preaching of Jesus. For him, the "projection of a social gospel" was the only "true witness of a Christian life" in a segregated and oppressive America.[59] Followers of the Jewish rabbi Jesus of Nazareth must protest the debasing and upending of the common human good and must resist any attempt to make structural inequality acceptable and normative. King recognized that "God struggles with us,"[60] and that along with divine engagement comes a divine solution to oppression and suffering. The divine solution presses us toward a social *praxis* that neither recklessly nor romantically embraces mere activism, but rather is immersed in, growing from, and consonant with a community of faith.

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57. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).
58. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 69.
59. Martin Luther King Jr., "The *Playboy* Interview," in Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 345.
60. Peter Paris, "Comparing the Public Theologies of James H. Cone and Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 222.

Dissenting from the Status Quo

King stated that he was not seeking "to integrate" Black people into the prevailing values of American society. Rather, he urged Black people to become "those creative dissenters who [would] call . . . the nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more notable expression of humanness."[61] King's example challenges not only Christians but *all* people of good will to become "creative dissenters"—no matter one's racial-ethnic cultural background, social class standing, sexual orientation, religion or faith, or debilities. His example challenges us as human beings, as world citizens to creatively dissent from those pernicious values that deform the potential flourishing of common human living. At the same time, the authenticity of creative dissent is grounded in preparation: in order to act with resourceful prudence, we must educate ourselves. King held that "education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy. Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions."[62]

King challenges his fellow citizens of all racial-cultural ethnic backgrounds, as creative dissenters, to lead and take part in a revolution of values—a revolution against increased privatization and growth of the nation's prisons, against massive rates of incarceration, particularly among Black and brown youth, men, and women, and against police brutality;[63] against the criminalization of poverty; against the hostility to labor unions; against the cruel responses to children, youth, women, and men who are migrants, refugees, homeless, mentally ill, and differently abled. King's example challenges his fellow citizens to take authentic responsibility for healing a crass and mean-spirited culture, for planting seeds of truth and justice and love.

The Importance of Hope

Hope as a practice key to the realization of justice was never far from Martin Luther King's thoughts, words, and actions. He was a man of hope who believed that through faith and love, a stone of hope could be sculpted from a mountain of despair; he was a man of "prophetic Christian realism."[64] For King, hope was never confused with

61. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 133.
62. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 155.
63. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil, *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
64. David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 67. In the "I Have a Dream" address, King concluded that with this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." In Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 219.

liberal or neoliberal notions of progress or optimism. While progress and optimism are laudable, neither is rooted in transcendence, which in religious or theological—certainly, in Christian—terms, depends upon faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Hope is, at once, the eschatological *and* concrete ground of human existence and human action. On the one hand, hope is fixed on God; it is religious, resurrectional, eschatological; on the other hand, hope springs from the concreteness of our creatureliness—our experience, energies, capacities, and abilities for action. Hence, in the framework of a practical-political theology, hope is tied ineluctably to authentic social *praxis*.

Thomas Aquinas distinguishes hope as *moving* or *stretching toward* a good, as a *desire* for a good—a good that is difficult or arduous, yet possible to obtain.[65] Further and importantly, Aquinas writes: "The perfection of hope lies not in achieving what it hopes for, but in embracing its standard."[66] Hope centers us on and steadies us in sustained effort to obtain what we do not yet possess. Hope, then, requires of us "an obedience"—situational and specific, motivated by love of God and neighbor, drawn on by commitment to the good, engaging constants of historical and personal circumstance, necessarily unselfish, unstinting, humble.[67] Moreover, what we hope for, what we desire—changes us. At the same time, authentic hope can never be innocent; it astutely grasps the asymmetry of power in the structural or institutional relations between the haves and have-nots. "Power, properly understood," King maintained, "is the ability to achieve purpose.. . . There is nothing essentially wrong with power. The problem is that in America power is unequally distributed."[68]

Where Might We Go from Here

Martin Luther King Jr. lived a life of committed solidaristic action as the empathetic incarnation of Christian love; he committed his life and service to all who suffered oppression and responded with creative dissent and thoroughgoing dissatisfaction with injustice. Fifty-five years after his death, his life and example still have much to teach all Americans. Yet, we Americans make it difficult to learn from him. Ever so cynically, we have canonized Martin Luther King Jr., turned him into what Brandon M. Terry describes as a "mythic figure of consensus and conciliation, who sacrificed his life to defeat Jim Crow and place the United States on a path toward a more perfect union."[69] We Americans are comfortable with *this King*: the King who preached exegetically sophisticated, philosophically informed, theologically creative, well-crafted sermons; the King who spoke eloquently about a dream for his children and his

65. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II.40.1 (hereafter cited as *ST*).
66. Aquinas, *ST* II-II.17.2.
67. Glenn Tinder, *The Fabric of Hope: An Essay* (Atlanta: Emory University Press, 1999), 94.
68. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 37.
69. Brandon M. Terry, "MLK Now," *Boston Review* Forum 5 (January 2018): 12–30 at 13.

country; the King who blasted the church for ignoring the social mission of the Gospel;[70] the King who denounced ministers, priests, rabbis, and religious leaders for their reluctance and fear to join in struggles for equality and civil rights; the King who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. This is the King whom we Americans celebrate, honor, and revere. This is the King whose daring eschatological dream of beloved community has been trivialized, misinterpreted, and marketed as simplistic economic inclusion even as thoroughgoing change in the political system has been dismissed. We Americans are happy—*too happy*—to call this King "a prophet of U.S. progress and redemption, Moses leading [his people] to the Promised Land."[71]

There is another King, one whom we conveniently overlook; the King who makes us *uncomfortable*. This is the King who condemned the Vietnam War; the King who with sadness indicted his country as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world"[72]; the King who charged that "the life and destiny of Latin America are in the hands of United States corporations."[73] This King is no silver-tongued court prophet who eases our consciences or who performs social miracles on request. This King's prophetic voice echoes the condemnations of Amos—our complicity in the impoverishment, abuse, disemployment, and trafficking of children, women, and men at home and around the world. This King's prophetic voice rings with the condemnations of Micah against the militarism we applaud even as we abandon traumatized veterans. This King's prophetic message disturbs our consciences, calls us to personal religious, intellectual, and moral transformation, and urges our engagement in institutional transformation and change. This King's voice is fearless, outspoken, and judges the conduct of elected government leaders, legislators, judges, and appointed officials. This King's voice judges the conduct of privileged and powerful participants who extend to one another the residual benefits of exploitation, exclusion, misogyny, and racism.

The need for change and transformation of the United States rests on the personal and individual need for change and transformation of mind and heart, behavior and action of the people who constitute American society. Thus, such transformation requires that each citizen cultivates the moral and social virtues that promote and further the common human good. The history of the United States is mired in expropriation of land, genocide, racism, misogyny, economic exploitation, oppression, nativism, and cultural imperialism. We the living are *not* guilty of the historic injustices and crimes against human dignity and life of the various Indigenous peoples and their cultures. These crimes were perpetrated prior to and in the founding of the United States, from the seventeenth century through the twentieth century. But, if we the

70. In the sermon, "What is Man?," King condemned as "do-nothing religion" any religion that professes concern for the souls of human beings and fails "to be concerned by social conditions that corrupt and economic conditions that cripple the soul." Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 108–109.
71. Terry, "MLK Now," 13.
72. King, "A Time to Break Silence," 233.
73. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 175.

living are *not* guilty of these historic injustices, we can never forget that the brutalities and sins of the past have spawned the troubled and painful present in which we live. We are responsible for the present and, thus, for the future that our children's children's children shall inherit. We have the responsibility—here and now—to refuse to continue to act in accordance with or in complicity with the attitudes and dispositions, prejudices and hatreds, racisms and oppressions those brutalities and those sins sustain. Those of us who are the beneficiaries of privileges of race or gender or expropriation or exploitation or cultural imperialism have a special moral and social responsibility to acknowledge those privileges, to recognize their continuities with historical injustices, and to act to change the very structures that have afforded us those privileges.[74]

Our racism, acquisitive materialism, violence, and militarism remain urgent problems now—so too does our anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, hatred of immigrants and refugees, disdain for the differently abled, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. These problems are not generated from somewhere *out there*; rather, these problems are sedimented in our consciousness—in us—in our thinking and feeling, in our refusing to live mindfully. By so living, we undermine our social and moral connectedness to one another. The achievement of proper conditions for human flourishing form civil obligations, but not merely civil obligations. Such achievement constitutes part of the fabric of our responsibility to and for one another as human beings. Advocacy and action for justice are our obligation, our responsibility—yours and mine. We *too must* "face . . . the fact that tomorrow is today."[75] We *too* have a choice: love, authentic human relationships, and hope—***or***—hate, violence, and despair. *We* too confront "the fierce urgency of now." And this is *our* chance, our opportunity, our obligation to choose between chaos or community. Where will *we* go from here? What will *we* do?

Author's Note

This article is a revision of the lecture "The Fierce Urgency of Now" given on April 4, 2018, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The lecture was given at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and sponsored by the university's School of Theology and Ministry, Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, and Theology Department.

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74. Iris Marion Young cautions that "if we do not face the facts of historic injustice, we may be haunted by victims' ghosts and destined to repeat the perpetrators' wrongs." See Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 172.
75. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 191.