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MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: A MAN FOR ALL TIME

By
William Hunter, Ph.D.
and Parris Baker, Ph.D.

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JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

INTRODUCTION

American icon Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired the nation in life and in death. As the nation approaches the 52nd anniversary of King's assassination on April 4, 2020, local King academic experts William Hunter and Parris Baker write about King's life, legacy, and enduring impact in the Jefferson Essay to follow.

Hunter and Baker, along with Marcus Atkinson and Scott Michael, discussed King and the recent visit to Erie by King's oldest son, Martin Luther King III, in a program in February 2020 at the Jefferson Educational Society.

Erie Mayor Joe Schember presented King III with a key to the city and honored the entire King family for their enduring commitment to fighting social injustice.

The honors were fitting for many reasons, of course. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, inspiration, and legacy continue to be felt in cities and towns across America and the world. As Jefferson trustee Dr. Baher Ghosheh pointed out, King's revolutionary life and impact were global as he was influenced by India's Mahatma Gandhi and King, in turn, influenced South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

FOREWORD

by Marcus Atkinson

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the lessons he taught continue to have a profound effect on the Erie community, which held its 29th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day March in January 2020. To properly memorialize the agency surpassing the half-century mark, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center brought Martin Luther King III to Erie as the keynote speaker of its annual fundraising dinner. To the agency's Executive Director James Sherrod and its board of trustees, 2020 symbolized the clear vision that Dr. King so eloquently articulated about the racial and ethnic unification of not just our country, but our world. Inviting such a distinguished speaker and commissioning the writing of this essay were both intended to accentuate and honor his legacy.

The MLK Center, 312 Chestnut St., is in its 51st year of operation, having been founded in 1969 by it first leader and Executive Director Alex Thompson, Sr.

Fred Rush, a board member and son of the late Claudia Rush, was one of the agency's founders. Mr. Rush told the Erie Times-News in 2019 how a group of African American community leaders led by Thompson created the Bayfront Neighborhood Action Team in 1966 to improve a section of lower westside Erie, and Thompson used state grants to buy dilapidated homes and clear the property long before the group had the money to build the center.

"That's why it was called Alex's leap of faith," Rush said. The center was opened three years after Bayfront NATO was formed and less than a year after King's assassination. Just as it did at its founding, the center provides needed programs, including childcare, social services, and educational classes. It serves more than 7,000 individuals and families.

PART I
The Changing Rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.

By William Hunter, Ph.D.

In August 1963, approximately 250,000 Americans, up to 80 percent of them African American, congregated in the nation's capital to join the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Though most of the activities of that day, and all of the supposed outcomes, have mostly been forgotten, one aspect that has engrained itself into the American popular culture is the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

It has been widely noted that the speech was actually two different pieces. King admitted several months later that he felt he may have been losing his audience and diverted from his prepared text into a narrative he'd "used many times before ... I Have a Dream." "And I just felt that I wanted to use it here ... I just turned aside from the manuscript altogether. I didn't come back to it." That was not an unusual practice for King. As Gary Younge points out, King would often "weave together previously used riffs, and anecdotes, and metaphors ... to frame a particular argument or describe a specific situation."

While King's rhetorical gifts have been most commonly recognized in this specific speech, a closer look at the totality of his spoken rhetoric demonstrates that he used very similar techniques throughout both his secular oratory and Christian preaching. This essay will demonstrate that by examining the differing effects of these rhetorical devices, it is possible to understand the significant shift in politics and theology that occured between the March on Washington in 1963, the Poor People's Campaign, and his assassination in 1968. It will demonstrate that during the last five years of his life, King shifted from a moderate political stance to one focused more clearly on faith, and, more specifically, the faith of the Black Church.

These changes are not a demonstration of a changing view as to his mission, but are instead a shift about where he is able to draw his authority. As Wolford Harris has pointed out, during the 13 years of his public life, King "practiced what he preached. In doing so, he developed as a political leader and broadened his view of reforms needed in America's domestic and foreign policies; he grew and deepened, but he did not fundamentally change."

One additional aspect that King held to with a great deal of consistency is a speaking style learned from his father and African American

forefathers. Rhetorically speaking, a significant number of King's speeches fit into the category of the American Jeremiad, a structure that had formed well before King's birth. "In a jeremiad, the speaker adopts the stance of a prophet-outcast, evoking Old and New Testament prophets. ... In African American jeremiads, the speaker signals this position of alienation through metaphor and scriptural allusions."

The Jeremiad carries a threefold structure. According to David Howard-Pitney, it should demonstrate a review of the promises of freedom contained in the founding documents, a specific critique of the failure of America to fulfill its promise, and, finally, a prophetic belief that America can achieve these promises and enjoy these clear benefits. Therefore, King places this speech in the historical context of Frederick Douglass' "What to a Slave is The Fourth of July" and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman," and actually, according to an analysis of a large sample of abolitionist rhetoric, "I Have a Dream" can be linked to the one-third of the these earlier documents that referred directly to the promises contained in the Declaration of Independence.

What makes this model significant to our larger argument is that the American Jeremiad highlights the power given to the concept and authority of the United States. Keith Miller states that "According to the logic of 'I Have a Dream,' segregation is wrong because it eviscerates the Emancipation Proclamation, scandalizes Thomas Jefferson's vision, and contaminates the freedom in 'America.'"

Though twice in the speech King does quote directly from the Bible, (Amos 5:24 and Isaiah 40:4), most of his rhetorical power comes from his use of anaphora, or the repeating of specific phrases that force the listener to understand seemingly unrelated ideas as parallel images.

One of the most significant extended anaphora in the prepared speech creates a vision of American culture from the end of slavery through the middle of the Twentieth Century into the future. King establishes this image in the repetition of three phrases related to time: "One hundred years later," "Now is the time," and "We can never be satisfied." It is possible, and beneficial, to view each of these separately, but a better understanding of King's rhetoric can be gleaned from seeing them as one extended rhetorical device dealing with the past, present, and future.

The anaphora dealing with "One hundred years later," despite its indirect reference to today, uses images of manacles, chains, and being alone in the vast ocean which are clearly references to slavery and the slave trade. By developing this image, King is linking the historical horrors of the Nineteenth Century with reality of black lives in 1963, most specifically with issues of poverty and segregation. King continues this argument with his next anaphora,

"Now is the time." Here he is connecting the past and contemporary issues with the need to bring Black America out of segregation into justice and brotherhood and to do it now because the future that is being selected offers a choice between King's rhetoric of Brotherhood and a veiled allusion to the rhetoric of Malcolm X and others offering "the marvelous new militancy."

This future is designated by the reference to what must come ahead, "We can never be satisfied." This section deals with very specific cultural and economic issues, such as segregated motels and living areas and voting rights. By then, King is creating a significant rhetorical argument, ending this passage with the quotation from Amos – "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." The context of Chapter 5 of the Book of Amos is a warning to the Nation of Israel to repent and give up the hollow practices and words, as well as to provide justice and righteousness. And by bringing this intertextual reference into his discussion of 1960s America, King is looking for a solution to the racial injustice inherent in America's system since its inception, an injustice that is depicted by the racist actions of a nation founded on words of equality and freedom. If this solution does not manifest itself, the country runs the risk of falling under the wrath of God, as did the ancient nation of Israel.

This argument is further supported by the second significant rhetorical device, voice merging. Keith Miller defines voice merging as a rhetorical method in which Black preachers "create their own identities not through original language but through identifying themselves with a hallowed tradition ... (and) borrow homiletic materials from any sources, including the sermons of the predecessors and peers."

Most famously discussed in regard to "I Have a Dream" is the set piece King frequently used. An extension of the song "America," part of King's refrain was reused from a 1952 speech that Archibald Cary delivered at the Republican National Convention, most specifically extending the song's concluding image of "letting freedom ring." As Cary said, "From every mountainside, let freedom ring. Not only from the Green Mountains and the White Mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire; not only from the Catskills of New York; but from the Ozarks in Arkansas, from the Stone Mountain in Georgia, from the Great Smokies of Tennessee and from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia — let it ring."

But King also uses distinct voices from Abraham Lincoln and the Founding Fathers to establish a historic, American authority for his call for social justice. For example, King begins the second paragraph with the words "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." The importance of King's reference to the Emancipation Proclamation in regard to racial justice does

not require analysis, but the brief merging of King's speech with Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" may hold more significant meaning. One important aspect is that by including Lincoln's most famous speech, King was adding a degree of solemnity.

There is, however, an important rhetorical device that Lincoln used in his address that works toward the conclusion that King is striving for in his speech. During the first years of Lincoln's first term, he referred to the United States as "a Union," which denotes that the strength of the country is only as strong as its citizens' willingness to remain and cooperate with the other parts. However, during the "Gettysburg Address," Lincoln referred to the United States as "a nation" five times during a five-minute speech, most famously in the completion of the line that King referenced in "Dream" – "Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation." Here King adopts Lincoln's use of seeing a clearly divided country as one political concept, that despite the differences and conflicts currently raging across a racially conflicted land, we are, and always have been, one nation.

King then continues this voice-merging concept by using the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as voices of racial unity. King's "Dream" connects Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and the Emancipation Proclamation with The Constitution and Jefferson's Declaration of Independence as fully endorsing economic and social justice.

Of significant note is that during the entirety of this argument, King is linking the goals of the March to historical and political precedents rather than spiritual ones. "King avoids using biblical metaphors when speaking of economic justice ... slavery has already been linked to a biblical metaphor ... The economic issue, however, is stranded on a blatantly nonbiblical 'lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.'"

Drew Hanson argues that King may have begun with patriotic references instead of Biblical ones in order to convince a white audience who remained skeptical. "By opening with praise for the nation's founding documents, King could underscore the Civil Rights Movement's loyalty to America," as well as his trust in the ability of the Lyndon Johnson Administration to deliver.

However, a specific aspect of voice merging that has received significantly less attention is the use of Langston Hughes in King's extemporaneous set piece that concludes the speech. It is clear that King was familiar with Hughes' work, but his last overt mention of Hughes by name was 1960. The specific references to Hughes became muted, most likely, following his being called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953 and the continuation of the accusations that Hughes was a Communist throughout the 1960s.

Jason W. Miller points out that Hughes' poem "Mother to Son" (1922) is merged into earlier King speeches and in earlier drafts of "I Have a Dream," though it was removed from the delivered address. But what no one has discussed is viewing the speech through the lens of Hughes' more comprehensive work, "A Montage of a Dream Deferred" (1951).

The concept of dreams and dreaming had played an important role in Hughes' poetry since at least as early as his 1932 volume "The Dream Keeper" and becomes most front and center with the publication of the "Montage." This work, which is an extended poetic work made up of a series of pieces discussing one central idea, takes the concept of dreams, or aspiration, and discusses the effects of having these goals delayed. This is probably most specifically discussed in the single piece "Harlem."

What happens to a dream deferred?

> Does it dry it up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore-
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over-
> like a sugary sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> Or does it explode?

Though it clearly demonstrates the potential increase of value in delaying reaching one's goals, Hughes' poem does carry with it potential dangers of this deferment. Most specifically, the dream could be lost or become something damaging, but the greatest dangers are the pain of having to carry it for too long and the danger that the delay could cause violence.

If we examine the ending anaphora, "I have a dream," with this vision located in Hughes, what is generally understood as a vision of hope for the future of race relations in this country begins to carry with it a slightly more concerning edge. Perhaps we can now link these ideas with the "marvelous new militancy" mentioned earlier in the speech.

Though this moment is now closely tied to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and to the history of the Civil Rights Movement, the initial reaction is far more nuanced. It is only as afterthought that this speech has become

seminal in our understanding of our own country. By the time of King's death, the address had virtually disappeared from the national memory, and there was no reason to believe that might change. However, as the nation grew more violent in its reaction to the changes of the 1960s, and King reacted to this turmoil, "I Have a Dream" became a comfortable way for the United States to tell itself a comforting, if inaccurate, tale of King's legacy. "King has called on America from the Lincoln Memorial to abolish Jim Crow, the nation had done so, and King had died victorious."

The period between the March on Washington and King's assassination, however, reveals a King and a Civil Rights Movement much changed. As access to the nuts and bolts of the nation began to open up to African Americans, King grew concerned regarding the economic disparity that continued to exist between America's white and nonwhite citizens. In his speech from February 16, 1968, King admits that removal of political barriers may not be enough. "What does it profit a man to be able to have access to any integrated lunch counter when he doesn't earn enough to take his wife out to dine?"

This, among other issues to be described below, led to the development of the Poor People's Campaign in which waves of America's poor would come to Washington, D.C. to secure employment and universal income. There are three distinct differences between the Poor People's Campaign and the March on Washington.

First we see the active inclusion of a multi-ethnic America. King and his lieutenants sought participation among all of America's poor: Native American, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachian whites.

Secondly, the passive resistance of the March would be replaced by militant, nonviolent action, using civil disobedience to shut down businesses, schools, and the government, and tie up hospitals and bridge traffic.

Most importantly, rather than suggesting change through a symbolic gesture of a single day's appearance in Washington, the Poor People's Campaign would entail a large contingent of the unemployed to remain in a D.C. tent city causing disruption until the federal government acted to defeat poverty. According to Andrew Young, "Right now, the 'old style' kind of March on Washington isn't sufficiently crisis-packed ... people don't respond until their own self-interest is threatened." Rather than attempting to use the abstraction of the American Dream to inspire the government and the American people to move toward action, the Poor People's Campaign was going to continue to challenge America until it provided, as a minimum: 1) a commitment to full-employment; 2) a measure to guarantee an annual income; and 3) the federal funding of at least 500,000 low-income housing units per year.

Taken together, these demonstrate a movement away from the use of American history and philosophy as authority for his mission of civil and economic rights. There are two specific historical moments that have been noted as causal in King's distrust of the Johnson Administration and the American government to actually bring about the level of change he was seeking.

First, Bernard Lee noted that, after Rampart Magazine ran a photo essay of dead Vietnamese children, and despite his senior advisors' fear of the political backlash, King decided to commit himself to opposing America's role in Vietnam, even though he had already spoken out against the war. And, secondly, the reaction to the advances of the March on Washington had not been a growing peace.

In 1968, only three years after Selma, events had shattered much of the hope and idealism that fueled the movement. Medgar Evers had been assassinated in his driveway. Shortly after King delivered "I Have a Dream," white racists murdered four innocent girls at their church one Sunday in Birmingham. A few weeks later, a sniper assassinated a young president in Dallas.

Just weeks prior to the planned Poor People's Campaign, King became involved with the garbage workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Despite his staffs concern that the work in Memphis could, at best, distract him from his work with the campaign or, at worst, recreate the disaster of King's Chicago Campaign, King felt that the extent to which the Memphis strike demonstrated clear economic and work issues, this opportunity epitomized the preparation for the Poor People's Campaign.

With this connection, it becomes possible to examine the rhetoric of King's last, great address – "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," (also known as "I See the Promised Land") as a marker for his understanding of the goals and authority of the Poor People's Campaign.

Following a number of years of political reversals and having alienated Johnson, his most important political ally, King walked to the front of the Mason Temple, knowing he "badly needed to reinvent the garbage workers' strike, (but) he also needed to resurrect the civil rights movement. So much had happened; so much had changed."

By 1968, King was drawing less of his political authority to patriotic benchmarks, but had begun drawing more distinct authority from the Bible, and using the Bible to create a distinct sense of discomfort to much of the nation that he appealed to in 1963.

When dealing with the documents that had played such a large

role in his "I Have a Dream" address, in this speech King distanced himself from the Constitution, claiming that "Somewhere I read of the freedom of the speech. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is a right to protest for the right." He even refers to his own role in the march as more of a forgotten abstraction than a historical reality. "Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a might stream.'" By making these claims, King appears to use the philosophical underpinnings of the United States, even up to the March on Washington as myth rather than as historical documents that can be used to advance the needs of the poor.

Rather than starting from the rhetorical stance of the March on Washington, King reestablished the authority of this words in the power of God, and more specifically the power of African American understanding of God. The typological theology and process of self-determination undertaken in "Mountaintop" represents the consummate expression of the distinctive theology and system of knowledge found in slave religion. Miller makes the argument concerning King's use of slave religion as based, primarily, on an understanding of sacred time found in slavery which "erases all historical and geographical barriers."

Eugene Genovese, in his seminal work "Roll Jordon, Roll," establishes that Western and African cultures have developed different understandings of how time works and how it affects us. While the West has established time based on industrial need to movement and progress, the traditional African means of time-reckoning stresses on the past and the present, but not the future. "Time, being two-dimensional, moves, as it were, backward into a long past; the future, not having been experienced, appears senseless."

This understanding of the past and time allows King to bring a brief cultural history of the world into an inevitable understanding of the present day. His "mental flight" from Egypt, (an African starting point), through Greece, Rome, the Renaissance, the Nineteenth century South, the Great Depression, ending in the first half of the Twentieth century, brings all of the history of improvement and establishes it as the inevitable outcome for the struggles being fought for in Johannesburg, Narirobi, Accra, New York, Atlanta, and Memphis. King is seeing not to specific legal or social changes that need to be made, but instead is pointing out that, historically, all of human existence is leading to the equal treatment of all peoples. In other words, King is rejecting the European understanding of time and history and is bringing himself and his audience into a self-discovery with this universe of sacred time.

As opposed to the standard Southern Christianity, which emphasized the peace to come in a future heaven after suffering the horrors of this world in slavery, the Black Church highlights the needs of today. The Reverend Henry

H. Mitchell tells us: "The Black preacher is not an army officer ordering men to their death. Rather he is a crucial witness declaring how men ought to live."

King emphasizes this same idea, again using the rhetorical anaphora. It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new Memphis, Tennessee.

King also uses two distinct Biblical narratives to establish his authoritarian pronouncement of the coming civil equality. King's use of Moses in "Mountaintop" is most famously remembered at the conclusion when King appears to be predicting his death by remembering in Deuteronomy 34 that Moses is allowed to view the Promised Land, but will never be allowed to enter. However, King's use of Exodus here reinforces an intertextual reference between his speech and the Moses story of his people's flight from Egypt. King's structure of this speech follows the same pattern and theme of the Book of Exodus. And essentially the entirety of the Bible, in that it recalls the overarching theme of promise, failure, and fulfillment.

Making this point more specifically is King's retelling of the parable of "The Good Samaritan," which he rephrases as a story of "dangerous unselfishness." This narrative immediately follows King's call for his audience to spread the suffering of the Memphis garbage collectors by strengthening the collective economic power of Black America by boycotting white corporations that are not following fair hiring practices, and strengthening black institutions. Specifically implied in King's use of this parable is the lack of compassion and action provided by the characters in authority, the Levite and the priest. King speculates that those in authority may have considered themselves as having better things to do or following arcane religious regulations. This then follows our metaphor of the weakness of America's political authority. They are able to say the right things and pass correct, if meaningless, laws, but they are never prepared to get themselves actually involved.

King's view of the priest's and Levites' reticence is that they were afraid. The Jericho road was, during Jesus' time, a dangerous, bandit-filled territory. He was able to depend on the white middle classes present in front of the Lincoln Memorial, but he was less sure of their willingness to wade into a garbage strike in Memphis or a tent city in the nation's capital.

Then King brings in the Good Samaritan, a character representing not only a stranger to the injured man, but a sworn enemy. King is here emphasizing the necessity of shifting from using positive social rhetorical speech about "The Other" to actually getting involved with the suffering of those who are different. Rather than "If I stop to help this man, what will

happen to me?" one should ask, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

Since the accusations of Communism and his opposition to the Vietnam War had cost him much of the support of the great squishy white middle, King no longer felt compelled to deal in the generality of dreams, but instead was calling for clear, distinct, economic actions of the wise use of black dollars and the physical disruption of the white economic system. In essence, in shifting from the rhetoric of the March on Washington to the words leading to his Poor People's Campaign, King was shifting from viewing God as the sacrificial lamb who "will wipe away every tear" (Revelation 7:17) to the warrior Lion who, once roused, will conquer. (Revelation 5:5).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Bill Hunter is a professor of American and African American Literature at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

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PART II

The Changing Relationships, Realities of Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Parris Baker, Ph.D.

April 16, 1963, slightly more than four months before his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. composed the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." This open letter was King's written response to and defense of disparagement that emanated from eight liberal white Alabama clergymen. The white clergy, concerned that King's "direct action" approach would incite civil disturbance, wanted King to allow the process of securing equality, social and economic justice to follow a judicial path. The clergy operated from the strategic position of moral suasion. The belief was that social transformation would occur through personal conversion because conversion changes individuals and individuals change society.

For King there was little evidence to support this belief and, moreover, history was replete with contrary evidence to attest that waiting for the oppressor to change would never happen. King identified the inherent moral and ethical responsibilities that incumbent theologians have to speak against the evils of racism: "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 the good people[1]."

King believed no theology, Black or White; Protestant or Catholic could become Christian theology if the theology did not directly engage and confront white supremacy in the Church and in the social and economic institutions throughout the world. To remain silent about the deadly consequences of white racism in the modern world automatically invalidates any theology's claim to Christian identity. King realized that if white America's treatment of black people was going to change it would change through courageous confrontation of racist institutions by theologians. In the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King attempted to clarify why those who were oppressed and downtrodden could not afford to wait and why those who were in positions of privilege and power should not postpone any action to effectuate change. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail[2]," King documents his disappointment:

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1 https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail

2 Washington, James, M.A *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (1986): 295.

> I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice.

Now, slightly more than 50 years later, as the United States accelerates with quantum, hypersonic speed into the Twenty-first Century, it appears our national momentum is being hampered once again by the friction of race. Our movement toward improved race relations and racial justice, according to King, "still creep(s) at horse-and-buggy pace[3]." In the United States the social, educational, economic, and health status for African Americans have been historically poor. Explanations for the poor outcomes are numerous and complex. Empirical research repeatedly reports that structural and institutional inequality, discrimination and racism remain recurrent exogenous variables.

The status of African Americans has improved in some areas and remain stagnant or have worsened in others. According to the Economic Policy Review (2018), African Americans still have worse outcomes than their white counterparts in health, home ownership, household income, family wealth, infant mortality, and incarceration. Nevertheless, African Americans are graduating from high school and attending college at significantly higher numbers. African American students remain less likely to attend and graduate from college compared to their white cohorts.

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission Report) concluded in 1968 that America was moving toward two societies; one black, one white – separate and unequal. Moreover, if America continued on this course it would devolve into a polarized American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values. Throughout American history the issue of race, specifically with and for African Americans, has continued to confront our judicial and educational institutions.

In November 2017, Erie received the dreadful distinction of being the worst city for African Americans to live in the United States by 24/7 Wall St[4]. Enormous disparities in household income, education, unemployment,

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[3] Ibid: 292.

[4] https://247wallst.com/special-report/2017/11/03/the-worst-cities-for-black-americans-2/3/. This was also the subject of a Jefferson Educational Society Essay that criticized several elements of the 24/7 Wall St. report.

incarceration rates, and residential segregation were contributing indices used to make the dubious determination. There was an emergent perception that Erie has become a pluralistic community; that there were two Erie communities; one for people of color, one white; one impoverished – one affluent. It is believed one community is growing and developing while the other community is being gentrified and disappearing. Each issue has spurred agitated conversations where more questions have been raised than answered.

The Twenty-first century continues to find America polarized by partisan politics, disparate economic conditions, and differentiated religious, racial, and ethnic groups, where there are aggressive attempts to mute or muffle necessary local and national race-related discussions (DiAngelo, 2018; West, 1993). The Pew Research Center reports hate crimes in the form of assaults and intimidation against Muslims are significantly higher today than the assault rates measured in 2001 (after the terrorists attacks)[5]. Anti-Semitism, almost 80 years after Auschwitz, is currently on the rise worldwide and in the United States[6]. These polarized political divisions are quite contentious and conflicted; complicated further by attempts to conflate important issues. Race and religion are America's accelerants, the antecedent cultural factors which threaten to incinerate our nation.

"Racism is particularly alive and well in America. It is America's original sin and it is institutionalized at all levels of society" according to James Cone (2004). To offer some rationality to the institutionalization of racism in America, L. Wang (2006) draws on the analogy between computer software programs and discrimination. Just as the Times New Roman font was once the default setting for most computer word processing programs, Wang states, "And, as often happens when most of us accept the default setting on a computer, discrimination by default creates a situation in which racial discrimination becomes the default; the expected, the accepted, the standard" (p. 8). This implicit, reflexive, automatic, unquestioned, and normative reception of racial discrimination as default causes a vast number of white Americans not to see systematic and institutional racism.

In addition to the idea that racism is the default within America's democracy, it has been suggested that America's desire to silence race-related discussions is based on a concept of white fragility – the avoidance or refusal by white people to engage in discomforting and complicated discussions about race and racism (DiAngelo, 2018). This assumption is based on the misconception that the United States has become a post-racial society (Theoharis, 2018). Historians and social scientists partially attribute this naïve belief to the understanding that the lived experiences of African Americans and

[5] pewresearch.org
[6] brookings.edu

the interpretations of American history by African Americans and other people of color are absent, omitted, invalidated, or minimized in historic and education literature (Asante, 1998; 2003; Oluo, 2018, West 1993).

Important to African Americans and other people of color is that historical narratives accurately reflect their lived experiences and for current chronicles to conscientiously report the racial, economic, social, and judicial injustices that are regularly appropriated to these groups. Moreover, the stories of African Americans regarding their personal experiences with acute and chronic racism must be heard, validated, and most importantly believed by white people (Oluo, 2018).

The Black Lives Matter Movement, like the Civil Rights Movement, has forced our nation to face the uncomfortable, but grave histories of African Americans in America. On August 28, 1955, Emmett Till, 14 years old, was murdered in Money, Mississippi by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam who, protected by double jeopardy laws, both admitted to the murder and were paid $4,000 for describing the story for Look Magazine[7]. Many believe it was Till's death and the pictures of his mutilated body that acted as a catalyst for the commencement of the Civil Rights Movement. More likely, though, it is a nation of angered African Americans who were tired of being victimized; in the view and by the hands of White Americans.

Recently, media outlets flooded America with pictures of mutilated, dead black bodies into the homes of America. Once again, our nation was confronted with the legacy of racism and white supremacy. The death of Trayvon Martin, 17, and the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who fatally shot him in 2012, was all too familiar to African Americans. The deaths of Emmett Till and of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American who was fatally shot in 2014 by a white police officer from Ferguson, Missouri both marked civil justice movements.

There has been a long historic and horrific narrative of public executions at the hands of white men that has contaminated the consciousness of America. Black Lives Matter, a three-word phrase, has framed an easily articulated social narrative regarding America's racial history (Bailey & Leonard, 2015). Yet this simple message has been perceived as pernicious and hostile by white Americans, underscoring the salient points detailed in King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

> We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in direct action movement that was

[7] Emmett Till *https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/emmett-till-1*

> 'well-timed,' according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.' We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights.[8]

Changing Relationships: From Conversation to Commitment

Why does America as a nation resist so intensely the real discussion of race? Much of the disparity and many of the inequities and injustices experienced by African Americans and other people of color have been legislated by the United States judicial system, enforced or implemented by law enforcement departments and tacitly or overtly supported by a majority of white Christian citizenry (Fletcher, 2017). Real discussions within judicial, religious, and social systems would encompass continuous dialogue focused on changing extant economic, education, and religious structures that maintain or enhance racial disparity. Real discussions seldom happen.

West (1999) asserts that white Americans don't like to talk about race because the discussion raises important underlying questions about what it means to be an American and part of American democracy. Whiteness is an integral construct in American democracy and Christianity. West maintains the difficulty of defending America as a democratic nation is to acknowledge that the historic construct of whiteness must include the complementary construct of the subordination of black people.

The subordination of black people or the promotion of white people is the result of the construction of a legislated concept called race. With the assistance of the U.S. judiciary and religious institutions and other communities, fluid definitions of blackness and whiteness were routinely established or refined to so that real resources of social, political, and economic importance could be determined, appropriated and allocated or withheld (Fletcher, 2017). Two important decisions were made that contributed to the racialization of America.

Early in the history of the United States, racial issues important to Christians were the ordinances or sacraments of salvation, baptism, and communion. Could slaves be included in these sacred activities and, if so, were

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[8] Washington, James, M.A *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (1986): 292.

the efficacious effects, legally and spiritually for slaves binding? To become a Christian meant fundamentally that you were free; from sin, slavery, and to participate in the church ordinances or sacraments. Religious hierarchies, both Catholic and Protestant, created nomenclature that would justify the continuance of slavery, established a culture that reinforced slavery, and assembled communities to teach rules and rituals that normalized the practice of slavery (Emerson & Smith, 2000).

Throughout American history the question of an appropriate relationship between religion and government, specific to the issue of race, has continued to confront our judiciary (Hollenbach, 2003). Major constitutional legislation, such as *Scott v. Sanford* 60, U.S. 393 (1857)[9] Supreme Court decision ruled that Dred Scott, a black man, was not entitled to his freedom under constitutional law. Moreover, the majority opinion by Justice Roger Taney held that African Americans could never become American citizens, and because slaves were property under the Fifth Amendment, any law that deprived a slave owner of that property was unconstitutional.

Emancipating African Americans did not alter America's ideological position on race. The 13th Amendment (ratified in 1866) constitutionally prohibited slavery. The Amendment XIII Section 1 of the U. S. Constitution[10] reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." However, several states did not ratify the 13th Amendment until well into the Twentieth century: Delaware (1901), Kentucky (1976), and Mississippi (1995), but not officially ratified until 2013.

Amendment XIV Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution[11] ratified in 1868 reads:

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

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9 https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/60us393
10 https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxiii
11 https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxiv

In *Plessy v. Ferguson* 163 U.S 537 (1896)[12] the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Louisiana Supreme Court ruling that sanctioned and instituted the constitutional position of racial discrimination regarding the utilization of public facilities and services with the "separate but equal doctrine." This separate but equal doctrine was reversed in *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka 347 U. S. 483 (1954).* The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that racially segregated schools were in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment[13] and had no place in public education. The test of the *Brown v. Board of Education* came with the attempted integration of Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Nine African American students (referred to as the Little Rock Nine) were forbade entrance of the all-white education institution. Federal troops were ordered to escort the children into the school.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were two major legislative victories for King. These legislative treaties were indispensable in dismantling Jim Crow policies and other de facto segregation practices. However, with each piece of legislation passed, greater efforts were initiated to hinder the progress by African Americans to acquire civil and human rights.

King adamantly cited two documents to support his belief in and work for nonviolent liberation, reconciliation, and racial justice: the Bible and the United States Constitution. He took the themes of democracy, freedom, and justice and integrated Old and New Testament scripture to promote love and hope, faith and love in black people. From the emancipation of the Hebrew children found in Exodus, through the prophetic work of Amos (But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream[14]) and concluding with the story of the Good Samaritan, King stirred the faith of black people to hold on to the promises of God. Black theology and black preaching both centered on the experiences and encounters with the crucified Jesus Christ.

Blacks had discovered experientially the judicial and law enforcement systems were not going to protect or save them. Time and again there was marked evidence of this truth in black suffering. Black religion for many years was focused on the eschatology of Jesus and the redemption and freedoms offered through death. In an America where seemingly white people as a group prospered as a matter of fact and black people were positioned to directly contribute to that prosperity, black nihilism (West, 1993) was conjoined with the institutional and structural marginalization of large numbers of black

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[12] https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/163us537

[13] 14th Amendment granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the US and equal protection of the laws.

[14] Amos 5: 24.

people. Preaching was a time to remind congregants of the promises of God relative to protect the needy and defend the poor. The themes of justice, hope, and love were critically important to black people, who desperately needed to identify with Jesus, whom they believed understood their struggles:

> He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.[15]

King used the same strategy in many of his speeches. In his last speech, referred to as "The Mountaintop Speech" or "I See the Promised Land," King attempted to encourage the congregants of Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, and all of America to honor the sacred words of the U.S. Constitution:

> All we say to America is, "Be true to what you said on paper." If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of the press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just as I say, we aren't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are going on.[16]

King and many other black theologians were confronted with the continuous contradictions of the biblical God who delivers from evil; who establishes divine justice and judgment; who liberates victims from the oppressed; and who ensures be not deceived. God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.[17] Theological reconciliation of these themes became urgent when juxtaposed to the everyday realities of living black in white America. Religion was a source of personal and collective identity and efficacy for black people and, simultaneously, a source of empowerment and strength in the struggle for freedom. God's word affirmed black people's

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[15] Isaiah 53: 3-6.

[16] Washington, James, M. A *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (1986): 282.

[17] Galatians 6: 7

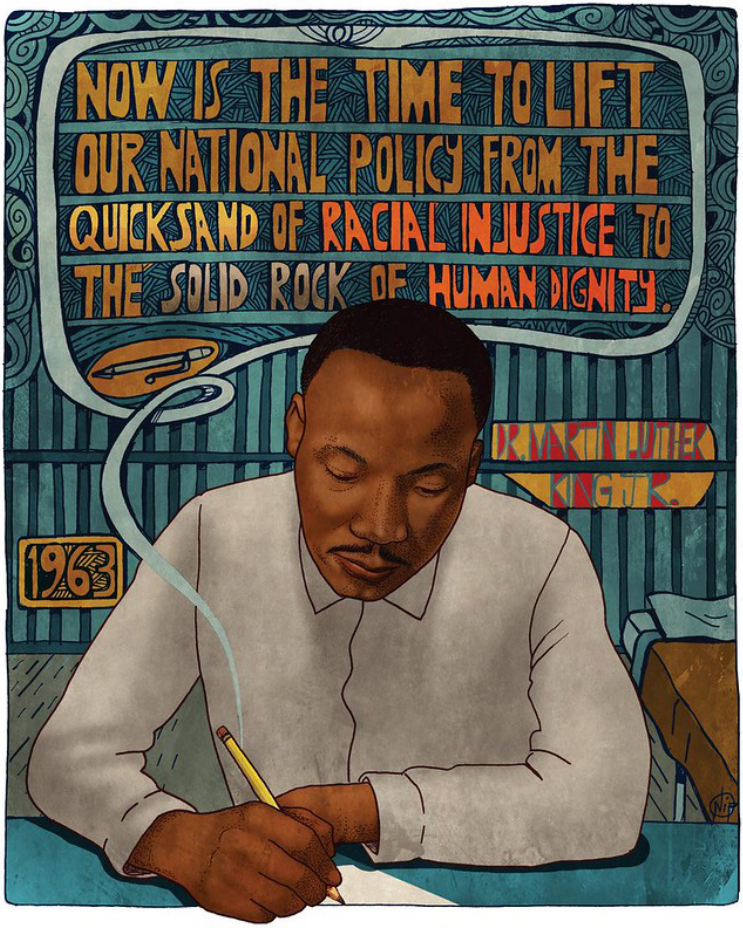
personal worth and human dignity. Given the daily attacks by white society to demean and dehumanize black people, King recognized that in church black people could experience social status, prestige, and occupy positions of authority. In church and in the presence of God black people were not second-class citizens, but children of God.

Changing Realities: The Need for Creative Extremists

After some reflection, King, who was considered a radical, recognized the need for and embraced the charge of being an extremist. "Was not Jesus an extremist in love – love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." "So the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be. We will be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love?"[18]

Following King's assignation on April 1968, Rev. Ralph Abernathy and members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference decided to move forward with the planned Poor People's Campaign. The purpose of the People's Campaign was to erect Resurrection City in the Mall of Washington, D.C. to demand economic justice for poor people across America. Although the demonstration was held, many of the original demands remained unmet. On June 20, 2020, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival has a planned march on Washington, D.C. to continue the unfinished work of the 1968 campaign.

[18] Washington, James, M.A *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (1986): 298



Though the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is unfinished, he leaves a tremendous legacy of undiminished hope and resilient love. King resolutely believed in the redemptive power of love – "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies." Redemption requires reconciliation – "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy to a friend." The pathway to true reconciliation is repentance – For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.[19]

[19] 2 Corinthians 7:10, New American Standard Bible

In order for repentance to occur there must be confession by the offender. Change is impossible without confession – "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other." "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools." For confession to be meaningful it must be the confession of truth – "I have a dream that this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" Finally, King believed that to declare the truth takes courage – "Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal."

On August 28, 2008 – 45 years to the day of King's "I Have a Dream" speech – a dreamer, an extremist, by the name of Barack Hussein Obama accepted the Democratic nomination for president with these words:[20]

> And it is that promise that 45 years ago today brought Americans from every corner of this land to stand together on a mall in Washington, before Lincoln's Memorial, and hear a young preacher from Georgia speak of his dream. The men and women who gathered there could've heard many things. They could've heard words of anger and discord. They could've been told to succumb to the fear and frustration of so many dreams deferred. But what the people heard instead – people of every creed and color, from every walk of life – is that in America, our destiny is inextricably linked. That together, our dreams can be one. 'We cannot walk alone,' the preacher cried. 'And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.' America, we cannot turn back. Not with so much work to be done. Not with so many children to educate, and so many veterans to care for. Not with an economy to fix and cities to rebuild and farms to save. Not with so many families to protect and so many lives to mend. America, we cannot turn back. We cannot walk alone. At this moment, in this election, we must pledge once more to march into the future. Let us keep that promise – that American promise – and in the words of Scripture hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.

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[20] https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94087570

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Parris Baker is Director of Social Work, Mortuary Science, and Gerontology at Gannon University.

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JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

3207 STATE STREET
ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA 16508-2821

814-459-8000
www.JESErie.org