

FREEDOM OF INALIENABLE RIGHTS: DRAWING INSIGHT FROM MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. IN ADDRESSING POVERTY AS AN ISSUE OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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Abstract

Governed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, as citizens of the United States we should be free sovereign autonomous individuals, free to have the power and right of self-determination over our own minds, bodies, lives and souls. This paper argues that the sustained level of poverty in the United States infringes upon the inalienable rights of many people in the United States. It also explores how religious education can seek to inform moral conscience in response to unjust capitalist conditions that compromise and thus threaten the liberty, democracy, and equality of many U.S. residents. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s theology of social ethics is examined for its rich content, which provides a prescription for doing justice and empowering the poor. On a broader level, this study investigates how progressive religious education can foster moral education theoretically and practically to empower the poor in a democratic society. It shows how progressive religious education can encourage the poor to exercise their democratic rights, participate in democracy, and seek redistributive justice as an expression of prophetic Christian faith.

The Founders of the United States knew that liberty is about more than just securing political freedoms. True liberty requires economic freedom—the ability to profit from our own ideas and labor; to work, produce, consume, own, trade, and invest according to our own choices. The Declaration of Independence asserted America's liberty by appealing to humankind's fundamental rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Founders understood the *pursuit* of happiness as a natural right because the right to enjoy the fruit of one's labor is a fundamental tenet of liberty.

But today, with 46.2 million who are poor and on public assistance, 13.9 million people unemployed, and 8.2 percent unemployment rate, economic freedom is no longer a reality for many people in the United States who are willing to work earnestly towards their economic dreams. With the middle class being pushed to the fringe of U.S. society, what is left is essentially, "two Americas: One America does the work while another America reaps the reward. One America pays the taxes while another America gets the tax breaks" (Ensinger 2009). The two types of Americans are the rich people and the poor people.

What is even more alarming is that, according to the latest data from the Congressional Budget Office, the richest one percent of Americans saw their income, adjusted for inflation, ballooned upwards by 275 percent between 1979 and 2007. Meanwhile, however, the bottom 20 percent of the United States saw their income increase by only an inconsiderable 18 percent.

There is obviously a problem when the top 20 percent of the U.S. population has secured a robust economy while the bottom 80 percent is struggling to obtain subsistent living in a land of exuberant material prosperity. This is more than an economic, a political, a social, and a cultural problem; this is a moral problem. It is thus fair to say that with the deprivation of economic freedom for most people in the United States, we are a nation who has lost our way morally—that is, we have lost the moral compass of economic freedom for the masses. What is needed is a renewed moral energy that can set forth a vision to re-make U.S. society, and cast off of its shameful and disgraceful economic inequality, and nurture the dawning of a new age in which this nation embraces in practice the sacred creed enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence: *“We hold these truths to be self-evident that all humankind are created equal.”* And, therefore, should be granted their inalienable rights of economic freedom.

In order to recapture the moral spirit of the United States, I turn to Martin Luther King, Jr., and the history of the Black Freedom Movement in the 50’s and 60’s. The Civil Rights Movement was a liberation movement to free black humanity in particular, and all racial communities in general, who were victims of political, social, economic, and cultural oppressions. More specifically, however, I want to focus on the economic oppression and deprivation of the civil rights era. In this presentation, King’s moral apparatus is examined to see how religious ideas functioned in the context of politics, law, economics, and psychology, in a way that empowered those who were deprived of their natural rights of economic freedom. The traditions that influenced King personally and academically are also presented, and his contribution to seeking greater economic justice in the United States is explored.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s social ethical vision was grounded in his religious beliefs as he also sought to promote a New America as a sociopolitical and economic ideal. His social ethics, as inspired by the social gospel tradition, creatively linked Christian religion and morality with democratic politics and lawmaking. King saw the importance and relevance of linking faith and justice, thereby creating “an alliance between religion, morality, law, and politics that transcended church-state boundaries, and that permeated every facet of American life” (Williams 1988, 127). Hence, King is considered the very embodiment of what Frederick L. Downing called “the praxis tradition,” the tradition that refuses to separate religious faith and moral consideration from politics, legal matters, and social reformism (Baldwin 2002, XV). King was a public theologian and moral leader of his time.

Personal Influences

King was influenced personally by the African-American religious tradition within his nuclear family and the Christian church. Though he did not adopt the Baptist fundamentalist faith of his father, King nonetheless was influenced by his family’s noblest ethical ideals that were rooted in the black social gospel tradition. King’s father, "Daddy King Sr.," served as the first role model for young King, Jr. and was one of the principal influences in molding his personality. King’s father was constantly concerned with social, economic and political issues. He assisted in the organization of voter registration drives, participated in the NAACP, and sat on the board of Morehouse College. As pastor of the local church, he embedded strong religious ideals in his son and linked him to the church. Lectures from both of King’s parents on the subject of racial harmony stuck with young King and armed him against all forms of prejudice (Blakely 2001).

In late adolescence King left his home to begin his formal education at Morehouse College, where he became acquainted with the remarkable president of the school, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, who influenced generations of black students (Blakely 2001). In Mays's strength of purpose and religious commitment, young men like Martin found a role model. Later on, he publicly recognized Dr. Mays as an enormous influence on him in his formative years. Mays confirmed the religious convictions that the young man had already developed through his father's influences. Mays also reinforced King's belief that without God, nonviolence lacked substance and potency.

Academic Influences

With a strong Christian faith in hand, Martin Luther King, Jr. embarked upon his formal education. Additionally, throughout his formal education King focused his studies on the theory and practice of nonviolent social change. King said that Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience," was his "first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolence and resistance" (Blakely 2001). It was primarily Thoreau's concept of refusing to cooperate with an evil system which so intrigued Dr. King (Blakely 2001).

As Martin moved on to the seminary, he began to pass countless hours studying social philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill, and Locke. Next came Hegel and his contention that "truth is the whole." More fully, Hegel's ideas fascinated King and convinced him that growth comes through struggle, particularly the struggle of a thesis and antithesis, an idea that would later prove very important in his life (Blakely 2001). King became convinced that the partial truths in opposing positions about social issues could be combined in an effective synthesis to achieve greater social justice. Overall, Hegel claimed that truth is found neither in the thesis of an argument nor in its antithesis but in an emergent synthesis of these two which can reconcile the truth of both opposites and create a whole while at the same time avoiding extremes. King believed that a dialectical process for justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. He also held that the goal of social action is to achieve justice via struggle, and that justice achieved is truth obtained (Ansbro 1994).

While King deplored the substituting of materialism for religious values, he applauded Marx for exposing the injustices of capitalism, promoting class consciousness among workers, and challenging the complacency of the Christian churches. It was in part due to his reading of Marx that King became convinced that capitalism had failed the needs of the masses and that it had outlived its usefulness. The greatest influence on King's social outlook, however, was Walter Rauschenbusch. It was Rauschenbusch's book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that led King to realize that Christians should be concerned about people's day-to-day socioeconomic environments.

Toward the end of his life King came to be associated with certain thinkers through the content of his speeches and writings. For example, he used the concept "agape" (Christian brotherly love) in ways that showed the unmistakable influence of Paul Ramsey. Ramsey had coined the phrase "enemy-neighbor" (the neighbor includes the enemy) and referred to regarding him with love as the ultimate in agape, for in such cases nothing can be expected in return. King's own words closely echoed this statement when he professed that, "the best way to assure oneself that

love is disinterested is to have love for the enemy-neighbor from whom you can expect no good in return, but only hostility and persecution."

KING'S CONTRIBUTION TO BAPTIST SOCIAL ETHICS FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

In the 1950's and 60's there were a variety of national issues that gave rise to the black freedom movement. The American political and legal structures had been unfair to certain classes of people—minority American (African Americans in particular)—especially with regard to human rights, civil rights, and labor rights. Unjust structures produced racism, economic injustice, and militarism. These social problems caused social maladjustment and social unrest. Moreover, American imperialism was often found overseas, causing social problems throughout the world. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed many of these national and international social problems. Economic injustice, however, is the important issue that is emphasized in this paper.

In addressing economic issues, King increasingly called openly for a radical redistribution of political and economic power in American cities, the nation, and the world. The mid-1960s ghetto uprisings were in fact revolts against unemployment, powerlessness, police violence, and institutionalized racism. King's final dream, a Poor People's March on Washington, aimed to mobilize Americans across racial and class lines to reverse a national cycle of urban conflict, political backlash, and policy retrenchment. King's vision of economic democracy and international human rights remains a powerful inspiration for those committed to ending racism and poverty in our time. But how did King's social ethics address poverty in America and what was his strategy to mediate the economic crisis?

In the civil rights struggle of the 50's and 60's, while problems of segregation and the retardation of voting rights existed in the South, the North was facing discrimination that disproportionately affected the black community. Because of discriminatory business and employment policies in the North, high unemployment rates were rampant in many minority communities. High unemployment rate unequivocally resulted in impoverishment.

King understood that the poor in the United States are aware that they live in the richest nation in the world, and that while they are perishing on a lonely island of poverty, they are surrounded by a vast ocean of material prosperity.

King's Prophetic Role in Calling for Economic Justice

King often asserted that his primary role, first and foremost, was to be a preacher of the Christian gospel: "I am first and foremost a minister. I love the church, and feel that civil rights is a part of it. For me, at least, the basis of my struggle for integration and [justice]...is something that began with a religious motivation" (Cone 1991, 120). Because of the influence of religion during his childhood years, especially that of his father and grandfather, King grew up abhorring segregation, economic deprivation and other social evils, considering these to be rationally unexplainable and morally unjustifiable.

King not only talked about the reality of the poverty of his time but, based on his moral-religious conviction, he also composed a strategic program that would empower minority communities politically and economically toward security and independence. Because discrimination

inevitably led to economic injustice, King's program of economic liberation for those who were poor focused on empowering them to transcend the discriminatory employment practices often found in the North. King envisioned and introduced two concepts to overcome discrimination: (1) the combined labor and consumer strength of the Negro community and (2) full employment and a guaranteed income.

The black population in the 1960's—the populace that faced the most racial discrimination in opportunities—ranked the highest in organized labor—“nearly two (2) million Negroes” (Washington 1986, 600). They were concentrated in key industries such as truck transportation, steel, auto and food industries. These, King thought, constituted “the backbone of the nation's economic life” (Washington 1986, 600). With such a large labor force, King held that labor unions could recruit more members and increase in size, thus giving the black community the organized labor power to counter discrimination. The black community was also the largest consumer force. King believed this consumer strength was a strong economic lever available to the black community (Washington 1986, 602-03). With this purchasing strength, boycotts against banks, stores and other businesses with discriminatory practices could force these businesses to change and to offer more inclusive economic opportunities.

As another coordinated solution to the poverty crisis, King called for government jobs programs aiming at full employment to be combined with an even more radical remedy: a guaranteed annual income (Manis 2008, 197). Such a guaranteed income should be pegged to the median income and not tied to the lowest income. He also believed that the income must be dynamic, automatically rising as incomes rise as a whole (Washington 1986, 616).

King held the United States accountable for its infringement of democratic equality and its failure to guarantee economic opportunity for all. That is, to ensure rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

KING'S MORAL VISION AS GUIDE FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE TODAY

How can Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ideas of economic justice serve as a guiding force to address poverty as an issue of economic justice in the United States today? How can faith communities incorporate King's moral-religious ideas in democratic politics toward economic equality? From a religious faith standpoint, for King, religion and politics are inseparable--that is, faith must be linked with justice. The Christian gospel is a two-way road: on the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. The priestly dimension of faith must aligned with the prophetic dimension. The prophetic dimension of faith is religious education in action promoting policies consistent with democratic equalitarianism.

Dr. King was a Christian who saw the religious education of his faith to require intervention on behalf of the poor. King said that "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." This means that "charity" was not enough, that restructuring our society to be a decent society was the only answer to the problems of poverty. King died pushing for economic justice for the poor in

fighting for organized labor and living wage jobs. Contemporary faith communities should also be conscious of this sacred obligation.

One way for contemporary religious community to push for economic justice on the behalf of the poor, for example, is via the support of peace and justice movement advocating labor unions and livable wages. Today, labor unions in North America are under unprecedented assault. Public workers in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and other states, for example, face all-out campaigns to destroy their collective-bargaining rights. The magnificent outbreaks of opposition to these attacks provide a potent reminder that economic security, respect and representation on the job are not arrogant demands of “greedy” workers but basic human rights. If King were alive, he would be linking arms in the front ranks of the protests against the attacks on trade unions (King III 2011).

On the living wage issue, many elected officials in New York (Brooklyn and the Bronx) joined faith leaders, labor leaders, community leaders, and local residents are pushing for swift passage of the Fair Wages for New Yorkers Act, popular legislation that will help create more living wage jobs. Dr. King’s eldest living son, Martin Luther King III, endorses this campaign, calling for living wage jobs throughout New York City. Martin Luther King III states that New York City offers a national roadmap for continuing Dr. King’s unfinished work of economic justice...We need the living wage movement to succeed and spread to other parts of the country. Countless stories of the working poor today are about people making impossible choices: food or rent, clothing or electricity. When we pause over those stories and understand their painful significance, we grasp something fundamental about a nation as wealthy as the United States: no working person should have to settle for surviving over living (“MLK’s Fight for Economic Justice Inspires Citywide Call for Living Wage” 2011).

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