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Ethics 2: Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.
Dr. Simpson

"*It is midnight within the social order...*"

"Now is the time..."

"The hour has come..."

"The fierce urgency of now..."

"The myth of time..."

"The clock in our souls revealed that it was daybreak..."

I felt engaged by several themes we explored this semester. But chief among them was King's consideration of time and the impact it had on his whole reality. I think his perception of time informs everything we read— his treatment of the subject of the North, the transformation he advocated on a national scale, and the setbacks the movement encountered. I felt delighted by many of the choices King made in synthesizing assorted theological and philosophical influences and building them into a life of public practice.

I consider the core of King's approach to time to be his concept of the "myth of time." Though he articulates this in assorted ways throughout his work, two key passages are foremost in my mind. Responding in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* to a missive from a man in Texas who averred that "[You] are in too great of a religious hurry (...) The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth," King replied:

> All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will

> have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard word time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is ripe to do right. (*TH*, 296)

First I think it should be said that King employs words like “myth” and “repent”, or phrases like “use time creatively” in denotative and connotative ways (to borrow a phrase). After a fashion, he does use myth in the “myth of time” in a vernacular, denotative sense, as a thing which does not exist, mythological things such as unicorns and faeries--or perhaps furies! But he also uses myth in the sense of “mythic,” as in some great shared truths told in the voice of stories and eternally recurrent through human events. He further urges people to *reject* the myth of time, the received mythic construct of time where history becomes progression and apotheosis, a doom which binds us to undertake progressive journeys and emerge as heroes (the thousand faces are optional). It is a very fine line, because King continues to place hope in a future judgment and kingdom, revealed by God. It could be asked, why not consider things progressively, even mythically if we believe that God is or will be working toward a heavenly future? Rejecting time’s mythic character risks rejecting hope, doesn’t it?

So consider King on creativity, how “we must use time creatively.” Creativity is a deliberately chosen term. It has the denotative sense of being resourceful or clever, subverting limitations and/or working within them to change conditions and achieve results. But King is also grounded in the biblically understood deed of creation, the action of God as Creator. To employ “co-workers with God” and “We must use time creatively”

in the same paragraph is no mere exhortation to cleverness. This communicates a specialized theology and anthropology. It is a connotation of co-creation, an intimation that God invites a partnership[1] in making God's revelation happen.

Another pivotal passage appears in *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution* wherein King again discusses the "myth of time." It's worth mentioning that a number of the exact phrases on the neutrality of time in *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* King also appear in *Remaining Awake,* so I'm not going to excerpt all of them:

> It is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And there are those who often sincerely say to the Negro and his allies in the white community, "Why don't you slow up? Stop pushing things so fast. Only time can solve the problem. And if you will just be nice and patient and continue to pray, in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out." (*TH,* 270)

The piece continues with the previously-cited material about the myth of time, and again uses the language of co-creation. A few pages later King summons words of judgment in response to these failures of poverty, racism and involvement the Vietnam war, "It seems that I can hear the God of history saying, 'That was not enough! But I was hungry and ye fed me not. I was naked and clothed me not.'" (TH, 275). He then drags that future judgment into the present tense: "The judgment of God is upon us today, and we could go right down the line and see that something must be done...and something must be done quickly" (TH, 276). What we see is that when King and his allies are confronted with the questions of "why" and pleas to slow down and wait, the response

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[1] There is a second, troubling element at work here, the "willing partners" concept that clearly comes out of a different theological foundation than heterodox Lutheranism. I can't help but worry over a denotative/connotative tension around "will/willing" as used by King. My automatic reaction to will is always negative. This is about the only time I did react negatively to King's writing. It's a matter I would love to address. But in another paper, probably, on the nature of invitations and "the promise that creates the faith to receive it."

quickly changes the entire subject, relocating the matter onto the ground of eschatological proclamation against the powers of this age.

I read in these a deep theological view and rhetorical mastery for articulating time. King repeatedly appeals to immediacy and the (co)creative use of time. The phrase, “We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is ripe to do right,” utterly puts me in mind of “the living present.” It’s a term sprinkled liberally through the work of the late Gerhard O. Forde[2]. In *Theology is for Proclamation*, Forde writes “The deed of proclamation in the living present is the deed of the living God! It is what God has in mind for us.” (Forde, 30). King’s understanding of a perpetual present tense for creative action wherein we can “do right” is a similar expression that meshes very well in my mind.

In *The Strength to Love*, King again elaborates on time, using midnight as a controlling image to enumerate the crises in society, psychology and morality. He ratchets up the tensions and disruptions of contemporary life throughout these dimensions and then seeks to disperse them with the promise of dawn:

> Midnight is a confusing hour when it is difficult to be faithful. The most inspiring word that the church may speak is that no midnight long remains. The weary traveler by midnight who asks for bread is really seeking the dawn. Our eternal message of hope is that dawn will come. (*TH,* 502)

The difficulty of “faithfulness” is mediated by the eschatological promise of an eternal message of hope, explicitly the person of “God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to be the hope of men in all of their complex personal and social problems” (*TH*, 502).

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[2] It’s no secret that I’ll read virtually every theologian in light of what I learned from my old teacher Gerhard. Sometimes it doesn’t quite work. Here, I stand by my yoking maneuvers!

Further King-Forde connections have thus flowered in my mind. It's from Forde that I learned a way of describing the contours of christology and soteriology. He writes

> Jesus is important because of his relation to the eschatological future, the question of the end (*finis*) and goal (*telos*) of all things. So, as current scholarship expresses it, there is an implied christological claim: to stand in the end one must be properly related to Jesus here and now (Forde, 63).

In making so explicit gestures toward the eternal hope in Jesus Christ, King carves out an eschatological stance. His references to hope and the one whom we recognize as *finis* and *telos* further distinguishes his vision of time. This also lends new force to all the issues. If the present can be claimed, shaped or disrupted by the eschatological future, then the present depends on realization of the hope proclaimed in the person of Jesus Christ.

What is more, his interpretations of time bear similarity to King's writings about power, particularly in *Where Do We Go From Here?* We see King describing power in neutral terms also, "Now power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change. (...) There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly" (TH, 246-247). He later conflates this power with that of God's, raising the expectation that power, in this case economic power, be employed to "put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth" (TH, 248). He puts out a vision of power that is relocated in time, tied together with proclamation of God revealed, "Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout 'White Power!'—when nobody will shout 'Black Power!"—but everybody will talk about God's power and human power" (TH, 251). So we might infer that in

King's formulation, time and power share a kind of neutrality, but more relevantly they share the possibility for co-creative participation[3].

They also share the same material ground: the personal God of love, in whom is "the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality" (TH, 250). This destruction of the myth of time and relocation of power are hallmarks of what I recognize as "eschatological consciousness." Though still little more than a bit of my own soundbite-ready turn of phrase, eschatological consciousness refers to both the awareness of prolepsis in declaration of the impact of Christ's redemptive actions, as well as the intent to communicate and embrace the present from this awareness. An eschatologically conscious theology or anthropology recognizes the present within or from the point of view of completed revelation. To attack time's character as myth while holding hope in a future is to push backward from the completed eschatological event, a radical push against how we perceive the world. King's faith literally disrupts the consciousness of a people who see themselves oriented forward in time.

My point in this is that out of these can come a way of reading all of King's work and speeches. Thanks to his breakthroughs on time, King's work is the first case study for what I'm hoping to describe. He is a real embodiment for the modern eschatological consciousness. If we read King in the light of his eschatological understanding of time,

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[3] Until recently, I have found little to dispute in the neutrality of power. Believe it or not, I hear in King's understanding a consonance with Martin Luther on Luther's notion that the will is a horse which goes where its rider directs it. I am still digesting Simpson's own consideration of power in terms of communicative or perichoretic power. I think it can be argued that King might be open to these concepts, but obviously his death cuts short any of those conversations. I hope to examine that concern under separate cover and maybe find a way toward their integration. Trying to integrate Simpson's critique of King with Luther and others so late in my paper-writing process—I'd already begun working on the "myth of time thesis" when he lectured the point on May 11— is just too disruptive and I fear I'd start babbling.

we understand anew the stakes in his speeches: integration of white and black in America, yes. But also the great conclusion of God's created reality.

This is what we are dealing with when we read in *A Christmas Sermon on Peace* the discussion of ends and means:

> We will never have peace in the world until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the idea in the making, and the end in process (...) because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree. (TH, 255)

That is King in the pulpit, pulling together future reality and present reality, playing with and against time. The sermon concludes in a glorious day, "the sons of God" shouting for joy (TH, 258).

This is what we are dealing with when we read in *Where Do We Go From Here?* King's challenge to the participants in the civil rights movement:

> We honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. (...) One day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. (TH, 250)

King interprets this "basic question" through the lens of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a move that again relocates the issue into that meeting place, the person of Jesus Christ, *telos* and *finis* of time:

> Jesus didn't get bogged down in the kind of isolated approach of what he shouldn't do. Jesus didn't say, "Now Nicodemus, you must stop lying." (...) So instead of just getting bogged down in one thing, Jesus looked at him and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." He said, in other words, "Your whole structure must be changed." (...) What I am saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, "America, you must be born again!" (TH, 251)

King has raised the stakes. He has laid onto the whole movement a burden to proclaim this disruptive word to an entire nation. I think his readings of the bible and his personal theology cut through an otherwise totally human endeavor here. Non-theist, non-Christian people engaged in the civil rights movement, and still do. King's altered vision of time represents a transforming ethics, one that drags its participants out of the conclusions that any civic minded person could come up with and instead locates its ground and force backward from the end of time.

We get another flavor of the nature of this eschatological consciousness in *Showdown for Nonviolence*. He declares a paradox in the twin infections of racism and democracy. "While doing wrong, they have the potential to do right" (TH, 71). It's a moment dripping with eschatological tensions. The warnings he issues meet directly the firm belief in American idealism. When King evokes the crisis on our way to accomplishing life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (TH, 69) he acknowledges Jefferson's great civil prolepsis that all people are created equal—surely an already-but-not-yet reality !

King's encounter with philosophy has a similar shape. As he sifted through Tillich, Hegel, Raushchenbusch and Gandhi in *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,* we get a glimpse of that fascinating understanding of time and reality. Even a relatively inconspicuous passage demonstrates characteristics of colliding realities of time:

> The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes reality. (TH, 39)

Emerging from his readings on the estrangement of humanity from its "essential nature," facing the reality of his own nation's estrangement, and glimpsing the foretaste of a beloved community in India, King writes that meditation, rich with transformed time.

As I work toward my conclusion, I want to address one other aspect of King's time-sense, the ecstatic King. His visionary prophetic voice is heavily textured with a kind of prophetic imagination. He masterfully weaves this voice into the great *I Have a Dream* speech, combining civic discourse with telescopic time sense. When King describes 1963 as a beginning, not an end (TH, 218), he still holds the end in sight. He pulls his immediate audience and the timeless audiences who will hear him again and again into his dream, the dream of prophets and gospel writers:

> I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists (...) little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of hte Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. (TH, 219)

We hear a dramatic tension between worlds, between civic discourse and the theological end and goal of time. In a sweeping prophetic gesture we glimpse with King a different reality, a *faith reality* that rewrites this one in an ongoing fashion, and in the living present.

This is how I was engaged by Martin Luther King this term. I had all these theological ideas rebounding in my brain, dating to the start of my theological education. Some of them are intriguing, if a little dry. And I had all these notions about King's

thought and the nature of the civil rights movement. Those were also dry, in the sense of having no clearly essential relationship to the church or the kingdom. Suddenly I'm reading speeches and conversations that I've heard in other settings, in history books and classes that were previously inflected with the zeitgeist. Now in view of these readings, especially the highly resonant themes I'd never read before, they're revitalized. We're reading all these sermons and learning the impact of the gospel word on this movement, instead of the spirit of the age, there's a presence of the Holy Spirit, and King now speaks of the transformative collision of Christian realities.

Consider how he speaks in the last sermon, *I See the Promised Land,* where he starts the sermon "standing at the beginning of time" and moves forward into his present context. Fueled by Jesus' parable of the man fallen among thieves[4] he proclaims a motive power to the people, promising a reality where they rise up and "make America what it ought to be". He concludes in a place outside of time, proclaiming a kingdom reality

> We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. LIke anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. (TH, 286)

This kind of proclamation is a heavy thing in light of his murder very shortly afterward. But to declare he can see the promised land while the world remained in its degraded and deranged condition? That's seeing something that isn't there. That's seeing something out of time, and proclaiming it in the face of sin and death.

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[4] Couldn't resist a hint of Robert Capon's refiguring of the parables.

Citations

Forde, Gerhard O. *Theology is for Proclamation.* 1990, Fortress Press.

King, Martin Luther. Collected in *A Testament of Hope.* 1986, Harper. (cited as TH)