

# THE ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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RELIGION AND  
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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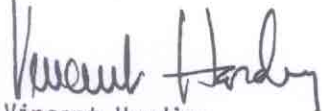
Dear Harold Weisberg,

Thanks very much for your note. I remember and appreciate your earlier book on the assassination, and I am pleased to hear that you are continuing your work.

My longer essay is in flux, but I am enclosing a bigger chunk of it than appeared in the Progressive. I do expect to be in Maryland around the middle of June and would be pleased to see whatever you may wish to share of your materials.

Meanwhile, thanks again for being in touch.

Sincerely,



Vincent Harding

VH/mm

# King and Revolution

It was the fall of 1966, after another summer of urban rebellions. A fierce debate over Black Power raged, the war in Vietnam continued to expand, white fear and anger began to mount, and black criticism of his positions grew more strident. Martin Luther King Jr. resembled a great, courageous, but deeply perplexed captain, trying desperately to control a ship that was being rocked by mutinies from within and raging storms from without.

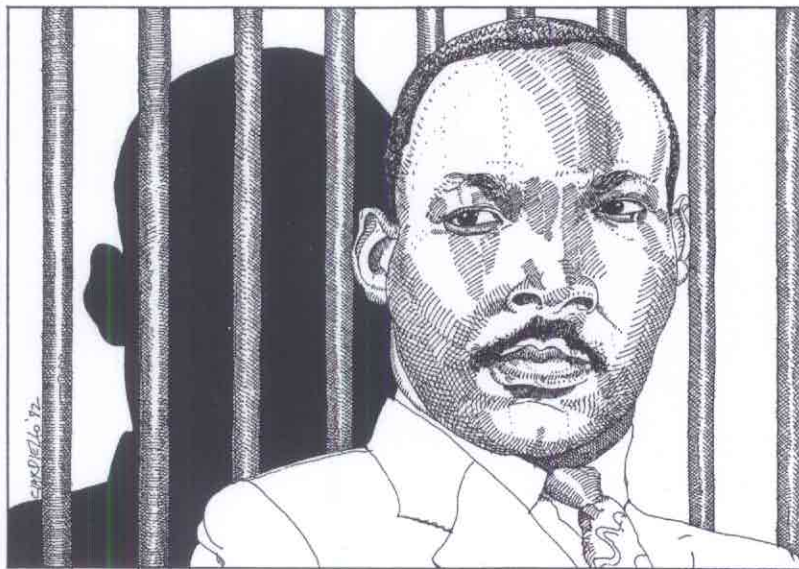
By then there was no longer any one entity which could be called the Black Freedom Movement and which King could really lead. The internal power of the movement he had done so much to create and focus had now broken out in many new directions, reviving, inspiring a plethora of older black—and white—traditions.

Now, for instance, a militant, sometimes militaristic black nationalism was sweeping the Northern cities, a revival of earlier black American movements that linked itself at the same time to the liberation struggles of nonwhite men and women across the globe. Talk of "urban rebellions" had replaced the idea of "riots," and there was active, serious discussion in various quarters of the coming "black revolution" and the struggle for "black liberation" in America.

Despite Presidential declarations of a "war on poverty" and hastily organized, often ill-conceived "antipoverty" programs, it was clear to King and many other black people that this was not really the quintessential American response to black needs and demands. Rather, it seemed likely that the Federal troops and their armored equipment sweeping through the black communities, the helicopters with their floodlights, the national military alerts, and the intelligence agencies' infiltration of black organizations were at least as descriptive of the Federal Government's real response to black aspirations as any other programs coming out of Washington.

It was impossible for King—or any other single individual—to understand, much less command, all the tendencies then set loose in the black communities of the land. (He

*Vincent Harding is professor of religion and social transformation at the Iliff School of Religion in Denver. This article is adapted from a longer study, "So Much History, So Much Future: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Second Coming of America." Harding's most recent book is "There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America."*



JOSEPH CIARDIELLO

knew, of course, that he was being falsely identified as an "Uncle Tom" by many Northern black rhetoricians of revolution who had never risked their lives as King had in the cause of his people's freedom.) Nevertheless, in various ways, King was trying to understand where the real, critical centers of traditional power lay in American society, trying to understand how he could tackle the forces that supported war, racism, poverty, and the internal subversion of the freedom movement.

It was no easy task, but King seemed convinced that he would be unfaithful to the history he and others had already made, untrue to his forebears and his children in the struggle for justice, unless he followed what appeared to be the logic of the movement. In other words, Martin King was being called and driven forward by the history exploding all around him, by the demands of his own conscience, by the enraged and anguished outbursts of his people everywhere. Now there was no turning back to the halcyon days of the March on Washington. What was demanded was a more radical challenge than he had ever seriously considered before—the shaping of a movement for fundamental transformation.

Little that he had learned in all the dangerous campaigns of the South had prepared him for the task of striking toward the heart of America's real political, economic,

and social structures of oppression, exploitation, and greed. Yet he was determined to go in that direction. He had concluded that there could be no black freedom, no true freedom for anyone without such a challenge being raised. And he knew that he could no longer assume that the Federal Government would be even a reluctant ally; that Government and its policies were now the prime target.

First, King decided to try to respond fully to the unspeakable agony, the terrible crime of Vietnam, defying all his critics and many of his friends, from the White House to members of his own organization and his own family. On April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, the struggling leader-searcher addressed a major meeting sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. King admitted that he had not spoken clearly and early enough, but vowed that he would never make that mistake again.

Attempting to give voice to the many millions of the voiceless whose movement toward freedom he now felt he was representing, King called to the American nation, to President Lyndon Johnson, to men and women everywhere: "Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose

homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours."

The black struggle for freedom had served to inspire and inspire the rapidly mounting American antiwar movement. Now King was urgently placing himself into the center of this force he had helped to create, calling for conscientious objection, even draft resistance, following the earlier examples of such younger leaders as Bob Moses, Jim Forman, and Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as well as James and Diane Bevel of his own staff. But King was still ahead of most of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, its board and its staff, some of whom were opposed to so forceful a move into the antiwar arena.

Indeed, this was one of King's major difficulties through much of the post-1965 period: The vision he was trying to fashion, the history he was trying to make were often beyond the capacities, the aspirations, the politics, and the imagination of most of the men and women who made up SCLC, his only real organizational base. At the same time, as head of the organization, he had to accept at least some of the blame for its political backwardness.

Still, King drove forward and was driven forward by all the explosive forces around him, by all the history he had helped to make. In the summer of 1967, after two of the decade's most deadly urban uprisings—in Newark and Detroit—had stunned the nation, after a national Black Power Convention had done much to stamp that variously defined slogan in the minds of black folk everywhere, King announced his plans for a major attack on America's internal structures of inequality and injustice.

On August 16, 1967, *The New York Times* carried a story from SCLC's tenth annual convention in Atlanta. It began, "The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said today that he planned to 'dislocate' Northern cities with massive but nonviolent demonstrations of civil disobedience before Congress adjourns its current session." According to the reporter, King said he "had decided on the step to provide an alternative to rioting and to gain large Federal spending for impoverished Negroes."

It was a volatile, confused, and dangerous moment in the nation's history and in King's own career. There was much uncertainty and disagreement within the ranks of SCLC and among the many-faceted freedom movement organizations. But by the end of 1967, King and his staff had decided

to focus this potentially revolutionary challenge in Washington, D.C., fully aware of the ugly, angry, and unreceptive mood at work in the White House and elsewhere.

At his radical best, King was determined to press the logic of his position, the movement of his people's history. Having attacked the nation's anti-liberationist actions overseas, he now intended to move on the heart of the Government, demanding a response to the suffering of its own semicolonized peoples. "I am not sad," he said late in 1967, "that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable. Without this magnificent ferment among Negroes, the old evasions and procrastinations would have continued indefinitely."

By December 1967, King had tentatively staked out his new, powerful, and dangerous position. In a series of broadcasts for Canadian public radio, he said, "Negroes . . . must not only formulate a program; they must fashion new tactics which do not count on government good will." Instead, he said, the new tactics must be forceful enough "to compel unwilling authorities to yield to the mandates of justice."

But here at the end, in his last major published document, King was not talking about blacks alone: The Movement had grown; there was no way to "overcome" without taking on much more than we had ever taken on before. Thus he said, "The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty."

Martin King was talking about a nonviolent revolution in America to transform the entire society on behalf of its poorest people for the sake of us all. He was calling on Chicanos, Native Americans, poor whites, and all those who were ready to identify with the needs and aspirations of the nation's poor to prepare themselves for a new, revolutionary stage of struggle. In the process, King was shaping a new role for himself, leader of a nonviolent revolutionary army/movement, one which he also saw connecting with the oppressed peoples of other nations.

For some time he had been talking about the need for "a revolution of values" within America which would deal with the needs of our own exploited and dehumanized peoples and place us at the side of all men and women struggling for justice and liberation throughout the world. Now, at the end, the words were clearer, sharper, harsher, no longer the vague "revolution of values." Martin King, who had begun twelve years before as the spokesman for a people who wanted to be

treated with dignity on a segregated city bus, was now calling for nonviolent revolution against all the structures of injustice.

He had declared nonviolent war against all the political, economic, and social institutions that denied dignity, hope, and the opportunities for the fullest self-development to all the black, white, red, and brown brothers and sisters of those early pilgrims toward freedom in Montgomery, Alabama. Although the seed for such a development was present in every fundamental black challenge to the racist powers of the society, surely no one in Montgomery—including Martin Luther King Jr.—ever imagined that a dozen years later the history they and others had made, the future which their opponents had fought to deny, would now lead King to call for nonviolent revolution in America.

Borrowed from the Gandhian tradition, demanded by the times, the nonviolent army of revolution became his own contribution to the worldwide struggle of the oppressed. Almost no one on his staff was ready for this, ready to move directly against the ruthless, brutal power of white America's most deeply vested military, political, economic, and racial self-interests.

Perhaps Martin King had seen and felt more than he was able to accomplish. Perhaps he could never be ready for this new role. Perhaps in the violent climate of America, it was impossible to be ready for such a campaign of revolutionary nonviolent civil disobedience without an organization that was fully prepared for all the dangers, all the opportunities, and all the long, hard, preparatory work. SCLC was not that organization. Nevertheless, ready or not, King appeared to be trying to get ready—facing toward Washington, D.C.

But first there were garbage collectors to help in Memphis, and there were powerful forces at every level of American society who were determined that Martin Luther King would never be ready for the kind of revolution he had now announced. As a result, he never made it to Washington, never found out if he was ready or not.

When the word of his death was flashed to the black communities of America, they sent up their requiem screams of anguish and rage. When they heard that the King was dead they lighted great fires everywhere, especially in Washington. Were these simply continuations of the long, hot summers, the burning of the dream? Were they no more than angry, flaming protestations? Were they funeral pyres for the King, for the hope, for the dream? Or were they, possibly, just possibly, torches, torches of continuing hope, searching for a way to the future, a way to that future that Martin King did not have a chance to make?

There is, of course, no answer to this question, other than the response we give: for that future is now pressing urgently upon us—desperately in need of new creators. ■

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3/18/83

Dear Professor Harding,

More than a decade ago I published a book on the King assassination. Since then I've obtained a considerable amount of once-secret FBI information in an FOIA lawsuit that is in its eighth year. I plan another book on this subject but I do not know when I'll be able to get to it because of the time taken by a number of FOIA cases and limitations imposed by age and health.

I write because I'd like to use extensive quotations from the Progressive's adaptation of your longer study in its April issue. It says part of what I want to say on that matter and says it very well.

Is the longer study available? I'd be interested in reading it, whether or not it includes more I'd like to quote.

It has long been my own belief that the changes in King were little appreciated or even understood as they were taking place.

If you are even in this area you may want to ~~examine~~<sup>examine</sup> some of the records I've obtained if you have continuing interest. They include the files on the Memphis sanitation strike and the Invaders and the main "MURKIN" file said to be on the assassination, but the FBI never investigated the crime itself.

The inventory of field office files on and about him totals 400 pages!

Thanks and best wishes,

Harold Weisberg