

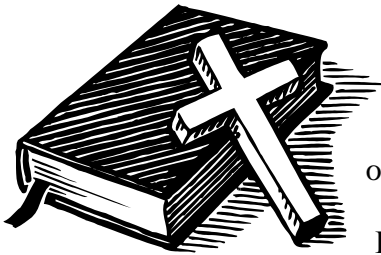


## **MLK: A Letter, A Man, and A Mission**

As many merely read about the segregation of the early and mid 1900's, I am old enough to remember it in its later days. I loved going to Tabor City, NC, the place of my paternal roots, because it was where Mom and Dad released me from their tight parental grip and gave me the freedom to wonder the streets of the small town. One of my favorite pastimes in Tabor was the Saturday trip to the theater, where a Bruce Lee movie was usually playing. I have many memories of those days and the theater always stands out as part of my mental memorabilia. I distinctly remember leaving the theater after any one of the many Kung-Fu movies we attended, and as kids often do, we rehearsed all of the new Kung-Fu moves, with all the sound effects included, all the way to Granddaddy's house. The issue here, however, is not my gravitation toward martial arts, but another and more significant memory of that small town theater. In that small town "backwoods" theater, like so many others in the South, there were seating restrictions in which white folk could sit anywhere they wanted, while the blacks were confined to the balcony section. Little did I know at the time that Martin Luther King had fought against the very kind of treatment that I saw firsthand, and as the catalyst to the civil rights movement, he refused to accept such treatment as a cultural norm, as many of us children did, but saw it, rather, as the expression of evil and responded accordingly.

King's letter to his "Dear Fellow Clergymen," was one such response. He, in fact, wrote this letter as a response to eight "fellow clergymen" who questioned his methods as a leader of the controversial movement, and its contents reflect a passionate appeal for consistency between

their acclaimed allegiance to the Bible and the way other human beings, people of color particularly, were treated. His thoughts are well organized, well expressed, and poignantly apropos for a generation, our current generation, that has lost its footing in the discourse of moral discussion, including race. In this discussion, I would like to analyze King's, "Letter to My Fellow Clergymen," written from a Birmingham, Alabama jail, and in doing so, evaluate the unmistakable theological impetus, the impeccable logic, the literary ingenuity, and finally, the indisputable cultural timeliness.



Nothing stands out about King's leadership more so than the distinct Biblical foundation from which it seemed to emerge. In other words, and to the chagrin of many modern civil rights leaders, King's efforts emerged from a distinctly Biblical perspective that, if attempted today, would meet with fierce and concentrated resistance. His letter, then, is replete with allusions to Biblical characters and concepts that mark it as distinctly Christian.

King consistently referred to those historical personages and/or the truths upon which he based both his argument and his work. He mentioned the prophets of the eighth century B.C. and the Apostle Paul, for example, and likened himself to them all as one who was "compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my hometown" (King). In his reference to the unpopular civil disobedience with which he was engaged, he likened himself to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their disobedience to the new law of Nebuchadnezzar. He even refers to the first century Christians who were willing to "Face Hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire." (King)

King further confirmed the Biblical distinctiveness of his efforts when he contrasted his view of Civil Rights with the increasing popularity of the Muslim effort. In other words, he contrasted the distinct Biblical impetus behind his efforts with that of Islamic groups. Desiring to proceed and succeed without violence, King noted the emergence of other non-Biblical and violence prone movements within the larger scope of the Civil Rights movement. He referred, for example, to those who possessed “a degree of academic and economic security” who profited by segregation and “became insensitive to the problems of the masses. These were “Negroes” who took another path to freedom. “The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad’s Muslim movement.” These people, continued King, “Have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible ‘devil.’” Obviously, King repudiated the demonization of both the nation and the white man as other emerging movements, Islam included, did. “If this philosophy had not emerged,” he said in reference to the distinctly Judeo-Christian based movement, “by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood.” Here, King drew another link to the Biblical undertones of his effort and again distinguished it from the Islamic tradition of violence. The freedom for which he fought, then, was driven by a worldview that was distinctly Judeo-Christian

While King’s work was distinctly Biblical, transcendent thinking was also intricately woven into his civil rights quest. According to him, in fact, all of his efforts found their impetus in a Judeo-Christian interpretation of reality that included a transcendent, absolute and personal

God. His theological appeal was not an idol practice, but rather, the work of a man who realized the import of such thinking in a world that would soon lose its ontological and moral footing. It was so much a part of his thinking, that his classification of “just” and “unjust” laws were determined by a knowledge of both the transcendent and absolute law of the Judeo-Christian God. If there were any chances of true freedom, it must materialize under a true interpretation of the objective world and a true objective world invariably included, according to King, a transcendent and absolute God. King knew that right thinking was essential for right behavior and the two are, in reality, inseparable.

Even the distinctions that King drew between “legal” and “moral” reflected a heavy concentration on the belief in a transcendent and objective law upon which all “just” laws were based. There were “just and “unjust” laws, he noted, with the difference between the two being the source. One was a mere human concoction, while the other was a reflection of the objective and transcendent law of God. “A just law,” he said, “is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a man-made code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To quote Saint Thomas Aquinas: an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law.” King's admission here is that an inexorable link exists between human law and the knowable, transcendent, and absolute law of the Judeo-Christian God. In other words, the justness of human law, according to King, is directly proportional to its compliance with the transcendent and objective law of God.

Another major component of King's letter was the impeccable logic with which he argued and operated. His logic emerged from both his own position and his appeals to his supposed

ministerial colleagues. In other word, he took every precaution to ensure that his position corresponded with the real world; namely, the existence of God and the creation of man in his image. King, then, used both correspondent and coherent thinking, each of which is a stand-alone test for any given truth claim. I am convinced that MLK did everything in his power to communicate the truth that he considered actual, transcendent, and objective, particularly as related to the ontological equality of all men, regardless of color. In essence, King regularly utilized logic as he paved the way for the equitable treatment of people of color.

First, King utilized correspondent thinking in his letter to his supposed colleagues in truth. Since religious truth was at the heart of his civil rights efforts, he was logically concerned not only that his position aligned itself with the real world, but that his colleagues, who claimed to believe the same thing, aligned their positions with same said reality. In other words, basing his entire worldview on a perceived reality, he knew that his message and movement must correspond to the actual world. Truth about God and his law, then, were both attainable, and therefore, the standard to which our human laws and behavior must correspond.

His purpose is simple and, yet, ingenious. If they, his colleagues, maintained reality to be X, then, how could they continue to hold a view about people of color that did not reflect what they believed about X. In essence, King challenged the lack of correspondence between their purported view of reality and their inaction concerning the current evil of racism. In other words, how could their claims to believe that all men were created in the image of God justify the unconscionable treatment of their fellow human beings, despite their color? He challenged them to align their actions with their alleged view of reality.

King also made brilliant use of the law of non-contradiction. One of the most basic components in logical thinking, he would not allow his colleagues to sit on the proverbial sidelines as if legitimately neutral to the atrocities of that generation. The law of non-contradiction, by its very nature, prevents the spread of a common mythological monstrosity known as “neutrality.” Neutrality is the position that many modern politicians take, for example, as if their neutral inaction on any given issue is a logical one. King's message resembled the call of the great Reformer, Martin Luther, who believed neutrality to be as much responsible for the advancement of evil as the perpetrators themselves. King, then called on his ministerial colleagues to stand against the evil of racism rather than aid and abet its advances with their mythological neutrality. Their supposed neutrality, according to him, while convenient, not only perpetuated the myth of neutrality, but paved the way to the continued mistreatment of people of color.

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner,” noted King, “but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice (King).

The law of non-contradiction, then, disallows the mythical middle ground so often sported as neutrality, and reveals King’s disdain for the cowardly mentality that enables the very injustice he considered himself called to fight.

Kings literary ingenuity is commendable as well. He does not argue in mere philosophical or theological abstractions, but instead attaches human flesh, faces, and emotions to the evil he confronts. King wrapped flesh around the skeleton of racism in order to move it

from the abstract into the real world. While this assumed neutrality gave argumentative credence to the racism of the day, King viewed such a distinction between the abstract racism with which so many whites had become comfortable and the racism that did actual harm to the real people as both illogical and illusionary. Racism could not exist in mere abstract form without affecting actual human beings. In fact, it will always manifest itself in one concrete form or another, either by its direct involvement in evil or its acceptable and enabling form, popularly known as neutrality.

Much of the racism King confronted was neatly tucked away as an acceptable abstract form. It was an evil that many Americans held at arm's length as an idea cuddled by their culture and placed beyond any philosophical or theological criticism. King, however, drew an inexorable link between the abstract racism to the real and disconcerted faces of those whose lives it actually affected. He painted racism with a human brush. He presented the evil for what it was, an atrocity against actual human beings, beings made in the image of God, personified in crying children who lost parents, brothers, and sisters who, for a number of unjustifiable reasons, experienced the inequitable abuses due to their color. He linked racism to human suffering in a way that the cultural climate did not allow. Of necessity, then I quote him at length. Said King,

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' but when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers and sisters smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funland is closed to colored children, and see ominous

clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky and see he beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?'; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading 'white' and 'colored'; when your first name becomes 'nigger,' your middle name becomes 'boy' (however old you are) (King).

Here, as noted above, King masterfully drove the racism from its abstractness and into the real world. He repainted the evil of racism in actual and personal color rather than the comfortable abstract form to which it had been comfortably confined. He painted the individual “trees” rather than the forest, the particular rather than the universal.

King exposed the same kind of soil in which the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany emerged and flourished. Daniel Goldhagen mentioned the fact that just such a distinction between two supposed kinds, or levels, of anti-Semitism paved the way for the extreme concrete form that we know all too well from the history of the era. Nazi Germany, in fact, was able to detach itself, quite successfully, from the racism as the evil that it really was by confining it to an abstraction rather than an actual evil against actual people.

According to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, the division of anti-Semitism into two kinds was a mythical distinction, because even though one logically preceded the other they are still inseparable. Defining Anti-Semitism as “negative beliefs and emotions about Jews qua Jews” (Goldhagen 34), Goldhagen’s point is that anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism despite its form, either abstract or concrete. “One is an anti-Semite or not” he says. The abstract form is “often distinguished from presumably ‘real’ form with no real concrete differences in the outworking of

either. The abstract form is also “concrete” because it “guides perception, evaluation, and the willingness to act.... Anti-Semitism is always abstract in its conceptualization and its source (being divorced from actual Jews), and always concrete and real in its effects.” In other words, the anti-Semitism we find in the pages of history was, simply put, the logical outworking of the prior philosophical and “abstract” form. An anti-Semite, then, was an anti-Semite long before he ridiculed, derided or harmed a Jew.

That is why King’s incarnation of racism and its effects made such an impact on me when I read it. King undermined the abstract cushion that allowed the dehumanization of a faceless race of people in the first place. He put children’s faces to the cultural catastrophe by painting distraught, inquisitive, and sometimes fatherless children as the “concrete” flesh and blood victims that they really were. A suppressing culture, therefore, could no longer denigrate blacks as faceless nobodies. The inhumane and ill treatment of “Negroes” could no longer be perpetrated against an abstract race. Racism was a concrete devaluation of actual human beings according to King and nothing less. In the simplest terms, it was an evil perpetrated against real people while creating real pain and suffering for the same.

Finally, both King’s work and his letter and his effort were timely. In essence, he does the one thing that could not happen in today’s philosophical, political environment. With the proliferation of naturalistic thinking, as opposed to supernatural thinking, in our modern world, the probability of such a movement as that of King’s is practically zero. This idea examines not only the Civil rights movement led by MLK, but the idea that if he had been dropped into our time, his efforts would have failed due to the epistemological slant that now permeates the public

sector. In other words, King was able to successfully link his work to a Judeo-Christian view of the world because the cultural consensus at that time was that religious knowledge was still believed to be actual knowledge in mainstream America. Now, however, religious knowledge has been reduced to mere opinion and religious opinions carry practically no weight in public policy. I purport, then, that King's influence came at a time when riding the coattail of strict Judeo-Christian thinking was still somewhat acceptable and that is exactly what made it successful in the first place.

Alan Bloom addresses this epistemological phenomenon this way, “From the earliest beginning of liberal thought there was a tendency in the direction of indiscriminate freedom.” (Bloom 28) The “indiscriminate freedom” to which he referred was the idea that freedom could exist without a transcendent referent – a freedom without the foundational transcendent law of the religious based Judeo-Christian worldview. “In order to make this arrangement work,” continues Bloom, “there was a conscious, if covert, effort to weaken religious beliefs, partly by assigning....religion to the realm of opinion as opposed to knowledge. But the right freedom of religion belonged to the realm of knowledge.” (Bloom 28)

King’s leadership and his emphasis upon the incorrigible and transcendent Judeo-Christian worldview, contrasted not only the rising and competing influences of the 1960's, but also those that exist today. I am convinced that without his Biblically grounded efforts, the historical record could have been much different. Without Kings’ appeal to a transcendent reality and his quest for peaceful protests, blood could have easily filled the streets of America. In fact, King expressed his deep concern that other “civil rights” leaders of his era opted for a different

method with a different foundation for their actions. In his effort to represent not only the constitution and its transcendent authority, the Judeo-Christian God, King recognized that other movements spawned by other worldviews, were harmful to both his efforts and society at large.

It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement...this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "evil" (King).

King's concern is obvious here. He recognized the importance of his movement's foundational assumptions and any movement based on the demonization of that foundation was inherently dangerous to both the freedom and peace he sought. Bloom elaborates on this idea.

The civil rights movement provides a good example of this change in thought. In its early day, almost all the significant leaders, in spite of tactical and temperamental differences, relied on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. They could charge whites not only with the most monstrous injustices but also with contradicting their own most sacred principles. The blacks were the true Americans in demanding the equality that belongs to them as human beings by natural and political right. This stance implied a firm conviction of the truth of the principles of natural right and their fundamental efficacy within the Constitutional tradition, which, although tarnished, tend in the long run toward fulfilling those principles. They therefore worked through congress, the presidency, and, above all, the judiciary. By contrast, the Black Power movement (*and now the gay rights movement - Tony Watts addition*) that supplanted the older civil rights movement – leaving aside both its excesses and its very understandable emphasis on self-respect and refusal to beg for acceptance – had at its core the view that the Constitutional tradition was always corrupt and was constructed as a defense of slavery. Its demand was for black identity, not universal rights. Not rights but power counted. It insisted on respect for blacks as blacks, not as human beings simply (Bloom 33).

Bloom's insight is exemplary. He notes the vast difference in the way the civil rights leaders of the 1960's viewed human rights verses the way most modern civil rights leaders view the same.

In other words, King saw the virtue and legitimacy of both the Constitution and the Judeo-

Christian premise upon which the freedom he sought emerged. Modern civil rights leaders, however, reject the inherent value of both. While King saw the Judeo-Christian premise necessary for the development of equal treatment, modern leaders see it as inherently evil.

The current theological and philosophical environment undergirding the modern civil rights agenda has jettisoned the transcendent and absolute base with which King linked human beings universally, and instead, resorts to a quest for power and recognition, not as human beings – the highest of compliments – but rather as black men, white men, or members of some other race. We have moved full circle. Moving from one's identification as an actual human being despite one's color, as King desired, to re-segregation under a modern movement that demands one's recognition due to his, or her, race.

The death of Michael Jackson revealed this shift. Some black entertainers reflected this divergence from both the base and the purpose for which MLK fought. Jamie Foxx, concerning Michael Jackson's, death, for example, had this to say, "No need to be sad," he told the audience. "We want to celebrate this black man. He belongs to us and we shared him with everyone else" (Anderson). Foxx wanted Jackson to be remembered for his blackness and as part of the black community, not for the highest of privileges for which MLK would have argued, as a human being. In fact, no higher honor nor tribute could have been paid Jackson than that he was distinctly, uniquely, and wholly human with all the rights and privileges thereof. The tragedy was not that a black man died tragically, but rather, that a fellow human being did. Gene Veith assesses this philosophical shift this way.

The modern civil rights movement, as exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr., stressed the unity of society. Black Americans should have the same right to vote, the same access to education, and the same economic opportunities as every other American. That had the same goal as every other immigrant group – full assimilation into American life. The postmodern Civil rights movement, on the other hand, as exemplified by Malcolm X, stresses the disunity of society. In the 1960's, frustrated by the slow pace of reform, many blacks began to repudiate the dominant “white” society altogether. They adopted a black nationalism, an identity centered in race and in the recovery of African culture (Veith, 150).

Veith's words are poignant as he documents the shift from desire for equitable treatment as human beings despite one's race to the disunity created by the demand for recognition due to one's race. While he does not contrast the philosophical base of King's movement with the Islamic underpinnings of the “postmodern civil rights movement,” he does mark the postmodern form as a repudiation of the “dominant white society” altogether. This, of course, stands in sharp contradistinction to King's worldview.

If we were able to bring King back to life and drop him in the Deep South again, I am convinced that the streets would be filled with political pundits, hecklers, news agencies, and even religious leaders, showing video snippets of his bigoted Christian rants. His social efforts, driven by a distinct and exclusivistic Judeo-Christian worldview, would no longer find the acceptance that once marked his work. His letter would have already been leaked to the press, and then subjugated to public scorn for his bigoted exclusion of other religions. I can hear the commentators now, “How dare he link our country's origin and its laws to an objective and transcendent reality? Does he not realize that linking our law to religion, the Judeo-Christian one no less, violates the ‘separation of church and state.’ Does he not realize that he has no right to denigrate another religion by elevating his above it?” Modern politicians would invariably label

him a fundamentalist-right-wing conspirator in corroboration with the likes of Fox News, Glenn Beck and somehow in collusion with the ghost of the late Dr. Jerry Falwell.

Reading King's letter, revealed many foundational components to which many Americans seem oblivious today. His ability to link ideas was phenomenal and his persistent dependence upon the Judeo-Christian worldview was even more astounding. I am convinced that because of the foundational ideas he espoused, his movement would have met with much different results today. Many self-proclaimed modern thinkers, for example, view religious ideas with disdain, and, therefore, cannot weave the necessary transcendent perspective into their worldviews. As a result, we have confined ourselves to one-dimensional thinking and relinquished our ability to solve many of the problems we face as a fallen race. It is evident that King's Judeo-Christian worldview, including his transcendent thinking, his masterful use of logic, his literary ingenuity, and his timely arrival, served the Civil Rights movement well, and we are indeed a better nation because of it.

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