

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY: Recontextualizing King
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(Talk delivered at Ithaca College on 21 January 2002)

I'm going to use my time to read passages from Dr. MLK's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." As you know, he wrote this letter to eight white "liberal" clergymen who had attacked him for his non-violent civil disobedience against segregation and had backed police brutality against African-American protestors.

The passages I've selected deal with three themes: the strategy of trying to silence critics of US policies by labeling them "agitators," the unwillingness, and perhaps inability, of liberals to work for meaningful social change, and the complicity of religious leaders and institutions in sustaining violent and unjust policies by refusing to condemn them.

I chose these passages because of their renewed relevance to two immediate contexts of our own times.

One is the continued context of racism even though segregation and Jim Crow laws no longer prevail. As Dr. King himself knew, however, simply making the laws more just does not ensure that we will also learn to do what is morally right. It is thus possible to have a view of legal justice that may not be grounded in the right ethical sensibilities.

The second context is that of "America's new war" against terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. Though no one in the US—other than white supremacists—object to eliminating terrorism, the fact is that we have so far killed thousands of hapless civilians who have nothing to do with terrorism and we are calling this "justice."

Not only that, but our civil liberties are once again under assault and we are once again hearing the rhetoric of hatred, suspicion, and Othering that once was directed against African-Americans being directed today at Muslims and Arabs.

And anyone who speaks up against the injustice of US policies is censured by being labeled anti-American; in other words, a traitor. I myself have been attacked for trying to explain why people around the world, and not just extremists, are harmed by US policies and why we need to come up with more ethical ways to live in the world.

As you listen to me, then, keep in mind not only who wrote the words I will be reading, but who is repeating them today, and in what particular contexts.

I should note that Dr. King's language is gender inflected in keeping with the linguistic practices of his time and also that to him the word "Negro" was not a pejorative epithet.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever effects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country" (290).

". . . 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 Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, 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; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who . . . constantly advised the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection" (295).

"I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action" (298).

"I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions . . . but despite these . . . I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. . . .(298). . . . In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,' and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which

made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular” (299)

“Maybe again, I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?” (300).

“Over the last few years I have consistently preached that non-violence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to achieve moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends” (301).

“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” (296).

King, Martin Luther. “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, JR.* edited by James M. Washington. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1991.