
From the Instructor

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and legacy have resurfaced as the paradigm of social change, as evidenced by the recent "Occupy Movement" and the Arab Spring of 2011. The essence of King's morality and social ethics can be understood through a critical examination of his sermons, speeches, and writings. Accordingly, the writing seminar, which created the occasion for Zoe Strassfield's essay, focused on Dr. King's ethics of hope and love along with his evolving critical thinking on civil disobedience, non-violence, social policy, and the struggle for integration.

In her exciting essay, "A Day of Sputniks and Explorers: Martin Luther King on Science and Technology," Zoe captures the essence of Dr. King's philosophy and its relevance for contemporary society in her unique topic, which raises the question, "How did King view the scientific progress of his time period?"

Through a creative exploration of King's writings, Ms. Strassfield reveals King's relationship to science on many levels. She makes many claims, but she validates them with solid evidence and consistent documentation of sources. Specifically, and to her credit, Strassfield handles multiple sources—demonstrating her ability to gauge the authority and reliability of sources and making critical choices among the materials at her disposal—manages structure and organization of a "longer" essay, and practices acknowledgement and response.

In particular, Strassfield not only identifies Dr. King's essential disavowal of any perceived "conflict between science and religion," as evidenced in his early academic writings, but also recognizes a deliberate intersection of science in King's later professional essays and speeches on civil disobedience, nonviolence, and societal reform. The heart of Strassfield's discussion necessarily focuses on the moral and ethical components of King's philosophy associated with the human use of science and technology. Accordingly, she maintains the relevance of King's ethic of love, moral stance on nonviolence, and hope for societal unity—sisterhood and brotherhood—toward the creation of a more humane and just society for all.

— Mikel Satcher

From the Writer

For the Spring 2012 semester I chose to take WR 150: Rediscovery of an American Hero: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. because I thought being able to study Dr. King while attending the school where he received his degree in theology presented a great and rare opportunity. The course also appealed to me because as a writer I was interested in how words could make a difference, and I knew that Dr. King's words had changed the world.

For our third and final paper, we were asked to choose a topic related to Dr. King's life and work. When our class visited the Martin Luther King, Jr. Reading Room at BU's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, I was really surprised to see that one of the papers from King's student days that was on display featured him writing about my major, archeology. I really felt a connection to Dr. King knowing that we both thought archeology was cool.

While no essay is ever effortless or easy for me, "A Day of Sputniks and Explorers" allowed me to write about a lot of topics very close to my heart, including space exploration, aviation, public perceptions of science, and social reform. I was surprised by how many little details I'd picked up in my reading for pleasure over the years were usable in the paper: Yuri Gagarin's biography, the history of film adaptations of Frankenstein, a *New Yorker* cartoon. There actually turned out to be a whole lot more material that I considered using but didn't wind up fitting in.

— Zoe Strassfield

A DAY OF SPUTNIKS AND EXPLORERS: MARTIN LUTHER KING ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

When visiting the Martin Luther King, Jr. Reading Room at the Mugar Memorial Library with my Writing 150 class, I was struck by the content of one of Dr. King's student papers that was on display. The title and subject, "Light on the Old Testament from the Ancient Near East: The Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity," seemed perfectly ordinary for a paper by a theology student, but what surprised me was the way in which Dr. King began his paper—by praising the science of archeology for providing "a critical, unbiased, and scientific light" (King 163) with which the accuracy of Biblical sources could be examined. As both an archeology major and someone accustomed to hearing frequently of the "conflict" between science and religion, I welcomed such words. Afterwards, in class, I began to notice references to science and technology in the readings that I was assigned. I became curious—how did King view the scientific progress of his time period?

I had learned much about King's life and beliefs, both in the class I was taking and in school before that, but I had never read anything addressing that question. However, it clearly seemed to be an issue of some importance—if the present is also a time of great scientific and technological change, how should social reformers who seek to follow King's example regard science? Can scientists be allies in the struggle for non-violent change, or is science irrelevant to or even a distraction from this struggle?

By examining the speeches and writings of Dr. King, I aim to show that King saw science as a neutral force that could create either harm or ill depending on who was using it. Science without morality, in King's view,

furthered oppression and led to the creation of deadly weapons. However, when practiced by those who understood the ethic of love, science could be a force for good in the world, improving lives, furthering human understanding of our world, and helping people come together in unity.

As King was not a scientist and mentions of science in his writings usually occur in speeches related to larger social issues, very little has been written about King's attitudes towards science. James Washington's monumental 1986 collection of King's writings, *A Testament of Hope*, contains no listing for "Science" or "Technology" in its twenty-three page Index (Washington 689-702). The subject is mentioned briefly in Fredrik Sunnemark's *Ring Out Freedom! The Voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, where Sunnemark says that King's mentions of science in speeches "can be divided into two different areas. First, King often points to the conflict between scientific progress and moral values. Second, he refers to academic disciplines, mainly anthropology, biology, psychology and sociology" (Sunnemark 97-98). In "Martin Luther King and the 'Ghost in the Machine,'" Will Fitzgerald states, "Clearly, [King] hoped that high technology could aid the human rights revolution, but he feared it would not," and argues that artificial intelligence researchers in King's day could have benefited from listening to his philosophy of love (3). While the statements in both of these works agree with what my research so far has revealed, neither focuses exclusively on the issue of King's attitudes towards science. Also, while Sunnemark correctly names the academic fields that King "mainly" spoke about, his listing minimalizes other fields, such as physics and engineering, which King also referenced.

King's most frequent references to science occur in the sermons collected into his 1963 book *The Strength to Love*. Given that James Cone and others have said that King must be understood first and foremost as a preacher (Cone 122-123), his sermons would seem to be an excellent place to begin our investigation of King's attitudes towards science. In Washington's introduction to the portions of *The Strength to Love* that are featured in *A Testament of Hope*, he remarks that King "refused to accept the false dichotomy between folk and intellectual preaching" (Washington 491), indicating that King at least believed there was nothing wrong with

mentioning “intellectual” topics such as scientific developments in a sermon. But does King refer to science only to condemn it?

The thirteenth sermon in *The Strength to Love*, “Our God is Able,” might at first appear to be anti-science, speaking out against “those who seek to convince us that only man is able” when “the ringing testimony of the Christian faith is that God is able.” King states that with the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, “the laboratory began to replace the church, and the scientist became a substitute for the prophet” (King 504). In the present day, according to King, such individuals ask, “Is not God being replaced in the mastery of the cosmic order?” because “man-made spaceships carry cosmonauts through outer space at fantastic speeds” (King 505).

King’s use of the word “cosmonauts,” a specific term referring to astronauts from the former USSR, is interesting, given that by this time both Soviets and Americans had traveled through space. (The first cosmonaut to travel in space was Yuri Gagarin, in April of 1961. He was followed by astronaut Alan Shepard in May of that year.) The fact that he said “cosmonauts” rather than “astronauts” or “cosmonauts and astronauts” may indicate that King was intending to include indirect criticism of the Soviet Union’s official policy of atheism as seen also in an earlier sermon from the same book, “A Knock at Midnight.”

However, King addresses the criticisms of “the devotees of the new man-centered religion” with a call to “take a broader look at the universe”:

Will we not discover that our man-made instruments seem barely to be moving in comparison to the movement of the God-created solar system? Think about the fact, for instance, that the Earth is circling the sun so fast that the fastest jet would be left sixty-six thousand miles behind in the first hour of a space race. In the past seven minutes, we have been hurtled more than eight thousand miles through space. Or consider the sun which scientists tell us is the center of the solar system. . . . By this time tomorrow, we shall be 1,600,000 miles from where we are at this hundredth of a second. The sun, which seems to be remarkably near, is 93,000,000 miles from the Earth. Six months from now, we shall be on the opposite side of the

sun—93,000,000 miles beyond it—and in a year from now we shall have been swung completely around it and back to where we are right now. So when we behold the illimitable expanse of space, in which we are compelled to measure stellar distance in light-years and in which heavenly bodies travel at incredible speeds, we are forced to look beyond man and affirm anew that God is able. (King 505–506)

King's proof of the majesty of God is a succession of scientific facts, all correctly stated. King's complaint, then, is not with science or scientists in and of themselves, but with those who claim that science means humanity has no need for God. King's message is this: "Man is not able to save himself or the world. Unless he is guided by God's spirit, his new-found scientific power will become a devastating Frankenstein monster that will bring to ashes his earthly life" (King 505). Frankenstein's monster, as suggested by the title of an early film version of the story, *Life Without Soul*, is a famous metaphor for science as menace. But when science is "guided by God's spirit," it can be a force for good, such as these astronomical facts that encourage humans to be humble and aware of God's power. In "A Knock at Midnight" King describes how science has freed humanity from "the midnight of crippling ignorance and superstition," and conquered "dread plagues and diseases" (King 497).

In two other sermons from *The Strength to Love*, King describes how science can be an ally in the fight for racial equality. "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart" begins with King stating that ideally all people must be "toughminded" or intellectually fit and capable of skeptically investigating their world, but also "tenderhearted," acting with understanding towards others and practicing the ethic of love. Racism consists of the opposite qualities, the "softmindedness" to believe that people of different races are inferior and the "hardheartedness" to act with violence against them. "Softmindedness," according to King, "is one of the basic causes of racial prejudice. . . . Race prejudice is based on groundless fears, suspicions, and misunderstandings" (King 493). On the other hand, a "toughminded person," such as a scientist, "always examines the facts before he reaches conclusions, in short, he *postjudges*" (italics mine). Social scientists, in fact, are presented by King as examples of toughminded people who have found racism to be wrong based purely on an examination of the facts: "The

toughminded research of anthropologists” reveals that belief in “the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of the Negro race” has no basis in reality (King 494). Racism thus is not only amoral and contrary to religious teaching but also foolish and unscientific. “Love in Action,” another sermon collected in *The Strength to Love*, criticizes the idea of “black” or “white” blood as unscientific, reminding listeners that “segregationists refused to acknowledge that science has demonstrated that there are four types of blood and that these four types are to be found within every racial group” (King 43).

Both “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart” and “Love in Action” also deal directly with the idea of a “conflict” between science and religion, which King believed did not exist. In fact, according to King, just as scientists must be guided by religious values to use their knowledge ethically, religious people must have a scientific, questioning worldview in order to understand the problems of the modern world and create rational strategies to fix them. (This theme—a religious leader ill-equipped to deal with the modern technology of the 1960s—is satirized in a contemporary *New Yorker* cartoon by Robert J. Day in which a priest in a large stained-glass church prays, “Give us this day no sonic boom” (Day 1).)

King admits that “softmindedness often invades religion,” and that “religion has sometimes rejected new truth with a dogmatic passion” (King 493), as evidenced by the “misinformed” churchmen “who felt that they had an edict from God to withstand the progress of science, whether in the form of a Copernican revolution or a Darwinian theory of natural selection” (King 40). As evidenced by the earlier quote, King himself clearly believed that Copernicus had been correct about the planets orbiting around the sun, and he elsewhere states that while “Social Darwinism” is a human conceit, “the Darwinian theory of evolution is valid in the biological realm” (King 104).

In contrast to “softminded persons” who “have revised the Beatitudes to read, ‘Blessed are the poor in ignorance, for they shall see God’” (King 493), King states, “Never must the Church tire of reminding men that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent,” and that “we are commanded to love God, not only with our hearts and souls, but also with our minds” (King 44). Intelligent religious individuals, in King’s eyes, would oppose racist claims on both moral and factual grounds.

One paragraph from “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart” sums up King’s vision of symbiosis between religion and science:

[Softmindedness] has also led to a widespread belief that there is a conflict between science and religion. But this is not true. There may be a conflict between softminded religionists and toughminded scientists, but not between science and religion. Their respective worlds are different, and their methods are dissimilar. Science investigates, religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts, religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary. Science keeps religion from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism. Religion prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism. (King 493)

If King must be understood first and foremost as a preacher and his sermons to be the work closest to his inner thoughts, then these references show that King was knowledgeable about science and technology and believed such knowledge to be important to modern life. To borrow the terms used by King in “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” we might say that King demonstrated a toughminded desire to be educated about science relevant to current issues—the astronomy and physics of the space race, anthropological research into the nature of race—together with a tenderhearted commitment that such knowledge should be used for beneficent purposes.

Clearly, King made numerous references to science and technology in his sermons at Ebenezer Baptist Church. In moving out to examine the larger body of King’s speeches and writings, we find these references and attitudes repeated elsewhere. When we move beyond the church to examine the very public marches and protests he carried out in the streets, we see that King’s movement benefited from the technological advances of the day—television and radio allowed King’s message to be carried around the world and revealed the horrors he and his followers faced, modern surgery saved King after the 1958 attempt on his life, and commercial jet aviation

allowed Dr. and Mrs. King to visit India and speak firsthand with Gandhi's followers (King 25).

However, King also saw the continued development of more powerful weapons technology—especially nuclear bombs and missiles—as making nonviolence more direly needed than ever before. King's 1958 account of the Montgomery bus boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom* (excerpted in the later collection *A Testament of Hope*), ends with this observation:

In a day when Sputniks and Explorers dash through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, nobody can win a war. Today the choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. (King 490)

Here, we again see King's awareness of current scientific developments. Instead of talking generically about *satellites* dashing through outer space, he refers to the Soviet *Sputnik 1* and American *Explorer 1* satellites, both launched shortly before the book's publication, by name. King also warned of the misuse of science and technology by segregationists to further oppression, such as the design of urban rapid-transit systems that ignored black neighborhoods (King 325–326) and the claims of southern anthropologists of “proof” of racial superiority (King 358).

But, according to King, science was also an arena in which minorities could make great contributions and thus put the lie to outside claims of their “inferiority.” In a 1961 commencement address at Lincoln University, King reminded his audience that “being a Jew did not stop Einstein from using his genius-packed mind to prove his theory of relativity” and that “from humble, crippling circumstances, George Washington Carver rose up and carved for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of science” (King 212). Other scientists mentioned by name in this same speech were the “great anthropologists” Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovits, who, in contrast to the “utterly ignorant claims” of white supremacists, “made it clear through scientific evidence that there are no superior races and there are no inferior races” (King 211).

As mentioned above, King made occasional references to the developments in spaceflight that were occurring contemporaneously with his campaigns. At the time, many complaints were raised that the space

program was a waste and a distraction when the United States faced serious social problems, perhaps most famously in Gil Scott-Heron's poem, "Whitey on the Moon": "I can't pay no doctor bill. / (but Whitey's on the moon)" (Madrigal 1). Given that similar debates continue to this day, we should be understandably curious as to Dr. King's stance on the space program.

In his final presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Council, King states:

John Kenneth Galbraith said that a guaranteed national income could be done for about twenty billion dollars a year. And I say to you today, that if our nation can spend thirty-five billion dollars to fight an unjust, evil war in Vietnam, and twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on Earth. (King 248)

Clearly, King believes that the government should spend money helping to relieve poverty. However, it is interesting that he mentions the moon program second, after the Vietnam War, suggesting that he considered the war to be a larger waste. The war is described as "unjust" and "evil," while no adjective, negative or positive, is given to the space program.

This "Vietnam first, moon second" pattern is also seen in the only other mention of the space program by King included in *A Testament of Hope*. In a 1968 interview with Rabbi Everett Gendler, Gendler asks King's opinion of, among other things "the power structure, the establishment finding funds for supersonic transports, moon projects, technological developments which are mere luxuries, for Vietnam, but not for those pressing needs which effect millions here at home" (King 671).

King's response goes on for nearly four pages and addresses this last point only at the very end of that space:

We feel that there must be some structural changes now, there must be a radical re-ordering of priorities, there must be a de-escalation and a final stopping of the war in Vietnam and an escalation of the war against poverty and racism here at home. . . . One of the great tragedies of the war in Vietnam is that it has strengthened the military-

industrial complex, and it must be made clear now that there are some programs that we can cut back on—the space program and certainly the war in Vietnam—and get on with this program of a war on poverty. (King 675)

Again, there is the suggestion that while funding used for the space program should be used to help relieve social problems, Vietnam is a larger and more heinous waste. King made numerous speeches opposing the war in Vietnam but seems to have mentioned the space program on only these two occasions. Clearly, stopping the war seemed to be of greater importance to King. After all, according to the figures he cites in his address to the SCLC, the government could provide a guaranteed national income almost twice over for what it spent in Vietnam without touching the space program.

It should also be noted that King does not comment on Gendler's mention of "supersonic transports" or other "technological developments which are mere luxuries." Given King's belief that science guided by morality could benefit humankind, he probably did not agree with the blanket statement that all technological developments were "mere luxuries." So long as the government was spending an appropriate amount of money and effort to relieve poverty, there was no harm in King's eyes in *also* pursuing research designed to help improve life. The "supersonic transports" mentioned by Gendler were attempts to create an American counterpart to the Anglo-French *Concorde* supersonic airliner that was at the time under construction (Rosenbloom 403–423).

Air transportation was a technology King had earlier spoken favorably of on numerous occasions. King traveled frequently by airplane as part of his civil rights work and used an airplane flight as a metaphor for his movement in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, stating that while he may have been one of the movement's "pilots," its "successful journey" would not have been possible without the "ground crew" of all of his marchers, organizers, and associates (King 225). He described air travel as having made it clear that "no individual or nation can live alone" because the world was now "geographically one," a place where it was possible to "eat breakfast in New York City and dinner in Paris, France." "Through our scientific genius," King said, "we have made of the world a neighborhood; now through our moral and spiritual genius, we must make of it a brother-

hood.” The airplane and its impact on the world thus challenged people to “rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity” (King 138).

King thus considered air travel to be a positive technology that encouraged world unity, unlike space travel, an outgrowth of missile technology—and thus part of “the military-industrial complex”—that seemed to have little practical benefit to humankind. If King had lived a few months or years longer, however, he might have had reason to think differently. In the years following the moon landing, space experiments with applications to life on Earth became a larger priority for the space program, leading to advancements in medicine, agriculture, and countless other fields (Jones 1). Treaties were signed restricting the scope of military activities in space, and cooperation between nations on space projects increased, turning the world of “Sputniks and Explorers” that King had feared were signs of the increasing threat of “nonexistence” into an arena for nonviolence. In 1975, seven years after King’s death, the joint Soviet-American crew of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project visited his grave in Atlanta.

It was images sent back by astronauts in lunar orbit the Christmas after King’s assassination that inspired poet Archibald McLeish to pen a *New York Times* editorial very much in line with King’s comments about the combination of scientific and spiritual genius:

The medieval notion of the earth put man at the center of everything. The nuclear notion of the earth put him nowhere—beyond the range of reason even—lost in absurdity and war. This latest notion may have other consequences. Formed as it was in the minds of heroic voyagers who were also men, it may remake our image of mankind. No longer that preposterous figure at the center, no longer that degraded and degrading victim off at the margins of reality and blind with blood, man may at last become himself.

To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers

on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers
who know now they are truly brothers. (MacLeish 1)

These words are a true demonstration of King's vision of what science could be in the hands of those who were spiritually guided—a motivation to unity, an aid in making the world both a neighborhood and a brotherhood, and a rejection of a life that was “lost in absurdity and war.”

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