

The Vision of the Beloved Community

- The organizing principle of King's thought and Activity
 - *At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is “community” – the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother.*
 - **Liberalism & Personalism**
 - Provided the theological & philosophical foundation of the concept
 - **Nonviolence**
 - Provided the means to attain it.
 - **Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr**
 - Qualified King's initial optimism about the possibility of actualizing it within history and changed King's attitude about the kinds of tactic necessary to move toward it
- *“Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation...”*
 - from his last book: a completely integrated society is at the crux of his faith and his vision.

The Meaning of the Beloved Community

- A transformed and regenerated human society.
 - *“The ultimate aim of the SCLC is to foster & create the ‘beloved community’”*
 - *“Our ultimate goal is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living – integration.”*
- Integration – much more inclusive and positive than desegregation.
- Desegregation – is essentially negative...it can be handled by laws.
- Integration
 - The positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities.
 - Involves personal and social relationships that are created by love.
- Desegregation
 - Creates *“a society where men are physically desegregated and spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts apart. It gives us social togetherness and spiritual apartness.*
- Beloved Community
 - *“We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”*
 - *“Whether we realize it or not...each of us lives eternally in the red.”*
 - *The “I” cannot attain fulfillment without the “Thou.”*

The Meaning of the Beloved Community (cont.)

- MLK: the civil rights movement - a microcosm of the Beloved Community
 - Comments at an airport (1966) p.132
- MLK frequently called on whites to help in certain campaigns
 - *“injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”*
 - *The victim of electric cattle prods and biting police dogs was the entire national community.*
 - *Discrimination against 10% of the population – weakens the whole social fabric*
 - *The liberation of black people will also lead to the emancipation of white people*
 - Quote p. 133.
- MLK's vision of the future
 - A society free from the malformation of persons resulting from racial hatred
 - ...free from the abnormality of persons resulting from economic injustice.
 - **JUSTICE:** P. 133
- **Economic justice** – there was for MLK an early and consistent concern for:
 - an egalitarian, socialistic approach to wealth and property
 - *A life is sacred. Property is intended to serve life, and no matter how much we surround it with rights and respect, it has no personal being. It is part of the earth man walks on; it is not man.*

The Meaning of the Beloved Community (cont.)

- Everyone should have the physical and spiritual necessities of life.
 - MLK's egalitarian position – related to his strong feelings about racial discrimination.
 - Though influenced by Marx later in life – he was no Marxist.
 - Quote from Strength to Love - p. 135
 - MLK on Marx – p. 136
 - MLK on the Kingdom of God – p.136
- King could not envision the Beloved Community apart from the alleviation of economic inequity and the achievement of economic justice.

The Beloved Community & The American Dream

- **I have a dream...**
 - Major motifs...first formulated when at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church & during the Montgomery bus boycott (1955-57).
 - Dream in Concrete terms – p. 138.
- Dr. L. Harold DeWolf –explained that the Dream existed originally in the mind of God and that King saw himself as a medium for the communication of God's dream to God's people.
- The vision – closely related to the perennial dream of American democracy
 - ...a future utopia...a Holy Commonwealth
 - A land of the free and the home of the brave
 - A land flowing with milk and honey
- The American Dream is a combination of:
 - Religious hope for the Kingdom of God of the Puritans
 - Secular dream of democracy rooted in the Enlightenment of the 18th century
 - Opportunity and equality for all

The Beloved Community & The American Dream (cont.)

- MLK's dream "deeply rooted in the American Dream"
 - Two elements:
 - **Universalism of the Dream**: all classes, races, religions.
 - **Each person has inherent God-given rights**: by virtue of being human – and not simply privileges extended by the state.
 - **...3 MEALS A DAY FOR THEIR BODIES**
 - **...EDUCATION & CULTURE FOR THEIR MINDS**
 - **DIGNITY, EQUALITY, & FREEDOM FOR THEIR SPIRITS**
- The Civil Rights Movement – an effort to recall the U.S. to its original dream
 - MLK – black people had a peculiar contribution to make to the revival of the American Dream.
- MLK also transformed what has been called the civil religion of America
 - An explanation – p. 140.
 - He broadened the perimeters of the American civil religion – bringing it closer to the Christian norm of community.
- **Note**: the Beloved Community was grounded most importantly in the millennial hope of Judeo-Christian religion.

The Beloved Community, The Kingdom of God, & The Millennial Hope

- Although Kingdom of God did not occupy an explicit place in MLK's writing
 - It was implicit in everything he said and did
 - Kingdom of God & the Beloved Community were synonymous
 - What MLK said: p. 141
 - Both - expressed an optimism about the future of society and historical process
- Reinhold Niebuhr – every religion which has been concerned to ameliorate the problems of society has also included a millennial hope.
 - “The Religious Imagination” RN “is as impatient with the compromises, relativities and imperfections of historic society as with the imperfections of individual life.”
 - Israel's Prophets – the arrival of the Messianic Era
 - Jesus – advent of the kingdom of God
- For MLK the most important theological presuppositions were:
 - The liberal version of the doctrine of creation
 - The prophetic appeal for social justice
 - The New Testament concept of *agape*.

- **The Liberal version of the Doctrine of Creation**
 - All persons are created in the image of God – inseparably bound
 - “made from the same basic stuff...molded in the same divine image.”
 - The divine image in persons is the source of “humanness” – human identity.
 - Galatians 3:28
 - *The universalism of this text is at the heart of the Christian gospel.*
- **Prophetic vision of justice, peace, freedom, equality & harmony**
 - Spelled out in terms of equality in voting, public accommodations, education, jobs, housing...
 - MLK conceived justice & righteousness in *this-worldly* terms
 - He expected them to be achieved within history.
- **Christian love (agape) – “redeeming good will for all people.**
 - It is the love of God operating in the human heart.
 - Creating genuine personal relations between people
 - Love is a community-creating force
 - Its inherent unselfishness leads to cooperation instead of competition & conflict
 - Agape will do whatever is necessary to originate & to perpetuate community.
 - **Hate** always destroys community
 - MLK on the cross – p.144
 - Harvey Cox contends that MLK's vision is expressed in the word Shalom
 - 3 parts: reconciliation – freedom – hope.

Means to Achieve the Beloved Community

- Nonviolence for MLK – had a dual meaning
 - A way of life – derived from agape
 - A method of action – strategy for social change
 - **These are inseparable for King**
- Nonviolence – the only moral means to achieve the Beloved Community
- Violence – is both immoral & impractical
 - Immoral, because it is based upon hate instead of love
 - Impractical, because it is counterproductive
- The goal of independence is the usually the annihilation of the oppressor
- The goal of integration is reconciliation.
 - ***Love is the only force that can raise human relationships to the level of trust and understanding necessary to unite a fragmented society and to bring about the Beloved Community.***
- MLK did not ask whether the end justified the means.
 - Rather ***the goal determines the method.***
 - Moral ends could not be achieved by immoral means.
 - Change agents are usually criticized more for their behavior than for their goals. So, the behavior of social movement should reflect the goals.

Means to Achieve the Beloved Community (cont.)

- MLK's did not expect or insist that everyone make “a principled commitment to nonviolence” in order to be a part of the civil rights movement.
 - He knew that relatively few absolutely committed to nonviolence as a way of life.
 - He was not a purist like Gandhi later in life
 - There was always an element of pragmatism and realism in his thought.
 - Ex: In Selma, those who could not accept nonviolence were given other things to do
- Nonviolence as a “method of action” – nonviolent resistance & direct action
 - Direct action: sit-ins, pray-ins, boycotts, civil disobedience.
 - Some called this ***creative disorder***
- There appears to be a failure by MLK to distinguish between strategy and tactics – as these terms are used today in social change.
 - In Military
 - Strategy – science of planning – maneuvering forces to an advantageous position
 - Tactics – science of arranging & maneuvering forces in “action”
 - In Social change
 - Strategy – overall plan of action adopted
 - Tactic – methods used to implement the strategy
- Here is an example of the two in social change
 - nonviolent direct action = strategy, an economic boycott = tactic

Means to Achieve the Beloved Community (cont.)

- Though MLK often referred to nonviolent resistance as a tactic or technique, it should be viewed as a strategy with many tactical manifestations.
 - Therefore, some of the errors MLK admits making must be seen as tactical
 - MLK was always ready to change his tactics if the situation seemed to warrant it
- Following Birmingham and Selma, MLK began to express doubt about the viability of his tactics.
 - He began to realize – that groups with power do not relinquish it without an all-out struggle.
 - This was especially during the preparations for the Poor People's Campaign.
- MLK realized the meaning of so-called "white backlash" & that poor blacks in the Northern ghettos has not gained anything appreciable from the civil rights legislation
- 1967(*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*) MLK is aware of the force of the arguments of the proponents of Black Power. **(p.150)**
- In his last book "*The Trumpet of Conscience*" MLK outlines a positions that falls into the category of nonviolent sabotage
 - A definite major step beyond "creative disorder."
 - Those tactics used earlier were no longer enough to produce structural changes

- As the time of the Poor People's Campaign approached, there was evidence that there would have been new tactics.
 - MLK – p.150
 - Andrew Young – p. 151
- Just prior to his death, MLK began to advocate the use of mass civil disobedience to effect revolutionary (i.e. structural) changes within the social system.
 - Again think strategy & tactics here.
 - He was going to change the tactics –nonviolence would continue.
- MLK criticized severely "urban riots" and "guerrilla romanticism"
- MLK moved more toward a strategy of radicalism which was in his eyes a nonviolent strategy.
 - More & more stress on: power, coercion, conflict and confrontation
 - This is what Reinhold Niebuhr called rational coercion or non-violent coercion
- One of MLK's last published articles shows how he was firm on staying the course with nonviolence as a strategy. **(p.153)**
- For MLK violence by black people in the U.S. would be a futile exercise leading to suicide.

The Actualization of The Beloved Community

- **The Orthodox school of thought** – the dominant school in the Christian Church:
 - Kingdom of God will be realized only by an act of God after the end of history.
 - i.e., strictly an other-worldly phenomenon
 - Its locus will be “above” or “beyond” historical existence
 - History is not a redemptive process because human beings do not possess the moral power to bring the millennial hope to fruition.
- **Protestant liberalism**
 - The millennial hope will be actualized within history in the form of an ideal social order as sin is gradually overcome by education and science and as the inherent potentials of human nature are liberated.
 - Rauschenbusch: “*is humanity organized according to the will of God...implies that progressive reign of love in human affairs.*”
 - Brightman: p.155
- MLK took much from protestant liberalism – he had an unshakable faith in the potentialities of human nature and the vitalities of history.
 - His optimism was always qualified by the realism of Reinbuhr
 - And yet... **there is within human nature an amazing potential for goodness**

- The Beloved Community would not be produced automatically simply by the passage of time
- He learned from Neibuhr – the elimination of one evil often brings another to the surface.
 - This will necessitate a persistent struggle against the demonic structures of injustice and an unswerving commitment to the ideals and values of the Judeo-Christian faith.
- MLK attempted to avoid what he called – a superficial optimism – on the one hand and – a crippling pessimism on the other hand.
- MLK worked unceasingly for the realization of his dream and never lost hope that
 - **There will be a great camp meeting in the promised land**
 - Again, rooted in his faith in the power of God to achieve God's purpose among humankind within history.