

# Religion, Ethics, Ecology

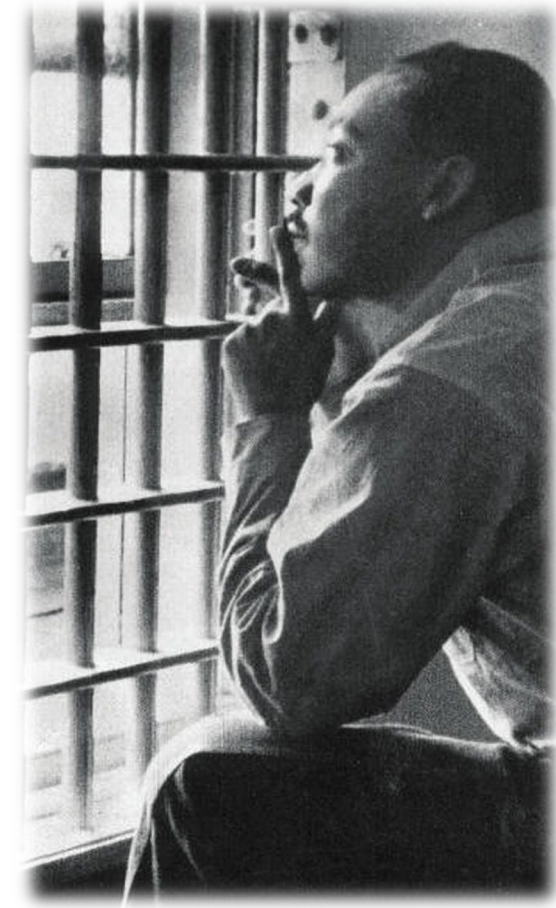
## Intersectional & Racial Justice

Week 3 Lecture | Professor Crews  
Religious Studies 247 W



We begin our discussion this week with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 1963 *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, where Dr. King lays out a political and moral case for the Civil Rights Movement and its campaign of non-violent civil disobedience targeting racial segregation. Dr. King raises many important points in his letter, and I want to call attention to a few that are of special interest to our exploration of religion, ethics, and social justice.

- Dr. King rejects white religious leaders' call to "wait", arguing "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice." Whites moderate belief in the "myth of time" keeps racism in place, making them more dangerous than open racist white supremacists.
- Dr. King argues that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Our moral obligation to fight injustice cannot be restricted by geography. There is no "outsider" when it comes to Americans fighting against racial injustice in America.
- Dr. King argues "there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws...A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law...Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."
- Dr. King goes on to add that "There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application." This speaks to the question of ethical means vs ends.





- Dr. King argues that “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come.” The question is, will social change take place through non-violence protests (Dr. King’s goal) or armed confrontations (Black Nationalists, Malcolm X, urban uprisings)? This is a question that is even more pressing in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and the insurrection led by white supremacist and allies in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021.
- Dr. King asks us to rethink the ‘extremist’ label, which is often used to shut down political debate. “So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?”
- Dr. King also calls out Southern church leaders for their lack of commitment. As Dr. King notes, “There was a time when the church was very powerful...[but now] the church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo.”
- Dr. King also rejects the call by white religious leaders to thank the police for “keeping order” and “preventing violence”. As King responds, “I don’t believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen [list of police injustice]...it is just as wrong, or even more, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.”

**Armstrong**  
ACOUSTICAL FIRE GUARD  
THE ACOUSTICAL TILE WITH A TIME DESIGN RATING.

1 B

In that dramatic scene on LeMay's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime - the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thus rose above his environment.

2 B

I have been greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course there are some notable exceptions. I am not surprised at the fact that each of you have taken some significant stand

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2 B (cont)

on this issue. I commend you, Rev. Stollings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non-segregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of the state for integrating Springhill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the Church.

3 B

Whenever the early Christians entered a town the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated."



A handwritten copy of Dr. King's April 16, 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," responding to a group of white clergymen who criticized him as an "outsider" inciting trouble. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," King wrote. One year later the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law.

By May 1963, many Civil Rights leaders are in jail, so Birmingham organizers turn to youth protests for support. "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's commissioner of public safety, responds by unleashing fire hoses and attack dogs against marching youth.



In Maulana Karenga's article *Living the Legacy of Dr. King*, he argues Black history includes "a long list of prophets, messengers, saints and holy men and women, who...went forth to seek and speak truth, promote and do justice and bring good in the world," and he locates Dr. King in this long tradition of Black freedom struggles shaped by religion. "He taught us to value the sacredness of human life, arguing against capital punishment, war, police brutality and other forms of official violence...he taught us to love peace, cherish freedom, pursue justice and sacrifice for them."

Karenga also highlights Dr. King's claim that we have "both the moral right and responsibility to resist evil, including disobeying the established order and its unjust laws...Thus, when a man-made law conflicts with moral law and reasoning, we have not only the right but the responsibility to resist it." This goes back to the point in King's Birmingham letter about the tension between just and unjust laws and raises a provocative question about our moral duties in the face of injustice. This ethical tension between law breaking and law enforcement has been a reoccurring theme of debate around #BLM and related protests this past year.

- Karenga highlights Dr. King's claim that "to ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it."
- Karenga also argues "that religion must have a social role as well as a spiritual one."
- Karenga also reminds us of the "centrality of struggle" to not only free ourselves, but also to "build and sustain the Beloved Community or good world...a beloved community of humanity based on mutual respect, non-violence, peace, justice and cooperation for common good."

In his article *The King We Need: Martin Luther King Jr., Moral Philosopher*, Charles Johnson delves into the moral philosophy of Dr. King, arguing that King was “more than just the civil rights leader... [MLK Jr.] was one of [America’s greatest moral and political philosophers](#), his life founded on deep, sophisticated and courageous spiritual convictions.”

Johnson argues that to fully appreciate the legacy and moral philosophy of Dr. King we need to go beyond the superficial story of Dr. King and delve into his “[complex yet ethically coherent philosophy—part social gospel, part Personalism \(the belief that God is infinite and personal\), and part Gandhian \*satyagraha\*](#).”

Johnson calls special attention to one of Dr. King’s most important, but lesser-known sermons from Feb 4, 1968, “The Drum Major Instinct,” the last sermon that Dr. King gave before he was killed. Dr. King argued we must resist the tendency to want to be out front in the spotlight, to be seen and heard, as the drum major is. Instead, King urged us to “[be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That’s what I want you to do...](#)”

As Johnson argues, part of the wide appeal of Dr. King was that his ethical values were reflected in his own life. “[If moral authority is based on moral consistency, then the above statement, which King felt encapsulated his life’s primary work and vision, demonstrates why this liberal theologian became a leader admired by all Americans and world citizens of goodwill, for he lived his own advice.](#)”





Charles Johnson also argues that if we look at the broad arc of Dr. King's life, we can discern three distinct phases of his life, which he describes as follows:

## Stage One – Nonviolence as the Way

In this initial phase of King's public life, Johnson argues his core beliefs can be expressed in 3 “transcendentally profound theses,” which he describes as:

- Nonviolence (in words and deeds) is not just as a protest strategy, but “a Way, a daily praxis people must strive to translate into each and every one of their deeds.”
- King encouraged everyone to “practice agape, the ability to unconditionally love something not for what it currently is...but instead for what it could become.”
- King also understood the way in which we are all interdependence: “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated.”

Johnson described this “we-relation” at the heart of King's moral philosophy as involving a recognition that “moves us to feel a profound indebtedness to our fellow men and women, predecessors and ancestors.” This was the period when Dr. King was rising through the ranks of the Civil Rights Movement and becoming one of its central figures, ultimately earning him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 at age 34.



## Stage Two – “What can I do now?”

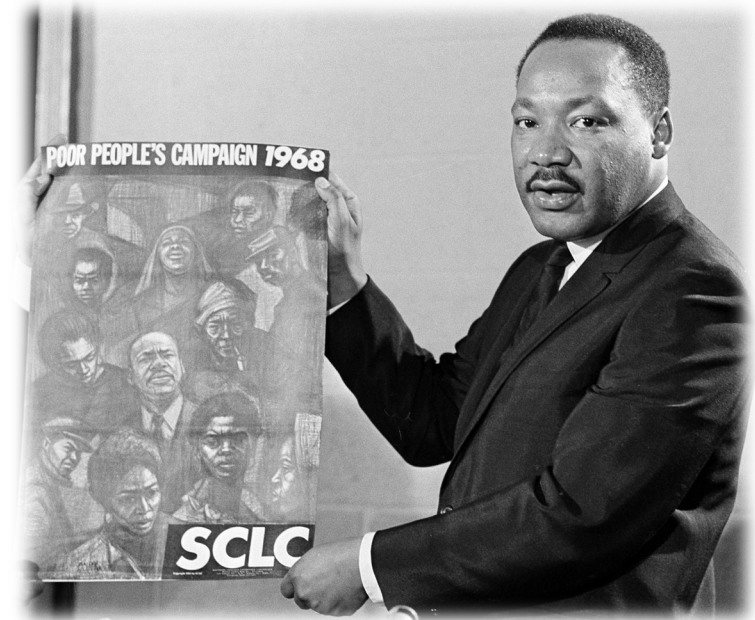
In the aftermath of the Civil Rights struggles of the early 1960s, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Dr. King struggled to see where his energies could be best spent, with some urging him to retire from the limelight. But King was not done fighting for change and began to expand his focus to broader issues of economic injustice in America.

## Stage Three – His last and greatest dream

As Dr. King wrote early in his career, “It is a well-known fact that no social institution can survive when it has outlived its usefulness. This capitalism has done. It has failed to meet the needs of the masses.”

This final phase of King’s life included two important themes—his critique and opposition to the Vietnam War and his attack on capitalism and the widespread poverty that many Americans were facing, an issue that led to the launch of the Poor People’s Campaign in 1967.

As Johnson notes, “Had he lived and realized his “Washington Project” of leading the poor of all races and ethnic backgrounds to shut down the nation’s capital, King might have become the most dangerous man in America—the one public figure, much revered, who could potentially unify in his person and through the power of his moral authority the civil rights, labor and antiwar movements.”



In his 1967 speech to the American Psychological Association (APA), Dr. King reflects on the role of social scientists in trying to both understand and expose racism and institutional racism in America.

“White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism and the understanding needs to be carefully documented and consequently more difficult to reject. The present crisis arises because although it is historically imperative that our society take the next step to equality, we find ourselves psychologically and socially imprisoned...The white majority, unprepared and unwilling to accept radical structural change, is resisting and producing chaos while complaining that if there were no chaos orderly change would come.” Dr. King’s comments were delivered decades ago, but his insights are just as applicable today as they were in 1967.

Equally important, Dr. King locates the phenomenon of “urban riots” that had dominated the news in 1967 within the broader landscape of social injustice produced by whites and maintained by institutional racism:

“The policymakers of the white society have caused the darkness; they create discrimination; they structured slums; and they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance and poverty. It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society...Let us say boldly that if the violations of law by the white man in the slums over the years were calculated and compared with the law-breaking of a few days of riots, the hardened criminal would be the white man. These are often difficult things to say but I have come to see more and more that it is necessary to utter the truth in order to deal with the great problems that we face in our society.”

King also highlights his opposition to the Vietnam War and economic inequity. Responding to critics who suggested he should steer clear of “contentious” political issues, he argued that our “conscience must ask the question, 'Is it right?!” And there comes a time when one must take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular. But one must take it because it is right. And that is where I find myself today.”

Three final points are worth highlighting from King's speech to the APA.

- First, Dr. King highlights the importance of civil disobedience in moral struggles for justice and sees this as the “middle path” between passivity and violence. “I believe we will have to find the militant middle between riots on the one hand and weak and timid supplication for justice on the other hand. That middle ground, I believe, is civil disobedience. It can be aggressive but nonviolent; it can dislocate but not destroy.”
- Second, Dr. King stresses the importance of understanding the role of voting in Black politics and social change and gaining a clearer picture of the moral power of electoral politics. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now say that Black electoral gains during the 1960s did matter. The fight against disenfranchising people of color from voting, combined with gerrymandering of electoral districts, shows this issue still matter today.
- Third, King began to lay the groundwork for later moral philosophy to engage more deeply with issues of systemic racism in America. As King argued in his speech, “Ten years of struggle have sensitized and opened the Negro's eyes to reaching. For the first time in their history, Negroes have become aware of the deeper causes for the crudity and cruelty that governed white society's responses to their needs. They discovered that their plight was not a consequence of superficial prejudice but was systemic.”

Finally, since Dr. King was speaking to an audience of psychologists, he ends with a reflection on the psychological term “maladjusted,” arguing that what we need is a concept for “creative maladjustment.” “I am sure that we will recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.”



In reflecting on Dr. King's ideas, as well as some of his interpreters, I think we can take away a few lessons related to the intersections of religion, ethics, and racial justice.

First and foremost, the issues that Dr. King addressed during the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s are still very much alive in 2021, as the recent insurrection by white supremacists and MAGA supporters in Washington D.C. made clear for all to see.

Secondly, the life and message of Dr. King was one in which ethics, doing what was morally right to fight against racism and injustice, was at the core of his beliefs. For King, these moral obligations were grounded in his deep faith and religious values.

Third, as readings this week on the Black Lives Matter movement and Indigenous rights highlight, these political issues raise interlocking ethical dilemmas and questions which we as a nation need to address together, and much of the burden of that work of racial reconciliation will fall on the shoulders of young people today.





# Weekly Assignment Reminder

- Remember to check our class Blackboard regularly for updates, announcements, and other related class information...
- Have you done the weekly readings and watched any associated videos? Weekly readings are listed on the [Class Schedule](#) page.
- Reminder that your Personal Ethics Statement (PETS) Revised Draft is due Tue, Jan 19 by 11pm, and you should comment on 3 other PETS by Thu Jan 21 at 11pm.
- Reminder your Revised [Final PETS](#) is due Friday, Jan 22 at 11pm.
- Reminder your Ethics in Action Case Study #3 post is due Wed Jan 20 by 11pm, and you should comment on 3 other ethics post by Fri, Jan 22 at 11pm.



MARTIN  
LUTHER  
**KING** JR.  
DAY

January 18, 2021