

Scholar applies King's philosophy of truth in post-truth age

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Martin Luther King Jr. is known as a civil rights activist, a minister and a world leader who gained the Nobel Peace Prize.



Martin Luther King Jr. makes his last public appearance at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968. The civil rights leader was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel when he was killed by a rifle bullet on April 4, 1968. (AP Photo via RNS/Charles Kelly)

In a recent book, longtime King scholar Lewis V. Baldwin adds other titles to the man whose birthday is marked with a federal holiday, including ethicist, theologian and philosopher.

In a thick volume, *The Arc of Truth: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.*,

Baldwin continues his study of King. After previously concentrating on King's cultural roots and his prayer life, the emeritus professor of religious studies at Vanderbilt University focuses on what the leader had to say about truth.

"We're living in an age of lies and conspiracy theories and alternative truths, disinformation," he told Religion News Service in an interview. "I wanted to write a book that would speak to that and since I am a King scholar, I thought King would be a great case study for getting at these kinds of challenges, because King had a lot to say about the power of truth, of truth telling and of truth sharing."

Baldwin, 73, spoke to RNS about how King defined truth, how his legacy has been distorted and how 20th-century civil rights activists compare to 21st-century protesters.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Since your book is titled *The Arc of Truth*, perhaps we should start with how you think the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. defined truth.

Dr. King defined truth in some of his speeches as the legitimate extension of facts. He saw the relationship between facts, truth and reality. At other points, he speaks of truth as coming to terms with reality. He used that kind of terminology especially when he spoke in terms of objective truth, objective truth being those truths that are universally accepted and those truths that are verifiable.

You say that King "who sought, spoke, and acted on truth" in the 20th century has become "the target of so much untruth" in this current century. What are some of the examples of this that concern you most?

The man and his legacy are being distorted. His legacy is being hijacked,

misinterpreted. For an example, on the extreme right of the political spectrum, there are those who argue that Dr. King was opposed to affirmative action, and they make that argument without any proof at all.

There are also those on the right who make the argument that Dr. King, if he were alive, would be opposed to critical race theory. Some have argued that he would be a Republican if he were alive. So, all of these claims are made without any foundation whatsoever.

Because the people who make the claims obviously have not read Dr. King. They don't understand his message. So, in a sense, Dr. King has become a victim of this post-truth age, because right-wing extremists have made him a convenient and useful symbol in an orchestrated and coordinated effort to promote their own conservative social, cultural and political agenda for this nation.

Are there concerns that you have about people on the left and how they have depicted King in these days?

Not really. I think King, for the most part, has been depicted in a proper way. The only problem I have with the left is that there has not been enough of a pushback on what is happening on the right, in terms of their distortion of Dr. King's message, his ideals.

You write of King's kitchen vision after he received a phone call from a white supremacist in 1956, threatening his life. What difference did it make for his ministry and activism to have that moment?

Dr. King actually came to a clearer sense of himself as an ethical prophet through that vision in the kitchen, because the voice that spoke to him that night, around midnight, said: "Stand up for justice; stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

Those are the words of Jesus from the New Testament. So, he found through religious experience what he had not been able to find in philosophy and theology.

You note that King wrote: “There is some element of truth in all religions.” How did his connection with leaders like Mohandas Gandhi, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thích Nhất Hạnh enhance his interest in religious diversity and distaste for religious bigotry?

Dr. King came up with a new and creative approach to interreligious dialogue, rooted in a Christian-Jewish-Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic solidarity against structures of oppression and exclusion and injustice. He tried to intersect people of different religions in his struggle for both civil and human rights.

I think it speaks not only to his universal concern for humankind. It also speaks to his theological and philosophical liberalism, because you don’t have fundamentalists talking about respecting other religions. But Dr. King argued that no religion has a monopoly on truth.

How do you analyze what you call “the truth-telling about who and what King was as a human being,” specifically that he fought against racism so much and less so about sexism, and he was described in some reports as an adulterer?

I explain that in terms that Dr. King used himself. Dr. King argued that we’re all paradoxical creatures. We have a capacity for good and a capacity for evil. And the struggle in life for him, he said, was always to keep that good self in control of that evil self.

We have both, and at times we all fall, and that’s just a fact of life. And he admitted over and over that he was not a saint, that at times he had fallen short.

But the important thing was that he was always interested in doing the will of God, even if he failed. Interestingly enough, when it came to the philandering, the adultery issue, Dr. King ultimately admitted to his own wife that this had occurred. I think that speaks to his capacity as a truth-teller.

Dr. King argued that truth grows. I think, if he were alive today, he would be very supportive of women's liberation. But it was not a major issue in that time, and he did make statements, of course, against this idea of women being subservient to men.

You also said that marching along Southern highways and in the streets was for King a “visual message about not surrendering to the machinations of evil and untruth.” Do you think more recent protests, including by supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, and maybe others, are accomplishing the same goal, or are they different in some ways?

This is how Dr. King understood the civil rights movement: When you go out and march, boycott and hold prayer vigils in the street, demonstrations in the street, all of that is designed to expose evil in society and to force people to confront and deal with that evil.

So, I would say, in that sense, Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the MeToo movement demonstrations, demonstrations held by students in the March for our Lives against guns, they are all the same in that regard.