

After 50 years, King's Nobel Prize speech sheds light on lasting nonviolent legacy

By Kelsey Dallas

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As protests continue across the country in response to the deaths in police custody of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the words and actions of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. have become an important reference point for observers on all sides of the issue.

MSNBC, for example, published an article exploring "10 ways to be like Martin Luther King after Ferguson," including sustained participation in disruptive public protests in response to former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee's argument that peaceful protest was King's primary legacy. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio also referenced King in his statement urging protestors to remain calm and promising to address injustices through reform.

These conversations highlight King's complicated but lasting influence as the world remembers his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, given 50 years ago this week on Dec. 10, 1964.

Half a century has passed since that speech in Oslo, but King endures as an international symbol of peace. And though his words that day are rarely referenced, overshadowed by his "I Have a Dream" speech and other writings, scholars say his Nobel Prize acceptance speech offers a more complete picture of the sweeping nonviolent philosophy, based on religious faith, that informed King's everyday work than many contemporary discussions acknowledge.

"King's image today is strongly tied to racial equality," said Keith Miller, a professor of English and a civil rights researcher at Arizona State University. "But that's not the whole story. He may have focused on race, but he saw it as related to other issues," such as global poverty and war.

A religious reformer

For Richard Lischer, a professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School, King's Nobel prize speech displays a man rightly considered one of the last major religious reformers in the United States. He said King's words portrayed him as "a prophet for justice," someone who drew lessons on reconciliation from Bible passages about relationships with others.

"In the New Testament, Jesus says that if your enemy strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other. King took that command from Jesus and applied it to social situations and racial situations," Lischer said. "He attempted to say to Christians, black and white, that their faith could be integral to their social convictions" as he brought Christian love to bear on injustice.

For King, nonviolent protesting was intimately tied to religious belief, because he "was

trying to create a social revolution in the mirror of the Bible," Lischer said.

Like the civil rights movement as a whole, the idea of nonviolence didn't begin with King, said the Rev. Frederick Streets, senior pastor of Dixwell Avenue United Church of Christ and former chaplain at Yale University. It had been debated by African-American leaders since the early 20th century, and tales of pastors' trips to India to visit Mahatma Gandhi were passed along in black churches.

"King was schooled and nurtured in passive resistance and nonviolence," Streets said. "Then he took it and embodied it and applied it" to the American context.

This application heavily relied on King's personal faith and the connections he drew between nonviolent resistance and the ethic of Jesus, Streets said, even when this link wasn't explicit in public addresses.

In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, for instance, King never mentioned Jesus Christ or his grounding in the Bible, instead referring to "an abiding faith in America" and "an audacious faith in the future of mankind."

He defined nonviolence as "the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time — the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression," leaving out its ties to black churches and prophetic leaders.

Acknowledging that King might have avoided some Christian imagery because of the ceremony's international audience, Lischer said religious faith was still implied throughout the address.

To find it, he said, readers or listeners need look no further than the word "love," the concept King in his speech called the foundation of nonviolence.

"Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace," King said. "If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."

The social gospel

Miller said King saw "a religious imperative" at work in his own efforts and nonviolent resistance as a whole. He noted that King believed in both a personal and social gospel, concluding that "the principles of religion applied across the board, not just when you're trying to get yourself saved."

This social gospel informed King's views not only on racial tensions, but also on poverty and war, the two other issues he addressed during his Nobel lecture delivered on Dec. 11, 1964.

"In King's mind, if you were going to be a good Christian you had to address the three evils he talked about: racism, poverty and war," Miller said. "He thought religion

explained how it's possible to solve these monumental social problems."

This viewpoint was at play from very early in his career, noted Lischer, who explored King's career as a church leader in his book, "The Preacher King, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America."

"His sermons were the first draft of everything he said to America," Lischer said. "He was always preaching about liberation, love, justice, suffering and hope."

A lasting legacy

Although American society today is less religious than it was in the 1960s, Streets said that King's views on nonviolence and social justice are still relevant, and rightfully referenced in protests over Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

"The idea of nonviolence itself is timeless," he said.

But what's missing from ongoing conversations about King, Miller noted, is an understanding that he had a more holistic view about justice issues than conversations about race encapsulate. His work involved a pursuit of peace in many forms, and he believed the journey wouldn't end with him.

That's likely why King discussed the Nobel Peace Prize in terms of both past and future generations, rather than situating the work of the civil rights movement squarely in the present.

"I think Alfred Nobel would know what I mean when I say that I accept this award in the spirit of a curator of some precious heirloom which he holds in trust for its true owners — all those to whom beauty is truth and truth beauty," King said.

King was a carrier of "a whole network of language," not the originator, Miller said. He began and ended his Nobel Peace Prize address with a nod to the many people who labored before and alongside him, and to those who would continue struggling for justice long after him.

How would religions react to the discovery of life on other planets?

By Kelsey Dallas

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Astronomers predict it's only a matter of time before advanced space flight missions discover biological life on other planets.

"It's very unlikely that, certainly in any of our lifetimes, anybody with funny-looking

fingers will come down in a flying saucer," said David Weintraub, an astronomy professor at Vanderbilt University, with a laugh. "But there's a reasonable likelihood that we will detect the presence of biological activity on a distant planet."

And how will religious communities react to such a discovery? That's the question Weintraub explores in his book, "Religions and Extraterrestrial Life: How Will We Deal With It?"

Throughout history, religion has been a filter through which faithful people engage with scientific developments, such as the discoveries of the earth revolving around the sun, dinosaur fossils or mounting evidence of evolution. Finding extraterrestrial life on other planets would not just reorient a scientific understanding of outer space, it would also require believers to conceive of their place in the universe in new ways.

"I think if you walk down Main Street of any town in the U.S., you would find that many people believe in extraterrestrial life. But if you then asked them to explain if that life is compatible with their own religion, they would be pretty confused," Weintraub said.

By confronting that confusion, he hoped to make life on other planets a more comfortable possibility.

The science and religion divide

Over the course of four years of research, Weintraub used each religion's own writings to explore its compatibility with the discovery of extraterrestrial life, summarizing what faith leaders have already said about the possibility of life on other planets and predicting areas of potential conflict.

The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has spent the most time writing about the issue, Weintraub noted, and would be benefitted by its long history of adapting to scientific developments. Buddhists might be the most comfortable with life on other planets, as their religious texts offer no limit to the size of the universe. The evangelical Christian community stood out in Weintraub's mind as the most unprepared to deal with such a discovery, given its ongoing tension with science on the subject of evolution.

Although the phrase "extraterrestrial life" might call to mind the spooky, slimy aliens featured in science fiction movies, Weintraub said that his project was never meant to be sensationalistic. He simply recognized that religious communities do have a stake in what, if anything, is discovered on other planets.

"There's a great deal of overlap between the domains of astronomy and religion, at least in terms of the questions we ask," Weintraub explained, offering examples like "Are we alone in the universe?" and "What's our purpose here?"

The discovery of single-celled organisms, plant matter or some other form of biological life may answer scientific questions, but also challenge some religious conceptions of a divine creator.

Historically, shared scientific inquiry have led to conflict rather than camaraderie between religion and science. However, the tension might be lessening as religious leaders come to support peaceful coexistence over an antagonistic relationship.

"Religious Understandings of Science," a study published in February by Rice University sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund, reported that less than a third (27 percent) of Americans feel that science and religion are in conflict. However, 20 percent of Americans believe that religious people are hostile to science and 22 percent that scientists are hostile to religion.

High-profile events like February's "Creationism versus Evolution Debate" between The Creation Museum's Ken Ham and Bill Nye ("the Science Guy") exacerbate lingering concerns over the conflict between religion and science. But Kevin Schmiesing, a research fellow with the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, believes that there's more nuance to the discussion than there used to be.

More than ever before, there's room for debate about how religious communities should respond to scientific conclusions, he said. When guidance can't be found in the Bible or other religious text, it becomes a question of interpretation for individual believers.

"Faith tells you to find the answer," Schmeising said. "Then you have to decide."

Learning from the past

Schmiesing's Roman Catholic faith is involved in one of Weintraub's favorite examples of the often uncomfortable overlap between science and faith. It's the story of Galileo's assertion that the earth revolves around the sun and the church's decision to put him on trial for heresy.

Although Galileo wasn't the first scientist to posit the heliocentric theory of the solar system, he was likely the most assertive about it, Schmiesing noted, explaining that the trial was probably as much about Galileo ruffling the wrong feathers as it was about the belief that his theory was contrary to scripture.

Whatever the motivation, the trial was scandalous enough to warrant an admission, centuries later, from Pope John Paul II that Galileo shouldn't have been persecuted. According to Schmiesing, the episode can be summarized as a knee-jerk reaction to a misunderstanding.

Weintraub highlights the Galileo trial because it features the same elements that would be at play if biological life were discovered on a distant planet: traditional theological claims about the universe, new understandings of outer space and the perceived threat of change. Rather than offer a prescription for how to proceed in an age of space exploration, he simply wants to begin a conversation.

"What I want is for people to read the book and think," he said. "Most people haven't felt the need to think deeply about (extraterrestrial life) and I think they probably should. I think it's time to do so."

The evangelical case study

Although there are many compelling reasons for religious communities to begin discussing extraterrestrial life, Weintraub will likely be disappointed, explained Peter Enns, an affiliate professor of biblical studies at Eastern University. He said faith leaders have a reputation for being reactive rather than proactive in their response to scientific discoveries.

Enns has written extensively on America's evangelical Christian community, a group that Weintraub believes could have the hardest time reorienting their religious views to accommodate biological life on distant planets. Because of the group's commitment to a Bible-based worldview, discussion of the issue would be complicated by the fact that the Bible has nothing to say about space exploration.

"(The discovery of extraterrestrial life) would be an example of how an evangelical view of the Bible doesn't really have explanatory power for things that we see everyday," Enns said.

However, the evangelical community could begin to think seriously about when to expend their energy on scientific debates, noted J.T. Bridges, an assistant professor of philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary.

Rather than spend time worrying about "what we may or may not discover" on missions to space, Bridges explained that evangelical Christians should learn to "understand the difference between central and peripheral commitments of their theology."

With a robust understanding of their theology, evangelicals would grasp that the existence of extraterrestrial life is no more threatening to the idea of God as creator than was the discovery that the earth revolved around the sun, he said.

"It wouldn't mean that large ecosystems could pop into existence from nothing," Bridges said. "Every contingent thing demands something that sustains it."

Believers struggle to make sense of salvation for the mentally ill

By Kelsey Dallas

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A wooden toy, a photograph and a framed doctoral degree reveal the motives of an anonymous donor who has helped fund research into mental illness and Christian faith.

The man said his father made the toy during one of many stays in a mental hospital. The photograph shows his brother at 18 wearing a winter hat in summertime, an early sign of schizophrenia. His son earned the doctorate in spite of living with severe depression.

But the items and the people they belonged to tell a bigger story "about almost 25 percent of the population in the U.S. who have some form of mental illness in their family," he said. "It is about those families who belong to a church and realize that their loved one has spiritual battles which no one else can understand."

He wants the research to launch a conversation and help find answers to the questions mental illness leaves in its wake — particularly those involving faith.

Among the many questions explored in "Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith," a survey conducted by LifeWay Research and co-sponsored by Focus on the Family, was the disparity between the opinions of the mentally ill, their families and pastors on the question of whether mental illness disrupts an individual's ability to accept their faith's promise of eternal life.

While a majority of their family members and pastors said they strongly believe the mentally ill will receive salvation, only 40 percent of those who suffer from mental illness agreed. According to researchers, clergy and others, the gap illustrates an ongoing struggle for faith communities to understand and help fellow believers who live with conditions including depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

"One of the key aspects of getting better is having hope, because mental health issues destroy hope," said Matthew Stanford, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University. "The church has hope to offer that transcends circumstances."

Significant differences

LifeWay Research, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, analyzed more than 1,500 responses to 76 questions to provide a snapshot of the issues that exist along the intersection of mental illness and faith.

Regarding salvation, the study reported, "54 percent of pastors, 57 percent of family members and 40 percent of individuals with acute mental illness strongly agree that someone who is initiated into the Christian faith and church and later experiences acute mental illness that keeps them from living like a Christian will still receive salvation."

The "strongly agree" response is what Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research, calls a "robust category," more useful in illustrating differences between groups than the weaker "somewhat agree" response. He explained that the 17-point differential between the responses of family members and affected individuals illustrated a "significant difference of perception" when it comes to Christianity's promise of salvation.

The difference likely derives from the impact mental illness has on a person's self-esteem, said David Murray, a scholar and pastor who helped design the survey and served as liaison between the anonymous donor family and LifeWay Research.

"One of the major symptoms of (mental illness) is pessimism about oneself. When people are in the midst of it, they see very little hope," he said. Family members are

more optimistic, better able to see the bigger picture of an individual's life.

Joseph Heagany, a regional manager for the Family Services mental health program of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said that part of the "psychic pain" caused by mental illness is this inability to connect with the church's hopeful, salvific message.

"When I've visited with individuals severely debilitated by mental illness, they could still understand the facts of atonement (or salvation), but would say it didn't apply to them," Heagany said.

The study showed that 20 percent of individuals with mental illness report that their disease makes it difficult to understand salvation, a statistic that further illustrates the challenge faith communities face when they seek to become more welcoming to people impacted by mental illness. However, Stetzer noted, it's an obstacle that he hopes the study will help churches overcome.

"I think that one of the things that the Christian tradition has always believed is that the gospel is extended to everyone," Stetzer said. "In that extension, we need an explanation of how people might respond, even those who struggle with mental illness."

A holistic approach

As a young, headstrong preacher in the northwest islands of Scotland, Murray berated parishioners who thought of mental illness as anything other than an outward expression of sinfulness. He was "insensitive and unsympathetic," unwilling to acknowledge the need for support groups and psychiatrists.

But when his wife became ill, no amount of prayer could cure her depression. After doctors finally provided the help required, Murray realized he had gotten mental illness all wrong.

"I call it my Damascus road experience," Murray recalled, referencing the story of the apostle Paul's conversion to Christianity in the New Testament book of Acts. "I became passionate to help people."

The situation inspired a sermon series, a book and, eventually, a new vocation. Murray is now a professor of Old Testament and practical theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Michigan, where he researches the relationship between mental illness and religious practice and writes books like "Christians Get Depressed Too."

Murray said the key difference between his early understanding of mental illness and his work today is the realization that healing can only come through a holistic approach.

"People are physical, social, vocational, mental, as well as spiritual beings," he said, explaining that a Christian response to these disorders has to account for all these areas.

The gap in confidence between family members and affected individuals about a

sufferer's ability to receive salvation should be partly linked to the Christian community's historical resistance to the holistic view of mental disorders, Stanford said.

The situation has improved in recent years, he explained, with churches widely accepting the role members of the medical community need to play in treatment. But believers can still do harm to those who suffer when they imply that diseases like depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are a form of punishment from God.

"The people of faith struggling with these things are sometimes told very negative things by other congregants, like that (mental illness) is a spiritual issue and they need to pray more," Stanford said. "We tend to undermine that person's faith by putting the whole issue in a faith context."

A more effective response grows out of a long-term commitment to meeting the needs of someone struggling with a mental illness, Heagany said.

When meeting with someone who expressed their exclusion from the church's teachings, Heagany explained that he "gently challenges" this distorted thinking, "helping the client remember previous times of feeling hopeful and identifying how that feeling was nurtured and how to strengthen such feelings again."

Religion's unique role

The importance of holistic thinking doesn't mean the Christian community should be hesitant to articulate a faith-based response to mental illness, explained Kathryn Greene-McCreight, the priest associate at the Episcopal Church at Yale.

Greene-McCreight was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the late 1990s. Although thankful that the stigma surrounding mental illness has lessened, she is frustrated that Christians have yet to offer a religious response to accompany the scientific community's growing understanding of effective treatment plans for various mental illnesses.

"It seems to me that we're not offering anybody any help, short of making people feel less horrible about having to go into a mental hospital" she said.

To empower affected individuals and their families, churches leaders need to do a better job of sharing the unique form of hope that comes from Christianity's message of salvation.

"Everybody wants to offer hope. The National Alliance on Mental Illness wants to talk about hope all the time, but it's a different kind of hope because it depends on circumstance — medications kicking in, therapy helping," Greene-McCreight explained. "Christian hope is much firmer than that. It's the bedrock."

However, Greene-McCreight's own experiences during the early years of her diagnosis illustrate that the Christian message has to be articulated according to one's belief.

As an Episcopalian, she didn't believe that her salvation was linked to the righteousness

of everyday behavior. Her faith struggles still stemmed from a loss of hope, but the root cause was her confusion about her relationship with God.

"What would happen to me at the end of my life was not a huge question," Greene-McCreight said. "Instead, my questions were 'How do I live in this moment and how do I get to the next moment?' and 'If God is there right now, why isn't God doing what I want?'"

Moving forward

Although the study outlined many areas where further work needs to be done, Murray said he did feel optimistic after reading through the results.

"A few of the statistics surprised me" in a good way, he said. He highlighted the finding that, "76 percent of pastors agree that a Christian with an acute mental illness can thrive regardless of whether or not the illness has been stabilized."

What will be important moving forward is for faith communities to live out these claims in their interactions with the people who suffer from mental illness, Murray said, which can only happen if pastors take advantage of the wisdom offered by mental health professionals.

Focus on the Family has expanded its Thriving Pastor ministry to include a variety of resources for reaching out to mentally ill congregants. The organization's new guide for pastors "Serving Those With Mental Illness," offers an overview of the research and brief medical descriptions of depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

Coverage of the LifeWay Research study has included several additional tips for improving Christianity's service to the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. Advice included encouraging pastors to talk openly about the issue from the pulpit, print the meeting times for local support groups in church fliers and establish relationships with care providers.

And in the case of Christianity's promise of salvation, faith communities need to remember to talk about it in terms that bring light to the darkness of mental illness, Stanford explained.

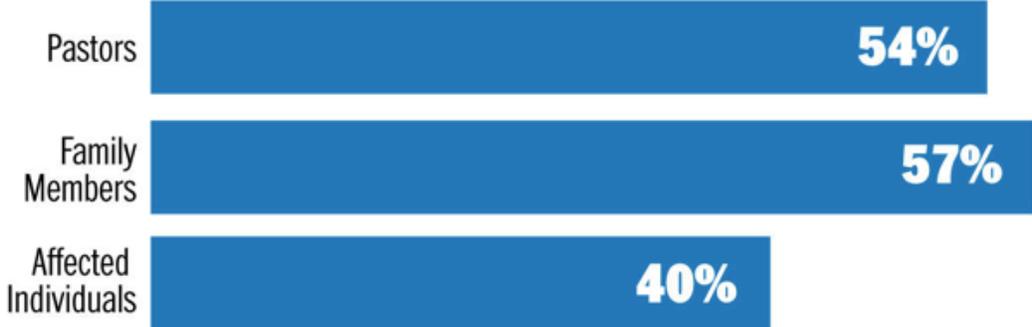
"The church has had a bad tendency to not be particularly focused on real world issues. It tends to take a spiritual high road," he said. "But now people are asking, 'How does that work for my daughter with depression?' The church has to be educated and equipped with answers."

Stanford said that church leaders need to prepare their response even before a mental illness-relation situation occurs, building connections to mental health professionals in their community and learning to recognize distress in their congregants.

In that way, faith leaders can be ready to be part of a person's healing, bringing Christianity's message of hope to the recovery process.

Does mental illness impact salvation?

Percentage of respondents who strongly agreed that Christian men and women suffering from acute mental illness that keeps them from living like a Christian will still receive salvation



SOURCE: LifeWay Research

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