

Subverting the Powers: Martin Luther King's Rhetorical Model

Michael D. Royster¹

Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr. employed the rhetorical strategy of verbally embracing American Civil Religion in order to hold America accountable for its gross negligence of its own constitutional virtues. In the sermons “The Drum Major Instinct,” “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” and the famous “I Have a Dream” speech, King orally subverts powers which consist primarily of an invisible system. Such powers have produced collective guilt of social, political, and economic injustice among America’s moral community. In response to the ambiance of the overall mood of the country, the undisciplined speech would have made divisive and polarizing language unavoidable. However, King employs tactical word combinations and in the case of the March on Washington that was televised live, background props to produce an inclusive message to a socially isolated audience.

Due to King’s oppositional message against unyielding powers, he faced great physical and psychological risks when speaking in the local church and in larger public venues. Pastor Tyrone Gordon of St. Luke “Community” United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas suggested that “preaching each sermon as if it were one’s last,” is a key to inspired, passionate and dynamic sermonic delivery on a consistent basis. Although King had natural gifts, and a strong dedication to the craft and discipline of homiletics and public speaking, each of his messages deliveries was if they were his last. For his last 12 years, King faced continuous death threats; therefore, he had no other choice but to speak and

¹ Michael D. Royster is an Instructor of Sociology at Prairie View A&M.

proclaim as if it were his final opportunity.

Charge to Subvert the Powers

King's nomination and election of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) initiated a continuum of intense public discourses that confronted an unjust status-quo. In response to some success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a sense of shared and prolonged bitterness, and the ambiguity of the future direction of the quest for justice, King's speech at Holt Street Church marks his initial charge to "subvert the powers" within the context of mass protest, where he sought "to arouse the group to action" (Carson 59). The objective of appealing to religiosity through framing the act of assertively safeguarding individual and collective dignity as mandated by God functioned as a strategy to overcome inactivity due to succumbing to fear and intimidation.

The speech functioned as King's template for the future fulfilling of "the task of combining the militant and the moderate (Carson 61), through the strategic uses persuasive appeals to broad values such as citizenship, democracy, religion, and the sacredness of the U.S. Constitution to convey a demanding message. The speaking event's context pinpoints the moment that King accepted the charge and received the moral community's confirmation as a figurehead to "subvert the powers." Charles L. Campbell further elaborates on the connotation of "the powers" as both physical and spiritual with tangible manifestations in the social, political, and economic realm (Campbell 13). Because it was evident to King that escalating societal problems was beyond the complexities of "flesh and blood," he rhetorically approached "the powers" as a commanding officer in a spiritual battle.

The Risk

Consequentially, King's charge to "subvert the powers" like all persons with charismatic authority relied on maintaining a supporting base and favorable public opinion. During his earlier years as a public speaker, King employed a "nonconfrontational style of inclusion" (Lischer 153) in his sermons and speeches. His inner convictions surfaced by his later years as evident in his "profound critique of the American system (Lischer 161)." Widespread prominence in a splintered society created brutal opposition from multiple directions. "King became a prime target for the young radicals' discontent" (Howard-Pickney 161). After the 1964 Harlem Riot, "King tried to calm black crowds and was booed and interrupted by angry ghetto-dwellers (Howard-Pickney 160)." The backlash from repeatedly denouncing the Vietnam War further motivated the FBI and the Executive Office to tag King as "the most dangerous man in America (Howard-Pickney 177)." Accepting the charge to "subvert the powers" accompanies significant risks. However, the greatest unforeseeable part of the challenge lies in rhetorically "staying-on-message," while enduring without surrendering his will to the powers. During King's final year he "had lost much white support for challenging national economic patterns and foreign policy, he was spurned by many blacks for his presumed lack of courage and over willingness to compromise with white authorizes" (Howard-Pickney 181). While King refused to yield to the populist narratives, his rhetorical devotion to his widely rejected "radical-moderate template" resulted in the inner exposure of his "private pessimism" (Howard-Pickney 181)

American Civil Religion Rhetoric

Drawing from Howard-Pickney's three rhetorical elements comprising the American jeremiad (Howard Pickney 8), King's famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech epitomized the use of American Civil Religion to convey a relatively progressive-radical message. The speech opens with the phrase "five score years ago" which captures the similarity and emotion of the "Gettysburg Address." The Lincoln Memorial steps in the background indicate that the event occurred near a sacred landmark or what King referred to as a "hallowed spot." While King praises the "U.S. Constitution" and the "Declaration of Independence" which function as the most sacred documents of American Civil Religion, he uses such phrases to revisit a promised made to America, while "appealing to authority" (Mervyn 96).

Approximately one-hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation and nearly as long since the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) which placed abolition into law, King's declaration that "the Negro still is not free" contains the second rhetorical element of the jeremiad tradition entailing a "criticism of present declension, or retrogression from the promise (Howard Pickney 8)." The speech's first fourteen minutes, which annual post-King tributes usually omit, primarily consists of a national rebuke for failing to honor its "sacred obligations." The final three minutes of the speech contains the third and final element of the jeremiad tradition, entailing "prophecy that society will shortly complete its mission and redeem the promise" (Howard Pickney 8). A celebratory ambiance was created through the use of sermon repetition such as the *anaphora* form of repetition of the same word or groups of words" (Lassiter 72) as in the "Let freedom

ring” refrain. Symbolically the speech closes with excerpts from the anthem “My Country ‘tis of Thee” and the Negro Spiritual “Free at Last,” as an appeal to both patriotism and the progressive black church.

Conclusion: Hidden Behind the Rhetoric

Due to the steadfast hard and routine encounters, King was more than naturally gifted with a robust imagination, but such an imagination functioned as an essential coping mechanism. King’s sermon titled “Paul’s letter to American Christians” exemplifies his use of imagination in proclaiming a “social gospel.” However, behind his imagination and rhetorical aptitude lies his sense of urgency in critiquing the Christian community as being obsessed by being socially acceptable at the expense of morality, the unanticipated consequences of capitalism’s towards increased exploitation, Christianity’s promotion of social divisiveness and polarization within the church. Ultimately, the sermons functions as a bold rebuttal to the sectors of Christianity that use Christian rhetoric to justify manifestations of oppression. King’s latter sermons such as “The Drum Major Instinct” contained traces of an acute awareness of the imminent threat of mortality within close proximity. Towards the end of the sermon he gives extensive references to the contents of his eulogy.

As a simultaneous advocate for peace and justice, King embodied his ministerial life-course message as upholding the rhetoric of “nonviolence” despite being personally threatened with such violent acts as stabbings, house bombing, threats, and eventually an assassination. Although King embraced “nonviolence,” his life was dedicated to fighting injustice by calling and challenging his audiences to live up to the ideals they espoused.

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