

“A Moral Astigmatism”: King on Hope and Illusion

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The collection of writings and speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., that is most widely used – taught to students, cited by scholars, read by ministers and activists – is titled *A Testament of Hope*.¹ A hefty tome of 736 pages, edited by James Melvin Washington, a Baptist minister and church historian then at Union Theological Seminary, the volume features King’s thoughts on nonviolence, civil disobedience, love, racial integration, and movement strategy. Curiously, the one topic that is almost entirely absent from *A Testament of Hope* is hope. In fact, hope is addressed so fleetingly that it is not even included in the volume’s index. The one essay in the book that promises to address hope directly, “A Testament of Hope,” is in fact an assessment of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s that was posthumously published in *Playboy*, and it appears that the magazine’s editor chose the title. The one sermon that King did preach explicitly about hope is oddly absent from Washington’s collection.

By 1986, when *A Testament of Hope* was first published, King was so associated with hope in the popular imagination that the title seemed natural – even if it mismatched the content, to the point that King’s own thoughts on hope were irrelevant. By 2011, King was so associated with hope that the national monument to King in Washington, D.C. was structured so that King would physically embody hope. King’s figure emerges out of a giant, unformed block of granite, the rock still partially obscuring his legs. An inscription on the stone explains its meaning, in King’s own words: “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” The sculptor has depicted

¹ San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

both the mountain of despair, the unformed granite, and the stone of hope, the figure of King himself: King *is* hope. All this despite the relative scarcity of hope from King's political and religious rhetoric.

Hope's association with racial justice is not only with King: in the American popular imagination, the civil rights movement as a whole is remembered as being a movement quintessentially about the power of hope to motivate social change. Historian Vincent Harding's 1991 account of the movement is tellingly titled *Hope and History*. Barack Obama successfully positioned himself as the heir to the civil rights movement with his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention titled "The Audacity of Hope" – a title he would later use for his 2006 book. This contemporary common sense, that black Americans particularly employ hope and that King was particularly concerned with hope, projects a concept of hope as it circulates in popular culture today backward, obscuring the critical insights of racial justice movements. Before we can tap these critical insights, developed with particular power by King, we must first appreciate the cultural forces that obfuscate hope in the present, then explicate what King actually did say about hope, and only then turn to his more familiar oratory, by then properly equipped to appreciate the theory, rather than mere rhetoric, of hope that he so effectively deploys.

Ascribing Hope

Why is it so natural, so convenient, to associate King and the broader civil rights movement with hope? In other words, bracketing the question of whether the rhetoric of hope was especially used by King or the civil rights movement, and of whether the feeling of hope was especially present, why is hope so vigorously *ascribed* to King and the civil rights

movement? King's race, his status as personifying race, condensing a racial minority community into one individual, is essential to answer this question. In the popular imagination, King (and his civil rights colleagues, and Obama) is able to hope in a way that no white American (or Latinx American, or Asian American) is able to hope. He distills hope, and it fills him, overdetermines him, in a way that it does not affect others who are not iconically black. Yes, there is a close association between Americanness and hope, particularly a sort of Christian Americanness that allows John Winthrop and Ronald Reagan to speak of the nation's promise to become a city upon a hill, and that allows Bill Clinton to brand himself as a "man from Hope," his conveniently-named hometown in Arkansas.² But while white Americans have hope, black Americans *are* hope. These are the two paradigms in the American cultural imagination: others, ethnic Americans, are associated with hope only by analogy with one of these – or they, like Europeans and Jews, are imagined to be agnostic with respect to hope, simply having no knowledge of or experience with the phenomenon.

So, to understand the cultural logics at work here, we must consider hope as a package of ascriptions to black Americans, not as a concept or phenomenon that stands alone. Historians have enumerated this package and its variations: most relevant here, the way black Americans were (and are) seen as particularly emotional and particularly spiritual.³ In contrast to the cold, reasoning, planning, racially unmarked American, paradigmatically the rigid Puritan descendent, the black American has a spirited engagement with the world. The black American is not alienated from his body or the world: he can dance naturally, make love freely, and sing instinctively. Whether it is because of his closer proximity to primates than to other humans, or because of retentions from Africa, or because of the way God created him, the black American

² See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980.

³ See, for example, Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

may have trouble calculating and analyzing, but he has no trouble feeling and moving and playing – and praying. There is a natural openness to the spiritual realm, a soulfulness heard in his songs and his sermons, seen in his rituals and his gesticulations. Therefore, the black American effortlessly hopes. Hope comes along with these other feelings and spiritual practices, and so the black American is a naturally talented hoper. This is one side of his soulfulness: sorrowful and joyful and hopeful. In more sophisticated accounts, and when these cultural tropes are internalized by black elites (as they always have been), such soulfulness derives from continual confrontation with the tragic. No commitment to the rational and the abstract could endure the inexplicable hardships and surprises offered by the world – providing blacks privileged access to the depths of the soul, and so to the mysteries of hope. Even if this accounting for black soulfulness offers reasons and not mere caricatures, it nonetheless fits comfortably, and effectively regurgitates, white supremacist cultural logic.

Another factor behind this over-ascription of hope to King, and black Americans, has to do with the logic of condescension twinned with an allergy to alterity. Those poor *others*, if only their conditions improved. Then, they would not be *other* – they would be just like us. They must want to rise above their conditions, to overcome the obstacles facing them – they must want to become just like us. For this they must hope. In the case of other minoritized communities, such condescension manifests as a presumed desire for cure. In the minds of the comfortable majority, the primary feeling felt by those in a blighted minority is desire for cure, along with uncertainty about whether such a cure will be obtained – that is, the primary activity of the blighted minority is imagined to be hoping. Note here how the hope is presumed to be for what is, in effect, self-

destruction: the hope is imagined to be a hope to join the majority, a hope that the conditions constitutive of the minority community will soon no longer exist.⁴

Consider the once-dominant way of understand homosexuality. It was seen as a misfortune that caused personal and social difficulties, and it would be best if homosexual desire could be eliminated or redirected – if homosexuality could be cured. This was the view of mainstream, heterosexual culture, but it was often a view deeply internalized by those whose desire did not fit the heterosexual mold. After political mobilization and cultural shifts, talk of cure is now *Verboten*; instead, we talk of changing institutions (such as marriage) to provide accommodation. In an important sense, however, the ascription of hope to the minoritized community remains: once that hope was for cure, now that hope is for acceptance (and “love”). In both cases, there is an over-ascription of hope, as it is imagined to be central to the affective lives of those in the minoritized community. In the last few years, a similar shift has been happening in the disability community. Where representations in popular culture of those people with disabilities once was almost inextricable from messages of hope-for-a-cure, and this was internalized by those with disabilities themselves, recent disability rights activists have rejected this framing. They have pointed to data showing the self-reported quality of life of those with disabilities is very nearly the same as those without disabilities. They have centered stories of people with disabilities who lead affectively complex lives, arguing that this complexity is erased when these individuals are viewed through the prism of hope-for-a-cure, effectively dehumanizing those with disabilities.⁵

⁴ This is at the level of the cultural imagination. More sophisticated accounts would try to distinguish conditions of oppression, which are to be combatted and eventually dismantled, from the minoritized community itself, which could preserve its characteristic practices and institutions. For example, disability advocates may push for the infrastructure to make life with a disability easier, such as curb cuts, while not focusing on cure for disability. See Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁵ Barnes, *Minority Body*; Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Members of a minoritized community who do not hope, who would remain homosexual or disabled, or who would embrace their blackness and reject integration, are branded pathological. Ascribing hope functions to mark those minorities who are agreeable from those who are disagreeable, those who are on board with the basic framework offered by the dominant community and those who may reject that framework. Ascribing hope advances the standing of certain elements of a minority community, usually those with relative wealth and power, and delegitimizes others. Those others may find themselves subject to other ascriptions. They may be labeled angry or hateful or irrational or macho. Paradigmatically in the U.S., this played out in the contrast between the supposedly pacific, hopeful Martin Luther King, Jr., and the frightening, angry Malcom X, to be followed by the Black Panthers. The scenario would repeat a half century later, with Barack Obama cast as pacific and hopeful while his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, was cast as frightening and angry. (Ironically, Obama's title "The Audacity of Hope" came from a sermon that he heard Wright preach – though this is entirely erased from the public representation of Wright.)

In short, there are many reasons to be suspicious of our intuitions about hope, particularly in the context of a minoritized community. Given the power of the cultural logics at work, even to enter into a conversation about hope in such contexts with the intention of deepening or adding complexity to them, or of recovering new currents of "dark" hope from the margins, will more likely than not only strengthen the hold of those underlying cultural logics – which we may abbreviate as white supremacy. (A similar claim might be made, if the focus is on white Christian-American hope, about strengthening the logics of American imperialism and exceptionalism.) Must we then remain silent on hope? Given the central role of hope in Christianity, and the central role of Christianity in shaping contemporary culture, it does seem

important to find a way to speak of hope, to inquire about the phenomenon of hope beyond the ascription of hope – even if our goal is to upend the ways of the world. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself offers resources to think hope otherwise.

The Virtue of Hope

To appreciate what King does have to say about hope, we must carefully bracket our preconceptions. We must set aside the connotations of hope in ordinary language. We must sever the concept from the network of other concepts with which it is linked: desire, possibility, expectation, and cheerfulness, among others. We must then listen to King's words, struggle to understand them, then begin filling in hope's meaning again. Only in this way can we appreciate the distinctiveness of King's account of hope, obscured as it is by hope's incorporation into today's spiritual ethos and by the over-ascription of hope to minoritized communities.

For most of his career, King had little to say about hope, but in the last year of his life he would deliver a sermon entitled "The Meaning of Hope."⁶ Oddly, or perhaps tellingly, it has never been published. In it, King offers an uncharacteristically systematic account of how he understands hope and why he believes it is important – an account that differs markedly from the anodyne language of hope that often circulates around King as he is represented. King delivered the sermon at Montgomery, Alabama's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on December 10, 1967 at a celebration of the church's ninetieth anniversary. This was the church where King was first called to the ministry, and it was the perch from which he led the Montgomery bus boycott, his first moment in the national spotlight. King had resigned eight years earlier, joining his father in the leadership of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta so that he could devote more of his time to

⁶ The King Center Digital Archive, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/meaning-hope#>.

civil rights movement organizing. He would repeat an abbreviated version of the sermon three months later at the white, liberal Central United Methodist Church in Detroit, just three weeks prior to his assassination. This was a period during which King's audience and political emphases were shifting. King had been formed in the black church and at a black college, Morehouse, then trained at white, liberal seminaries in the North before returning to the world of the black church and black protest politics in Alabama, but King's visibility had brought him increasingly in front of white liberal audiences supportive of the Southern struggle. King's political analysis had also broadened as he increasingly spoke about how racial justice could not be realized without directly attacking economic injustice at home and American imperialism abroad. When King preached of "The Meaning of Hope," then, he was speaking out of a specifically black American experience, and he was initially speaking to a black church, but his voice had been shaped by broad concerns and was tuned for a broad audience.⁷

In December of 1967, King was preaching amid turmoil. Racial tensions were escalating as more militant black leadership was taking center stage. The Vietnam War and protests against it were escalating. President Johnson's leadership was being called into question, and Johnson was facing a challenge in the Democratic Party Primaries from the left by Eugene McCarthy. King had just announced his plans for a Poor People's Campaign, and he was struggling to build consensus around the plan to march again on Washington in May 1968, this time with a focus on economic justice. In short, it was a difficult time for the nation and for King, a time of worry and uncertainty. It was a moment that called for pessimism, or so it would seem.

⁷ For context, see David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: William Morrow, 1986. For a chronology of King's preaching, see the inventory of papers at Stanford's Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project.

King began his sermon acknowledging, “I’m worried about America.” Where once he was worried about racism, now his worries had multiplied. They included American militarism, poverty, gross economic inequality, and the culture’s materialism. These were deep problems, national maladies, King intoned, and they seem to be leading toward “spiritual doom.” Yet “because there is something wrong our struggle must continue,” King declared. King’s sermon was aimed at explaining this imperative. If the situation was as King described it, with the prognosis so poor, why struggle?

The only explanation, King seems to be asserting, must come from the concept of hope. King aims to explicate hope so that he can make sense of the imperative to struggle, so that he can convince his audience to join him in struggle – specifically, to join him in the Poor People’s Campaign. The word hope is used loosely and variously, on King’s assessment. These usages distract us from the true meaning of hope. They are at most analogous to hope, at worst confused, misdirected imitations of hope. Ultimately, King’s goal is to show that when hope does not result in struggle, it is misunderstood, so his task in his sermon is to provide a precise account of hope such that it always motivates struggle.

Hope clearly concerns the future, but to understand hope rightly, according to King, we must be clear about the way hope connects the present to the future. King had already thought through these questions of temporality as he developed his own theological voice in his student days. King’s religious thought sought a middle ground between two positions to which he was sympathetic. On the one hand, liberal theologians saw the world continually improving, the Kingdom of God gradually unfolding on earth together with human progress. On the other hand, neo-orthodox theologians emphasized God’s radical alterity with the implication that we cannot be certain that even the best, most faithful human efforts would realize divine justice. King

wanted to affirm both the importance of human effort to realize the Kingdom of God and the radical alterity and indiscernibility of the divine. In his sermon on hope, he does this by denying both that there will be inevitable progress toward a better future and that there a radical break between the (fallen) world of the present and a (effectively eschatological) world of the future.

These are two misunderstandings of hope, as the language of hope circulates in ordinary language. Hope is sometimes used in a context of confidence that desired ends will, eventually, be achieved because the passage of time necessarily brings us closer to our desired ends; or hope has no relation to this world at all, only properly referring to a world beyond. The former of these confusions King labels “magic hope” and “optimism” – it is essentially the sense that “tomorrow everything will automatically be better.” But such a view does not appreciate the tragic, fallen nature of the world, the way that our best laid plans often have consequences we do not anticipate and the reality that our knowledge is limited and the world is full of surprises. The other confusion about hope, supposing that its proper objects do not exist in the world, overlooks a key aspect of the phenomenology of hope, according to King: “What is hoped-for is in some sense already present.” The point here is quite subtle and not particularly intuitive. King seems to be suggesting that in order to hope for a certain object, we must have a concept of it. We must, in a sense, visualize it. Only then can our affections attach to it, and only then can we pursue it. If there was an object of hope totally outside our world, we could not form a concept of it, so it would not be an object of hope at all. The middle ground that King stakes out, between optimism on the one hand and other-worldly hope on the other, he labels “realistic hope.” This, the genuine meaning of hope that King will proceed to further flesh out, acknowledges that achieving the object of hope is necessarily uncertain but also acknowledges that hope has real motivating force in the world, as we affectively respond to the object of hope as we conceptualize it.

King realizes that his discussion about affectively responding to objects of hope might bring to mind certain sorts of objects: luxury cars, fancy houses, or other material possessions. But King was to exclude these from being proper objects of hope – these, rather, are merely objects of desire. Here is the key difference he asserts: “Desire has an ‘I’ quality; hope has a ‘we’ quality.” King has in mind two senses of the collective nature of hope, one with respect to the person who hopes and the other with respect to the object hoped-for. Regarding the former, King observes that when we notice someone who genuinely hopes, even if we ourselves are not hopeful initially, we become more hopeful. In other words, “hope is always contagious”; insofar as no one lives alone, whenever any one person hopes there are others who soon hope as well. With respect to the object of hope, King asserts that objects of hope that only benefit one person should not be counted as proper objects of hope. The luxury car or fancy house may be desired, but it is a conceptual confusion to describe them as hoped-for – whereas freedom and peace are proper objects of hope, objects which can be enjoyed by many. King offers the test: “You can never hope for something that you don’t hope for somebody else and for many other selves.” Indeed, here the two collective senses of hope link together. There is a clear connection between hoping for objects that are not only for yourself and the ability of hope to spread from one individual to others in proximity to the hoper.

While peace and freedom may seem like particularly political objects of hope, King sets them against a theological background. King participates in the classical Christian theological tradition in which the ultimate object of hope is God. More concretely, objects of hope must be names of God, such as the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, or they must be worldly manifestations of God, elements of the Kingdom of God as it would appear on earth, such as freedom and peace. Such objects of hope are necessarily shared: one does not hope for an object

just good for me, but good as such, not for an object beautiful for me, but beautiful as such. If the object of supposed hope is just good for me, or just beautiful for me, it is merely an object of desire. Could King make his claim about the collective nature of hope without this background theological commitment? It certainly seems as though one could argue that the objects of hope have to be objectively rather than subjectively valuable while remaining agnostic as to whether a god is necessary to guarantee the objectivity of that value.

Note how King's conclusions about the proper objects of hope relate to his earlier assertions about the existence in the present of hoped-for objects. If these objects are essentially manifestations of goodness, truth, and beauty, then King is saying we already have an intuition about what is good, true, and beautiful. These intuitions are present but unfulfilled today; as we name them and pursue them, they may be further realized. This is the role of hope: it focuses our attention on what is good, true, and beautiful, and it motivates us to pursue and so bring about the realization of goodness, truth, and beauty – though we must be ever mindful that the fallen, tragic nature of the world will always prevent their full realization in this world. For every step we take in pursuit of them, we may then take two steps back. For King, this means that the only motivation we could have for pursuing them, the only motivation we could have for hoping, is a belief in God, in a guarantor that, at some eschatological moment, goodness, truth, and beauty will be fully realized. Once again we might wonder: is not the foretaste sufficient motivation? Are not the glimpses of goodness, truth, and beauty, however inchoate, yet still recognizable, enough to fuel their pursuit, no matter how difficult and seemingly futile that pursuit may be?

King's sermon builds in its rhetoric force, and halfway through he is making a bold claim: hope is essential for life. This is not merely a rhetorical claim for King, emphasizing the importance of hope. He has something quite precise in mind, a conclusion that follows from his

understanding of the way hope joins present and future. We will not die if we do not hope, but our life will be reduced to bare biological existence. We will be “dead spiritually and psychologically.” What makes us distinctively human will disappear: life without hope is an endless repetition of what was done before, what has been said before, what has been thought before. With the link between present and future severed, except as it manifests in selfish, essentially animal desire, we live only in the present, again and again, never engaging our particularly human capacities – those that King classes as “spiritual.” For him, hoping is the affective and agential response to our encounters with goodness, truth, and beauty in the world. If we cut off that response, we interact with the world inhumanely, like an animal or a machine, crudely calculating our self-interest and mapping out a course of action that maximizes our ability to fulfil it.

King’s claim is stronger still. Without hope, he sermonizes, we lose our capacity to reason and to perceive rightly. After all, hope involves our response not only to goodness but also to truth and beauty. Hope pulls us toward truth, motivating our inquiry into truth itself, not just knowing what is useful for us in the moment; and pulls us toward beauty, motivating us to appreciate more than just what is pleasant at the moment. In other words, our processes of reasoning and perceiving will be cut short when we are only interested in what helps us fulfill our subjective desires in the moment, refusing to countenance that there may be partially manifested truth and beauty that we may pursue, with struggle. King vividly proclaims that, for those without hope, “there is a moral astigmatism covering their lives and they can’t see reality.” The language of astigmatism, rather than blindness, is important here, for those without hope have confidence that they *can* see. Yet the hopelessness makes them believe “the ugly beautiful and the beautiful ugly,” “the true false and the false true,” “the good appear evil and the evil

appear good.” As an example of those who have lost their capacity to reason and perceive rightly due to hopelessness, King points to his contemporary black nationalists. They faced so many defeats, faced so many obstacles as they pursued their objects of hope, that they are understandably frustrated, bitter. So they begin to pursue their short-term desires that actually run counter to the realization of the goals to which they are implicitly committed. King asserts that guerilla warfare, in the context of 1967 America, will not achieve freedom and peace – does not reflect a pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Those same conditions that produced black nationalists were threatening the spiritual condition of the nation more broadly, on King’s account. He acknowledges that he himself often feels deeply discouraged. It looks as if the tensions and contradictions of the present are so dire that any effort to overcome them will be in vain. Even if we encounter instances that hint at truth, or goodness, or beauty, the world gives us reasons to turn away from them. Realizing them seems so implausible that pursuing them would be wasted effort. Yet one who has hope persists: this, King asserts, is where faith and hope are connected. Hope is “animated and undergirded by faith,” by which he means a belief that objects of hope will, eventually, be realized, despite evidence to the contrary. In a theological register, for King this boils down to faith in God, the guarantor that goodness, truth, and beauty will, indeed, have the ultimate say. At one point King describes this as a belief that the universe is organized according to a moral law, and that which runs against the moral law will eventually meet defeat, just as those who attempt to defy the law of gravity will necessarily fail.⁸ This is God’s law, and having faith in it follows from faith in God, “the ground of our hope.” King makes this a specifically Christian story: the way God

⁸ See also Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, Chapter 4.

works to motivate our hope when hopes are fading is through the Holy Spirit and through Jesus saying to us, “Fight on.”

To what extent is King’s Christian language and particularly his faith in a Christian God necessary to accept his account of hope? Drawing on the philosopher Robert Adams, we might think of a deflationary account of faith in which faith just means persistence despite doubt, despite appreciating that there are good reasons to stop persisting in a certain belief or practice.⁹ Adams suggests that such faith is necessary in morality as such: students ask why they should be moral and philosophers give reasons, but the skeptic gives reasons as well, and even the best philosophical account does not convince beyond a reasonable doubt. Yet commitment to being moral (in some sense) persists. This account puts emphasis on the virtue of faith: the disposition to persist in a project while appreciating the force of reasons to abandon that project. Framed in this way, a deity who guarantees the success of a project, let alone Jesus who says to me “fight on” or a Holy Spirit who “revives my soul,” are unnecessary to account for what faith looks like in practice.

Indeed, King seems to appreciate this, offering theologically-laden accounts of faith interchangeably with what seem like deflationary accounts. Note the effect adopting this deflationary account of faith has on hope. If faith just is the disposition to persist despite appreciating reasons to desist, and hope is the pursuit of partially realized goods despite reasons to believe that they will never be realized, faith and hope become one and the same. Hope could only be distinguished from faith if hope is misunderstood as optimism, with goods necessarily unfolding “in the very flow of time,” or as directed wholly outside the world. If hope binds the future to the present and manifests in the way King suggests, hope adds nothing on top of the

⁹ Robert Merrihew Adams, “Moral Faith,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 92:2 (1995), 75-95.

virtue of faith. Indeed, in one breath King intones, “I can hope this morning because I have faith in God and his power” and, in the next, simply, “Hope is a refusal to give up.” What is described as hope in the second instance seems very much like faith, and what is described in specifically theological terms in the first instance is described in secular terms in the second. The idiom of theology and hope seem to be merely adding rhetorical force to what is being described here: the practice of faith.¹⁰

King points to the example of the Middle Passage as an extreme example of hope, with myriad reasons for those enslaved to believe that goodness, truth, and beauty will go unrealized in this world. As he presents it in his sermon, it is because those enslaved can recognize themselves as God’s children that they proclaim, in the spiritual, “There is a balm in Gilead.” At first, it sounds as though King is saying that faith in God, a particularly anthropomorphic God, makes possible the hope of enslaved Africans. But King’s point is that “our slave foreparents,” despite the brutality of slavery that King graphically recounts for his listeners, resisted. Even though they were lacking in armies or material resources, they “refused to be stopped” in their commitment to pursuing freedom. In other words, King is demonstrating that the virtue of faith is even present, perhaps particularly cultivated, in the more dire of circumstances. For those enslaved to understand themselves as children of God means to understand that goodness, truth, and beauty was in them, that even the enslaved could conceptualize and pursue them – in the face of worldly forces militating against all such pursuits. That is Christian hope, on King’s view, but it is also secular hope – and it is also secular faith.

Whether he is calling it faith or hope, King suggests that what he describes is best cultivated in community. Recall how, for King, hope has a collective, contagious nature. Where

¹⁰ I explore the conflation of hope and faith further in *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, Chapter 3.

the forces of the world work so hard to stamp out hope, on our own we are likely to succumb to these forces. If we wish to hope, we must place ourselves in contexts and institutions in which we are brought in proximity to others who hope. Many institutions, however, are animated by worldly interests. They facilitate the shared pursuit of desire, each individual more effectively pursuing her own desire by pooling resources with others, as it were. So we need to find institutions in which the collective pursuit of goodness, truth, and beauty is the guiding principle, where participants subordinate their own individual desires to this principle, even as they doubt, even as they appreciate that there are reasons to think this quest is in vain. King has one very specific institution in mind here: the one in which he is speaking and in which he was formed, the church. It is the task of churches, on his account, to “keep the flame of hope burning” and so to serve as the “custodian of hopefulness.” When we deflate Christian hope to secular faith, we might ask anew: what are the institutions and communities today that cultivate the virtue of faith?

Dreams and Illusions

Now that we have seen King’s own account of hope in the sermon where he offers a systematic presentation of this account, it appears quite different from the soft, spiritual language of hope that circulates around him. Hope is not cheerfulness nor vague inspiration, but rather grave resilience that makes possible clear perception and right action. Some of those who would follow in King’s rhetorical path appreciated hope’s subtlety, others did not. In 1993, Cornel West spoke about the “need for audacious hope” distinct from optimism.¹¹ Rather than believing “things will get better,” West described himself as hoping “against the evidence.” Then, like

¹¹ Cornel West, “An Abiding Sense of History,” Commencement Address at Wesleyan University (May 30, 1993), <http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/cornel-west-wesleyan-speech-1993>.

King, West uses the language of hope and faith interchangeably. “What I’m talking about,” according to West, is “the courage to act when doubt is warranted” – that he then calls “faith,” following William James.

“The Audacity of Hope” was the name of the sermon Jeremiah Wright was preaching when, according to the narrative Barack Obama presents in his memoir, the future president had his conversion experience in Wright’s church.

In that single note – hope! – I heard something else; at the foot of the cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians [?] in the lion’s den, Ezekiel’s field of dry bones. These stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story...¹²

For Obama, it seems, the rhetoric of hope drew him into a grand narrative of survival in dire circumstances, persistence in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles – a narrative that binds together the black American community, and one in which he could locate his own self-understanding. A decade later, on the Democratic National Convention stage when Obama would grab broad public attention for the first time, he made hope the cornerstone of his remarks, which he titled, “The Audacity of Hope.”¹³ Like King and West, he distinguished hope from “blind optimism.” Just as for King, Obama’s paradigm of hope is “slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs,” and after adding the hope of the immigrant and the hope of the working class youth, he concludes with his own hope, “the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him.” In concluding rhetorical flourish, Obama describes

¹² Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009, 294.

¹³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19751-2004Jul27.html>

hope as “the belief in things not seen; the belief that there are better days ahead.” Oddly here, Obama brings together a classic, biblical definition of faith with what could easily be read as “blind optimism.” Together, it sounds as though we are not sure how wonderful America will be, or how the nation will arrive at this wonderful state, but we are absolutely certain that it will arrive sooner or later. King would find an improper object of hope here. Obama is really describing a desire that America should achieve greatness, a desire essentially reflecting the shared self-interest of Americans, not a proper object of hope that could be shared by all, regardless of their national affiliation (or, for example, status as indigenous people whose interests dramatically misalign with America’s).

Is it necessary to dilute hope when it moves onto center stage? It might seem as though King himself presents evidence that this is the case. After all, King’s fame was secured by what seems like a simplistic rhetorical appeal to hope. He told the nation about his “dream.” In ordinary language dreams and hopes are used almost interchangeably, and their affinity is often leveraged for rhetorical power. Obama’s speech, “The Audacity of Hope,” is appended to his memoir *Dreams from My Father*. Indeed, King does use hope much more loosely in his acclaimed speech than in his sermon on “The Meaning of Hope.” He begins the speech praising the Emancipation Proclamation as “a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves.”¹⁴ This suggests new possibilities opening, a sense that aspirations can be realized in the present, in this world – in short, it suggests optimism. King then turns to disappointment: “One hundred years later, the Negro still is not free.” Nevertheless, despite this disappointment, black Americans are committed to the ideals of freedom and justice. Those are the ideals motivating the march, motivating the civil rights movement. King urges a commitment to struggle, and he

¹⁴ <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/i-have-dream-1>

speaks of the urgency of struggle. The nation is stuck in the “quicksand of racial injustice” but it now must be lifted “to the solid rock of brotherhood” in order to “make justice a reality for all of God’s children.” Here we find a worldview familiar from “The Meaning of Hope.” There are ideals of goodness that are present in each of us, as “God’s children.” King conjures a world with these ideals realized, a world of justice and brotherhood. And the image of quicksand is a reminder that there is no clear path from here to there, that often the struggle to realize those ideals will seem as though it is in vain. King may not use the word hope here, but his use of the imperative solicits hope from his audience: “Now is the time” he refrains.

King is quite explicit about drawing rhetorical strength from the tension between the eschatological and the worldly. Imagining that he is asked what would satisfy him, King first lists a series of concrete demands – an end to police brutality and segregated accommodations, integrated living, and voting rights – before concluding “we will not be satisfied until ‘justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream’.” In the biblical passage King invokes, Amos 5:24, God is decrying idolatry in the strongest terms: “I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. . . . You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god – which you made for yourselves.” The passage King deploys, then, does not suggest a happy conclusion in which the laws of segregation finally pass away. Rather, it suggests the dramatic destruction of each and every form of idolatry. It suggests that we live in a world where idols skew our perception and affections, and it reminds that, one day, truth and goodness and beauty will wipe away all such idols, transforming our world into a place almost unrecognizable from the perspective of the present. What we can see, here and now, are certain idols, certain forms of worship that run counter to God. These include the specific forms

of racial domination that King delimits, but by juxtaposing this list with the passage from Amos, King is making clear that this list is not exhaustive, nor is it halfway complete, nor even one percent complete. Yet these specific injustices are necessary to name nonetheless. Hope has as its object a world flooded by justice, but hope entails the pursuit of that object in this world, which means concretely grappling with proximate idols, like police brutality and residential segregation.

King sees a community joining together in pursuit of proper objects of hope. He urges those who struggle with him to stay true to the dynamics of hope. Hopelessness can motivate struggle as well, and such struggle can look quite similar to struggle motivated by hope. But King insists they are not the same. Hopelessness motivates struggle that is ultimately self-interested and undisciplined. It strikes out in anger against those individuals and institutions that appear to be oppressive. In the language of “The Meaning of Hope,” it suffers from “a moral astigmatism.” Such struggle does not discern goodness, nor truth, nor beauty – and so, seeing the world wrongly, it cannot achieve that for which it ostensibly aims. Struggle motivated by hope employs “soul force,” that is, reflection on our collective ideals as they are pre-figured in ourselves, to guide struggle – as struggle motivated by hope is essentially the pursuit of these ideals. It cannot lead “to a distrust of all white people,” as King says from Washington, because its organizing terms are universal, names of God, with worldly categories like race employed pragmatically in pursuit of that which transcends them. Hope, when properly understood, is collective, and so is struggle. As King puts it with respect to whites, “They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.” Blacks’ hope for freedom is a hope for the freedom of all, and it is contagious. And that makes it effective, makes it capable of resisting the many obstacles that the world will present: “We cannot walk alone.”

The challenge for King, or at least for understanding King in a way that makes his most famous speech consistent with his sermon on hope, is to get the temporality of hope right. The object of hope, a world of peace and freedom, is certain to be realized – because, in King’s idiom, he believes in God. But it is not just that “there are better days ahead.” It is not just that the passing of time necessarily improves the conditions of the world, or the nation. Rather, we are capable of envisioning that world to come in the present, as it is prefigured in the present, and we are capable of steadfastly pursuing it. We cannot know when or how our pursuit will be successful, and there will be plenty of reasons to think that our pursuit will be unsuccessful. The image of the dream captures this complex relationship between present and future. “Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.” Discontinuous with the present yet motivating in the present, “dream” equivocates between utopian fantasy and targeted desire (as between literal dream, in sleep, and consciously developed vision for the future). This equivocation is precisely what is called for by King’s account of hope. What the hoped-for state of affairs looks like is impossible to describe in the present, yet we can find hints of it in the present, and we can be motivated to pursue it, pragmatically, by those hints.

With the unforgettable refrain, “I have a dream,” King moves from specific objects of desire, such as that “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood,” and moves to the biblical, transcendent object of hope: “that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together’.” In other words, those specific objects of desire regarding race are shown to qualify as proper objects of hope because they participate in the pursuit of a much grander goal: the achievement of ultimate truth, goodness,

and beauty on earth, expressed in theological language as divine presence. King explicitly names this “hope,” but not only that: “This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.” Hope deflates to faith, and King proceeds to name what it entails practically: the pursuit of objects hoped-for. “With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together.” In short, the rhetoric of the dream is particularly well-suited for King’s account of hope, and this account of hope really means commitment to properly-oriented collective struggle in spite of good reasons to abandon that struggle. Here we have a critical account of hope quite different from both the happy hope we think of today and the secularized tragic hope advanced by some of King’s would-be followers.