

Religion As A Conversation Starter! Embracing King's Political Philosophy Of 'Somebodiness'

A lecture by Prof. Jonathan Walton followed by an on-stage conversation with Prof. Lerone Martin

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Graham Chapel at Washington University in St. Louis

Marie Griffith:

Good evening to you all and welcome! I'm Marie Griffith. I'm the director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. My faculty colleagues and I are all delighted to welcome you here for this really special event this evening. I'm grateful to you for taking time out of your busy schedules—I know it's a busy time of year. We are honored to have Chancellor Emeritus Dr. William Danforth with us this evening, so welcome to you. We're so thrilled to have so many wonderful students with us tonight, so welcome to you. And to other members of the university community and the broader community we're very grateful to have you here as well. This is our last event of this year and so I would like to recognize our fantastic staff who has worked incredibly, incredibly hard this year to put these events together. Leslie Davis, our event coordinator just walked out the door, I want to thank Leslie for all the work she's put into these events. And Debra Kennard, our assistant director who has overseen everything we do at the center. Leslie, Debra, thank you so much for everything you do at the center and your hard work. We could not do this without you. We're also grateful to our student workers and at this point, at the end of their two years, I'd like to recognize our post-doctoral fellows. You know, we have the most amazing post-doctoral fellowship program here at the Danforth Center, and among the many amazing things they sometimes do for us, they have helped us for the last two years carry mics and help you ask your questions when you come to our events. This is really not in their job description. So I just want to thank the three of you and Dana for doing so much for the center these last two years including what you do tonight for us.

Our program tonight features a lecture from a distinguished and very special guest, Professor Jonathan Walton. And this will be followed by a conversation between Professor Walton and the Center's own Professor Lerone Martin which will address King's legacy to Religion and Politics today whereas this event is as you know in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The interview and conversation will immediately follow the lecture, and we'll conclude with about 15 minutes of questions and conversation with all of you here. And we also want to invite all of you here to stay afterward for a reception in Umrath Lounge during which you may greet Professors Walton and Martin and all of the rest of us. I'm going to introduce them both now so that we don't interrupt the flow of the program as we go on and I will introduce them in reverse order.

Professor Lerone Martin is an Associate Professor in Religion and Politics at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics here at Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Martin is the author of the award-winning book *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Making of Modern African-American Religion*, which tracks the role of the phonograph in shaping African-American culture, religion, and politics during the first half of the 20th century. Among other things, this book was the 2015 recipient of the prestigious Frank S. and Elizabeth D. Brewer Prize for outstanding scholarship in religious history by a first-time author from the American

Society for Church History. In support of his research, Dr. Martin has received a number of nationally recognized fellowships including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, The Woodrow Wilson national Fellowship Foundation, and the Louisville Institute for the study of American Religion. Dr. Martin earned his Bachelor's degree from Anderson University and his M.Div from Princeton Theological Seminary before completing his PhD at Emory University. Dr. Martin joined the center's faculty in 2014 as assistant professor after a postdoctoral fellowship with the center and after three years of teaching on the faculty of Eden Theological Seminary. His commentary and writing have also appeared in popular media outlets such as CNN, Religion Dispatches, Charisma, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and Religion and Politics. Currently, he is writing a book titled *The FBI and Christian America* on the relationship between religion and national security in American history to be published by Princeton University Press.

Professor Jonathan L. Walton is an acclaimed author, social ethicist, and religion scholar. He is the Plumber Professor of Christian Morals and the Pucey Minister in the Memorial Church of Harvard University as well as a member of the Harvard faculty of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Religion and Society at the Harvard Divinity School. Much of Dr. Walton's scholarship is focused on Evangelical Christianity and its relationship to mass media and political culture. His first book, *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* examines the theological and political traditions of African-American religious broadcasters. Dr. Walton's latest book, *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in its World for our World* is an extension of his work from the pulpit and the classroom. The book is the interpretive exploration of the Bible from the perspective of the most vulnerable and violated characters in Scripture. *A Lens of Love* is an aid for Christians who seek to be rooted in faith while pursuing professional lives that are just, ethical, and challenge inequity. Dr. Walton's work and insight have also been featured in several national and international news outlets including the New York Times, CNN, and the BBC. Dr. Walton earned his PhD in Religion and Society and his MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary. He also holds a B.A. in Political Science from Morehouse College in Atlanta. He serves on several professional boards and committees which include the Board of Trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary and I'm proud to say, the National Advisory board of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. Professor Walton's lecture this evening is entitled "Religion as A Conversation Starter! Embracing King's Political Philosophy Of 'Somebodiness'." Please join me now in welcoming him to the stage.

Jonathan Walton:

Good Evening. In abstentia to Chancellor Wrighton and to Senator Danforth, my friend and to Chancellor Emeritus Danforth-- it is so wonderful to see you here—Danforth is a name that helped shape my undergraduate education in many classes in the Danforth Chapel at Morehouse College where I know John Danforth once served on the Trustee Board of Morehouse College under Benjamin Elijah Mays, a towering religious intellectual, who I with so much joy named my own son after—Elijah Mays Walton, to Sister Marie, Marie Griffith, Professor Griffith, my dear, dear friend and colleague who was my faculty mentor when we were on the faculty at Harvard together and who continues to be my teacher, and to all the faculty and fellows of the Danforth Center and to every one of you, because as we say in the Baptist tradition, 'everybody is somebody in the house of God.'

I'm not going to keep you long, because I want to get into conversation with Professor Martin, but religion as a conversation starter, religion as a conversation starter. When Ieshia Evans, when Ieshia Evans left her home near Scranton, Pennsylvania to head south to Baton Rouge during the summer of 2016 she did not plan on ending up on news programs and mobile devices everywhere. The nurse and mother of a young son had a humbler agenda. As one of her friends posted on Facebook, "She just wanted to look her son in the eyes and tell him that she fought for his freedom and for his rights." Like many she was outraged over video footage from Baton Rouge of police officers murdering 37-year-old Alton Sterling. His supposed crime? His daily routine of bootlegging movies and music outside of his local convenience store. So, without any claims of being an activist or a history of protest, Ms. Evans headed to Baton Rouge to stand alongside thousands of others in non-violent protest. She had no idea that she would be arrested, and in the process arrest the world's attention. As Baton Rouge police officers in full riot gear lined up along the street, they began to arrest one protestor after another, and Ieshia Evans felt strongly that protestors were well within their Constitutional rights. After witnessing two others wrassled to the ground carried away in handcuffs, Ms. Evans made her way into the street. A summer zephyr interrupted the heat and humidity just long enough to catch the bottom of her sun dress. Her hands joined together in front of her svelte frame, her eyes appeared to look beyond if not directly through the two armor clad police officers who clumsily descend upon her. This is when photographer Jonathan Bachman captured a moment that has come to define a movement. Look at the picture. The visual contrasts are as instructive as they are arresting. The officers appear anxious, even defensive. Ieshia Evans looks still and serene. The officers represent power and authority of the state. Ieshia Evans reflects another form of authority: power seemingly not derived from this world. You will also notice cracks in the asphalt that run behind and in front of Ms. Evans. The cracks appear metaphorical. Ms. Evans and the arresting officers seem to stand on two different planes of existence.

There's a reason I begin tonight's conversation on Martin King's political philosophy with this photograph, for this now iconic image seems to encapsulate two central features of King's moral and political thought: nonviolent resistance as a form of mass-protest number 1 and dignity as the primary dimension of human personality number 2. And while many have given attention to the strategy of non-violence and others in power will often appeal to non-violence as a cynical strategy to "keep the peace." Fewer have considered King's political claims to citizenship as grounded in his faith conviction and in his theological orientation. Religion, religion my friends was not a feature of Martin Luther King's political thought and subsequent activity. King's religious faith was at the heart of his participation in the public sphere. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he was first and foremost a Christian minister of the Gospel. From 1955 when Mary Fairburk, Joanne Robinson, and other members of the Women's Political Council of Montgomery helped propel him to national prominence with the bus boycott all the way to April 4, 1968 when an assassin's bullet went into his jaw, King's Christian commitment and his professional vocation animated his public witness. It's interesting that though this was arguably the most central feature of King's life, his religious identity is so often diminished. The reasons vary, based upon the community, but it seems that religious and nonreligious seem willing to sacrifice Martin Luther King Jr.'s faith on the alters of their own epistemic certainty. For instance, well what're you talking about? For instance, when I'm around many evangelical Christian communities of all colors, King is a civil rights leader and a political activist. He led demonstrations, he lobbied civic leaders at the local and institutional levels. Yes he may have

begun his career as the pastor of Dexter Ave in Montgomery, but at some point he shifted his focus from personal piety to social reform or as the story goes. It's easy to trace the theological underpinnings of this narrative, for evangelical theology in the United States has privileged individual salvation, personal conversion, and interior change of the heart since the so-called Great Awakening Revivals of the 18th century. And in the 20th century, both white consensus, cold-war, jingoistic Billy Graham and longtime president of the national Baptist convention J.H. Jackson used this theological framework to question King's theological credibility. And today, both racially exclusive and multi-racial congregations alike adhere to such theological logics in the contemporary moment. Public morality gets reduced to personal piety. A narrow personal piety as Marie Griffith points out in her new wonderful book. A personal piety that's largely reduced and often obsessed with patrolling sexuality and reproductive rights. This may explain why conservative evangelicals chose to incorporate Martin Luther King into their ideological talking points.

This is so unfortunate. Because now it seems Martin Luther King Jr. has now become part of the pantheon of American civic gods: alongside George Washington and his cherry tree sits MLK, the innocuous, color-blind dreamer. A veritable tooth-fairy of racial harmony. I would even argue a similar dynamic is at work among many black churches in the Afro-Protestant tradition. Sure, many congregations will celebrate Dr. King for his work toward racial justice, while conveniently cleaving him from his own evangelical roots. This way many of us, many of my fellow black Protestant preachers, we can recognize his moral courage outside of the doors of the church, while continuing to obscure our own moral cowardice inside of our new worship centers. Our parochial and our provincial Biblical exegesis about personal prosperity and blessings may soothe and satisfy, but it's still socially and politically anemic. It's easy. It's easy to shout "God's gonna bring you out!" and "Get ready for your breakthrough!" Yet whisper at the social structures, political machinations and the macroeconomic realities that encumber the vast majority of this nation and this world. But I find myself similarly on the defensive about King's Christian commitments among so-called secularists, say my university professorial colleagues. None here of course. Many political theorists advance the view that religious commitments are out of bounds when it comes to advancing political positions. They view religion as a quote—unquote "conversation stopper" to cite the late philosopher Richard Rorty's commonly evoked phrase. Theological claims and appeals to metaphysical truths some believe do not fit with the discursive rubrics of modern democratic ideals. Then there are others like some of my colleagues at Harvard that argue that religion is an enemy to enlightenment. Therefore, for someone like Martin Luther King Jr. to have intellectual credibility and political viability, then we must disenchant his worldview. The fact that many of these same intellectuals who do this, who argue that religion is part of—is—is in opposition to enlightenment and that they feel the need to disenchant Martin Luther King's worldview. Many of these intellectual traditions that are born of the enlightenment are the very intellectual traditions that unleashed and concretized these structures of injustice of which King opposed and had to fight against his entire life. But, I guess that's an inconvenient truth that some professed secularists have the privilege to ignore. Now to be sure, I can understand why some are tempted to push religious commitments outside the public sphere. I'm not crazy. When we consider the loudest religious voices attempting to influence public policy over the past few decades, this position is understandable, and I'm not talking about the fore sharia law scare. But when I think of the exclusive, authoritarian, and anti-intellectual tendencies of the religious right for example or other Christian evangelicals whose

literalist interpretations belie the values of open debate. When I think about claims and revisionist histories about America as a Christian nation or these kind of historically revised traditionalism that often baptize bigotry in the name of religious freedom, I can understand why some would want to push these voices out of the public sphere. Attempts to limit reproductive rights, deny labor protections to LGBTQ identified citizens, and ban immigration from predominant Muslim countries are just a few of the recent examples over the past year. That's why I agree, much of the publicized God talk in American politics has a lot to be desired. But the philosophical contributions of King however, strike a valuable and viable contrast. King's valuable, well, he's viable. He's viable in so far as he demonstrates that religious commitments need not be inconsistent with the normative values of modern democracy.

This is where those who oppose bringing normative religious commitments into the public sphere. This is where they overreach. It's not as if normative ideals and commitments don't undergird liberal democracy. The equality of humanity, checks and balances of governmental power, and equal treatment under the law are a few of these normative commitments. And these values and ideals are even stated explicitly in the founding and governing documents of the United States. As the Declaration of Independence declares, "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It's this conception of equality that lends itself to equal faith, equal voice, equal protections, equal opportunity to hold government leaders responsible to their citizens. And it was King; it was Martin Luther King Jr., students, it was his theological reservoir that compelled him to affirm the humanity and dignity of all regardless of race, class, or religion. As he states so clearly in *A Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, "any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust." And this is what makes King's intellectual contributions particularly viable for the field of political theory, even for those who don't hold his theological commitments, his mature moral framework is transferrable and intelligible to all radical democrats—small 'd.' Dedicated to promoting policies and political theories that advance the well-being of the most vulnerable in our society. Think about King's own evangelical roots. Yes, Martin Luther King was an evangelical. He was a product of the Afro-Protestant tradition with this emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the radical equality of humanity, all are made in the imago dei or the image of God. For King, this had clear political consequences. In principle, for Martin Luther King Jr., this notion of the parenthood of God and siblinghood of humanity rejects any worldview or social structure that privileges one group over another group. Racism at the interpersonal level and segregation at the social structural level were equal sins for King as he believed that transformation of the individual and structural change must take place at the same time. In other words, conversion of the heart divorced from a challenge of unjust structures was meaningless and immoral. That's why King had little tolerance for Christian preachers who called themselves—and who called themselves—concerned with the heart and who called for immediate personal conversion from sin, yet cried "wait!" when it came to desegregation efforts. As King states in *Pilgrimage to Non-Violence*, "Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that cripple them, and the social conditions that strangle them is a spiritually moribund religion waiting burial." Another place, he says "It's a dust dry religion that is the Marxist opiate of the people." Now from a political perspective, one might appear and one might say King privileged structural change over individual conversion then. Since he had these

kind of words for folks like Billy Graham and his ilk. Yes, the activist wing of Afro-Protestant nurtured Martin Luther King Jr. as it relates to structural change. His grandfather, the Reverend A.D. Williams was a founding member of the Atlanta Civic League, an alliance of African-American clergy who organized in response to anti-Black violence in the city in 1906. His father, Martin Luther King Sr., originally Michael Luther King by the way—Michael Luther King Sr.—helped secure positions with full arrest privileges for African-American police officers. As well as help secure equal pay for African-American teachers in relationship to their white counterparts. And the expressed mission of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was to redeem the soul of America, informed by that rich social gospel tradition. Where it's not just about converting and changing and transforming and redeeming the heart of the individual. It's about redeeming the society, and to those who argued that legislation could not solve this nation's ills because legislation can't change the heart of an individual—has anyone ever heard that before? —some of you might have heard that last Sunday. To that King said, "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me." Or as he put another way, "the law may not change the heart, but it can control the behavior of the heartless."

But to place too much emphasis on structural change for King at the expense of human personality however is still misguided and wrong-headed. Because what does that do? That diminishes King's religious commitment and distorts his own philosophical method. For King, justice will not immerge from a prevailing thesis of structural change or antithesis of personal transformation. Both are important features of a complete moral life. This is why King gravitated--at Crozier Theological Seminary and Boston University—this is why he gravitated towards the concept of personalism. For it's this belief that all individuals are endowed with ultimate intrinsic value that was consistent at his Ebenezer Baptist church growing up. And it's this belief with a political corollary in his political philosophy. Think about it this way, students. If every person is precious and full of dignity and worth, discrimination of any sorts degrades God's human, unique creation. What is more, if every persona is equal under the parenthood of God, then every person deserves equal protection under the law. One equal soul equals one equal vote. One soul replete with dignity and worth deserves equal opportunity regardless of the accident of birth. Thus, things like voter suppression as well as economic disenfranchisement diminish and degrade human personality for King, and first, they are sins against God. There's one other thing I want to tell you before I get ready to have a conversation with my dear Brother, Lerone Martin. Along with this understanding of human dignity, there is another dimension of King's political thought that we should not overlook, and that is the importance of shared narratives that come out of his evangelical tradition. For King, it was the exalted place of the Biblical narrative, and how he used it. For King Biblical stories provide communities the grist of sacred narratives and sacred traditions of virtue. It's these shared narratives of faith that provide the moral and the intellectual resources to imagine concepts of redemption, forgiveness, and human potential for change. In other words, it's through these shared stories that we have this thing that some philosophers will call moral imagination. And this is where King as a public philosopher demonstrated so effectively his polyvalent political vocabulary: he could cite a range of shared narratives. You asked this question earlier about how we think broadly. He could cite a range of shared narratives to underscore his normative ideals of a radically inclusive democracy. Once again, let me cite *A Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King offers several prominent personalities whose lives are now legends in the civic imaginary. In this letter, which

I believe is the most morally clear, concise, and consistent religious epistle ever penned by the way, ever penned. Yes, I said that, Letter from Birmingham city jail. I believe it's the most morally clear and consistent epistle ever penned. Alright. And it's here that he cites the Hebrew prophets: he cites Amos; he cites Jesus, he cites the apostle Paul. King also includes prominent political figures like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln. King presents them as creative extremists who promoted the cause of justice and democracy. He cites great figures of the Western canon, intellectual canon: Martin Luther, John Bunyan, and in the same letter, the man cites Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And so, whether from the Biblical text or from Western history, these figures are central characters in narratives that extend the late motifs of freedom and equality. So, for King, a story was never just a story. All stories are laden with sacred meaning potential, and so therefore we have to be careful about the stories that we tell. As a matter of fact, one political philosopher, Robert Gooding Williams has recently suggested in a new book that just came out that this is how King wrote his book *First Stride Towards Freedom* about the Montgomery bus boycott, that King wrote it as a sacred narrative. King describes the Montgomery bus boycott as an ultimate fight between good and evil so that it might serve as a moral resource for democracy. A narrative of American protest in which subsequent generations might find pride and inspiration, for it is in the valiant struggle for justice in Montgomery that African-Americans everywhere might reimagine their inherent sacred worth and dignity that racial discrimination too often depletes. And it's here that he says the fight for justice infused citizens with—I quote—“a sense of somebodiness.” A new determination to achieve freedom and human dignity. And so just like a story is not just a story, mass protest is never just mass protest. It's not just about being a set of political demands for intended reform. Protest is greater than that for King. Mass protest is performance art. It's like a religious ritual. It's the dramaturgical and even theatrical representations of injustice and resistance. It's the sacred marking of memory. It's the preformed narrative of a community. Protest is an important demonstration and marking of human dignity and that is why, my friends, I wanted this picture of Ieshia Evans included. It's her photo that now sits alongside other iconic images of protest and resistance. Images that amplify the inherent value of the oppressed in the face of oppressive circumstances, and by doing so, these images provide inspiration and moral vision for us.

Does anyone here remember images of student protestors at Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, NC? There's a reason why those images make that indelible impression upon our psyche. How about anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa? How about our dear brother who has simply become known as tank man standing before a tank in Tiananmen square in 1989? There are reasons why we continue to look to them for inspiration and motivation even outside of their respective contexts. Why? Because these images represent a sacred story. They represent ideals that both inspire us and stand in judgement over us. They should inspire us—pictures like Ieshia Evans—should both inspire us to act and remind us of our own moral cowardice. And it's once we affirm the inherent dignity and moral posture, then and only then, for Martin Luther King Jr. are we prepared to engage in non-violent protest and demonstration. Only then! Only after we go through this self-purification process. Why? Because that is the point. The point is that we understand our sense of human dignity and our own inherent value, and once we understand our inherent dignity and value then we're able to see the inherent dignity and value in another. And when we see it in another, we understand that our protest activity is not to defeat those we're protesting against, but it's to defeat injustice and then bring those we are protesting against back into this thing he calls beloved community from Howard Thurman.

And for King, he believed that only non-violent resistance could bring about this result. Why? My human dignity becoming into contact with your human dignity. The god in me being able to recognize the god in you, and if the god in me recognizes the god in you in terms of your inherent dignity and value and worth that God placed inside of you, then everybody is equal. So therefore, I have to start looking at babies, black babies in Birmingham like I look at black babies in Chicago and white babies in Appalachia and little Mexican babies in southern California and Asian-American babies in northern California, and then all the sudden I begin looking at babies in Israel as precious as babies in America, and babies in Palestine as precious as babies in Israel, and babies in Vietnam as precious as babies on the campus of Washington University.

Let me be clear, there are a lot of people who aren't buying what grows out of this conception of dignity and that's King's philosophy of non-violence. He's had his fair share of critics for that. Why many equate King's non-violent direct action as a form of pacifism, and is it fair to expect people who already reside on the underside of oppression to further acquiesce themselves to their oppressors. Has anybody ever heard that critique before? To ask victims of injustice to assume responsibility for the redemption of their victimizer is a too high of a price. I'm tired of redeeming them. Others point to King's willingness to endure violence as an ultimate act of indignity and dehumanization. How can you say that we are all equal in the eyes of God, how can you say that we have inherent worth and dignity, and therefore ask us to subject ourselves the ultimate act of indignity and dehumanization by accepting your blows? How can King call for people to maintain their dignity yet forego their right to self-defense? This critique is particularly true among sectors of the African-American community who define manhood narrowly according to the twin masculinist categories of protector and provider. Once again, King's his best defender here. First, King is clear there is nothing passive about non-violent direct action. The goal is to uncover and to even unleash structural violence that is already present in unjust systems. So, asking protestors to purify themselves and adopting the right moral position is hardly a form of acquiescence. As a matter of fact, it requires courage. That's why King said at one point—he said—I find it amazing how people will say to me that they can't get hit with a brick or can't—nobody can call them the n-word without them having to fight back, because they have to be able to defend themselves. But yet, you are subjected every day to substandard housing and inadequate housing for your children. You are subjected to the violence of ghetto grocery stores that sell yesterday's meat at tomorrow's prices. You endure this type of violence each and every day. The violence of police states, and yet it takes the violence of somebody throwing a brick for you to say I want to fight back? Non-violent direct action gives you an opportunity to fight back each and every day. Second, to those who believe enduring abuse is an insult to human personality, again we can't separate his concept of human personality from this. That's why he said it's the structure of violence that's actually dehumanizing you and degrading you. So again, I want to end this how I began this. Talking about Ieshia Evans, and this concept of dignity. Dignity—it's something—it's who we are innately, made in the imago dei. It's also a disposition or a demeanor. Something we embrace in order to meet the demands of mass protest. And finally, it's something we ought to recognize in others. If we can recognize it in ourselves, then we should be able to recognize it in others, and therefore gravitate towards others and grab each other and embrace each other in beloved community. It's like we say at the Memorial Church every Sunday before we do this thing called the passing of the peace. We ask the question; how can we say we love a God who we've

never ever seen before yet forget to say we love the person we walk beside each and every day. How can I look upon your face, Curly, and ignore God's love? It's you I must embrace. Why? Because you're my brother, you're my sister, and I love you with the love of the Lord. Human dignity or as King put it, riffing off of Benjamin Elijah Mays, "we're all inextricably linked in a human fabric of humanity and garment of destiny. What effects one of us directly, effects all of us indirectly." These are the reasons I believe Jonathan Bachman's photograph of Ieshia Evans has come to capture this particular historical moment. Because whenever violence has erupted in Baltimore, down the street in Ferguson, Dallas, those who side with the state power search for any excuse they can to justify a militarized police presence. And the evil act of police brutality takes a back seat to property damage. Riots receive more attention than the violence of oppressive and ideological state apparatuses. And when those who have already overdetermined—those whose bodies have already been overdetermined as inherently violent within a white supremacist imaginary participate in violence at any level, the evil forces of oppression are absolved of their responsibility. This is both tragic, and it's manipulative. But Bachman's image disrupts that. The power of a repressive state was countered by a moral force of justice. The evil of a violent, militarized system was jarringly supplanted by a non-violent yet forceful presence, and when those people like protestors, like Ieshia Evans, when they are otherwise framed as violent, when they demonstrate, when we demonstrate our inherent dignity despite disquieting circumstances, evil is exposed, and injustice is clearly identified. That's why I say, when you look at that picture, arresting officers may have had the weapons, but Ieshia Evans has the power. Thank you.

Lerone Martin:

Thank you, Professor Walton.

Walton:

My suit don't look as good as his.

Martin:

Please

Walton:

I think I got way more material than his.

Martin:

Thank you for your wonderful lecture. Um in the time we have for our conversation, I wanted to move us to think about some of the things you've laid out for us tonight about King and his legacy. How we might think about some of these things in our current political moment. So I want to think about in the time we have, King as a minister but also as a man and then also as a symbol. So, something you mentioned several times and you've mentioned this on the radio as well, which is a fascinating idea is the fact that Martin Luther King is an Evangelical. And when most of us think of this idea of evangelical, Martin King's face is not the face we think about. Right? We may think of Billy Graham, we may think of some other folks, Franklin Graham, we may think of Liberty University, things of this nature. But you are insistent in this idea of King as an Evangelical, could you say more about that?

Walton:

Yeah, you know again I think there was a particular success in a sort of neo-evangelical movement in the final quarter of the 20th century that obscured a rich tradition of progressive evangelicalism. I mean you think of Professor Griffith and Professor Maffly-Kipp, I mean I know that they teach about this. There is a wing of the evangelical tradition, right that was committed to abolitionism, that was committed to the participation of women in the public sphere, that was committed to civil rights activism. While conservative evangelicals for the most part had kind of ducked and run in the name of what some would have referred to as the fundamentalist retreat. But it was after the civil rights movement and in many ways in response to the civil rights movement that conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists who had been off in the fringes began to join forces and said that we can put our differences aside long enough, and they won the marketing and branding war. In so far as they began to refer to themselves for instance as well, we're going to out you know the five-point fundamentalism, we're going to put some of those things aside and we're going to all agree that we are believers. And even the use of that term itself became politicized because there became default assumptions built in about what it meant to be a believer, and if one was outside that then that meant you were not a believer. And it just so happens that those who were of a more progressive or what they called liberal theology then were deemed as not Christian or not meeting the appropriate, you know—the litmus test that was created. And the popular media, the 24/7 news, entertainment cycle bought it hook, line, and sinker. And before you know it, the Jerry Falwells of the world and the other members of the moral majority and the kind of gilt televangelists that were getting all of the attention that had learned how to sell and market themselves, you know, throughout the 20th century. They began to control the airtime, and it made for good tv. It fuels the news cycle. And so, before you know it, Evangelical becomes narrowly defined in this way. And so I think it is particularly important, especially for someone like myself, somebody who comes out of this tradition, I think it's an important—even an important naming act—an important political act to lay claim on a tradition that is our own, and see that there are actually rich intellectual resources within that tradition.

Martin:

Do you think that that is something that might motivate current day activism, particularly if we're thinking about Black Lives Matter or movements like that to reclaim evangelicalism in that that way? That it could be a powerful source in that way?

Walton:

You know, I don't know. I think we're going to let these folks, the young folks here tell us what's going to be a powerful force for activism right now because as was the case even in Martin Luther King's day, he was even chasing student leaders and activists. And so, I don't like to get too far ahead of our young people and say what's actually going to work for them because we become that classic case of where you and I are gonna be running behind them saying “wait, wait! We're you're leaders; we're you're leadership.” But I do think that it's important in a day and age where people like Martin Luther King Jr., where they're susceptible to becoming empty signifiers that can become anything that we want them to mean for our own narrow purposes, and that's from the left and from the right. And so, I do think that it's important to take them seriously on their own terms. And so, that's why I even spent so much time, even tonight, obviously there's a lot we could talk about: the neo-fascist turn on a global scale or we can talk

about all the things going on in this country. But, I think it's sometimes best for us to cut off some of the noise and some of the news and focus on the rich intellectual resources of the tradition on their own terms, and see how that might fuel our own moral imaginations. And that's the use I see for someone like Martin Luther King Jr. now.

Martin:

Thank you for saying that. You mentioned about how King has become an empty signifier. We've seen the way that King sometimes has become such a symbol and an icon. He's been used by past presidents from Obama to Trump, and as we saw in the Superbowl, he's been used to sell trucks: Ram trucks. Using a sermon that was against materialism, that was fascinating, right. Why is Martin King such a powerful symbol? Why is he such a powerful icon to be used? Why do you think he's such a--?

Walton:

Well, I mean again, he's in some ways, some might say he's a victim of his own success, and I'm talking about early success. Because let's be clear, I'm not talking about Martin Luther King Jr. who died in 1965. No, clear, I'm saying 1965. I'm not talking about April 4, 1968 in front of room 306 of the grand hotel. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about 1965 when King made a definitive decision to move beyond talking about Civil Rights for African-Americans to human rights on a global scale. When he moved beyond talking about desegregating lunch counters to talking about just distribution of economics and exploitative capitalism. In so far as, because it's not enough that somebody be able to sit at a lunch counter if they can't afford a meal when they get there. And it's when that Martin Luther King Jr., after he had been considered among the top-25 most heralded and respected American leaders that he fell out of favor. As one theorist put it, "he no longer was willing to be a bonsai tree that was shaped in the way that both the black bourgeoisie and white liberal establishments would have him to grow." That he broke free of that. Or, as James Baldwin says, "It was the dangerous path that he put himself on because he refused to be a negro leader." What's a negro leader? A negro leader has three obligations: it's to inspire the people, to accommodate the power structures, and then come back with enough that you can appease the people. And then, you go back to "go" and you hit start again. Inspire, Accommodate, and Appease. In the mold of Booker T. Washington and others. And that was the problem with Martin Luther King Jr., he refused to be a negro leader, because he spoke the truth as James Baldwin put it. He said the same thing to white audiences that he said to black audiences. He said the same thing to black audiences that he said to white audiences. He said the same thing to the rich that he said to the poor. He was morally clear, and he was morally consistent. And it's that, that cost him and put him out of favor. There's that, that after 1965, Lyndon B Johnson went from saying how a University, quoting how we shall overcome to saying we got to do something about this negro. Literally. Or, when he stood—when on April 4th 1967, when Martin Luther King stood in the pulpit of the Riverside Church, and said you can't expect me to speak out against violence and promote non-violence when it comes to Africa-Americans or negroes in the ghetto, but remain silent when it comes to the greatest purveyor of violence in the free world--America's foreign government, because guided missiles are being shot by misguided men. It's here that J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI called Martin Luther King Jr. the most dangerous negro in America. Alright? And so that's 1965, when he fell out of favor, and we all forget, you know. I remember my dad used to say—it's the thing about cultural memory—I remember my dad used to say in jest, he said you know

in hindsight, all black folk loved Martin Luther King Jr and no white people ever voted for Nixon. You know, right? Because it's this kind of conception from hindsight. But we also need to remember that part of the reason that King was preaching in Jewish synagogues and the Riverside Church was because so few African-American pulpits would open up their spaces to him. He got kicked out of the National Baptist Convention. We talk about King being a product and a son of the black church, a prince of the black church tradition: they kicked him out. Kicked him out of the National Baptist Convention. And, I mean at his death, he had a disapproval rating that among white Americans was 70% and among black Americans was in the high 30%. So again, now to answer your question. You come back and all of a sudden, "I have a dream," becomes a beautiful inspirational moment. And there are some people, who would actually even say that the beginning of the end—the beginning of the downfall was 1983 when Ronald Reagan signed his birthday in a federal law, that that was the beginning of the end because it's much easier to celebrate annually a dead icon than it is to heed the words of a living prophet. And so, we take King, we put him in a museum. We put him in a case. We point to him, and again he basically has the power of a tooth-fairy. And because he has risen to that status, then we can market him for our own purposes. You can be a conservative and you can take as some conservatives have, they take those last 36 words that my children will be measured not by you know the color of their skin but the content of their character, and you can use that to promote a color-blind ideology that ignores racial injustice as if everyone is starting from scratch. Or you can be a progressive—or I don't know—let's call it a liberal, and you can put King's face on a t-shirt next to Barack Obama and say something like "Living the Dream" or "The Dream Realized." As if racial representation and being the leader of America, or having a black face as the leader of American empire was King's goal for beloved community. Come on, man. I'm sorry; I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Yeah.

Martin:

About that, so about King as a symbol and icon, you sit at—you occupy a very fascinating space. You are both a scholar—an accomplished scholar, but you're also a minister, and you are at Harvard's Memorial Church where you are ministering to students, to faculty, to members of the Cambridge community. So, you have a very fascinating vantage point. So, I want to ask you, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges to laying out King's ideals for the 21st century? For those of us who are interested in religion and politics, to use King's ideas not only as a conversation starter but partner. What do you see as some of the biggest challenges for us moving forward with using King? And then finally, secondly, some of the greatest hopes you have from the vantage point you have?

Walton:

I mean one of the things, I'm so inspired by young people today and their activist sensibility because they're truth tellers. I mean it's that level of **indistinguishable word** that level of frank speech that they have. Where they are willing to tell the truth, and the truth isn't always—how can I put it—the truth isn't always comfortable. The truth doesn't always conform to the rubrics of real politik. But they are able to tell the truth because they are able to look at one another and see dignity in one another as we were talking about. Right? They're able to look at one another, and they're able to say, you know, you come from, the color of your skin, your ethnic background, I'm not going to love you in spite of that. I'm actually going to be able to love you and respect you because of that, because of who you are, because of what you bring. And for

those of us who are unwilling, and who are moving too slowly and moving too cautiously—you know we're worried about what's it going to mean for our status, what's it going to mean for our career, what's it going to mean for our next opportunity—they're the ones that are pushing us on campuses like this across this country. So one of the things I see as my role at Harvard is to encourage and to provide the space for students to do just that, and let them know that they are loved and that they are affirmed and that they are appreciated, and that we aren't trying to squelch their voice. Right? I think that is where King—and probably more so than King, Benjamin Elijah Mays, former president of Morehouse College—I think that's one of the areas where they were so effective with young people. Because rather than treating them in a kind of supercilious, patronizing way, right as if we know better, you know, you need to do this and then you need to do this. They just sort of created the conditions for them to flourish, while helping to teach them lessons of the past, and if I'm going to do anything with my position at Harvard, it's to actually—I mean I'm dealing with the most privileged and gifted young people you know from this planet—and just like the young people here, I mean the students here. I know people tell you all the time you're the best of the best. I don't know if you're the best of the best, but I know you're in a dawggone good situation right now. And you are going to be in positions of privilege, and it's a matter of what you're going to do with them. And so, if you learn to tell the truth, if you learn to affirm dignity in all people, if you learn to become intolerant of intolerance and intolerant of injustice, then you're going to be able to shape and impact positively every field of human endeavor. And so, that's what I see as our responsibility. It's what we owe them.

Martin:

Well, speaking of the students, we'll get ready for some questions now. We have two of our postdocs, Christy and I believe Moshe as well will have microphones. We got maybe around 10 minutes for questions and we want to with no pressure for my students, if they want to ask questions, we can go there first, and then we'll turn to the rest of the audience for any type of question they may have for professor Walton. We have one there in the back there, I think. Is Mimi back there? Ok.

Audience:

Hello, I'm _____. I'm a student of professor Martin. Thank you for coming here. So, you said in your speech, um "religious commitments need not be inconsistent with liberal democracy," and I just wanted to ask you a few questions about that statement. So, it's like liberalism defined as individualism and intellectual freedom, I think that actually can be inconsistent with religious commitments in like some pretty detrimental ways. So dogmatic religions can challenge individual intellectual freedom and while as you said, they may lead us to good things, so it's like my personal commitment to a Christian god might lead me to pass the Civil Rights Act or it might lead me to be kind to my neighbor or it might lead me to do all sorts of good things, right? Dogmatic religions can also lead me to do all sorts of problematic things, right? So, my commitment to a Christian god might lead me to persecute the LGBTQIA community; they might lead me to persecute women or limit their rights. I think that much of the Christian tradition directly contradict the values that serve as the foundation of our nation. Equality, what about equality for women? That's not something I see being explicitly said in the Bible, so it's like if my personal religious commitments are to interfere with my commitments to liberal democracy, then I see a very severe contradiction in that situation. So should we not encourage a wall of separation between religion and politics in the public sphere in order to

prevent people from using their personal religious commitments from persecuting others? Thank you.

Walton:

First, thank you for the question, and let me affirm pretty much 99% of what you said. But I guess where I could agree with you and then still offer the counterexample, and that's why I'm offering Martin King as a counterexample. Because I absolutely do believe that the kind of autocratic sensibility and theological, dare I say, primitivism of some absolutely can lead to the tyrannical repression and theocratic silencing of the most vulnerable, but that's also true of other political, social, economic philosophies that we don't ask to be pushed out of the public sphere. And so, if you say there should be a wall of separation, part of the reason I would say it's part of the point of democratic deliberation is for us to bring it to the public square, and let's hash it out. Let's meet it out. Because in the same examples that some would give and that you could give and that I could give of some of the more reprehensible religious views, I would say similar of certain economics philosophies that privilege profits over people. And therefore, equally reify the status quo, concretize injustice, and render the most vulnerable even more vulnerable. But nobody asks that we not allow those economic philosophies in the public sphere. As a matter of fact, many of those economic philosophies dictate and govern policy right now. And so, just as the way that we fiercely debate them and have the capacity to fiercely challenge them, I think we should because more importantly I think when we—it's almost like Biblical interpretation—when we push things aside to the background—alright, when we push it to the background—then we're less likely to see or be able to identify its kind of nefarious behavior. So, we can say all we want that we have this wall of separation, while certain status quo default religious assumptions even in the name of secularism are running rampant, but we don't have the moral resources or even language to challenge it. And so that would be my response to you. I can see you're not buying what I'm selling. Am I in that class tomorrow? I'm not, oh thank God!

Martin:

We have another question over here, please.

Audience:

Hi, my name is _____. So I'm interested in how we begin to make active moves toward reclaiming or adding nuance to the legacy of MLK? This building, the chapel that you're in, there's a speech every year, right during MLK day sponsored by the University. This University, which has continuously and historically profited off of the labor of black and brown bodies, um but somehow has this MLK speech every year um where the chancellor attends, etc. So I'm just thinking about ways in which we can resist that and there's a lot of hashtags on MLK day um "get your hands off my mlk" or like I'm trying to remember, but things like that that're trying to readjust the narrative. But your place in academia and the pulpit, how do you try to bring more nuance to his legacy? Thank you.

Martin:

And before you answer, just so you know, another student that we're really proud of. She's a Rhodes Scholar.

Walton:

Dang, get me back to Cambridge. Well, first of all, congratulations my dear sister, congratulations I mean that. Wow. Incredible. I'm sure your family, they're somewhere, you're just standing on their shoulders. I know that you realize that and thank God for all the love and wisdom they poured into you. Yeah, how do we do this? Right? Or how do I do this? Micro-social ways in some way. I'll give an example, you asked me personally. Right now I teach a course called "Malcolm, Martin, and Masculinity" where I teach about the political and religious traditions that informed both Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Malcolm X, and instead of just looking at them through the lenses of race and class as is often the case, I also look at them through the lenses of gender politics, right? And the ways that their gender politics possibly frustrated some of their ultimate aims. And what is the point of the class? The class is not just a history class: I'm an ethicist; I'm a social ethicist. Right? And so, part of the assignments—many of the assignments—and the in-class lessons are about taking contemporary issues and filtering them through those lenses of race, of class, and gender, and thinking about how we might think about them different philosophically, religiously: based upon one's own religious tradition. Right? As well as being true to the moral normative commitments of say liberal democracy. Right? How might one do that? And then also, part of their writing assignments are one and two page reflections. I go in-and-out. Why? Because I'm not really down with the 12-15 page critical review essay as much anymore. Why? Because there's a different style of writing. Right that is leading us into the future and a different style of argumentation. And I'm not simply just talking about talking points, but I'm talking about how one can restructure a debate. So that's not simply right talking points versus left talking points, but one can actually think critically, restructure the debate quickly, and place it within one's own moral framework. And that's where King was a genius, and so I'm hoping that students both at the undergraduate level and at the Masters level will leave this type of course with these types of writing and rhetorical tools that they might be able to use. Why? When they go to law school, when they go to medical school, when they are lucky enough and fortunate enough as you to become a Rhodes scholar and go to Oxford, right or when they end up on capital hill. So that right now they are grounded in a moral—like King—a morally clear and consistent framework, so that they're not being pulled whatever direction is either popular or is profitable.

Martin:

I think we've got time for two more questions. Wow. Well, we haven't been to this side of the room, let's go over here. Thank you.

Audience:

I love Audre Lorde's comment in '79, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." And then I look at Martin Luther King's *Letter* and how he perfectly with the four points, you know where he got all the information, went to the person, it didn't resolve, and then came to purification to then have protest. Recently, I was listening to a documentary where David Brooks stated that we seem to be void of public theologians right now. Martin Luther King was perfect in that. Um what do you think of the current state of theology, are we void of it, and what do we need to do about it?

Walton:

Yeah. You know, I'm a little suspicious to be honest with you when I hear—whether it be 1988 it was Russel Jacoby, the last intellectual, right—that the public sphere is void of public

intellectuals or we're void of public theologians, and one of the reasons I'm somewhat suspicious of those sorts of claims is because typically they have a particular conception of what a public intellectual and/or what a public theologian looks like, right? And it's typically a white, male body. They're thinking Reinhold Niebuhr; they're thinking Paul Tillich. And so women—you know—people of color typically don't fit the bill of these sorts of public voices. And we also know that quite often, even as is the case with the Black Lives Matter movement, it is people of color and women and queer bodies that are doing all of this heavy lifting without public recognition. And so just to kind of note that real quick. Um and then the first part of your question was about—well—you were saying Audre Lorde's quote about "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Yeah. Yeah. That's a funny formulation. You know, and not to say it doesn't carry any weight. It's just like all metaphors—you know—metaphors break down. And so, it's like—it's like Malcolm—you know Malcolm loved to make the distinction between field slaves and house slaves. Well, historically we know—you know—from the great work historians have done, it was actually house slaves—people who were enslaved in the house—that were much more likely to be able to lead and animate revolts. They were the ones who had the information; they were the ones that were able to poison food. They were the ones that were able to strategize from the inside. And so, I guess what I don't want to do—what I would hate to say—is kind of create these sorts of exclusive frameworks. So often, my students do this. Right? My students do this, and I find it kind of funny, you know? The student from someplace like Chicago or Atlanta, "we're reading all these western authors, blah blah blah." Right? You know? Like, you're from Atlanta. And so these kinds of walls of division where like there aren't any intellectual resources that are available to us. So that's where to your point—what I think you were pointing out—about King, I think he is a moral exemplar of having a polyvalent vocabulary, of being able to pull from multiple intellectual traditions unapologetically and unashamedly and being able to use it. And in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, "This is just what made King brilliant. He was always able to take a crooked stick and just kind of hit a straight lick at the perfect moment with it."

Martin:

We've got one more question, and then.

Walton:

I want to hear from my sister in the blue, because I think she was just saying amen when I was talking.

Martin:

Ok. This will be our last question.

Walton:

I'm sorry anybody else, but I heard her say amen a couple of times, and so she deserves a question.

Audience:

It's the Baptist in me. Um for the sister back here in terms of the religion in the public square, we are able to bring critique to bear whether people are talking about God or people are talking about their tradition—and it's the tradition that brings the harm. For this sister over here, our

Rhodes Scholar sister, Martin Luther King Jr. was so complex and so multilayered that even MLRK (?) we talk about the “I have a dream” speech, before he got to the hoop, which is what the I have a dream part was, he talked about economic injustice. So, we can always go to that part of the speech, we can always go to that part of what he taught us to bring a kind of more nuanced reading to what he was all about. Now my question to you. I want to say thank you for your love of *A Letter from Birmingham Jail*, cause I’m crazy about it myself, and after this is over, I want to get your contact info because I taught a whole course on the letter. My question has to do with the whole idea of redemptive suffering. As a woman and scholar, I have a problem with that. I don’t think there is any redemption of America’s soul through anybody’s suffering. Suffering is just an indication that something is deeply wrong, and I think what we have to think about is this. This is not a kind of way to think about—um—violence versus non-violence, but it’s a way to stand up and say any violence whether it’s personal violence or structural violence is an indication that something is deeply wrong and that nobody is redeemed by it.

Walton:

Yeah. Mhmm. I actually, I didn’t use the language of redemptive suffering intentionally. I talked about non-violent direct action as a strategy that was informed by this kind of conception of inherent dignity, and while I acknowledged the many critiques that come his way, and obviously that critique of redemptive suffering from womanist scholars was in my mind. That was one of the reasons I was intentional not to name it. Because I don’t quite know what to do with that because I agree with you. But even as I agree with you, I also understand, I also concede the ubiquity of suffering, and it’s because of that ubiquity of suffering that it does not dissipate—or it’s not mollified—by or because of our claims of it’s not our responsibility. And therefore, does it matter in terms of do we view this in terms of redemptive suffering or do we view this as a strategy of uprooting what’s already inherently there towards transforming it? And I guess I appeal to the latter to uproot the violence that’s already inherently there. To uproot the violence that’s already inherently targeting women of color, poor women, working women, alright? Without having to make a kind of metaphysical claim—to my dear sister in the back, a metaphysical claim—about whether it’s redemptive or not. Because that is just a question that I’m not comfortable with theologically. That that burden ought to be placed on those who are already on the underside.

Audience:

Unintelligible

Walton:

Can we say King was wrong about that? Man, as a Morehouse brother, you putting me in an uncomfortable position to say publicly like that King. Oh, you putting me in an uncomfortable position. I can say that—uh I can say that—it had a context and it had a particular purchase that worked for a moment, and of course we know, once he got to Chicago, once he got to Los Angeles it didn’t work because it didn’t resonate with people on that kind of theological level. Alright? And since it didn’t align with their sense of a sacred narrative they had about suffering, there was not much purchase for it. Great question by the way, great question.

Martin:

Marie?

Griffith:

I told y'all at the beginning that this was our last event of the year, and I just want to say I could not be more delight and more thrilled to see we saved the very best for last. Thank you both so much.