

Martin Luther King's Living Legacy

King scholar reflects on his life as
a preacher, orator, and Civil
Rights leader

By Roscoe Barnes III

Note: This is a preprint of an article Roscoe Barnes III wrote in January 2009 as a reporter for Public Opinion in Chambersburg, Pa. It features an interview with Dr. David True, who is now Associate Professor of Religion at Wilson College. Since the publication of the 2009 interview, True has taught two courses on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Wilson College. In January 2016 he taught an MLK Travel Seminar that included visits to historical sites in Atlanta, Ga.; Greensboro, N.C.; Birmingham, Montgomery, and Selma, Ala., where the class also engaged in community service and nonviolent training.

See "Featured in Wilson Magazine: Eyes Opened" (<http://www.wilson.edu/featured-wilson-magazine-eyes-opened>) and "MLK Travel Seminar" (<http://www.wilson.edu/mlk-travel-seminar>)

The Interview

President-elect Barack Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. share a common legacy, and the success of one is undoubtedly linked to

the other, according to an assistant professor at Wilson College.

"It's hard enough to imagine an African American president. It's impossible without the Civil Rights movement with Martin Luther King," said David True, who studied King for his doctoral dissertation.

True earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree in Theology and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education. His dissertation was titled, "'Faithful Politics and the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr, and Walter Rauschenbusch.'" During a recent interview, True reflected on the legacy of King.

Barnes: What prompted you to include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in your research for your PhD?

True: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of my heroes. I discovered him in seminary. How can one not fall in love with the Civil Rights movement and all that it means in American history, and its continuing power in forming the nation's identity with Obama's election?

King was capable of bringing his faith to politics. I had grown up with the notion that the church had nothing to do with politics. It was about soul-winning exclusively. King believed that our faith took us out into the world even into politics. He stood for justice. He was courageous, eloquent and charismatic.

In my graduate work at the PhD level, he represented for me very much the same idea. I was writing a dissertation on this question of the role of faith and politics. I was trying to demonstrate that in the 20th century there was a line of thinker preachers, practical theologians, who led the way in shaping our politics for the better. They brought out the best in us, not in a narrow, divisive way. In other words, King was a part of a trajectory that

saw Christianity as having something in common with the best of democracy.

Barnes: What would many people be surprised to know about King?

True: I have found, especially when teaching, that students are quite familiar with King's name. But when you ask who he was, they will not answer that he was a preacher. They say "Civil Rights leader" and other things except that he was a preacher.

Barnes: What do you consider his biggest assets or strengths?

True: The areas in which his strength could be seen were his courage, his eloquence, his intelligence and his faith. The thing that strikes me is his ability to synthesize information so that he could draw from a number of sources—political and religious—and he could restate those in a way that spoke to very diverse audiences and to a large mass audience.

There was something in his intelligence that allowed for this ability to synthesize, from Thomas Aquinas and Mahatma Gandhi, to Reinhold Niebuhr. He was constantly working back and forth with these traditions. He was talking about "the deep wells of democracy" with Thomas Jefferson and gospel of equality with Paul. That ability to connect certain aspects of the Christian tradition with the democratic tradition really gave the Civil Rights movement a moral legitimacy and urgency that became impossible to resist. I was also struck by his abilities to cross boundaries. He would tailor his message to an audience in order to reach that particular audience.

Barnes: What do you consider his biggest weakness?

True: The obvious things: the plagiarism and the evidence of his sexual indiscretion. How we should respect him in regards to this will be viewed differently by different people. As for

me, as someone who grew up in the Christian faith and was reading the great Old Testament stories, I always found the tremendous power in their humanness. These were figures like me. The same goes for King, with me.

I'm not interested in putting him on a pedestal... but in trying to understand him as a fellow human being. He struggled and failed in some cases and in this we see a fuller picture of who he was.

Consider the vast amount of pressure he was under, constant death threats, the pressure to succeed in school. I'm not trying to excuse his failures. He certainly wasn't perfect. The challenge is to see the fuller picture of who he was. What we tend to do with so many of these figures ... is close them off in an airtight bag and then extract one aspect of their lives. They tend to become a caricature and consequently we lose touch with the continuing power to inform our lives.

For example, we often hear of King as this tremendously uniting figure, and he was, but he could also speak of the schizophrenia of American society and the terror that African Americans in the south had to endure. He said America, at times, could be a hypocritical nation. The task of a historian and theologian is not to pick and choose, but to see the full human being and the full measure of their thought.

Barnes: Can you think of one lesson or idea from King's life that would benefit us today?

True: His notion of love for another continues to be something we desperately need to hear and remember, and learn to embrace. Our differences can't be allowed to alienate us from one another. The call of faith is to love one another, even when that is not easy.

Barnes: If you could ask him one question, what would it be?

True: I would be curious about, what would have become of him had he lived. He spoke of aspirations to become a professor and retire from active life. It's hard to believe he ever could have done that. I tend to think that was more his tiredness talking than a realistic possibility. I would also like to hear him on issues that have emerged more fully since his death.

Barnes: Do you see any similarities between King and Obama?

True: They both have the ability to cross cultural boundaries, and in doing so, to speak to particular peoples and different audiences, to bring us together. It's part personal charisma and part penetrating insight into what it is we share. They all deeply believe that our lives are interdependent. That finally we are not simply individuals on isolated journeys, but that we have mutual obligations. We have rights that are to be respected, but we also have responsibilities, responsibilities for our neighbor, so to speak. To fail to see this is fail to see that we human beings are social beings who live in mutual dependence with one another but also with a larger social and natural world.

Obama also has a passion for justice like King; and I think he has a kind of moral common sense, a pragmatism. He's not interested in winning a point. He's interested in getting things done for the common good.

Writing about King

David True has written numerous articles and conference papers on King. In January 2004, he published, "Martin Luther King Jr. and the Possibilities of Democratic Politics" in the peer-reviewed journal, *Political Theology*.

In March 2002, he presented a paper titled, "Redeeming Democracy: Martin Luther King Jr. on Pursuing the Good in the Political Real," at

the regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Ga. In November 2002, he presented a paper titled, "Democracy and the Good: Martin Luther King Jr. on the Pursuit of the Good in the Political Realm," at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Toronto, Canada.

During the spring of 2002, True served as the visiting instructor for St. Andrews Presbyterian College, Laurinburg, N.C., where he lectured on "The Religious and Ethical Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.

True also serves as:

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About the Author

Roscoe Barnes III, Ph.D., is an author, historian and prison chaplain. He is currently researching F.F. Bosworth and Ernest Hemingway. He is the author of several books, including *F.F. Bosworth: The Man Behind 'Christ the Healer'* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). Visit his personal website at www.roscoebarnes.net or <https://independent.academia.edu/RoscoeBarnesIII>