In the nearly forty years since his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has become a beloved symbol to millions of people around the world, and we here at Trinity are only a small part of the global community that today takes time out to remember his life and legacy. That many people around the world are focused on King today is probably not surprising to us. What is less well known, however, is the way that King was focused on the world. We tend to remember him for his civil rights efforts in the South or at best as an American icon. Today, however, I offer three examples to show that the global worldview that was so important in King’s life. His ideology was shaped by a diverse group of thinkers from around the world; his early activism had a strong international perspective; and in the last years of his life, he returned to that perspective, at great personal cost. All of this shows that King truly was a citizen of the world.

While a student at Crozer Theological Seminary, a still-teenaged Martin was introduced to the teachings and activism of Mohandas Gandhi. King later wrote that he was “electrified” by Gandhi’s concept of Soul Force – the power of love and truth – and how it could be used as a tool for social change; he immediately went out and bought a half-dozen books on the subject. He was especially interested in Gandhi’s tactic of nonviolent resistance, which meant non-cooperation with evil and was channeled through peaceful protests such as strikes, boycotts and protest marches; the most famous example of this was his 1930 March to the Sea, during which more than 60,000 people walked 250 miles in protest of British rule in India. King also found great value in the fact that nonviolent resistance was based on love for the oppressor and a belief in divine justice.
Although he recognized that there were differences between the Indian struggle against colonialism and the African American struggle against racism, he nonetheless felt that Gandhi’s ideas could be applied in the U.S. “[Gandhi] was,” he later wrote, “probably the first person in history to life the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful effective social force on a large scale.”

It is notable that this devout American Christian studying to become a minister was able to appreciate and utilize the ideas of a Hindu from the other side of the world. This appreciation for international scholarship continued while King was a seminary student at Boston University. His study of comparative theology showed him that many faith traditions around the world share a common concern with the eternal struggle between good and evil. He also read the works of European theologians and philosophers such as Tillich, Kierkegaard, and Hegel, who convinced him that with pain and struggle world history would inevitably move towards universal justice. King did not become a disciple of any single philosophy; his genius was in his ability to incorporate the ideas of diverse scholars into something new – and perhaps more importantly – something with practical applications for social justice. Thus before he even completed his education, King had already become, intellectually speaking, a global citizen.

Several years later, the young man who was now Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King traveled to Africa. The former British colony Gold Coast had recently achieved independence from colonial rule and was now the nation of Ghana. On March 5, 1957, thousands of people gathered in the capital of Accra to hear President Kwame Nkrumah say “At last, Ghana, your beloved country, is free forever.” The crowd included Martin and Coretta Scott King, who had just concluded the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott,
along with other African, West Indian, and African American dignitaries, including C.L.R. James, Ralph Bunche, Louis Armstrong’s wife Lucille, Adam Clayton Powell, and future Jamaican Prime Minister Norman Manley. Also in attendance was U.S. vice president Richard Nixon, who according to one story asked several people “How does it feel to be free,” only to be told “We wouldn’t know. We’re from Alabama.”

King reiterated this message during his own meeting with Nixon, when he said “I want you to come visit us down in Alabama where we are seeking the same kind of freedom the Gold Coast is celebrating.” During a radio interview, he declared that Ghanaian independence would have a major impact on the lives of oppressed people in Asia, the U.S., and other parts of Africa. He also met with Tanzanian anti-colonial activist Julius Nyere and traveled to Nigeria and England before returning to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, which had funded the trip with a $2500 collection. The sermons and speeches that he gave after coming home showed the great impact that his travels had on his global consciousness. His first sermon, entitled “The Birth of a New Nation,” previewed a more famous oration to come in later years, stating that when the Ghanaian flag went up, “I could hear that old Negro spiritual once more crying out: ‘Free at last, free at last, Great God almighty, I’m free at last.’” He recognized that difficult days lay ahead for the new nation, saying that “this nation was now out of Egypt and had crossed the Red Sea. Now it will confront its wilderness,” but he hoped that African Americans would assist this process by lending their economic and industrial expertise to their brothers and sisters in West Africa. The recent movements in Ghana and Montgomery, he continued, showed the effectiveness of nonviolent protest in combating oppression and creating a “new order of justice, freedom and good will.” In
conclusion, King appealed to the Christian church to take a role in this struggle; “we got orders now,” he declared, “to break down the bondage and the walls of colonialism, exploitation and imperialism.”

King’s international travels and speeches further show how central a global worldview was in his life. In the years to come, though, he found it much more difficult to openly maintain that worldview. Like every other aspect of society, the Civil Rights Movement was fundamentally shaped by the Cold War, which provided both opportunities and limitations. Every African, Asian and Caribbean country that gained its independence during the 1950s and 1960s was enlisted in the Cold War, as both the U.S. and Russia tried to form alliances with them. Many of these postcolonial leaders tried to work with both sides. Part of this was savvy politics, part of it was an appreciation of what both had to offer, but part of it was also a commentary on American inequality. People around the world were not convinced by America’s claim to be the standard bearer for freedom when the international press showed them images of schoolchildren attacked with fire hoses in Birmingham and other acts of racism. Martin Luther King knew that these incidents were an embarrassment to the U.S. government, and so he worked tirelessly to draw attention to them, knowing that the government would be forced to intervene on the side of justice to restore its international reputation. In one speech, for example, he declared that “If America doesn’t wake up, she will one day arise and discover that the uncommitted peoples of the world will have given their allegiance to a false communistic ideology.”

Although the Cold War provided King with a useful civil rights strategy, it also limited his ability to form closer ties with other activists around the world. To do so
would have brought charges that he was a Communist sympathizer, and such accusations could destroy a person’s reputation in those days whether they were true or not; W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson are only two examples of this. King never visited Africa again, although in 1958 he did visit the Holy Land and make a long-anticipated pilgrimage to India, where he laid a wreath at Gandhi’s shrine. After seeing the legal changes that the Indian government had made to help its own oppressed minorities, known as the “untouchables,” King became convinced that the U.S. government also needed to enact some sort of affirmative action policy. For the most part, though, he avoided these sorts of overt comparisons to international situations except on rare occasions, and then only when speaking before all-black audiences. He did not abandon his global worldview or forget about the rest of God’s creation; he simply was not able to discuss it so openly.

This began to change, though, in the late 1960s.

King had always believed that human beings must do away with warfare and find peaceful solutions to their problems. This belief persisted through the 1950s, when Americans lived in fear of nuclear annihilation, and grew even stronger in the mid-1960s when the United States began sending troops to Vietnam. King saw this war as “the madness of militarism”: a failure of peacemaking and an act of aggression against a poor nation populated by people of color. It also meant that there was less government funding for the domestic reforms that King had fought so hard for. It should be noted that King reserved his criticism for the government, not the soldiers; he was fully capable of loving the troops while despising the war that they were being sent to fight in. At the beginning of the war, though, he was reluctant to publicly criticize the war, since this would alienate President Lyndon Johnson and many moderates around the country. When he offered to
mediate between the warring countries, reminding the government that he was after all a
Nobel Peace Prize winner, Johnson told him to “stick to [civil rights].”

For King, though, the Vietnam War was only one symptom of a global problem. People around in the U.S. and around the world needed peace and an end to poverty and oppression, not war. During his famous anti-poverty campaign in Chicago, he noted that African Americans in the Windy City were subject to a system of “internal colonialism…not unlike the exploitation of the Congo by Belgium”; he also called on middle class blacks to boycott companies that refused to employ not only their own kind but also Puerto Ricans and other people of color. When he proposed that peace could be found in southeast Asia if China were admitted to the United Nations, the federal government became even more critical; President Johnson now refused to even invite him to discussions on civil rights. One of King’s allies wrote that “Vietnam is perhaps the gravest challenge of Dr. King’s career…He is no longer – and probably never can be – a spokesman for just an American Negro minority.” His consciousness as a global citizen had compelled him to speak out in favor of what he thought was right, just as he always had on civil rights issues; not anti-American, but pro-peace.

In 1967, King openly joined the peace movement. He argued that war was destroying not only Southeast Asia but also the U.S., where “an ugly repressive sentiment to silence peace-seekers” labeled anyone who did not support the war as “quasi-traitors, fools and venal enemies of our soldiers.” Nevertheless, he concluded, his “passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as the moral example of the world” compelled him to take a stand. In another speech, he declared that his faith had led him to speak “as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam…for the poor of America
who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam...[and] as a citizen of the world.” His global consciousness, always present but long subdued by external pressures, had been refined and now given to the world with a message of peace. Although some attacked him as a Communist traitor and the FBI increased its monitoring of his movements, he did not care, responding with one of his most famous quotes: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He had rejected the idea that he should focus only on domestic civil rights issues and leave foreign affairs alone; for King, there was no such thing as “foreign affairs” since all people were children of God.

This global perspective only continued to grow in the last months of King’s life. In his 1967 “Christian Sermon on Peace” in December of 1967, he argued that humanity would survive only if people began looking past race, class, and nationality and developed a world perspective; “we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” he declared, and “we aren’t’ going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact.” He proposed a Poor People’s Campaign that would mobilize all underprivileged Americans regardless of race or ethnicity; “We’re going,” he said, “to reach out to the poor people in all directions in this country. We’re going into the Southwest after the Indians, into the West after the Chicanos, into Appalachia after the poor whites, and into the ghettos after Negroes and Puerto Ricans. And we’re going to bring them together and enlarge this campaign into something bigger than just a civil-rights movement for Negroes.”

He was engaged in this campaign when he was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Even the aftermath of this terrible event showed his importance around the
world. From Rome, Pope Paul VI expressed his “profound sadness.” The Japanese government declared that it was “gravely concerned.” In Nigeria, the American embassy hung a portrait of King draped in black crepe outside the front door. The British Parliament passed resolutions expressing its horror, while the German Parliament stood in silent tribute, and 1,000 Germans borrowed one of King’s favorite nonviolent tactics, marching through the streets of West Berlin to express their condolences. At his funeral, Rev. Benjamin Mays, a former professor at Morehouse College, said “God called the grandson of a slave…and said to him: Martin Luther, speak…about war and peace; about social justice and racial discrimination; about [obligations] to the poor; and about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality and war.”

These were the ideals that King lived, worked, and ultimately died for. His personal philosophy was shaped by thinkers from many different racial, ethnic, religious and national backgrounds; this international intellectual perspective helped him understand what needed to be done to redeem the world and bring about social justice. While still in the early days of his career, he formed close ties with other scholars and activists from around the African Diaspora, understanding that desegregation in the U.S. and anti-colonialism overseas were all part of one larger struggle against oppression. In later years, this broadened into a desire to end all human suffering by ending war, poverty, discrimination, and the tribalism that caused many of these problems. In all of this he saw the interconnectedness of humanity. Martin Luther King’s vision was larger than the Civil Rights Movement, larger than the South, larger than the U.S., because it demanded recognition of the dignity of all human beings, given to us by God. He lived in the United States, but the world was his home.
Bibliography
