

American Thought Embodied in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

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Abstract: “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written on April 16, 1963, by Martin Luther King, Jr., the famous civil rights leader. The 1960s in America is usually called a decade that changed a nation. Some important social reform movements took place during this period. And it is also a special period for intellectual history which includes these main streams of American thought, such as puritan Christianity, revolutionary rationalism, and transcendentalism, pragmatism. Based on a close reading and a detailed analysis of the letter, we can find the traces of the influence of the American thought on Martin Luther King.

Introduction

The most influential streams of thought in America cannot be without puritan Christianity, revolutionary rationalism, transcendentalism, and pragmatism. Each of these streams had ever played an important role in their respective historical time. Their influences can be still found in modern America. The 1960s in America is usually called a decade that changed a nation. Some important social reform movements took place during this period, such as the civil rights movement, the youth movement, and the women’s liberation movement. And it is also a special period for intellectual history which includes these main streams of American thought.

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” is an open letter written on April 16, 1963, by Martin Luther King, Jr., the famous civil rights leader. King wrote the letter from the city jail in Birmingham, Alabama, where he was confined after being arrested for his part in the Birmingham campaign, a planned non-violent protest conducted by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference against racial segregation by Birmingham’s city government and downtown retailers. King’s letter is a response to a statement made by eight white Alabama clergymen on April 12, 1963, titled “A Call for Unity”. The clergymen agreed that social injustices existed but argued that the battle against racial segregation should be fought solely in the courts, not in the streets. They criticized Martin Luther King, calling him an “outsider” who causes trouble in the streets of Birmingham. This letter is regarded as a classic piece of American writing, not only for King’s anti-racism thought but for his eloquent skill. How did the main streams of American thought influence King? Can we find some traces of these influences in this letter? This paper is aimed at finding an answer through a close reading of the letter and a detailed analysis.

1. Puritan Christianity

Puritanism is a reform movement emerged within the Church of England during the middle of the 16th century. It had a profound influence on the social, political, ethical, and theological ideas of England and America. The puritans shared a common Calvinist theology of predestination that states whether we will be saved or not, was determined before we were born. In spite of that the puritans looked for signs that would tell them whether they were saved or damned, as a way of providing a feeling of control over their lives. They came to believe that success in this world was an indicator of whether they were saved. So they worked hard in order assure that they were indeed saved by God. Max Webber thinks this work ethics plays an important role in the formation of the capitalist spirit. Puritan attitudes and ethics continued to exert an influence on American society. They made a virtue

of qualities that made for economic success—self-reliance, frugality, industry, and energy—and through them influenced modern social and economic life.^[1]

The protestant Christianity including puritan Christianity has developed a lot with the past of time, especially under the influence of the First Great Awakening in the 18th century and the Second Great Awakening in the 19th century. Both of the two movements stressed firm faith in God, and believed in the total depravity of human being. But there are some differences between them. The First Great Awakening followed Calvinism, believing that there is no freedom of will; achievement of afterlife is predestined and Grace is irresistible. The Second Great Awakening was influenced by Arminianism, believing that there is freedom of will; achievement of afterlife is conditioned by faith and Grace is not irresistible.

Because of his family background and career experience, puritan Christianity had an impact on Martin Luther King. Both his father and grandfather were ministers of Baptist Church, and he himself had been a Baptist minister as well as a social activist till his death in 1968. Baptist church is one branch of protestant church. The tenets of Baptist churches include soul competency (liberty), salvation through faith alone, scripture alone as the rule of faith and practice, and the autonomy of the local congregation.

The religious color can be found from the beginning to the end of “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”. At the beginning of this letter, King explained why he was there in Birmingham. He said he was invited there by the affiliated origination of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He compared his work for freedom as that of the prophets of the 8th century B.C. and the Apostle Paul. At the end of the letter, he said to the addressee, “I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother.”^[2]

King showed his sincere love for and firm faith in God in his letter. He thought Jesus was an extremist for love, and Amos an extremist for justice. Even when he was criticizing the nonfeasance of the church in the civil right movement, He wrote, “I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.”

Baptists believe that faith is a matter between God and the individual. So when King felt disappointed with the indifference of the church, he thought, “Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world.”

When King explained why he advocated civil disobedience by breaking the unjust laws, he also appealed to Christian tradition. He wrote, “It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.”

Furthermore, the main goal of the civil right movement to obtain freedom and equal rights can be traced back to the puritan origin in American history. The early settlers in north-America were mainly puritans who escape from Europe to pursue religious freedom. They believe humans were created by God equally. So King said in his letter, “We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”

2. Revolutionary Rationalism

During the revolution time in the 18th century, rationalism played an important role in America. Most founding fathers such as Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson were influenced by the thought of enlightenment, in which reason was advocated as the primary source for legitimacy and authority. In many ways, the Enlightenment brought the ancient Greek spirit of Rationality back into the modern world. They believed in Deism, the view of God is that of an intelligent Creator who brought the world into being and then stepped away. Under the influence of Locke’s theory of natural law, they thought the universe is ordered by God according to rational principles; reason studying these principles can determine

standards for human behavior. The rationalists stressed the success in this life instead of afterlife. Franklin thought hardworking and earning money are signs of virtue. Democracy and liberty were strongly advocated by the rationalists, because they believed humans are created equal.

The influence of rationalism is obvious in King's letter. As we know, the goal of the civil right movement is to abolish segregation and obtain the equal rights for the black people. King wrote in his letter, "...thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence." These words remind us what Paine had ever said in *Common Sense*: "mankind is originally equal in the order of creation", and "As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture".^[3] Jefferson also wrote in "The Declaration of Independence": "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, which among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness".^[4]

It should be noticed that in the letter King also mentioned two pioneers of rationalism, Socrates and Aquinas, whose thoughts had a profound influence on the 18th century rationalism. When King tried to defend his direct action, he said, "Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so..." In his defense for civil disobedience, he mentioned Socrates again, "To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience." Thomas Aquinas as a medieval thinker upheld the value of human reason and natural knowledge. He set about reconciling Aristotelianism with Christianity. When King tried to define unjust law, he said, "To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

3. Transcendentalism

American transcendentalism was an important movement in philosophy and literature that flourished during the early to middle years of the 19th century (about 1836-1860). Under the influence of the Second Great Awakening and American Romanticism, it began as a reform movement in the Unitarian church, extending the views of William Ellery Channing on an indwelling God and the significance of intuitive thought. It was based on a monism holding to the unity of the world and God, and the immanence of God in the world. For the transcendentalists, the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world and contains what the world contains. Emerson, the spokesman of transcendentalism advocated self-reliance: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius."^[5] He opposed conformity and consistency. Every man has capacity and right to make use of his own intuition. So the transcendentalists stressed the direct connection between God and human soul without the interference of church. In the aspect of social politics, they advocated individualism and democracy, because they stressed the inner dignity and equality of the individuals.

Therefore King's pursuit of equal rights and freedom is not only in accordance with the tenets of Christianity and rationalism, but also that of transcendentalism. The same is true of King's criticism of the white church and his approval of direct connection between God and individuals. In his letter, King wrote, "How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists." "Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world." His opinions echoed Emerson's in *Self-Reliance*: "If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-Society, vote with a great party either for the Government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers,—under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are." "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps."^[6]

King's defense of civil disobedience by breaking the unjust laws also reminds us Thoreau's *Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau cherished the freedom of the individuals, opposed the various restrictions from the government. His thought is consistent with King's to some extent. Their consistency also embodied in their approval of using nonviolent measure in the struggle. As we know, Thoreau support abolition movement in 19th century, but he took a pacifist attitude, believing that one can break unjust laws, but never commit violence. King's nonviolent approval in the civil rights movement was not only influenced by Gandhi in India but also by Thoreau.

Transcendentalist disapproval of conformity and consistency was embodied in King's criticism of the white moderate and the church. The white moderate is more devoted to "order" than to justice. In order to keep the "negative peace" without tension, they would rather wait than taking any constructive action. This is typical of conformist attitude. As for the modern organized church, King regarded it as "an archdefender of the status quo", which lost the sacrificial spirit of the early church, could not save the nation and the world. "Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?" On the other hand, he praised those church members who left the organized church to join the civil rights movement. "But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom."

4. Pragmatism

Pragmatism can claim to being America's first and most lasting contribution to world philosophy. As a philosophical movement it began in the 1870s. It had been the leading philosophy of America from the late years of 19th century to the early years of the 20th century. The most important of the 'classical pragmatists' were Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. The influence of pragmatism declined during the first two thirds of the 20th century, but it has undergone a revival since the 1970s with philosophers being increasingly willing to use the writings and ideas of the classical pragmatists, and also a number of thinkers, such as Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam and Robert Brandom developing philosophical views that represent later stages of the pragmatist tradition. Pragmatism is marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. Pragmatists stress practice and effect. They deny any absolute and ultimate truth, but believe "Truth is what woks".^[7] James thinks pragmatism is a mediator between empiricism and rationalism, though he dubs pragmatism an "empiricist" method.

The traces and influences of pragmatism can be found in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". When king explained why they took direct action, he said, "The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." As we know, "pragmatism" is from the Greek word "pragma", which means action. So pragmatists take "action" as the main means and "effect" as the goal. King and his followers wanted to negotiation with the government, but the latter gave no response. They waited and tolerated, but no result came out. So at last they decided to appeal to direct action in order to achieve the expected effect. In this sense, King can be called a pragmatist in practice.

When King explained how one determined whether a law is just or unjust. The influence of pragmatism can also be found. He wrote,

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

Here King showed us that whether a law is just or not depends on its effect in practice. This reminds us Peirce's canonical statement of his maxim in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear": "Consider what

effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” And James had ever said, “Ideas become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience”; “An idea is true so long as it is profitable in our lives”.^[8]

King’s stress on effect in practice can also be found in other two examples. First when he defended his breaking the law, he said, “I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.” Second, King wrote, “... though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label.” For this change of attitude, he explained, “So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?” According to King’s reasoning, a law breaker could in reality showed highest respect for law because what he broke was an unjust law; an extremist could be a good one because he is an extremist for love. This is in fact in accordance with pragmatist tenets—“Truth is what works.” And an idea is true so long as it is profitable in people’s lives.

King’s criticism about the conformity of the white moderate and the church is also in accordance with the pragmatist idea about changeable truth. Because “Truth is what works”, and “Ideas become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience”, pragmatism prevents one from a dogmatic way of thinking, since one can never claim one’s truth is absolutely right but must always test one’s theories against experience. It allows for flexibility and change to adapt to a situation. The white moderate wanted to keep the existing order; the organized religion is bound to the status quo. These attitudes both are opposed to the pragmatists’ idea about truth. They were stumbling blocks not only of the civil rights movement but also of the development of the society.

Though this detailed analysis, we can conclude that the four mainstreams of American thought did leave their traces and influences in King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”. This may be another reason why this letter is regarded as a classic piece of American writing, apart from King’s anti-racism thought and his eloquent skill. From this we can also find how greatly the thoughts of a nation and a period influence the social and political life. Then we must rethink the significance of the research work on culture and philosophy. This reminds us of Karl Marx’s famous epitaph: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point however is to change it.”

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