

Jonathan Eig's King: A Life (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023)

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Review of Jonathan Eig's *King: A Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023)

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The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968; Ph.D. in theology, Boston University, 1955) is the subject of the American Jewish journalist Jonathan Eig's massively researched and admirably lucid new 680-page 2023 book *King: A Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Because Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis in 1968, he was a martyr for black civil rights – and for non-violent protest.

No doubt the Jim Crow practices in the South that inspired his activism are mostly historical memories today – perhaps in part thanks to Dr. King's non-violent protests. But slavery has been described as America's original sin, and the scars of slavery and racial inequality are still with us today. Consequently, I believe that the *agape* love that Dr. King advocated for non-violent protest can still be advocated today for those who want to fight racial inequality in American society today.

Disclosure: Twice in my young life, I heard the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speak in person. (1) I heard the Baptist minister speak to in person on the campus of Saint Louis University (SLU), the Jesuit university in St. Louis, Missouri, on Monday, October 12, 1964 – just days before it was announced that Dr. King had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – the topic of Eig's Chapter 31: "The Prize" (pp. 385-403); and (2) I also heard Dr. King speak in person on March 25, 1965, in Montgomery, Alabama, at the conclusion of the famous march from Selma, Alabama – the topic of Eig's Chapter 35: "Selma" (pp. 426-438).

In the fall semester of 1964, I took my first course at SLU from the American Jesuit pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). In the spring semester of 1966, I took my second course from him. In the fall semester of 1967, I took my third course from him – which is when I first read his 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of Ong's 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University.

In the fall semester of 1964, I first read selections from Ong's 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies*. But I do not remember exactly when I first read Ong's 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason [in the Age of Reason]*; Albert B. Lord's 1960 book *The Singer of Tales*; Marshall McLuhan's 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*; and Eric A. Havelock's 1963 book *Preface to Plato*. However, I had them all well before I started teaching black inner-city youth in the context of open admissions in the City of St. Louis and in New York City.

Yes, I was inspired by Dr. King's talks to devote ten years of my life (1969-1979) to teaching about one thousand black inner-city youth, alongside about one thousand white students, in

the context of open admissions in the City of St. Louis and in New York City (in 1975-1976).

Based on my experience of teaching black inner-city youth in the context of open admissions, I published my controversial article “IQ and Standard English” in the NCTE journal *College Composition and Communication* (1983). In it, I argue that the black and white IQ differences are most likely due to environmental and cultural differences, not to genetic and hereditary differences – to counter Arthur R. Jensen’s suggestion that they are due to genetic and hereditary differences. More specifically, I set forth a hypothesis that could be tested through longitudinal studies. I framed my hypothesis about cultural and environmental differences in terms I had learned from Ong about residual forms of primary oral culture and about print culture in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s. In addition, I was significantly influenced by Havelock’s 1978 book *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato* – especially by his Chapter 13: “The Early History of the Verb ‘to Be’” (pp. 233-248).

Also see my follow-up article “A Defense for Requiring Standard English” in *Pre/Text: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory* (1986). It is reprinted in the book *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, and Boundaries*, edited by William A. Covino and David Jolliffe (1995, pp. 667-678). End of disclosure.

In any event, Eig’s book contains a “Prologue” (pp. 3-6), 45 crisply written chapters (pp. 9-552), and an “Epilogue” (pp. 553-557). His book contains “Notes” keyed to page numbers (pp. 559-632) and an “Index” (pp. 643-669). Eig “interviewed more than two hundred people” for this book (p. 634; he lists their names on pp. 639-642).

Certain persons in Eig’s book are widely known (e.g., President John F. Kennedy, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, President Lyndon B. Johnson). But many of the persons that Eig mentions repeatedly throughout the book are not widely known. Consequently, the “Index” is a handy resource to use to refresh one’s memory of some of them.

Now, like the first Catholic president of the United States, John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), the black Baptist minister and civil rights activist was an extraordinary womanizer (the “Index” contains a sub-entry on King’s “extramarital affairs” [p. 656; also see the sub-entry “King’s infidelities and” under the entry on Coretta Scott King, p. 655]). In Eig’s Chapter 23: “Temptation and Surveillance” (pp. 270-278), he says, “[Stanley] Levison points out that King and John F. Kennedy had something in common in this regard. ‘Both had powerful fathers who were men of notorious sexual prowess, Levison told historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. ‘Perhaps both were unconsciously driven to prove they were as much men as their fathers’” (p. 272).

However, despite the frequency of President Kennedy’s name in Eig’s book, Eig does not happen to mention that President Kennedy was the first Roman Catholic ever elected president of the United States – a predominantly Protestant country in 1960, with a heritage of anti-Catholicism. Symbolically, Kennedy’s election in 1960 was important for many American Catholics. But the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church soon impacted all American Catholics – when it mandated the use of vernacular languages in the

Mass (replacing Latin) and abolished the custom of not eating meat on Fridays and much else. (It roughly overlapped with my years of undergraduate studies [1962-1966].)

For further discussion of Vatican II, see *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (2023); concerning President Kennedy, see pp. 565, 567, 627-628, 629, 696-697, 698-700, and 704-705.

Now, in Eig's Chapter 7: "The Seminarian" (pp. 74-80), he says, "King's genius in later years would be his ability to deliver messages that inspired Black and white listeners alike, messages that made racial justice sound like an imperative for all, messages that crossed lines of theology and geography, that suggested both sides needed to act if the racial divide were ever to be erased without violence. . . . Crozer [Theological Seminary] helped him find the right words and the right tone so that he could one day explain his diagnosis clearly and passionately to audiences of every race" (p. 78).

Based on my own experiences of hearing Dr. King speak in person in 1964 and 1965, mentioned above, I agree with Eig's characterization of "King's genius in later years." King's messages on both occasions were essentially about racial justice and about how the need to act without violence was imperative for all. On both occasions, I found listening to him speak was uplifting. With respect to the words of Dr. King's messages to his audiences, I do not disagree with any of Eig's specifications about Dr. King's later genius. However, I would add that he was a powerful speaker – and I attribute the power of his oral delivery to the rhythms of black Baptist preaching that he had assimilated – rhythms that were attuned to and expressions of the residually oral black culture in the United States.

Yes, to be sure, I was young and impressionable when I heard him speak in 1964 and 1965. Moreover, I felt crushed when he was assassinated in 1968. Nevertheless, I was inspired by Dr. King's life and work to subsequently devote ten years of my young life (1969-1979) to teaching black inner-city youth in the context of open admissions, mentioned above.

In addition, Eig says that at Crozer Theological Seminary, King wrote "as a Christian I believe that there is a creative personal power in the universe who is the ground and essence of all reality – a power that can not be explained in materialistic terms.' History, he concluded, was guided by the spirit, not by matter" (pp. 78-79). Like King, Ong does not hold the materialist philosophical position – on the contrary, he holds the non-materialist philosophical position.

For an accessible discussion of the non-materialist philosophical position, see Mortimer J. Adler's 1990 book *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*. For Ong's rejection of the materialist philosophical position advanced by E. O. Wilson in his 1975 book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, see Ong's 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness* (esp. pp. 11, 27-28, 119, and 169), the published version of Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

In addition, Eig says, "He [King] continued to show particular interest in the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, who argued that the 'Kingdom of God' required not only personal salvation but social justice, too. King admired Rauschenbusch's call to action and related to his sense of optimism. It is 'quite easy,' he wrote, 'for me to think of the universe as basically friendly. King believed that human personality reflected the spirit of God. But the negative corollary to that belief meant that racism, which degraded personality and denigrated human life, had to be evil. Even in the North, he experienced that evil" (p. 79).

Now, in Eig's Chapter 9: "The Match" (pp. 88-100), he says, "King chose [Boston University], in large part, for the chance to study with Edgar S. Brightman, known for his philosophical understanding of the idea of a personal God, not an impersonal deity lacking human characteristics. 'In the broadest sense,' Brightman wrote, personalism is the belief that conscious personality is both the supreme value and the supreme reality in the universe.' To personalists, God is seen as a loving parent, God's children as subjects of compassion. The universe is made up of persons, and all personalities are made in the image of God. The influence of personalism would support King's future indictment of segregation and discrimination, 'because personhood,' wrote the scholars Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., 'implies freedom and responsibility'" (p. 89).

For further information about Brightman, see the Wikipedia entry about him.

For further discussion of personalism, see the Wikipedia entry on "Personalism." Under the subheading "Catholic personalism," we read the following statement: "A first principle of Christian personalism is that persons are not to be used, but to be respected and loved. In *Gaudium et Spes* [The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], the Second Vatican Council formulated what has come to be considered the key expression of this personalism: 'man is the only creature on earth that God willed for its own sake and cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself' [quoted from numbered paragraph 24]." In any event, Ong characterized his work as phenomenological and personalist in cast.

Now, in Eig's Chapter 11: "Plagiarism and Poetry" (pp. 107-112), he says, "For his doctoral dissertation, King compared conceptions of God presented by two theologians Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. King criticized both Tillich and Wieman for their distance from personalism. Tillich ascribed personality only to beings, not to God, while Wieman described God in relatively depersonalized terms, as an 'integrating process.' King rejected both ideas, saying human fellowship with God could only occur when both parties to the relationship possessed understanding and respect. Ascribing a human personality to God, King argued, in no way implied a limitation of God's power" (p. 110).

Eig also says, "Personalism stresses that every human being shares the image of God. In the view of King and other personalists, every act of injustice toward a person is thus an insult to God. Unlike more abstract theologies, personalism connected to people's everyday lives and, to King, felt consonant with the action-based preaching of his father and grandfather" (p. 110).

In addition, Eig says, "King's dissertation attracted little attention until 1990, when scholars at Stanford University announced that substantial parts had been plagiarized. . . . Despite his plagiarism, and despite his fundamental disagreements with them, King learned lasting theological lessons from Tillich and Wieman. In his seminal work, *The Courage to Be*, Tillich wrote that courage to be requires acceptance of anxiety – the anxiety that comes with guilt, condemnation, and death. That courage means staying connected to God when one loses faith. 'But doubt is not the opposite of faith,' Tillich wrote, 'it is one element of faith.' That philosophy would help King find strength in the face of fear, in moments of exhaustion, and perhaps most poignantly, as he became consumed with the certainty of his own premature death. . . . King, in other words, took enough from Tillich to adapt the theologian's work to his own purpose and own audiences. In a 1967 sermon, King said people did not need complicated philosophy or theology. He compared Tillich's notion of God as 'Being-Itself' to the

way that ordinary people had always worshipped, thinking of God as a ‘lily of the valley . . . a bright and morning star.’ That kind of belief, King said, leads to the simplest conclusion of all, when a man or woman says of God: ‘He is my everything’” (pp. 111-112; only the last ellipsis here is in Eig’s text; but the earlier ones are mine).

Now, in Eig’s Chapter 20: “Leaving Montgomery” (pp. 217-233), he says, “In recent months, King wrote, he had become more convinced than ever in the reality of a personal God. ‘Perhaps the suffering, frustration, and agonizing moments which I have had to undergo occasionally as a result of my involvement in a difficult struggle have drawn me closer to God,’ he wrote. ‘Whatever the cause, God has been profoundly real to me in recent months. . . . Therefore, I am not yet discouraged about the future. . . . In a dark, confused world, the spirit of God may yet reign supreme’” (pp. 223-224; Eig’s ellipses).

In conclusion, Eig is remarkably straightforward and candid in discussing Dr. King’s faults and failures (e.g., his plagiarism, his extramarital affairs). But he also discerns Dr. King’s accomplishments and his suffering and his genius in his later years.

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