

The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by Lewis V. Baldwin

reviewed by [Michael G. Long](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

When students walk into my class on Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time, they are unlikely to know that King favored Sweden's democratic socialism over U.S. capitalism, but they certainly know the sensational stories about King's plagiarism and his relationships with women other than his wife. If these college students represent society, Lewis Baldwin and his colleagues face massive obstacles in their attempt to define King's legacy.

Defining that legacy is also difficult because, as Clayborne Carson notes in the foreword, a disappointing effect of celebrating a national holiday in honor of King has been the watering down of his radical critiques of U.S. society. We teach our children that King articulated a wonderful dream in 1963, but we rarely let them know that his dream turned nightmarish soon after, when four little girls were killed in a bombing at a Birmingham church.

Fortunately, Lewis Baldwin, professor of religious studies at Vanderbilt University, is up to the task he has set for himself. He has already written extensively on King's cultural and political legacy, and he carefully documents his research--something often absent from King scholarship. Especially refreshing in this collection of essays is Baldwin's combing of the early King writings available through the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project.

A detailed exploration of the early King is important for showing the weaknesses in the radicalization thesis, which posits that King's politics and economics became much more radical during the last three years of his life (1966-1968). Carson rightly suggests that the pre-1955 writings reveal that the young King was far more radical than scholars have tended to depict him. For example, as a graduate student at Boston University, he was already calling for the demise of U.S. capitalism.

These impressive essays--three by Baldwin, one by Rufus Burrow Jr. (who teaches social ethics at Christian Theological Seminary) and one by Barbara A. Holmes

(ethics, Memphis) and her sister, Washington, D.C., Superior Court Judge Susan Holmes Winfield--argue that not all students of King have accepted, let alone appreciated, his political, economic, legal and religious radicalism. Baldwin claims that political conservatives, including members of the Religious Right, ignore and undermine King's radical legacy by opposing affirmative action policies and supporting cutbacks in aid for poor children and skyrocketing budgets for an already bloated Department of Defense.

In Baldwin's view, an indispensable part of King's legacy is his radical vision of a democratic-socialist state that would lift the poor out of poverty, distribute power to the powerless, and practice a global politics of justice and peace through the United Nations. Baldwin also identifies King's political method--coalition politics coupled with mass social protests, guided by political leaders devoted to the common good--as part of a rich legacy too often ignored by conservatives.

If Baldwin wants to set the King legacy straight for conservatives, Barbara Holmes and Susan Holmes Winfield seek to clarify it for more progressive types who believe that King's focus on Christian love was too accommodationist. Far from supporting the status quo, they claim, "King's call to love challenged the laws that supported the antithesis of love." And his performative acts of love, they argue, directly resulted in a movement toward laws favoring the beloved community. Unlike protest in the contemporary world, King's appeals to love had proven results--results that did not accommodate court opinion, but in many cases overturned it and shaped it anew.

Finally, all of the authors, especially Rufus Burrow, seek to wrestle King away from secularists who would gut his legacy of spiritual beliefs. Burrow rightly notes that it is impossible to understand King's political and legal thought without grasping his belief in an objective moral order established by a personal God. For Burrow, King's political and legal thought begins and ends with his conviction that the individual, created by a God of love, possesses infinite worth. Burrow's essay, a highlight of the book, successfully takes on King scholars who have either dismissed personalism as a relatively insignificant influence in King's life or ignored the various ways in which King affected the shape of personalism itself.

The battle over King's legacy no doubt will rage on. But Baldwin and his colleagues have rightly called us back to the textual evidence. They have thereby empowered us to fight even more faithfully for the beloved community that King hoped would be his enduring legacy.