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Communism



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In the Cold War climate of the 1950s and 1960s, the threat of communism galvanized public attention. In 1953 Martin Luther King called communism “one of the most important issues of our day” (*Papers 6:146*). As King rose to prominence he frequently had to defend himself against allegations of being a Communist, though his view that “Communism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible” did not change (King, *Strength*, 93). Although sympathetic to communism’s core concern with social justice, King complained that with its “cold atheism wrapped in the garments of materialism, communism provides no place for God or Christ” (*Strength*, 94).

King first studied communism on his own while a student at Crozer Theological Seminary in 1949. In his 1958 memoir, he reported that although he rejected communism’s central tenets, he was sympathetic to Marx’s critique of capitalism, finding the “gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty” that existed in the United States morally wrong (*Stride*, 94). Writing his future wife, Coretta Scott, during the first summer of their relationship, he told her that he was “more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic. And yet I am not so opposed to capitalism that I have failed to see its relative merits” (*Papers 6:123; 125*).

King began preaching on “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity” in 1952, repeating sermons on the same theme throughout his career and including one as a chapter in his 1963 volume of sermons, *Strength to Love*. Communism’s presence demanded “sober discussion,” he preached, because “Communism is the only serious rival to Christianity” (*Strength*, 93). King critiqued communism’s ethical relativism, which allowed evil and destructive means to

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justify an idealistic end. Communism, wrote King, “robs man of that quality which makes him man,” that is, being a “child of God” (*Strength*, 95).

Despite King’s consistent rejection of communism, in 1962 his associations with a few alleged Communists prompted the **Federal Bureau of Investigation** (FBI) to launch an investigation into his alleged links with the Communist Party. In 1976 the U.S. Senate committee reviewing the FBI’s investigation of King noted: “We have seen no evidence establishing that either of those Advisers attempted to exploit the civil rights movement to carry out the plans of the Communist Party” (Senate Select Committee, *Book III*, 85). From wiretaps initiated in 1963, the FBI fed controversial information to the White House and offered it to “friendly” reporters in an effort to discredit King. In 1964 King told an audience in Jackson, Mississippi, he was “sick and tired of people saying this movement has been infiltrated by Communists ... There are as many Communists in this freedom movement as there are Eskimos in Florida” (Herbers, “Rights Workers”).

In 1963 King bowed to the wishes of the **Kennedy** administration and fired SCLC employee Jack **O’Dell** after the FBI alleged that he was a Communist. King also agreed to cease direct communication with his friend and closest white advisor, Stanley **Levison**, although he eventually resumed contact with him in March 1965. FBI surveillance and bugs tracked King’s political associations and produced evidence of King’s extramarital sexual activities—information that was later leaked to some reporters.

In 1965 King faced questions from journalists on *Meet the Press* about his association with Tennessee’s **Highlander Folk School**, which had been branded a “Communist training school” on billboards that appeared throughout Alabama during the **Selma to Montgomery March** and showed King attending a Highlander workshop. King defended the school, saying that it was not Communist and noted that “great Americans such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Reinhold Niebuhr, Harry Golden, and many others” had supported the school (King, 28 March 1965).

King’s position on the war against Communists in northern Vietnam, like his overall position on communism, was rooted in his Christian belief in brotherhood. Indeed, in the summer of 1965 the press reported King’s off-the-cuff remarks to a **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** rally in Virginia: “We’re not going to defeat Communism with bombs and guns and gases ... We must work this out in the framework of our democracy” (“Dr. King Declares”). In his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* King decried America’s “morbid fear of Communism,” arguing that it prevented people from embracing a “revolutionary spirit and ... declaring eternal opposition to poverty, racism, and militarism” (King, *Where*, 190).

Footnotes

Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 2006.

“Dr. King Declares U.S. Must Negotiate in Asia,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1965.

John Herbers, “Rights Workers Report Attacks,” *New York Times*, 27 July 1964.

King, “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity,” 9 August 1953, in *Papers 6:146–150*.

King, Interview on Meet the Press, 28 March 1965, **MLKJP-GAMK**.

King, “Let Us Be Dissatisfied,” *Gandhi Marg* 12 (July 1968): 218–229.

King, *Strength to Love*, 1963.

King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958.

King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 1967.

King to Coretta Scott, 18 July 1952, in *Papers 6:123–126*.

Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Book III: Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976, S. Rep. 82-86; 94–755.