

Review of *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Plagiarism Story*,  
edited by Theodore Pappas, (Rockford, Illinois: The  
Rockford Institute, 1994) 107 pages.

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The fact that with our student body largely Southern in constitution a colored man should be elected to and be popular [in] such a position is in itself no mean recommendation. The comparatively small number of forward-looking and thoroughly trained negro leaders is, as I am sure you will agree, still so small that it is more than an even chance that one as adequately trained as King will find ample opportunity for useful service. He is entirely free from those somewhat annoying qualities which some men of his race acquire when they find themselves in the distinct higher percent of their group.

The extract is from the letter of recommendation for Martin Luther King which Crozer Theological Seminary professor Morton Enslin wrote to Boston University. (p. 87) As one liberal to another, Enslin wanted to make clear that King was their kind of negro. In it we find the most significant key to understanding King's pre- and post-mortem careers. He was the liberals' boy.

This book is a collection of essays, letters and documents, most of which appeared at various times in *Chronicles*. The writers include the editor (of both *Chronicles* and this book), Theodore Pappas; journalist Frank Johnson of the London *Sunday Telegraph*; Thomas Flemming; Jon Westling, Walter G. Muelder, and Peter Wood of Boston University; Peter Waldman of the *Wall Street Journal*; Charles Babington (writing in *The New Republic*); with a foreword by Jacob Neusner. The last, while writing some of the bluntest comments condemning the unprincipled publishing industry and hypocritical academy, is still typical of our time in his inability to come to terms with actualities of King's character and career. He speaks of "the authentic achievements of Martin Luther King, Jr." and "the glories of his brief courageous life." (p. 19)

What this book makes clear is that King, who came from a family of shysters turned preachers, began cheating, plagiarizing and otherwise lying when in high school and never gave it up. Lacking the aptitude for serious scholarly work, in his passage through various liberal schools, particularly theological seminary and graduate school, he expressed a devotion to the various icons of apostate theology and socialist thought, and

the professors accounted this unto him for righteousness. There were, as Enslin put it, few “forward-looking and thoroughly trained negro leaders” (i.e. churchmen processed and accredited by apostate seminaries) and King showed that he knew how to take direction and fit into liberal circles. He was a man they could use.

It is easy to see the liberals' problem. While the black church then was as replete with scoundrels as it is today, they did not see liberal theology and agitation as the basis for their careers. As a result, the great mass of blacks in the South were a barrier to the liberals' social plans. Nor were there many leaders in the black churches liberals could use. (This has since been remedied, mainly by the enviable fame and success of King and his methods, but partly though lowering of academic standards to augment the army of properly indoctrinated and certified blacks). Men like King could (and did, the liberals were right) give the black churches a new direction, converting them from obstacles to liberal assets.

There are two things to be gained from reading this short book for yourself. The first is an appreciation of the massive scope of King's plagiarism, which was certainly known in his day. (The press did not think it would help the cause to report it.) Presumably the segregationists, since they did not capitalize on King's many plagiarisms, were simply too ignorant to recognize them.<sup>1</sup>

For it is not only in his dissertation that King plagiarized. He did so as an undergraduate in Morehouse College, and throughout his seven years of graduate study, particularly in papers in his major field, theology. King may simply have lacked the talent to succeed honestly in academics. “In fact, we know from his scores on the Graduate Record Exam that King scored in the second lowest third on his advanced test in philosophy—the very subject he would concentrate in at B.U.” (p. 88)

Once out of school King did not change. As with his habit of sexual licentiousness, he continued to plagiarize. He had to if he were to get where he wanted. King's admirers point to his eloquence as a significant aspect of his impact and success. Yet, in his academic work, “King's plagiarisms are easy to detect because their style rises above the level of his pedestrian student prose. In general, if the sentences are eloquent, witty, insightful, or pithy, or contain allusions, analogies, metaphors, or similes, it is safe to assume that the section has been purloined.” (p. 90)

King plagiarized in his books, *Strength to Love Stride Toward Freedom*. Further:

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1 This points to very significant problem for any group opposing the program of the dominant culture. It is the liberal establishment that owns the press and the universities with all their reporters and academics. They will research and publish what helps their cause, whether it is studies tending to support the left or the dirty linen of the other side. Non-liberals do not enjoy the advantages of this intellectual “infrastructure” and the same few people must combine activism and research and publishing. Even then, they can get their ideas and discoveries to the public only through marginal, limited circulation publications. Compare the highly publicized shootings of abortionists with the scarcely reported violence of pro-abortion factions.

King's Nobel Prize Lecture, for example, is plagiarized extensively from works by Florida minister J. Wallace Hamilton; the section on Gandhi and nonviolence in his "Pilgrimage" speech are stolen virtually verbatim from Harris Wofford's speech on the same topic; the frequently replayed climax to the "I Have a Dream" speech—the "from every mountainside, let freedom ring" portion—is taken directly from a 1952 address to the Republican National Convention by a black preacher named Archibald Carey; the 1968 sermon in which King prophesied his martyrdom was based on works by J. Wallace Hamilton and Methodist minister Harold Bosley; even the "Letter From Birmingham City Jail", that "great American essay" so often reproduced in textbooks on composition, is based on work by Harry Fosdick, H.H. Crane, and Harris Wofford.... (p. 94)<sup>2</sup>

The book's second lesson is the abject capitulation of academic standards before the demands of political correctness. This arises in two contexts: the dishonesty of Boston University administrators in the face of the plagiarism revelations, and the cover-up by the editors of the King papers at Emory University. Their first position was indignant denial, then came grudging limited admissions mixed with half-truths designed to mislead reporters, and finally a politically correct spin on the story according to which plagiarism (though they prefer other terms) is not so bad after all when done by blacks.

Boston University appointed a committee:

As the committee concluded in its September 1991 report, because King plagiarized only 45 percent of the first half of his dissertation and only 21 percent of the second, the thesis remains a legitimate and "intelligent contribution to scholarship" about which "no thought should be given to the revocation of Dr. King's doctoral degree." (p. 103)

The need to defend King's standing (and, it turns out, other prominent black writers) led to new critical theories of this special form of "discourse". As was earlier done with pimping, plagiarism was elevated to a beautiful expression of the flowering of black culture.

It certainly promoted King's career. Wherever he was scheduled to appear to mouth liberal pronouncements before a backdrop of black marchers, the tv cameras showed up, making him the publicly visible leader of the negroes. It was the sort of movement in which being seen on TV as a leader amounted to being the leader.

In time, however, new goals emerged for the radical black movement, and new leaders, less beholden to the older liberalism, appeared to promote these goals. The movement against us participation in Vietnam (it was pro-war, they simply wanted the Communist

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<sup>2</sup> Many black "churchmen" demand that the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" be added to the Bible. The plagiarism revelations have not led to a retraction.

side to win) also began to take away direction and momentum from MLK's "leadership". King needed to reposition himself in front of his people. He began to mouth the line of the new left. US involvement in the Vietnam war was wrong, he said, because it was a war in which white people killed yellow people. Even worse, white people made use of blacks to kill yellow people. With his new racist arguments and obvious sympathy for the Communists King began to threaten the reputation and moral credit he has amassed as the spokesman for equality, integration and other notions liberals had urged on Americans as both good and harmless.

But just when King seemed about to destroy his immense value to the liberals as a tool acceptable to the white middle class, he was assassinated. As a martyr he has been worth a least twice as much to the liberals as he was alive. In death King continues "free from those somewhat annoying qualities which some men of his race acquire".