

From reformer to revolutionary

by [Lewis V. Baldwin](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

*I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.*, by Michael Eric Dyson

Almost every conceivable facet of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life has been studied, analyzed, criticized and celebrated since his death in April 1968. Much has been written about his roots in southern black Baptist Protestantism, his intellectual sources and categories, his genius as an orator and leading pulpiter, his civil rights crusade, and his contributions to the reshaping of America's social, political and cultural landscape. Yet Michael Eric Dyson succeeds in offering a fresh portrayal of the civil rights leader while reconstructing his meaning and relevance.

An ordained Baptist minister, cultural critic, scholar and the Ida B. Wells Barnett Professor at Chicago's DePaul University, Dyson brings to his treatment of King a rare and vital blend of keen objectivity, analytical depth, exciting prose and critical insights. He both celebrates King and forthrightly confronts the many questions about his moral and intellectual integrity. He challenges the reader to look beyond King the cultural hero and national icon to the King who was both deeply flawed and ethically strong. He focuses especially on accounts of King's sexism, compulsive adultery and plagiarism. But unlike others who have identified and criticized King's moral failings, Dyson both humanizes King and argues persuasively that the civil rights leader is the greatest American in our history.

Dyson skillfully examines the tragic degree to which King's image and words are still being distorted and misused. He cautions liberals against sanitized and romanticized images of King, and rebukes religious and political conservatives for misappropriating King's words in defense of anti-affirmative-action policies, antiabortion causes and other right-wing agendas. Dyson reminds us that King grew and matured beyond the optimistic and rather naïve "dreamer" of the March on Washington (1963) to ultimately become, through his attacks on capitalism and U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a powerful threat to the status quo. The "true Martin Luther King Jr." is to be found neither in the words and actions of radical left-wingers who use his name in support of every conceivable cause, nor in the claims of right-wingers who reduce him to a "safe," system Negro.

The contention that King became increasingly "militant" or "radical" in his approach to America's problems is not new. Kenneth L. Smith, Adam Fairclough, James H. Cone and other King scholars have all made this point. But Dyson goes beyond the usual, superficial discussions of King's shifting attitudes toward race and economics to capture the civil rights leader's growing distrust of white America, his strong alliance with the poor, his call for a radical redistribution of economic power, his anti-Vietnam stance and attacks on U.S. foreign policy, and his movement toward militant pacifism or massive civil disobedience as a path to revolutionary social change. In its exploration of the moral, spiritual and intellectual journey that catapulted King from reformer to revolutionary, *I May Not Get There with You* is unsurpassed.

Dyson's critical assault on the King family's efforts to control and profit materially from King's papers, voice and image will contribute significantly to the continuing debate on the subject. His concern for the commercialization and exploitation of King's image is justified and impossible to reject on moral grounds, but in a capitalistic society it raises as many questions as it answers. One might argue that King's family is far more deserving of financial compensation than the hundreds of publishers, record companies and other businesses that market and sell his image and words. Though Dyson would be among the first to agree with this observation, he is most interested in how both black and white Americans might advance King's legacy with integrity and for the common good.

Dyson's examination of King's revolutionary vision of Christianity stands as a firm challenge not only to the contemporary black and white churches, but also to people in all religions who persist in separating faith from politics and social action. He argues that King disliked empty piety and apolitical religion as much as he did selfish ambition, unscrupulous competition and materialism. Dyson calls religious leaders back to the kind of prophetic ministry and sacrificial leadership that King exemplified.

Perhaps the most creative aspect of Dyson's book is its treatment of King in relationship to black nationalism and hip-hop culture. Dyson claims that King embraced vital aspects of an enlightened black nationalism, which rejected ethnic absolutism, the ideal of racial separatism, and hatred for the oppressor. And in his attitudes toward women, death and other issues, King has much in common with hip-hop artists such as Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. Here Dyson contends that the prophet of creative nonviolent dissent is as much a role model for young radicals

in the hip-hop generation as is Malcolm X. Many critics will casually dismiss these claims, choosing instead to believe that King's values sharply contrast with black nationalist principles and the lyrics and lifestyles of "gangsta" rappers.