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Books: Conversation with historian Keith Miller '71 (PhD '84)

by Kathryn Hopper

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Books: Conversation with historian Keith Miller '71 (PhD '84)

by Kathryn Hopper

Keith Miller '71 PhD '84 is a professor of English and faculty affiliate of the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict in ASU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and his work focuses on the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. A leading expert on the speeches and oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr., he is the author of the widely cited Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources. His latest work Martin Luther King's Biblical Epic: His Final Great Speech, examines King's last speech as an interpretation of the Bible.

How did you first get interested in studying the speeches of Martin Luther King?

I began studying King's sermons when writing my dissertation at TCU in 1983 and 1984. I was fortunate to interview King's father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., in 1983, shortly before he died. I was inspired to study King because of my dad, Rev. Ernest Miller, a Disciples of Christ minister who graduated from TCU right after World War II and who later graduated from Brite Divinity School. He dedicated himself to a personal Gospel and a Social Gospel and ended his career as founder and director of Habitat for Humanity in South Texas. He never met King, but they attended their different seminaries at the same time and shared a very similar curriculum. I often heard Dad talk about many of the same preachers, theologians, and Biblical scholars—such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Harry Emerson Fosdick—that King studied in his seminary. That gave me a certain perspective on King that certain other scholars lacked.

Why are you still studying King?

He won't let go of me. He delivered approximately 2,500 orations and published many essays and books, dictated hundreds of letters. The complete papers of Martin Luther King (which are now being published by Stanford University) are far, far more voluminous than the complete works of Shakespeare. There's much to study. Over the last 20 years researchers have written way more books about Lincoln's speeches than about King's. There are only three scholarly books about "I Have a Dream." My book is the first scholarly book about King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop," his final speech. There is virtually no new data on Lincoln. There are people who knew King well who are still alive, and it's a great pleasure and a great learning experience to meet them and listen to them.

What drew you to study King's African American background?

I gradually realized that, in addition to studying the seminary curriculum that my dad and King shared, I needed to investigate African American preaching, which King heard a lot of while growing up in his father's church. At first I felt deeply challenged. I grew up in small-town Texas among churchgoers in the Disciples of Christ. How could I learn what African American churches and culture were like? But when I started reading the few scholarly treatments of the African American pulpit, I realized that virtually all of them were condescending, sketchy, or otherwise badly flawed. I decided that it would be hard for me to do worse. I got hold of African American sermons from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s that were recorded and sold on blues labels. In the end, I argue way more for the importance of King's African American roots than many other scholars do.

What new insight does this new book offer?

King interprets the Bible in many hundreds of addresses, but scholars pay scant attention to his interpretation. In his final speech, he provides something of a tour of the Bible—from *Exodus* to *Jeremiah* to *Isaiah* to *Amos* to *Luke* to *Revelation*. I argue that he explicates the Bible in a loosely systematic fashion. He overturns the dominant perspective that Christianity has maintained toward Judaism over the last 2,000 years. Instead of treating Christianity as a religion that supplants Judaism, he argues that Judaism is the indispensable wellspring of Christianity. He contends that one must first understand Moses and the Hebrew prophets before one can grasp Jesus. King's favorite passage of scripture is *Amos* 5:24 ("Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.") He quotes that in "I Have a Dream," in "I've Been to the Mountaintop," and in many other speeches. He uses the translation of that passage supplied by his friend, Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian. In his last oration, he also uses a concept from another Jewish theologian to help explain Jesus's Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Further, this book gives unprecedented attention to the setting of the speech, the national headquarters of the largest African American Pentecostal denomination. An extremely obscure, but absolutely superb architect managed to put 3,734 seats in the sanctuary while somehow placing the pulpit fairly close to everyone. King's audience of 3,000 exuberant supporters cheered lustily throughout the speech, spurring him toward greater eloquence. Had this sanctuary not been available, King, who was exhausted and possibly sick with a cold, would have stayed in his motel room that night. He would never have given the speech at all.

Aren't people already familiar with his last speech?

The famous conclusion of "I've Been to the Mountaintop" is available as a snippet on YouTube. But the speech lasted an entire hour, and the rest of it is almost unknown. The conclusion concludes *something*. In order to understand the ending, one must consider the whole speech. Otherwise, the ending makes no sense. Also, instead of viewing the speech through the lens of his assassination the next day, I ask readers to imagine themselves in Memphis listening to the speech on the night that it was given. No one was sad after the speech. Instead, joy and elation flooded the sanctuary.

Did the process of researching this book bring any surprises or changes to your perception of King and the civil rights movement?

Like researchers in general, scholars of the civil rights movement pay almost zero attention to Pentecostal churches. But a Pentecostal bishop strongly supported King's cause in Memphis, the strike of African American garbage workers. Many of the garbage workers were Pentecostals. So were others in the audience for King's last address. In the speech, King twice uses Biblical imagery of sacred fire within the human body. For Pentecostals, this imagery resonates with imagery of "tongues of fire" in *Acts* that they consider especially important. Although King was a Baptist, there is definitely a Pentecostal dimension to the speech. For King, as for Pentecostals, the Bible is only

incidentally a book; more importantly, the Bible is an ongoing drama that engulfs garbage workers and everyone else.

You have written about the influence of Jim Corder, Gary Tate, Betsy Colquitt, and David Vanderwerken in guiding your dissertation at TCU. When you were writing this book, did you hear their voices?

They didn't focus on African American rhetoric. But they were had large, capacious intellects and encouraged students to explore many scholarly passions. They didn't try to harness their students. That's the beauty of teaching the humanities. The ultimate purpose is not to teach anyone to understand Shakespeare or Faulkner or Martin Luther King. The ultimate purpose is to prompt students to expand their minds, their sensibilities, their cultural reach, and their ability to write. Betsy Colquitt appreciated Leonardo da Vinci, Allen Ginsberg, and every artist, composer, and writer in between. Although I teach in the largest university in the U.S. and have been here for 25 years, I have never in my life met anyone like her. Her daughter, Clare Colquitt, is a professor of English at San Diego State University and is a source of stimulating conversations. In graduate school, I also learned much from other graduate students, especially Donna Haisty Winchell, Camille Adkins, and Kathleen Hudson.

What are you working on now?

I am now researching a book about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. While it is one of the most popular of all American autobiographies, some of it is patently fiction. It is not at all clear what parts were dictated by Malcolm X and what parts were composed by his collaborator, Alex Haley, or someone else. Neither is it clear whether Malcolm X would have approved the final product, which appeared six months after his assassination.

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