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Rhetorical Process

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The 1960s were not a peaceful time in the United States. The country was on edge and for good reason. There were fears that the Cold War would escalate to nuclear Armageddon, the president was assassinated, and tensions were high as families sent their sons to struggle against an unseen enemy in the jungles of Vietnam. The 60s were a period defined by conflict and change. It was within this context that the culmination of one of the most important movements in American history, the Civil Rights Movement, took place. The movement had been gaining momentum since the mid-1950s with Rosa Parks and the passage of the Civil Rights of Act of 1957, but the late 1960s found America at a tipping point, and the Civil Rights Movement was poised to propel the country into a future that included equal rights for all.

How this future was going to unfold was still unclear because the Civil Rights Movement had arrived at an ideological crossroads. Two of the most prominent leaders, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr., were approaching the idea of obtaining civil rights for all in two totally different ways. Malcom X was a member of the Nation of Islam and while, like MLK, he was working towards black empowerment, he advocated for black nationalism and said that black Americans should be able to protect themselves from injustice, by any means necessary. MLK’s philosophy was more in line with the traditional Civil Rights movement with his advocation for general equality for black Americans in society and the pursuit of a more pacifistic approach to achieving equality. In a time full of war and unrest both men were great and inspirational leaders, but King saw the importance of achieving the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, not through physical unrest and by further separating the African American community from the rest of America, but by showing that speech is mightier than the sword.

Not only were those speaking at the same time as King important rhetorically, but so were some of the great leaders who came before him. King drew from the ideas and speeches of great African American leaders like Fredrick Douglass, and from perhaps the most influence pacifist of all time, Ghandi. All aspects of life for African Americans would be influenced by the rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement. It would impact sports as Muhammed Ali’s speech contained remnants of both the violent rhetoric of Malcom X and the nonviolent speech of King (Gorsevski). It would even impact gender roles in the African American community as Kings speech called for men to be nonviolent (Wendt). The rhetoric of the past and present shaped not only King and his speech throughout the Civil Rights Movement but shaped the African American mind forever.

In this paper I will further explore this idea by asking the question, how did the rhetorical context in which King is speaking influence his nonviolent approach to the issue of civil rights? By rhetorical context I mean the ideas and speech of others that MLK drew on, as well as the rhetoric of the time he is speaking in with regards to the ongoing Civil Rights movement. The context that will be explored will span the works of theologians and political leaders who came before King, other civil rights activists and figure heads, and how King used sermons and other rhetorical devices to give his audience a relatable context in which to experience his speech.

Looking into how MLK spoke is extremely important because, while we can examine his words in the context of past and present rhetoric, his words had a profound impact on the future of rhetoric. Examining King’s work not only helps show how he was able to move a whole country in a positive direction with just his words, but it also teaches an important lesson that many people forget when they are advocating for political causes. We as a country have begun to lose decency in our speech. We attack each other instead of debating views, we spew hate and violence towards those we disagree with. Martin Luther King Jr. was a man who loved those who hated him, and he stood up for himself, not by reciprocating violence and hate, but by inspiring others through his words. It is incredibly important to examine the work of a man who spoke as MLK did, so we have a positive example to emulate when we ourselves engage in dialogue. By examining his speech, we can find how he used the rhetoric of his past mentors and present colleagues to advocate for the Civil Rights movement in the way that he thought was right and create a new rhetorical context for the future.

In the pages that follow I will rely on a variety of sources to make clear the rhetorical context in which King was speaking. In addition to these sources, I will be examining a specific speech delivered by King at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. That speech is “Our God is Marching On!” (also known as “How long, Not long) and it was delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. on the 25th of March 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama.

As important as it is to examine the speeches that Martin Luther King gave, it is equally important to examine the ideas and rhetoric from which he drew many of his tactics and philosophies. Of particular interest are those items that influenced how he spoke and his emphasis on the nonviolent approach. In a work by Dennis Dickerson, he lays out the people and ideals from which the theological basis for Martin Luther King’s approach to the issue of civil rights arose. Dickerson identifies King as “a primary beneficiary” of the work of African American intellectuals from the 1930s and 40s as they established ideas like “segregation as sin, Jesus as an ally in the struggle, and racial reconciliation…” (233). Dickerson identifies Benjamin E. Mays, who was president of Morehouse College when King attended, as one of Kings main role models and early influences (233). Just like many of his colleagues, and then King himself, Mays was heavily influenced by Ghandi and the nonviolent revolution that taken place in India. His book “The Negro’s God” combined the ideas of Ghandi and black religious thought and helped shape how King would seek to free black Americans from oppression. Dickerson sees Mays’s influence to be so strong that he says in his work that the ideas that Mays introduced were “woven into King’s rhetoric.”

While black intellectuals introduced King to the theological ideals that would shape his rhetorical approach to civil rights, they weren’t necessarily the originators and most influential proponents of the nonviolent approach that King used. The man who was really the father of the nonviolent approach used by King was Ghandi. Ramin Jahanbegloo explores exactly how King was influenced by Ghandi and where the ideas of Ghandi appear in King’s rhetoric in his article. King may not have gotten the chance to meet or directly interact with Ghandi like many of the black intellectuals who came before him, but he read the works of Ghandi extensively. King saw Ghandian philosophy as a “new and powerful weapon against injustice” (113). Jahanbegloo cites King in the article as saying “face violence if necessary, but refuse to return violence” (113). Just like Ghandi talked about his Constructive Program in India, so did King about his ideas to rid American of racism and poverty. They both saw that a new set of values needed to be instilled in the people if they wished to succeed. Jahanbegloo continues on in the article by discussing how King married the ideas of Ghandi with the Christian idea of “Agape” love. King described Agape love as this, “Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it ... It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community” (115). By combining the nonviolence of Ghandi and the Gospel of Jesus, King was able to create “social tools for a better social, political, and economic order (115). As discussed in the previous paragraph and as will be emphasized as the paper continues, King’s rhetoric emerged from his education as a pastor and the impact the mentors he had impacted his life. This work by Jahenbegloo sets a theme that is present throughout other works about King and in his own work. He does not limit his context to that which he is familiar with. He did not just use the ideas of the black theologians who mentored him in his speeches. He pushed himself beyond that. He read Ghandi for himself and he crafted his speeches around how others were talking about Civil Rights to make them more impactful than if it would’ve been constrained to purely black Christian rhetoric. Expanding the context in which he spoke was key to his success and will be explored in the rest of the paper

The context that King spoke in was not just shaped by the ideas that he agreed with. As there is with any movement and push for change, there was an opposing side. Malcom X was the figure head of the other perspective that believed that a more violent approach was necessary if African Americans were going to stand a chance in the fight for equality. As August H. Nimtz says in his article, there were no two people who “epitomized more the violence/nonviolence dichotomy *and* connection than Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X” (2). Nimtz saw the dichotomy that was created as necessary for the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement. To Nimtz it was the actual violent rhetoric of Malcom X that made the nonviolent threats made by King in his speeches credible (14). Not only did the words of Malcom X help create the context in which King was speaking, but so did the actions of those who were in opposition to both King and Malcom X. From the violence against protestors, to the assassination attempt against King carried out by the KKK, the nonviolent rhetoric of King was constantly challenged and then strengthened by the actions of those who opposed it. This notion that opposition helped strengthen the community King was trying to craft is consistent with the idea of Agape love that was mentioned previously and identified by Jahanbegloo. One of the focuses of Agape was the “…the insistence on community even when one seeks to break it…” (Jahanbegloo 115). Without this opposition it would’ve been difficult for King to juxtapose his cause against anything else and would lead to a weak sense of community among those who agreed with him. Without violence there can be no nonviolence. So as unfortunate as violence can be, it was necessary for King’s cause and strengthened his community of follows as they rallied around the Agape love he preached.

In their work, authors Ellen W. Gorsevski and Michael L. Butterworth also explore how violent and nonviolent rhetoric were balanced by Muhammed Ali and how his words showed that the rhetoric of both sides of the Civil Rights movement were not as separate as most people thought, but were instead deeply intertwined (58). They find Ali speaking at the intersection of King and Malcom X by using the context behind both of these leaders in his speech. One thing he did was explain how Ali focused heavily on telling the truth and how this aligned with the truth telling rhetoric used by both with both King and Malcom X (61-62). This work shows that while King’s work was predominantly nonviolent, it was not disconnected from the overall goal of gaining civil rights. His speech did not just apply to a nonviolent movement but was used within the context of the Civil Rights movement as a whole. This work also illustrates that King’s doctrine was not necessarily reserved just for Christians but was a uniting doctrine. King’s mentors were, as discussed by Dickerson, primarily black Christian intellectuals, but their ideas were not drawn from a Christian doctrine that was isolated from other ideals. Much of the previously discussed work talks about how the mentors of Kings drew from Ghandi, a man who himself was not a Christian. Here in the work of Gorsevski and Butterworth we see a practicing Muslim, Ali, using some of the ideas presented by King to shape his stance on things like the Vietnam War. When examining thinkers and perspectives that changed the world, it is vital to look at them in an appropriate context. King’s context was not just the Christian or non-violent communities but rather a worldwide stage as he advocated for Agape love and community for all.

Davi Johnson explores the idea that the context King spoke in extended beyond words and even beyond the Civil Rights movement. In his work, Johnson examines how King orchestrated large media events such as the Birmingham campaign to draw media attention to his movement and to craft the context in which he is speaking (2-3). Johnson looks at how King was able to make the racism in America more visible by creating a context in which powerful images could be captured. Johnson says that the images of police officers and their dogs confronting young protestors that were captured at the Birmingham campaign King organized “struck like lightning in the American mind” and allowed the American people, particularly white moderates, to contextualize the racism that King would then go to speak about (5-6).

As mentioned before, King’s rhetoric also extended beyond the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Simon Wendt explores this in “They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men.” Wendt looks at how throughout the civil rights era “certain notions of manhood continued to impede the efforts of civil rights activists to convince African Americans of the efficacy of non-violence” (548). This meant that to be successful King had to not only approach the issue of nonviolence within the context of civil rights, but he also had to challenge the status quo about what it meant to be a man in African American society. Challenging the status quo was not out of the ordinary for King. He challenged Christian establishment by looking at Ghandi for influence. He challenged political norms with attempts to create lasting political change in a country that was known for fighting wars for freedom. As Nimtz pointed out when he compared King and Malcom X, this nontraditional and out of the box thinking was never easy. King was tested time and time again, but it was his resolve in the face of adversity that made his unorthodox approach to civil rights so long lasting.

The rhetorical context around King’s speech has been studied in great detail, far greater than can be fully explored here. But how does that context play into his speech “Our God is Marching On”? That is what will be investigated here. The literature that was explored above will be used to help frame the context within which King was speaking. In the following paragraphs, additional sources that more closely explore exactly how King spoke and the way that King uses the context of his time as well as the ideas of other thinkers to shape his message will be analyzed. The presence of religious rhetoric, the nonviolent/violent dichotomy, and various rhetorical techniques will be identified and discussed.

First to be examined in the work will be the presence of religious rhetoric. Using religious rhetoric made it easy for those to whom King was speaking to more effectively absorb his message because it was presented in a way they were exposed to every Sunday in church. Crafting his speeches in the context of religious sermons made his message that much more potent and lasting. King was a proponent of “personalism” which is the idea that the value of the individual is found in their personality and sparked his idea of a “personal God” (Neumann 47). One place that King uses this personalism is at the very beginning of the speech when he gives an example of an elderly black woman refusing a ride while on a march because in her words, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.” King uses the example of this woman to show that each individual was going to have to fight if they wanted to see positive change for the collective. The individual soul was going to be key to winning this fight. The people respond to this by calling out “Yes, sir. All right.”

Other important religious idea that shaped Kings speech were those described in The Sermon on the Mount. From this sermon, two ideas were particularly impactful for King, the love of enemies and non-retaliation (Neumann 48). These concepts shaped how King would speak and are apparent at many places in “Our God is Marching On.” One example of non-retaliation is when he repeats the phrase “Let us march on ballot boxes” six times in succession. This phrase here serves as a non-violent tie into Malcom X’s speech “The Ballot or Bullet.” King does not give those listening the option of the bullet, he instead promotes the idea of using the ballot boxes to achieve their aim. The focus on the ballot boxes takes advantage of the context in which he is speaking and unites King with those like Malcom X because they both push for change, but King makes sure it is clear that the path to victory is through the ballots, bullets are not an option. As mentioned previously in Nimtz’s work, part of what made King so successful was the existence of other thinkers like Malcom X so that his nonviolence could be effectively placed into context by comparing it to other approaches to Civil Rights. The concept of loving your enemies appears later in the speech when King says, “Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.” Additional examples emphasis of the religious context are seen near the end of the speech when King asks and repeats the question “How long?” in regard to how long it will be until African Americans are delivered from their state of prejudice and discrimination. This question seems to elicit a call to the verse from Psalm 6:3 “My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?” King David, the author of the book of Psalms in the Bible, is here asking the Lord when he will deliver him from the suffering he is enduring. King uses this same question in his speech because African Americans are suffering, and their souls are under attack. He does not leave those listening without an answer to the question though and encourages them that it will not be long until they are delivered from this suffering.

King did not just draw influence from the ideas of Christianity to create the content for his speech, but he crafted it within the context of the “Old-time preaching” style to elicit emotion in his audience. It makes sense that King would use this style because it was something he was familiar with and knew would resonant with his audience. As Dickerson discussed, much of his education was in the context of religion so he had a deep understanding of the influence that information presented in the form of a sermon could have.

In his article, Wesley T. Mott lays out the structure of this preaching style and identifies where it shows up in King’s historical essay (413). Here this structure will be identified Mott says that first, the speaker must “establish rapport between speaker and audience.” King does this in “Our God is Marching On” by summarizing the events of the march from Selma to Montgomery, reminding them that he was with them during the struggle, and establishing a rapport via their collective hardship. He furthers his connection with the audience by going into detail about the origins of the Civil Rights movement and how their fight for equality has been filled with struggle and suffering. He then moves to the second part of “Old-time preaching” described by Mott as the “statement of the text.” King references a few texts in this speech but begins with a piece from James Weldon Johnson that rounds out the part of speech talking about the long road that African Americans had traveled both literally and figuratively to get to Selma. King inserts texts three more times in the speech when he tells the story of the battle of Jericho, uses parts of the poem “The Present Crisis”, and lines form “Battle Hymn of the Republic” at the end of the speech. After the piece from Johnson, King begins the body of the speech which as Mott says is characteristic of “Old-time preaching,” and is full of “repeated emotional climaxes” (413). He constantly elicits an emotional response in his audience, filling the speech with opportunities for the audience to participate in call and response. The repetition of phrases and ideas is apparent in the speech as he uses phrases like “will not dissuade us…. will not divert us…. would not discourage us” and constantly repeats the call to march, using the word and forms of it 32 times throughout the speech. He then finishes the speech with the fourth part of “Old-time preaching” by “resolving the emotional tension…” (413). He does this with the repetition of the question “How long” and answering it with “Not long.” Throughout the entire speech King is building up this tension as he lays out the struggles that he and his non-violent movement have faced. He then resolves this tension by telling the audience that it will not belong until they are delivered, because “His [God] truth is marching on.” By framing his speech in the context of a traditional sermon, King makes it easy for the audience to identify with and engage in the message he shares, allowing his non-violent philosophy to be spread much more effectively.

King did not only use religious rhetoric in the context in which he was speaking, but he also used traditional rhetorical strategies that relied on the context he was speaking in to drive home his point. This use of strategies outside the context of religion but still inside the scope of rhetoric is just another example of how King did not constrain his thought to just one perspective. Just as he relied on the teachings of Ghandi or used his differences with Malcom X to strengthen his position, he used rhetorical strategies outside the context of religion to strengthen his speech.

One such strategy he used is identified by Glen McClish. This strategy was “restrained energy” and was a way that King was able to distinguish his ethos (45). This strategy of restrained energy consisted of King calling out those he says are part of the reason for the mistreatment of African Americans in a “carefully controlled, yet stinging way.” McClish identifies this tactic in Kings “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” but it is absolutely present in “Our God is Marching On” because in it King targets the southern aristocracy, who he blames for all the segregation that has occurred in the south. Because of the context, (he was speaking in front of black southerners), the criticism of the southern elite was relatable and well received by the audience. King made sure not to alienate all white southerners with the critique because his goal is for African Americans and white Americans to work together for a better future so he ensures that this criticism is pointed directly and obviously not at the white South as a whole, but just the elite.

Another rhetorical strategy that King was able to implement effectively, particularly because of the religious context in which he was speaking, was the use of charisma. In “The Rhetoric of Power” by Jill Robinson and Danielle Topping, they identify how King used different rhetorical terms, like those relating to affiliation, optimism, activity, and inspiration to become an incredibly powerful speaker. All of these terms can be seen in King’s work. This is once again another example of how King expanded the context beyond religion and into the world of politics and leadership. The strategies he used were meant to empower others. Just as a traditional pastor, like those King learned from, would use empowering rhetoric to bring together their congregation, King used powerful rhetoric to encourage his listeners to continue pursuing this path of nonviolence. An example of King using affiliation rhetoric is when he uses the word “us” when he is talking to the audience. It is never just about him and his success but the success of the collective. He uses optimistic language as well throughout the speech. He ends the speech reminding the audience that “God is marching on” and no matter what, they will be delivered. He also fills his speech with activity rhetoric. He calls the audience to march on the ballot boxes and reminds them that “The battle is in our hands” so they now must take action to see the change they want implemented. Finally, King uses inspirational language to give power to his speech. He inspires the audience at the end of the speech when he asks, “How long?” and answers “not long” giving reasons as to why it won’t be long before segregation ends. He says that “no lie can live forever” that “you shall reap what you sow” and “…the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

The context in which King is speaking appears in many different ways in his speech. He uses his religious background and the influence leaders like Ghandi had on him to spread his nonviolent philosophy more effectively. He speaks of nonviolence during a time when violent tactics and philosophies were also being supported and used the dichotomy between the two to help strengthen his stance. King also uses traditional rhetorical techniques buttressed by the context in which he is speaking to elicit passion in the audience for his cause. Martin Luther King Jr. was the greatest speaker of his decade and one of the most influential leaders of all time. He achieved greatness through rhetoric, using the power of words to forever change the face of Civil Rights.

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