

Agape, Nonviolence, and the Beloved Community: Applying King's Philosophy to Contemporary Society

This paper considers the relevance and value of Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy to the issue of civility and politics in a changing world. Specifically, I consider the following aspects of King's moral and social philosophy and how they are relevant to the theme of this conference. First, I discuss King's account of agape as non-affective, all-inclusive, unmerited, redemptive goodwill for others, and creative. These features of agape are relevant to discussions of civility in politics in the following ways. As agape is action-based love as opposed to affection-based love, it is impervious to political differences that breed dislike. Further, as agape is all-inclusive and unmerited, all political opponents are the proper objects of the agapeic lover's love. I argue that by redemptive goodwill, King means to say that one's goodwill is embedded in a wholeness ethic. The agapeic lover does not merely will that the racist be happy, for said person may be happy if racially unjust policies are implemented. Rather, the agapeic lover wills the racists the good of having their corrupted moral system aright. I focus most on the creative aspect of agape, or what I call agapeic creativity. Agapeic creativity is a disposition toward beloved community generativity and ingenuity. The beloved community is a society in which there is justice, brotherhood, and goodwill. Thus, agapeic creativity is a disposition to create justice where there is injustice, brotherhood where there is estrangement, and goodwill where there is ill will.

The nonviolent resistance campaigns that King orchestrated were forms of agapeic creativity. As such, King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance is stronger than is often appreciated. I argue that a weak version of nonviolent resistance which is satisfied merely by abstaining from harming persons or property is often touted by social activists as being in line with the civil rights protests orchestrated by King. However, the stronger nonviolence philosophy utilized by King not only required that one eschew injury to persons or property, which King called "external violence," but that one eschew internal violence of hatred and bitterness as well.

I argue that these elements of King's philosophy are valuably informative to the issue of civility and politics and a changing world in the following ways. Civility and politics is subsumed in King's ethics of agapeic love and strong nonviolent resistance. This is because the agapeic lover is always in a state of seeking community with others, including their political opponents. As the beloved community for King is a place of justice, brotherhood, and goodwill, one's engagement with others will necessarily be directed toward this goal. It will be directed toward ensuring justice exists and eliminating injustice, but doing so in a way that reconciles one with their political opponents and while having goodwill toward their opponents. Further, I argue that agapeic creativity is dually grounding and responsive to shifts in society and world systems. It is grounding in that the agapeic creativity always seeks to create the beloved community. Threats to democracy may ebb and flow, technology may make the world of tomorrow unrecognizable to the world of yesterday, social values may shift, but for those who believe in King's vision, the goal in the midst of all this has not changed. This is the generative aspect of agapeic creativity. Simultaneously, however, the ingenuity aspect of agapeic creativity seeks to create the beloved community in a way that is responsive to changes in the world.