

Address at the Religious Leaders Conference
on 11 May 1959

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Washington, D.C.

In a 17 April 1959 letter, Vice President Richard Nixon invited King to a conference to discuss how religious leaders might support the President's Committee on Government Contracts "in advancing its program of elimination of discrimination in employment in government contracts."¹ Four hundred religious leaders representing twenty-two denominations attended the gathering at Washington's Sheraton Park Hotel.² In this published transcript of his remarks, King decries the "injurious effect" of discrimination upon black workers and declares that "to deny any group honest work and fair pay is not only immoral, it is almost murderous." He calls on his fellow clergy to help "break the deadening silence which engulfs the well-meaning white people of the South" who fear to "speak or act in the absence of respected company." King notes that "the Government alone has the power to establish the legal undergirding that can insure progress" and concludes by describing his dream of an America "where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character."³ Two drafts of King's address vary significantly from this version, published in 1960.

I warmly welcome the opportunity to be with you on this occasion because the subject of our discussion has such profound implications of human and economic importance. I am sure that a group of such distinguished leaders of thought will be able to develop constructive and lasting proposals.⁴

1. King accepted Nixon's invitation on 24 April. At Nixon's request, King had delivered the invocation at a previous meeting of the President's Committee on Government Contracts on 15 January 1958 (King to C. E. Ryan, 9 January 1958). For a typescript of King's address, see King, Address at the Religious Leaders Conference, 11 May 1959.

2. "Fight on Jobs Bias Spurred by Nixon," *New York Times*, 12 May 1959, and President's Committee on Government Contracts, Program, "Religious Leaders Conference," 11 May 1959.

3. In an 18 June 1959 letter, Nixon thanked King for attending the conference and noted that "the real success of the meeting will depend in large measure on the follow-up action taken by all of us to implement the concept of equal opportunity for employment and training for all groups." The following year, King declined an invitation to serve on a Religious Advisory Council to the President's Committee (King to George O. Butler, 18 April 1960).

4. A draft of this address that King deposited at Boston University [MLKP-MBU] included editorial comments made by an unknown person, some of which were incorporated in the published version. King's draft: "The problem we are dealing with is part of a world wide problem of man's failure to apply Judeo-Christian ethics to his every day life. It is part of our failure to conquer the evil of discrimination not only in so-called backward countries, but in the most advanced and civilized nations in the world. Indeed it is paradoxical that some less developed nations are more creative and resolute in attacking discrimination than are we with our long heritage of democracy. [¶] In my recent trip to India [~~strikeout illegible~~] I was profoundly struck by the approach of the Indian government to the question of untouchability. Not only is such discrimination a violation of law punishable by imprisonment but so great a general social attitude prevails that no public figure anywhere would dare to defend the discrimination of untouchability. It would be considered little short of barbaric to oppose the efforts toward progress in this regard. But beyond this a unique underlying moral philosophy gives strength to positive sentiment. India holds the view that there is a deep ethical

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Unfortunately, in our nation the moral determination to deal with the evil of discrimination has been neither deep enough nor consistent enough.⁵ There has been some progress, but even the most casual observer must admit that we are far from the Promised Land in the area of equal job opportunity.⁶ The tragic truth is that discrimination in employment is not only dominant throughout the South, but is shamefully widespread in the North, particularly in great urban communities which often pride themselves as liberal and progressive centers in government and economics.⁷

This discrimination in employment has resulted in an appalling gap between the living conditions of whites and members of minority groups.⁸

We need not look very far to see the injurious effect that discrimination in employment has upon the psychological and moral life of the victims. To deny any group honest work and fair pay is not only immoral, it is almost murderous. It is a deliberate strangulation of the physical and cultural development of the victims! Few practices are more detrimental to our national welfare than the discrimination with which the economic order is rife. Few practices are more thoroughly sinful.

responsibility and obligation of the whole people toward the untouchables for the centuries of injustice they were made to suffer. Consequently, as atonement for society's sins toward these people, they are granted special help and given special advantages to ensure their rapid advancement. These take the form of special scholarships, grants, special status for employment and other similar measures. I submit to you that while India may have to learn much in technology from us, we can learn much of moral attitude from her."

5. King's draft [MLKP-MBU] included this additional sentence: "It is, therefore, gravely ineffective."

6. The draft [MLKP-MBU] included this additional sentence: "One must measure what could have been accomplished against what ought to have been accomplished."

7. King's draft [MLKP-MBU]: "Even more serious is the fact that [*strikeout illegible*] the failure to make adequate progress is but one facet of the problem. The problem is compounded by the fact that new features are emerging which are forcing us backwards at a time when we should be speeding ahead. [¶] To illustrate; in many southern states great new industrial plants have developed employing hundreds of thousands. The jobs in these factories are and will increasingly become the most desirable forms of employment in the South. However, for the Negro they are as unavailable as if they were built on the planet Mars. Thus, the future is already passing the Negro by, and he remains condemned to ~~the~~ second, third or tenth class employment. Tragically, this occurs at a time when democracy needs the skills, and maximum capacity of every American. [¶] Furthermore, [*strikeout illegible*] in recent years there has emerged the development of a stubborn tenacious level of unemployment presently totalling 4 1/2 million wage earners. The special tragedy for Negroes is that they constitute some 25% of the total unemployed although they are only 10% of the whole population. [*strikeout illegible*] Discrimination hits the Negro with a double blow: He is excluded from desirable employment and he is proportionately the greatest victim of unemployment. [¶] This brings us to the effect upon moral life of a man whose most elementary necessities are denied and frustrated by his need for adequate employment."

8. King's typescript included these additional remarks: "For instance, recent statistics revealed that 43 per cent of the Negro families of America earn less than \$2,000 a year, while just 17 per cent of the white families earn less than \$2,000 a year. Twenty-one per cent of the Negro families of America earn less than \$1,000 per year, while only 7 per cent of the white families earn less than \$1,000 per year. Eighty-eight per cent of the Negro families of America earn less than \$5,000 per year, while only 60 per cent of the white families earn less than \$5,000 annually. Or to put it another way: only 12 per cent of the Negro families of America earn \$5,000 a year or more, while 40 per cent of the white families earn \$5,000 a year or more. Similar statistics can be recorded for other minority groups."

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The churchman who ministers to the poor or economically insecure section of the population knows well that morality is influenced by poverty. It is infinitely harder for hungry men with hungry children to respect the property of others than it is for the well-fed and the well-housed.⁹

But there is more than poverty which corrodes morality. When an individual is subjected to systematic humiliation, contempt and ridicule as an everyday feature of his life, it is hard for him to think of his tormentors as brothers.¹⁰ Moreover, under the incessant beating of effective propaganda drums, many members of minority groups become convinced of their inferiority.¹¹ With the destruction of their self-respect there follows a loss of respect for others and a deterioration of moral values generally.¹²

This festering sore of discrimination also debilitates the white person. It so often victimizes him with a false sense of superiority, thus depriving him of genuine humility, honesty and love. It causes him to treat his brother as a means to an end, substituting an "I-It" relationship for the "I-Thou" relationship.¹³ At its lowest level, this evil results in brutality, and its most inhuman expression in lynchings, bombings, and outrageous terrorism.

It is clear from all of this that the problem of discrimination in employment is not merely a political issue; *it is a profound moral issue*. Since the Church is the guardian of the morals of the community, it cannot look with indifference upon this pressing problem. A religion true to its nature must always be concerned about man's social conditions. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God, but to integrate men with men and each man with himself.

This means, at bottom, that true religion is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will

9. King further elaborated in his draft [MLKP-MBU]: "For the hungry man the temptation to sin is far more intense than for any other. Indeed, as a representative of the poorest section of the population I am proud that under pressures, often inhuman, so few succumb, and so many are deeply attached to high moral principles, and to their churches. This point needs to be emphasized when sensation seeking newspapers exaggerate crime and with deliberate [*remainder missing*]."

10. In a second draft of this address, from the Coretta Scott King Collection [CSKC], King made handwritten insertions and added paragraphs not included in the published version. In this draft, King substituted "Negro" for "individual." At the end of the sentence, King added the phrase "or as children of God."

11. In King's draft [CSKC], he substituted "some Negroes" for "many members of minority groups."

12. At the end of this paragraph King handwrote "despite these conditions." The succeeding paragraph reads [CSKC]: "This degeneration occurs equally in the white person. Arrogance, false superiority, deprive him of Christian humility, honesty and love. In its worst form, at its lowest level, these evils murge into brutality and its most inhuman expression, in lynchings, bombings and terroristic outrages." King began the following paragraph: "It is then that the light of the Christian ethic burns so ~~fully~~ feebly (that) we must wonder if it exists at all."

13. King refers to the work of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (*I and Thou* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937]).

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have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion in need of new blood.¹⁴

This, therefore, becomes a grave challenge to the Church and to churchmen. To meet it, all churches must accept the obligation to create the moral climate in which fair employment practices are viewed positively and accepted willingly. We must utilize the vast resources of the churches and synagogues for the many educational functions they can employ, and for which they have highly developed skills, facilities and experience. However, to possess resources is worthless without the will to be effective. The time has come when the churches are needed by their people and their nation as never before. They, uniquely, can break the deadening silence which engulfs the well-meaning white people of the South.

Everywhere, the white Southerner who deplores the evils of discrimination and segregation complains that, to speak honestly, or to employ Negroes, or to work side-by-side with them, will incur community hostility and scorn. He fears to speak or act in the absence of respected company. No one fills this need so perfectly as the clergyman. If he speaks out not once, not guardedly, but with the firm and eloquent confidence that truth provides, a small stream of support will grow gradually to a mighty river. I have said many times that I have faith that millions of white Southerners want to end the dying order of discrimination. They need spiritual leadership and guidance. The churches must provide it because they possess it, and have the moral duty to do it. If they fail, history will record that, in this tumultuous era of change, the churches were unable or unwilling to furnish moral leadership. This would be a grave indictment, and must not be the judgment for our age.¹⁵

While the churches have a moral responsibility to create an atmosphere conducive to fair employment, the Government alone has the power to establish the legal undergirding that can insure progress.¹⁶ We appreciate that the Government

14. King may have adopted this passage from Harry Emerson Fosdick's *The Hope of the World* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933], p. 25: "Any church that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, the economic order that cripples them . . . that kind of church, I think, would hear again the Master's withering words: 'Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!'"

15. King's draft [CSKC]: "Every church, and church organization should honestly reevaluate its programs to determine if a moral and social problem of these immense dimensions is adequately reflected in the life of their institution. Support for missionary work is noble and important. Support for community charities, socials and religious education are eminently worthwhile. But, is there a fair and proper degree of concern for practical brotherhood as a vital and every day activity. Is there some zeal and fervor behind such concern. I think if all of us elevate this burning issue to its proper level an infinite variety of creative applications can be developed because we have among us some of the nations finest minds. But the central and [~~strikeout illegible~~] urgent necessity is to recognize that in these turbulent days religious duty cannot truly be fulfilled without dedicated, courageous, consistent activity to give living meaning to brotherhood."

16. King's draft [CSKC] included the following additional sentences: "In this connection as in all other aspects of social progress, the government has two areas of responsibility: Firstly, the responsibility to establish in law the democratic ethical principle. Secondly, the obligation to maintain compliance with the law."

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has made some moves in this direction.¹⁷ We rejoice that Federal Government contracts clearly define the principle of non-discrimination.¹⁸ Now it is our task to support the government in its responsibility to enforce compliance with the law.

As churchmen, we naturally would prefer that men would voluntarily comply with the requirements of such contracts, but no one knows better than we do the problems and limitations of maintaining order and moral growth merely by means of persuasion and convincement. Love and persuasion are virtues that are basic and essential, but they must forever be complimented by justice and moral coercion.¹⁹ Without love, justice becomes cold and empty; without justice, love becomes sentimental and empty. We must come to see that justice is love, correcting and controlling all that stands against love.

Precisely because we cannot endure in love or justice the erosion and demoralization to minority groups that spring from discrimination in employment, the Church must be the first segment in the nation to stand firmly, not merely for the enunciation of the moral principle of non-discrimination, but it must also encourage and stand behind the Government when it carries out its obligation in refusing or withdrawing Federal contracts from those employers who do not in fact live up to the letter and spirit of the non-discrimination clause.

The Church must have the courage and the resoluteness to support the Government when it determines to make examples of industries in dramatically cancelling large contracts where the principle of brotherhood is violated. For, in refusing to operate strictly within the framework of the contract, employers violate and degrade human personality—and our most sacred trust.

Beyond this, there is a major job for all of us to tackle. We must work for the enactment of Federal and State fair employment practices laws. The existence of such F.E.P.C. laws, at state and national levels, is not merely for economic benefit of minority groups. Such laws are essential if our nation is to maintain its economic growth and prosperity.²⁰

I cannot close without stressing the responsibility laid upon leaders of minority groups to stimulate their youth to prepare themselves for better jobs. Doors are opening now that were not opened in the past, and the great challenge facing minority groups is to be ready to enter these doors as they open. No greater tragedy can befall minority groups at this hour than to allow new opportunities to emerge, without the concomitant preparedness and readiness to meet them.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said in a lecture back in 1891 that “if a man can write a better book, or preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods the world will make a beaten path to

17. In his draft [CSKC], King worded this sentence differently: “We appreciate that certain limited efforts within the area of federal competence have been taken.”

18. In his draft [CSKC], King quoted a nondiscrimination clause from an employment contract.

19. The CSKC draft included an additional sentence: “However, love and reconciliation are considerations that must be applied to all men—the oppressed as well as the oppressors.”

20. From 1941 to 1946 the Fair Employment Practices Committee monitored discrimination in the federal government, the armed forces, and defense industries. After its demise, several states outside of the South established agencies to monitor employment discrimination.

11 May his door."²¹ Certainly this has not always been true. But we have reason to believe
1959 that, because of the shape of the world today and the fact that we cannot afford
the luxury of an anemic democracy, this affirmation will become increasingly true.
So we must strongly urge our youth to achieve excellence in their various fields
of endeavor.

Throughout this talk I have spoken repeatedly of the need for action in the area of job discrimination. The words are not spoken lightly. I am not unmindful of the price that those must pay who act. It will often be high in inconvenience and unpopularity. But we must not allow *anything* to prevent us from making the ideal of brotherhood a reality. We cannot be a sheltered group of detached spectators, chanting and singing on sequestered corners, in a world that is being threatened by the forces of evil. We must work assiduously, and with determined boldness, to remove from the body politic this cancerous disease of discrimination, which is preventing our democratic and Christian health from being realized. Then and only then will we be able to bring into full realization the dream of our American democracy—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character, where they recognize that the basic thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum; a dream of a place where all our gifts and resources are held, not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare to live together as brothers—that is the dream. Whenever it is fulfilled we will emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glowing daybreak of freedom and justice for all of God's children.

PD. *Faiths: Joined for Action* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960).

21. This quotation may have originated from a journal entry of Emerson's (see note 6 to "Mother's Day in Montgomery," by Almena Lomax, 18 May 1956, in *Papers* 3:266).