

Power and Sexual Abuse

by Michael Curtis



Just friends but not like before. To think of what the Rev, Martin Luther King, Jr. has seemed to be seems like pretending. It is commonplace that prominent figures, like the U.S. Founding Fathers, are not devoid of faults, though they can be generally admired. Yet, the allegations of sexual misconduct are surprising about the behavior of M.L. King, born Michael King, Baptist Minister and civil rights leader who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and was renowned for waging his struggle for civil rights without violence. King has been universally admired, is celebrated or memorialized all over the world in statues, names of streets and schools, a U.S. national holiday, a monument on the National Mall in D.C. and a bust in Westminster Abbey in London.

The exercise of power has always been fraught with anxiety and concern, as well as the source of privileges and admiration. The experiments conducted in the 1960s by Yale Professor

Stanley Milgram revealing that people obey an authority who instructs them to conduct an act that can conflict with personal conscience or beliefs were disquieting. A very large proportion obeyed instructions to inflict great personal pain. Though the experiments can be criticized, they made clear that obedience to the command of an authority was more common than not, and that people abide by and are vulnerable to abuse of power. Recent studies in the U.S. have indicated that prominent men strive for and use their positions of personal authority not simply to gain privileges but to illustrate their power. More specifically, sexual abuse by prominent men against women in less prominent positions may be more the result of desire for exercise of power than for sex. The question has now been opened for discussion of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this issue of sexual behavior.

They do bestride their narrow world like a Colossus. Revelations in recent months of behavior in many countries by well-known personalities have shown that sexual harassment and assault against women is in fact common to men in powerful positions or who are regarded as icons. Actions committed or alleged to have been committed by U.S. celebrities such as Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, show biz personalities, and countless others, suggest that obtaining the utmost round of power affects how people behave. Their abuse of their elevated position is a key factor in their rude and disrespectful attitude to women and to unwarranted conduct of a sexual nature. The example of the French Socialist politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, managing director of the IMF, alleged to have sexually assaulted a hotel maid in New York in May 2011 indicated an attitude of intrinsic domination, of taking advantage of his powerful position and fame. He expressed no regret though he later admitted the act was a "moral fault."

This example of a sense of entitlement of abuse of women and sexually harassment illustrates the attitude that is common,

not confined to Hollywood or Broadway or TV, or Washington D.C., but is present in all spheres of activity where men are in dominant positions, military, Wall Street, large business concerns, sports, and universities. Information on this has come from a variety of sources, including the Me Too movement that has revealed that about half of all women have experienced unwanted sexual abuse and violence, though generally unreported. Some may be attracted by power, status, and influence. Power as Henry Kissinger said is the ultimate aphrodisiac, as women may be drawn to men who are prominent.

It is commonplace that prominent figures, like the U.S. Founding Fathers, are not devoid of faults, though they can be generally admired. Yet, the allegations are surprising about the behavior of M.L. King, born Michael King, Baptist minister and civil rights leader who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and was renowned for waging his struggle for civil rights without violence. King has been universally admired, is celebrated or memorialized all over the world in statues, names of streets and schools, a U.S. national holiday, a monument on the National Mall in D.C. and a bust in Westminster Abbey in London.

As a result of a recent publication, the question arises of whether King abused the power and popularity he had to take advantage of women, and to disgrace both his profession and his religious and moral beliefs. The information, or alleged information, about King, appears in an article by David J. Garrow in *Standpoint Magazine* of May 30, 2019, about the orgies, solicitations, prostitutes, affairs with 40 women with whom King was involved. His account depends on recently declassified FBI documents that summarize tape recordings of King in his home, office, and hotel rooms, such as the Willard Hotel in Washington, DC, and the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, documents which are under seal in the U.S. National Archives and will remain there until 2027. It is known that it was Robert F. Kennedy, then U.S. Attorney General, who on November

8, 1963 allowed the FBI headed by J. Edgar Hoover, 1924-1972, to bug King's phone calls and begin wiretapping his calls.

Hoover was preoccupied with real or imaginary threats to American security. He had over 60 folders on public figures which were destroyed after his death, but his files documenting the private life of individuals survive. Irrespective of his animosity to King on a personal level because of King's binge drinking and compulsive sexuality, Hoover was concerned for two reasons; he suspected King was associated with communists; and he thought that King's adultery made him vulnerable to blackmail. The FBI in the 1960s, relying on domestic intelligence not electronic surveillance had a list of 4, 453 suspected communists, of whom 336 were FBI informants.

Hoover was preoccupied with communism, and organizations suspected of being associated with it. He held that the racial segregation struggle, to which he was personally opposed, was being used by communists as a front to attack the U.S. Hence, his investigations of prominent people, Della Baker, civil rights activist, Jack O'Dell member of the staff of SCLC, scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, and the singer Paul Robeson. Part of Hoover's interest in King was the fact that one of the prominent advisors of King was the New York lawyer Stanley Levison who drafted articles and speeches for King, apparently had ties to the Communist party. For Hoover, this was evidence of King's connection and dependence on the Communists for guidance. In addition, King was targeted partly because of Hoover's COINTELPRO, counterintelligence projects aimed at surveying black action groups, such as SCLC, Black Panthers and Nation of Islam.

On August 28, 1963 at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King had made his famous "I have a Dream speech, a "dream deeply rooted in the American dream." A letter by W.C. Sullivan, then third in rank at the FBI, written to Hoover immediately after the speech talks of the efforts of the CP to

exploit "the American Negro," and that King was a key figure in the March, and thus in the efforts.

The FBI tapes do not reveal any affiliation or association of King with communist groups, but are concerned with sexual behavior. It is the allegations about his private life that are startling, illustrating both King's seeming sense of entitlement in his disrespect and abuse of women, and the apparent intoxication and perhaps aphrodisiac quality of King's power.

In what is the most appalling statement in the tapes, King is alleged in 1964 to have looked on, laughed, and offered advice to the pastor of the Baltimore Baptist Church who was raping a woman in a hotel room in which they were both present.

The whole story of King is complex. The writer, David Garrow, who won a Pulitzer prize in 1987 for his 1986 bio of King, says in his 2019 challenging article on King that it was rejected by various media, including The Guardian, The Atlantic, The Washington Post, and finally accepted by the relatively unknown Standpoint. This is troublesome and smacks of political censorship since Garrow names, and thus is legally responsible for the revelations of some of the women involved, with King such as Dorothy Cotton, highest ranked woman in the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) who accompanied King to Norway when he received the Nobel Prize for Peace, and mentions less savory women.

The case of King is also curious and perplexing to African-Americans as well as to others. His close friend Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who was physically next to him when he was assassinated on April 4, 1968 by the escaped convict James Earl Ray who may have acted alone or been part of a conspiracy. Abernathy spoke of King's weakness for women, and stated that King had spent his last night with two lovers. The well-known Brooklyn Dodgers African-American pitcher, Don

Newcombe, winner of the Cy Young award, wrote to President Lyndon Johnson saying that he was related to a woman with whom King was having an affair in Los Angeles, and that he believed King had fathered a girl by this woman to whom he contributed support.

King himself was troubled by his behavior. At one point, he explained "there is a Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll in all of us." God, he said, does not judge us by the separate incidents or the separate mistakes that one makes, but by the total bent of our lives. Irrespective of what is the judgment in the heavens, it is important that mortal analysts survey the nature of King's behavior to women, and assess whether he was another example of the misuse of power by prominent men for improper purposes.

The King issue raises interesting questions of how to deal with the issue in general. Do the customs of the times excuse the men in power who took advantage of women as something perfectly permissible? Does their attitude towards women lessen appreciation of their achievements? Will the statues of King be removed from university campuses?