

A New Angle

Episode 79

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Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I am speaking with Dr. Lerone Martin, associate professor of religious studies and director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University.

Lerone Martin: You think you know Martin Luther King Jr. But now it's time to think again.

Justin Angle: Dr. Martin will be visiting the University of Montana on January 26th as part of the President's Lecture Series. And since this event is a key part of our Martin Luther King Day celebrations, I'm also joined today by our director of African American studies and history professor, Dr. Tobin Miller Shearer. Lerone, Tobin, thanks for coming on the show today.

Tobin Miller Shearer: Happy to be here.

Lerone Martin: Thanks for having me. It's great to be with you.

Justin Angle: So, let's start, as we always do, with where did you grow up and what did your parents do? Lerone, why don't you start?

Lerone Martin: I grew up in a tiny town in northwest Ohio by the name of Fostoria, Ohio, a town of about 17,000 people. And both of my parents worked in factories that made auto parts for Detroit, which is very close, about maybe 70 miles away.

Justin Angle: As a child of two factory workers, give us the kind of short form version of how you decided to become an academic.

Lerone Martin: I am the youngest of five, and I was, let's say, I want to use the phrase my siblings used, annoying, the annoying younger sibling who was always asking questions about why. I was always a curious kid and about why certain things happened and what, you know, what was involved, what became before it. And so, I was a horrible kid to watch a movie with because I was constantly asking questions about why. And as I got older and went through high school, I had some great teachers who really, you know, were telling me, you know, the questions you're asking are actually more historical or questions that deserve further research. And, you know, there are opportunities for you to do that. And thankfully, I had some teachers in high school and college to encourage me to move forward and to think about a life of the mind and engaging in research. I had initially thought I was going to go into the ministry. So, after college I went to seminary, I went to Princeton Theological Seminary, and I think it was

there, as where I discovered that what I really found joy in and felt a sense of calling to was actually teaching as opposed to being in the church and then being in the ministry.

Justin Angle: Super, well, some certain parallels between your background and Tobin's background. Tobin, let's start with where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Tobin Miller Shearer: So, I was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia, grew up mostly in the southern Ontario and northeast Pennsylvania, was the first-born son of three sons. My dad is a mennonite minister, was for many years. My mother worked in a variety of church positions and then from that went on to work as a counselor. That's where my dad ended up as well, in mostly northeastern Pennsylvania.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And you came to academia kind of as a second career of sorts?

Tobin Miller Shearer: Yeah, I worked for about 15 years in the nonprofit sector, most of that situated in the Mennonite community through Mennonite Central Committee, doing anti-racism work and then did a mid-career shift, went to graduate school and ended up here at University of Montana.

Justin Angle: Let's maybe talk about the premise of your visit, part of our Martin Luther King Day celebrations. You are a scholar of Dr. King. Why are we still studying Dr. Martin Luther King? What are what are we learning? What's new to uncover?

Lerone Martin: I would say two things. The first is somewhat unfortunate, which is that his words and his work and his philosophy are still so very relevant today. And there's part of part of us that should be concerned about that, that some of the things that he spoke about, worked towards and constantly advocated for is still very relevant today, whether that's police brutality, whether that's inequality, racism, war, all of these things are still very relevant today. So, in some sense, King is never out of style because his words and the things that he was concerned about are still so relevant today. I think the second reason why it's still important to study him is because King is kind of this individual that everybody thinks they know, but they don't. He's the only individual that is not a president, but yet has a statue on the National Mall. And that kind of familiarity that he has or omnipresence in our culture, I think gives people a false sense of knowing Martin King. But there's so much more to him than just the I Have a Dream speech that is lionized year after year. King cared about racism, certainly, but he also cared about war. He cared about violence. He cared about poverty. So, I think there's so much more for us to explore in Martin Luther King's ideas and the things that he believed in. And I think it's such a rich treasure trove.

Tobin Miller Shearer: One of the things, Lerone, that I so appreciate in the comments you just made and what I know of your broader work is that you and your colleagues at Stanford's King Center have been very deliberately positioning yourselves to be sure that we're not engaging in this pacification of King, the erasure of his radicalism that Vincent Harding and others have pointed out for us. Can you say a little bit about that dynamic and culture where someone

reaches the stature that King has reached in the process, gets a bit removed from the very challenging things they were saying during the time that they were alive.

Lerone Martin: Yes. You know, part of that, I think, in some ways can be traced to the passage of the MLK holiday. And that is while the Reagan administration at the time vigorously fought against the passage of a MLK holiday, I think the Reagan administration eventually flips and decides to sign the holiday into law. And in doing so, from the very beginning, the Reagan administration was very savvy in trying to package the holiday and Martin Luther King as a celebration of the American dream. And then Martin Luther King Junior simply wanted people to pursue the American dream and that he was solely interested in inspiring people to be successful in America and not someone who was inspiring people to take a look at some of the social structures in our country that prevented people from being human and being successful and living a life of quality and a life from a lack of want. And I think from the very beginning, the holiday has been packaged in a way that defangs him or anesthetizes his legacy in a way that prevents us from seeing how he called America into question, both in his life, but also even from the grave.

Justin Angle: It seems like that's a pattern in history, certainly with leaders, but with stories, we kind of shade out the nuance. We erase the flaws in some ways in this case, you know, erasing some of the radicalism or trying to soften that. When we do that, we lose a lot of the humanity of a person, of his story and so forth. So how does the overall humanity of King get lost in the narrative sometimes?

Lerone Martin: You know, I think that's such an important point. One thing that comes to mind, Clarence Jones, who was King's personal attorney. And one of the things that he has mentioned is that there was a point in time because of all the pressure Martin was under, both in terms of just the Civil Rights movement and the protests and the violence he was enduring, the violence he was seeing his community endure, but also even the pressure that was put on him by the FBI. The FBI was engaged in the campaign to discredit Martin Luther King Jr. There was sending out intelligence against him to various government agencies and the military as a form of counterintelligence. And in the midst of all this stress and strain, Clarence shared that they took Martin to a physician, and the physician said that Martin was completely exhausted and that this man and this is a quote, this man needs to see a psychiatrist. Martin and Clarence and those around him basically said, no, you know, he can't, we've got to find another way because we're concerned that the FBI could possibly get a hold of the physician's notes and use it against him. And so, you just think about the kind of strain a human being is under, number one. And then number two, even the remedies that one would seek to alleviate one's condition, even those are foreclosed as a result of one's decision to stand up and speak truth to power. So, I think when we think about Martin King, the statue, the holiday, we think of this mythic hero. And in many ways, he was. But we lose track of the very human element and the toll that it took upon him because he decided to stand up and speak truth to power.

Tobin Miller Shearer: Given your new work on Hoover, Lerone, is there anything you discovered in your new research that helps us understand that whole FBI assessment and

interventions, whether under the COINTELPRO label or otherwise, that has this reevaluated those pressures that King was under?

Lerone Martin: What we've known for several years now is the effort to the extent to which they went to in terms of to discredit him, as you stated, Tobin, to embarrass him and to help to force him to lose any kind of social or moral authority in the public eye. I think what I was able to discover, which was a shock to me, was the extent to which the FBI was also trying to convince other ministers to come out against Martin Luther King Junior, and one in particular, the Reverend Lightfoot Solomon Mashaal was a well-known radio preacher. He was the first minister, black or white, to have his own television show beginning in the late 1940s in Washington, D.C., had a very large following, and the FBI partnered with him, feeding him intel about Martin Luther King Jr being a communist and Martin Luther King Jr being bent on subverting the country and helping the Russians and other groups who were trying to, the American thought, terrorized the country that they partnered with him and gave him intel. And he used that intel to preach sermons and to write open letters to the press and to write letters to the White House claiming that King was not a real minister and that he was a fraud. And I think that that level of detail, that level of coverage to try to shape government opinion in the halls of power, but then also to try to shape public opinion makers. I think that was the biggest shock that I think I discovered in my own research that the extent to which the bureau would go to try to really destroy Martin and his credibility and thereby they saw the civil rights movement as a whole.

Justin Angle: Yeah, this probably is a good time to highlight that work. And this upcoming book that you have, the gospel of J. Edgar Hoover should be out and hopefully in a month or so. Talk about this work, because it does it broadens the lens to include the Civil Rights movement more generally and the rise of Christian nationalism and the role of the FBI in that rise.

Lerone Martin: What I try to do in the book is show the way that a white Christian nationalism was really influential in shaping the modern FBI. We've often thought about the FBI as having an antagonistic relationship to religion because we know of their work to discredit and surveil religious groups, both Protestant and Catholic. We haven't thought much about what kind of religious faith did the FBI actually like. So, we know what kind of religious faith communities they didn't like. Those advocating for change. Mennonites, you know, Catholics such as Dorothy Day and others. But we haven't thought much about what kind of faith communities do they embrace. And in my research, through the Freedom of Information Act, as well as even a lawsuit to the Department of Justice to obtain FBI records, I was able to discover that the FBI had a very fruitful partnership with white evangelicals, especially the intellectual mainframe, if you will, of white evangelicalism with Billy Graham and Carl F.H., Henry and Nelson Bell and others who are really at the forefront of building in modern white evangelicalism. And the FBI partnered with them to launder intel, but also to have J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director, become a contributor to Christianity Today, the FBI distributed essays and content from Christianity Today as a way to, while trying to discredit Martin King to try to give a kind of credence and authority to white evangelicalism as the rightful face of the United States of America and as

the moral custodian of America. And I think we've seen that over and over again with white evangelical brothers and sisters rallying around political figures who fall far short of their stated moral and theological commitments, but yet they still rally around them. And what I found is that that is a repeating thing within white evangelicalism. And if that history is not unearthed and really confronted, then the movement will be bound to repeat it over and over and over again.

Tobin Miller Shearer: I want to make a connection here, Lerone, and hear your response, because I think it connects to the larger arguments you're asking your readers to explore and be confronted with. So, we know from many scholars that within in particular the white evangelical community, there is an emphasis on interpersonal solutions to the problem of race in America and racism more writ large rather than systemic solutions. So, in what you just described to us, we have a member of the FBI being courted by a community that sees the solutions to the problem of racism in an individual frame. And then you've got King, who, despite living out sort of notions of respectability, which would suggest to us aren't as challenging to notions of white supremacy and the underlying institutional racism in this country, but yet is talking about systemic solutions to the problem of racism. So, I'm just wondering how you see that working itself out, in particular in this kind of connection between white evangelicals and Hoover? Is this connected to that fundamental disconnect within the community between relational solutions versus King systemic solutions?

Lerone Martin: You're exactly right. Hoover and some, and I quote this in the book, Hoover has some comments he makes. There was supposed to be off the record comments to a group of reporters. And one of the things that he talks about is he has this moderate stance, and the evangelicals call it the evangelical moderate stance that they believe that those who are advocating for laws to bring about integration were wrong. But those who are engaging in white supremacist violence were also wrong and that the solution was somewhere in the middle. As you've just stated, Tobin, that it's about interpersonal relationships, that if folks just give their lives to Jesus, have a conversion experience and live lives as good citizens eventually racism will fade away. Hoover articulated this to a group of reporters by simply saying if African Americans would basically get their act together eventually they'll gain the right to have rights that are equal to white citizens. And so, for some reason with Hoover, it was this idea that it was, as you said, interpersonal, right, that it's as long as African Americans conduct themselves appropriately, then eventually they'll get their rights that King was advocating for something that African Americans were just simply not morally and virtue, and weren't virtuous enough and they weren't ready for it. They weren't morally ready. They were not simply mentally, psychologically and spiritually ready. But yet, when you ask the question about why is it that white citizens apparently from birth, Mr. Hoover, apparently, they're just ready for this automatically, but yet African Americans have to work towards it. But you're absolutely right. That question was not usually asked of Mr. Hoover publicly. And white evangelicals as a whole. And that's where the connection was, that the belief in this interpersonal relationship with Jesus and individual moral performance would somehow eventually wipe away racism by helping African Americans to become ready for full citizenship.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to my conversation with Lerone Martin and Tobin Miller Shearer after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. We're discussing the legacy of Martin Luther King. With Lerone Martin and Tobin Miller Shearer.

Justin Angle: So, in our remaining time, Lerone, I'd love to sort of bring this conversation to the present day to the extent possible. You know, we're kind of living through the kind of aftermath of Covid, however you want to describe it, the murder of George Floyd, the rise of Black Lives Matter, and kind of this moment where the conversation has shifted in the last few years. It's a conversation that's been ongoing, obviously, but it's acquired a new salience on campus, in the discourse in general. How do you view the role of King's legacy in forming this kind of renewed salience of race in our culture right now?

Lerone Martin: You know, King's ideas, he often summed them up, particularly in the last bit of his life, is that America was facing evil triplets or three evils, and those three evils were racism, poverty and militarism or war. And I think that King showed how those three things, he called them triplets because he saw them as interrelated, and the way that racism brings about inequality and poverty in America and the way that America was spending billions of dollars on wars both at home and abroad, but yet couldn't find enough resources to alleviate racism and poverty in this country. And I think if we still consider King's formulation of the evil triplets,

I think it can help us move forward today and all that ails our democracy. In King's probably the most famous address to the public, right, is probably the I Have a Dream speech. But even in that speech, which is often right frozen with the talk about King dreaming of the day where his little girls will be judged by not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. But in previously parts of their speech, he talks about poverty, and he also even brings up police brutality about violence. So King was on the cutting edge of these things, even in the sixties. So, I think that he's still relevant today. And I think that if we can think about and follow his formulation of the evil triplets, we can think about how we can solve some of the problems that ail our democracy in a way that doesn't isolate issues, that doesn't just simply say, okay, well, if we can get rid of police brutality, then we can simply we can remove it and it won't be a problem anymore. But I think King's formulation would challenge us to say that it's going to be difficult to get rid of police brutality if we don't actually deal with racism. It's going to be difficult to get rid of poverty if we don't deal with racism and militarism and war and so forth and so on. So, I think if we can move forward with his ideas of the interrelatedness of some of the problems that ail our democracy, I think they will bear great fruit.

Justin Angle: What advice would you have for students, anybody listening who kind of wants to just, one educate themselves more in this space, become a part of solutions, become a better citizen of the values of which you speak here. But it does seem we're living through a time where it's easier to police thought within ideological groups than it is to bring people together across ideological groups. How do you kind of think about that moment we're in and helping students and other folks figure out how to have more productive conversation?

Lerone Martin: I would say, and this is what I tell my students, is to try to think about historical figures and for our conversation Martin Luther King Jr., as a conversation partner. So as someone whose ideas you're going to read, consume, digest, think about. And then try to take those ideas into the world. And this is not to say the King's ideas are a blueprint to fix everything necessarily, but he is a conversation partner to help us to think through the problems that we confront today. So, for example, we know that Martin Luther King Jr. actually spoke to people who disagreed with him, whether that was the FBI, local police, sheriffs, where there was white supremacist groups. King tried his best before there was any efforts to protest, before there were any efforts to boycott. There was actual conversation and negotiation. And I think that's a part that's left off about Martin Luther King Jr. is that he did engage and talk to people who disagreed with him. I think that's something that we've lost in our public conversations today. But I think King can serve as a conversation partner by also looking at King as someone whose ideas bared great fruit. But not to allow his heroic status to blind us from our own genius. We can't allow King's heroics, heroic status, to blind us from our own genius today. We need to also look at King's principles and what he was fighting for and why he was using a march or why he was using a boycott. And maybe then that can inspire us to think about solutions for our own problems.

Justin Angle: That is wonderful wisdom and guidance for our audience. Thank you. You know, as we close here, we should reiterate the name of your upcoming book. I think you said it releases on the 7th of February. The title is The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover. How the FBI Aided

and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism. Any tips on where we'll be able to find it? All the places or is it selling through specific outlets?

Lerone Martin: All the places, wherever books are sold near you. It'll be, and hopefully it'll be in all the places. But certainly, Princeton University Press, the website there and local booksellers, Barnes and Nobles, etc.

Justin Angle: Awesome. I guess I have one final question, Tobin. You might have one as well, but, you know, you probably get asked to speak all around the world. Why did you say yes to Montana?

Lerone Martin: Well, I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to engage in students. I'm really excited about the next generation of folks. I'm always looking forward to engaging young adults and on college campuses because they are our future, and they are living at a time that's unprecedented in terms of the technology and communication. Martin King could not have imagined a world of the Internet, how we're speaking right now or social media. And so, I think we're living at a time that is unprecedented. And I think young adults are going to be the ones to lead us into the future. And there are hope for, you know, for a better day. I'll cite something that Martin King said here in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, not his acceptance speech, but his actual lecture. And he talked about how technology in the 1960s, this is 1964, how technology had just exploded. He said that we've learned how to fly in the air like birds, swim in the ocean like fish. But yet we haven't learned the simple act of living together as brothers. And he said

that our moral progress has not kept up with our technological progress. And I think that's a message even from 1964, that we can bring to young adults today. How are we going to make sure that our moral progress as a community, as a country, how are we going to make sure that our moral progress matches up to the fast speed of our technological progress? And that's what I'm excited to engage the students there at the University of Montana, and I'm really excited looking forward to coming to campus.

Justin Angle: What an important time for that message to come across. Tobin, any last questions for Dr. Martin?

Tobin Miller Shearer: Someone who's thinking about coming to your lecture, what's your one sentence teaser about why someone should come and hear you talk about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Lerone Martin: You think you know Martin Luther King Jr. But now it's time to think again.

Tobin Miller Shearer: Nice.

Justin Angle: Perfect. That was tight. It's almost like you workshopped it. That's great. That's great. Well, the title of the talk, the Presidential Lecture Series Talk is Becoming King: How a Wavering Teenager Became a Global Icon. It's at 7:30 on January 26 at the Ally Auditorium. It's also available on Zoom. For more information and to register, visit [Umt dot edu slash president](http://Umt.edu/president).

Dr. Martin, it's been a pleasure to speak with you, to get your message out there, to preview your talk, look forward to the opportunity to meet you in person. And we're really grateful and excited that you're going to be visiting with us in a couple of weeks.

Lerone Martin: Thanks for having me. Can't wait to be there and can't wait to see you all in person in 3D.

Justin Angle: That's right.

Tobin Miller Shearer: It'll be great. Looking forward to seeing you here.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee in Montana Public Radio. Kely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt, and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.