



# **THE MOUNTAINTOP VISION: MARTIN LUTHER KING'S COSMOLOGY OF CONNECTION**

by Drew Dellinger

*The Mountaintop Vision* is the first book to explore Martin Luther King Jr.'s view of the cosmos. Examining ecological dimensions of his thought that have been largely overlooked in previous scholarship, this book asserts that King's social justice vision was based not only on his prophetic Christianity, but also, in a fundamental way, on a worldview of interconnection.

King's vision connected racism with war and poverty, stressed the unity of peoples and movements around the planet, and recognized the interwoven nature of the universe, which he described as, "the interrelated structure of all reality." His holistic view of the cosmos and society is the hallmark of what I call his *Mountaintop Vision*.

In the last years of his life, which I call his *Mountaintop Period* (1966-68), King identified systemic links between social justice issues that were largely viewed as separate, fusing them into a unified critique that fundamentally challenged the modern system. This work articulates six aspects of King's Mountaintop Vision: (1) connecting justice to the cosmos, (2) emphasizing economic justice, (3) confronting systemic racism, (4) challenging US militarism, (5) exemplifying the prophetic path, and (6) building a global movement.

King's worldview constituted a *cosmology of justice* in which interdependence and compassion are woven into the fabric of the cosmos itself. In King's view, "the universe is on the side of justice."

This book examines King's speeches, sermons, and writings to demonstrate his vision of radical connection. I argue that King's view of existence as a "network of mutuality," in which "all life is interrelated," should be recognized as an early expression of systems thinking and ecological consciousness. King's Mountaintop Vision linked social justice, cosmology, and ecology in a way that may yet provide guidance for our future.

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## **THE SIX ASPECTS OF KING'S MOUNTAINTOP VISION**

The fundamental quality of King's Mountaintop perspective is interconnection. King's cohesive view of the universe and of society, and his ability to speak to these links—between imperialism abroad and oppression at home; between peace, and civil rights, and poverty; and between all beings in a connected cosmos—is the hallmark of his Mountaintop Vision.

Within King's interconnected vision there are six specific aspects that constitute his unified view. Looking at these individually, one can better understand King's thought in the Mountaintop Period.



### *1. Connecting Justice to the Cosmos*

The foundation of King's vision is his cosmological view of an interrelated universe that unfolds toward harmony and justice. From the dawn of the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the climactic months of the Mountaintop Period, King's sacred vision was embedded in a cosmological context. In fact, the universe is one of the most consistent themes in his rhetoric. Countless times King said, "all life is interrelated," that the "universe is on the side of justice," that we have "cosmic companionship" in the "struggle for justice," and that we are connected in a single "network of mutuality." For King, the cosmos is one and the universe "bends toward justice." Meeting with a group of young activists in the first weeks of the sit-in movement, King told the students, "All the stars in their course are supporting you. Go out with the attitude that God is with us and we have cosmic companionship."

### *2. Emphasizing Economic Justice*

The fires of the Watts rebellion, just days after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, signaled the beginning of a new recognition for King that the movement must now address economic justice. In 1966 King moved to Chicago to take on systemic northern racism and economic inequality. In King's last years—from Chicago, to Cleveland, to Mississippi, to Memphis—poverty and economic justice were never far from his mind.

### *3. Confronting Systemic Racism*

Throughout his life King embodied a lineage of resistance to the structures of racial oppression. In the Mountaintop Period King sharpened his critique of the origins and depth of white supremacy and made some of his starkest statements against systemic racism. He condemned the government's policies toward Native Americans, and what they revealed about the mindset of white supremacy, stating, "The ultimate logic of racism is genocide." Speaking in Laurel, Mississippi, in the last weeks of his life, King declared, "The thing wrong with America is white racism."

### *4. Challenging US Militarism*

King's stand against the war in Vietnam, and the enormous backlash he faced as a result, is one of the defining moments of the Mountaintop Period. When King risked his position and his popularity to say, "I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America," he reached a new level of confrontation with the forces of power.



### 5. Exemplifying the Prophetic Path

King traveled the path of the prophet, and called others to it, speaking uncomfortable truths about systemic oppression. During the Mountaintop Period his vision became both more global and more focused on solidarity with the marginalized. “The time has come for a real prophecy,” he said, “and I’m willing to go that road.” King called upon all people to be advocates and activists for justice. Each of us must “decide on the protest that best suits” his or her convictions, he said, “but we must all protest.”

### 6. Building a Global Movement

King’s final dream was to build a multicultural, international movement that transcended borderlines and divisions of race and class. The Poor People’s Campaign he was organizing at the end of his life embodied his vision of a multiracial, multi-ethnic coalition. The campaign brought together Native Americans, Latinos, whites, and blacks, into an alliance aiming to use nonviolent direct action to end poverty.

Looking even farther, in his last months King seemed to be formulating ideas for an international expression of the civil rights movement. He called for developing “the skills and strategy... to planetize our movement for social justice,” and in his last hours he told an associate that the next phase of the movement would be to “take it international.”

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Taken together, these six aspects of King’s Mountaintop Vision constituted a comprehensive challenge to injustice and disconnection. Not surprisingly, this vision was not welcomed by establishment voices. Three days after a major speech connecting the Vietnam War to racism delivered at Riverside Church, the editorial board of the nation’s most powerful newspaper attacked King:

In recent speeches and statements the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has linked his personal opposition to the war in Vietnam with the cause of Negro equality in the United States.

*The New York Times* editorial continued, “This is a fusing of two public problems that are distinct and separate. By drawing them together, Dr. King has done a disservice to both.” In the editorial’s headline the *Times* described his joining of peace and civil rights as “Dr. King’s Error.” In the *Chicago Tribune* a headline read, “Martin Luther King Crosses the Line.” And in a sense this was true: in the Mountaintop Period, King’s vision crossed many lines.



**DREW DELLINGER, Ph.D.**, is an internationally sought-after speaker, poet, writer, and teacher whose keynotes and poetry performances—which address ecology, justice, cosmology, and connectedness—have inspired minds and hearts around the world. He is also a consultant, filmmaker, and founder of Planetize the Movement.

Dellinger has presented at over 1200 events across the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. He has spoken and performed at numerous conferences—including Bioneers, the Green Festival, the Dream Reborn, and the Parliament of the World's Religions—as well as colleges and universities, poetry venues, protests, and places of worship. He has shared podiums and stages with luminaries such as Alice Walker, Cornel West, Thomas Berry, Danny Glover, Jim Carrey, Julia Butterfly Hill, Brian Swimme, Paul Hawken, Ani Difranco, Chuck D, Eve Ensler, and many others.

Dellinger's award-winning book of poems, *love letter to the milky way*, was selected by *ForeWord Reviews* magazine as a 2011 Book of the Year Award Finalist. Now in its sixth printing, *love letter* has devoted readers in dozens of countries on six continents. Dellinger's work has appeared in films, books, anthologies, and magazines—from *The New York Times* magazine to *YES!*, *Tikkun*, *Kosmos*, and others. His poems have been cited and quoted in venues ranging from prison workshops to climate change hearings before the US Congress.

As a consultant, Dellinger was a core developer and designer of the Pachamama Alliance's *Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream* Symposium, now used in 70 countries, in 13 languages.

Dellinger holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Religion from CIIS, and has taught and lectured at numerous colleges and universities including John F. Kennedy University, where he was Associate Professor and Director of the Program in Social Ecology.

Dellinger has been called “a national treasure,” by Joanna Macy, “a deep and courageous poet,” by Alice Walker and “one of the most creative, courageous and prophetic voices of his generation,” by Cornel West.

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