

The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries

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Most analyses of the intellectual development of Martin Luther King, Jr., concentrate on the formative influences that supposedly shaped the major themes in King's thought. Many commentaries have argued that one or another predominant influence was ignored or slighted by other commentators, and, unfortunately, much of the literature can be characterized as a multi-party tug of war, with different scholars seeking to claim King for Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel, for Boston University's personalism, for Mohandas K. Gandhi's satyagrahic nonviolence, or for Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism. Although there are varying degrees of accuracy in these contending claims, most of this scholarly battle for King's intellectual soul has proceeded with an amazing lack of attention to the two traditions which actually exerted the greatest formative influences on King's thought and action: the biblical inheritance of the story of Jesus Christ, and the black southern Baptist church heritage into which King was born.

The regrettable limitations of the literature on King's thought have been magnified by scholars' widespread blindness to the fact that dependable analysis of King's thinking must be based on wide-ranging usage of his hundreds of unpublished sermons and speeches, materials that paint a far more dependable picture of King's beliefs than the heavily edited and sometimes ghost-written works that were published in book or magazine form under King's name during his lifetime. Scholars have no expectation that presidents and prime ministers personally write every word of their public addresses, but most commentators on King, while often engaging in the most precise textual exegeses of King's publications, have failed to understand that a man whose daily schedule over ten years' time was even more hectic than that of most heads of state simply did not have the time to draft or sometimes even revise the works which were put forward under his name. This naive over-reliance on the least dependable King texts, coupled with the limited usage that commentators have made of the much more dependable, and often extemporaneous, unpublished King texts, has unfortunately led to a situation in which much existing scholarship on King is of little serious, long-term value, and in which truly dependable studies of his thought are just getting underway or beginning to appear. It is of crucial importance as this promising new era begins that illusions about past debates and contributions be minimized.¹

Another regrettable, though less crucial, problem in scholarship on King has been the widespread failure to pay adequate heed to the two most valuable analytical works written to date: Ira G. Zepp, Jr.'s impressive 1971 dissertation on "The Intellectual Sources of the Ethical Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., . . .," and Kenneth L. Smith and Zepp's co-authored 1974 book, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*² Written well before the copious King Papers at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta first were opened to researchers, Zepp and Smith nonetheless made far more productive use of the King materials at Boston University's Mugar Library than did other scholars. Nonetheless, in ensuing years, even well-known writers on King's life and thought have at times published pieces that make no reference whatsoever to these most thorough and insightful volumes.³

Zepp and Smith give a fair and balanced, if at times incomplete, portrayal of the major intellectual traditions upon which Martin King drew. They rightly suggest that it was King's three years at Crozer Theological Seminary (1948-1951), much more so than either his undergraduate experience at Morehouse College (1944-1948) or his graduate years at the Boston University School of Theology (1951-1954), that witnessed King's academic maturation and the development of a first-rate intellectual curiosity and self-testing. Nonetheless, while surveying the contributions that evangelical liberalism and the social gospel, Gandhian nonviolence, Niebuhrian realism and Boston University's personalism all made to King's development, Zepp and Smith do not adequately appreciate how King's evaluation and partial adoptions of different intellectual doctrines were profoundly rooted in his social presuppositions and faith experience. Those presuppositions and experiences were themselves the product of King's upbringing in a family and a church that inculcated the biblical stories, especially for this son and grandson of preachers, and that fully represented the strong faith heritage of the black southern Baptist church.

Most surveys of King's intellectual development, including Smith and Zepp's, begin not with King's childhood exposure to the Bible or his youthful years watching his father pastor Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, but with the written texts to which he was exposed, first at Morehouse College and then, more importantly, at Crozer. Most biographies of King overstate the impact of Morehouse President Benjamin E. Mays, and sometimes that of religion professor George Kelsey, on young King. They also underemphasize the importance of "Daddy" King's ministerial role and usually overlook two other Morehouse professors and close family friends, Lucius M. Tobin and Samuel W. Williams, who joined King's father in officiating at "M.L.'s" ordination to the ministry in the early spring of 1948 during his senior year in college.⁴

Almost all accounts play down the fact that King's student record at Morehouse was undistinguished and that faculty members viewed him as an underachiever. Dean B. R. Brazeal acknowledged King's "comparatively weak high school background," and President Mays called him capable of "substantial B work" but "not brilliant." Professor Kelsey termed King's record "short of what may be called 'good,'" but designated him "one of those boys who came to realize the value of

scholarship late in his college career. His ability exceeds his record at Morehouse."

King's achievements at Crozer proved Kelsey's judgment correct. Kelsey also viewed King as "quite serious about the ministry and as having a call rather than a professional urge."⁵ On his application to Crozer, King said he had chosen the ministry because of "an inescapable urge to serve society" and "a sense of responsibility which I could not escape." In a longer explanation just a few years later, King said:

I had felt the urge to enter the ministry from my latter high school days, but accumulated doubts had somewhat blocked the urge. Now it appeared again with an inescapable drive. My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something; on the contrary, it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity. I guess the influence of my father also had a great deal to do with my going in the ministry. This is not to say that he ever spoke to me in terms of being a minister, but that my admiration for him was the great moving factor. He set forth a noble example that I didn't mind following.⁶

Beyond the examples of Daddy King, Reverends Tobin and Williams, and academicians Mays and Kelsey, one of the most influential of King's experiences during his three years at Crozer was his close relationship with the Reverend J. Pius "Joe" Barbour, a King family friend and Morehouse graduate who had been the first black to attend Crozer and who pastored Calvary Baptist Church in Chester, Pennsylvania. While Crozer opened King's intellectual horizons and allowed him to demonstrate fully his academic abilities, Barbour's close father-son stewardship helped King remain firmly rooted in the heritage from which he had come.⁷

King's new commitment to academic excellence and intellectual curiosity was quite visible to his close Morehouse friend Walter McCall, who arrived at Crozer one semester after King. "The dramatic change came in him when he entered the seminary. He began to take his studies more seriously. . . . he devoted time to his books night and day." A white Georgian who roomed across the hall from King, DuPree Jordan, agreed. "He was very studious; he spent a lot more time on his lesson assignments than most of us did."⁸

The assignments that most stimulated King's interest were those he received from Professor George W. Davis, with whom he took thirty-four of his 110 course hours during his three years at Crozer. As Smith and Zepp relate in detail, Davis was an evangelical liberal heavily influenced by William Newton Clarke and William Adams Brown and also affected by the mysticism of Rufus Jones and Edgar S. Brightman's emphasis on the value of human personality in Christian faith. Laying Davis's principal beliefs alongside the later writings of King, Smith and Zepp contend that

Most of the major themes of Martin Luther King were the themes of evangelical liberalism. His stress upon the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the centrality of religious experience, the concern of God for all of life, the rights of man and moral feeling, the humanity of Jesus and his emphasis upon love, the

dynamic nature of history and God's actions therein, his essential optimism about human nature and history, the tolerance and openness of the liberal spirit, his tolerance toward pluralism of world religions—all of these were key themes of evangelical liberalism embraced quite early in his intellectual pilgrimage.

Davis, they emphasize, "introduced King to the major motifs of King's mature thought."⁹

Smith and Zepp are right to emphasize the profound importance of Davis in King's development, an importance that has been underestimated by most other commentators. Smith and Zepp also emphasize that it was Davis who first introduced King to the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch, the activist pastor and social gospel exponent whose influence on King has been noted, and at times overstated, by many subsequent commentators. A major characteristic of Rauschenbusch and the social gospel movement was an interest in social justice and the effects of social institutions and processes. In many ways the social gospel movement was a reaction against the excessively individualistic ethical vision of much Protestant thought that had been influenced by the Calvinist tradition. Social gospel thought was notably optimistic, and believed that much progress toward the "inclusive human community" that would represent God's will could be achieved if the church would adopt a social as well as personal role. Rauschenbusch "saw a major conflict between the teachings of Jesus and the major institutions of capitalism in the United States. He believed that the church would be more effective in combating the evils of society if it abandoned the indirect approach through individuals and made a direct assault upon unjust institutions." The social gossellers believed that social as well as personal salvation was attainable and a millennial peace could be achieved because human limitations were eradicable through proper education and moral instruction.

Rauschenbusch's three major influences on King, Smith and Zepp state, were his advocacy of a prophetic role for religion, of an active social change role for the church, and his belief that the kingdom of God was an attainable ideal—an ideal that King in later years often spoke of as "the beloved community." All three influences reinforced and strengthened the emphasis on socially relevant religion that King had always heard Mays and Kelsey stress at Morehouse.¹⁰

The commentary on Rauschenbusch in King's *Stride Toward Freedom* emphasizes the attraction King felt toward Rauschenbusch's advocacy of a socially-active church, but underlying even that positive response were two other dimensions in the writings of Rauschenbusch that deeply and profoundly appealed to King as a young divinity student at Crozer. First, King's attraction to the social gospel's openly optimistic view of society's chances for progress and humanity's possible perfectibility was not simply a matter of abstract preference. "It is," King wrote in an autobiographical essay at that time, "quite easy for me to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences." It is "quite easy," King added, "for me to think of the universe as basically friendly."¹¹

In essence, then, King's first profound intellectual attractions, to George Davis's

evangelical liberalism and Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel thought, had their explicit and, indeed, conscious roots in the incipient worldview that King acquired during his upbringing in a close-knit, loving family and the Ebenezer church environment that daily shaped the Kings' lives. Biographical writers repeatedly have stressed the privileged and relatively protected life that young King enjoyed in Atlanta's Auburn Avenue community, despite the harsh strictures of racial discrimination and segregation, but few if any commentators have fully appreciated the underlying link that existed between the predispositions King drew from his youth and the ideas he was drawn to as a young man.

A second, though less fully documentable, attraction that King felt toward Rauschenbusch's writings concerned the social gospel's strong critique of the evils of capitalism. "Most of us are not capitalists, we're just potential capitalists," one surprised fellow student, Francis Stewart, recalls King having told a white Baptist women's group at a church in Chester. In one seminar at Crozer, King presented an excellent and positive report on R. H. Tawney's classic Marxist study, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, and in another paper King spoke of "my present anti-capitalistic feelings." J. Pius Barbour, reflecting back on his own private conversations with King during those years, asserted firmly that King "was economically a Marxist. . . . He thought the capitalistic system was predicated on exploitation and prejudice, poverty, and that we wouldn't solve these problems until we got a new social order." King had spent one Christmas vacation reading the works of Karl Marx, and "he believed that Marx had analyzed the economic side of capitalism right," Barbour recalled.¹²

Daddy King also was aware of M. L.'s economic views. "Politically," King, Sr. wrote, "he often seemed to be drifting away from the basics of capitalism and Western democracy that I felt very strongly about." That strong theme in King's thinking was also clear to friends he made in Boston after graduating from Crozer in 1951 at the top of his class. Coretta Scott, the young Alabama music student whom King met in Boston in early 1952 and married fifteen months later, later recalled the subjects King brought up during their early dates. "I remember him talking about his concern for the masses. He talked about the unequal distribution of wealth and he said, 'it's so unfair that a small percentage of the population could control all of the wealth.' He felt that there could be a more equitable distribution of wealth." In particular, Mrs. King remembered, Martin was unhappy with the acquisitiveness he saw in his father. "He said, 'My old man is a capitalist and I don't believe in capitalism as it is practiced in the United States'. . . . He felt that that was very unjust and he said that his father loved money and that he thought in terms of his own family more than" the rest of humanity.¹³

Although those repeated, early manifestations of King's anti-capitalistic economic thought have been minimized if not completely ignored by most students of his life, another early political influence has been so over-emphasized and overstated as to distort seriously many of the commentaries on King's intellectual development. These accounts portray King as a complete believer in the precepts of Gandhian nonviolence as early as his second year at Crozer. Some writers have

suggested that a crucial influence was a lecture that well-known pacifist A. J. Muste gave at Crozer in early November, 1949. Although King certainly attended the talk, one of his fellow students remembered the event because of how strenuously King had disagreed with Muste's views. Muste and King got in "a pretty heated argument," Francis Stewart later recalled. "King sure as hell wasn't any pacifist then."¹⁴

One year later, during the winter of 1950-51, King heard Howard University President Mordecai Johnson, just back from a trip to India, speak in Philadelphia about how Gandhi's nonviolent satyagraha had brought about revolutionary changes in Indian society. That lecture spurred King's interest, but his first exposure to Gandhi's writings, in a course that fall with George Davis on the psychology of religion, already had given King a fundamentally critical attitude toward Gandhian nonviolence. King expressed his doubts in a paper he submitted to Kenneth Smith, who had just begun teaching at Crozer. Picking up on a recent article in the *Crozer Quarterly* by political theorist John H. Hallowell which attacked Muste's pacifism, King argued that Gandhi's success in India did not mean that the pacifist approach could work everywhere. Pacifists, King emphasized, "fail to recognize the sinfulness of man." Though they focused upon the problems of war and violence, they did not appreciate that those were merely symptoms of man's sinfulness. "Since man is so often sinful," King wrote, "there must be some coercion to keep one man from injuring his fellows." Aggression and injustice must be resisted, not tolerated, though the respondents "must not seek revenge." An active stance, not a passive one, must be adopted in the face of injustice. Seven years later, looking back upon the evolution of his thought, King remarked that "When I was in theological school I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt."¹⁵

The fact that King did not at any time during his divinity and graduate school education adopt a belief in pacifism, Gandhi, or nonviolence is further underlined by events that took place during the early months of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56. When white harassment and violence was targeted against the protest leaders and their homes, King and his closest colleague, Ralph Abernathy, decided to take up side arms. "We felt we ought to be ready," Abernathy later explained. "I asked King if he had any means of protection for him and his family. He said the only weapon he had was a butcher knife. He asked, 'What do you have?' I said, 'The only thing I have is a razor.' We decided that we should go downtown together and buy some weapons for our protection." Accompanied by a third minister, King and Abernathy visited the county sheriff's office to request pistol permits, but the applications were denied. Several days later, as white violence continued, King and several colleagues called upon Alabama Governor James E. Folsom, widely known for his relative liberalism on matters of race. "What we really want to ask of you," King told Folsom, "is protection of the state. We have no confidence in the city police." Folsom said he would have state officers keep an eye on King's home, but King had a further request. "What we would like to have, is to have you issue a permit to keep a gun in my car." The governor responded that he would have to discuss that with the Montgomery County sheriff, and King's group departed.¹⁶

Several weeks later, as representatives of several pacifist political organizations

arrived in Montgomery to speak with King and other boycott leaders, one of the representatives, Bayard Rustin, along with a journalist friend, William Worthy, visited King's home. Rustin took a seat on a couch and Worthy started to sit in an armchair. Rustin looked over and saw a pistol on the seat. "Watch out, Bill, there's a gun in that chair." Worthy put the pistol aside, and when King came in, Rustin queried him about the presence of the gun. The movement intended to harm no one unless violently attacked, King explained.¹⁷

Glenn Smiley, a Fellowship of Reconciliation staff member, was another exponent of nonviolence who visited Montgomery and spoke at length with King during the early months of the protest. Smiley took along an armful of books on nonviolence for their first meeting, and asked King about his familiarity with the doctrine. "I said to Dr. King," Smiley recalled, "'I'm assuming that you're very familiar and have greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.' And he was very thoughtful, and he said, 'As a matter of fact, no. I know who the man is. I have read some statements by him, and so on, but I will have to truthfully say'—and this is almost a direct quote ...—'I will have to say that I know very little about the man.'" King stated that he nonetheless admired Gandhi, and Smiley described to King how the essence of nonviolence was a refusal to retaliate against evil, a refusal based on the realization that "the law of retaliation is the law of the multiplication of evil." That session was only the first of many such long conversations between the two men about nonviolence and the Gandhian tradition, conversations that had a profound effect on both King's thought and his language. "He didn't even use the word at first," Smiley later stressed regarding King's adoption of nonviolence. "He used 'passive resistance' almost entirely."¹⁸

Although commentaries that seek to argue King's adherence to or appreciation of Gandhian nonviolence prior to the spring of 1956 are hence quite erroneous,¹⁹ one major intellectual influence that did come upon King during his last year at Crozer, an influence which in the long run was the most important academic doctrine in King's developing thought, is sometimes underemphasized by students of his life. That influence was the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose effect was quite clear in the critique of pacifism that King submitted to Professor Smith. In fact, both of the senior year courses King took with Smith exposed King to Niebuhr's writings and to Niebuhr's sharp critique of Rauschenbusch's social gospel optimism, a critique that Smith enthusiastically endorsed. Niebuhr believed that Rauschenbusch's emphasis upon the power of Christian love to advance the cause of social justice was misplaced and naive, that "it did not measure adequately the power and persistence of man's self-concern." Human selfishness, Niebuhr stressed in his 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, was the major barrier to justice in society, and people in privileged groups were the most persistent in obstructing any efforts to improve society. "Disproportion of power in society is the real root of social injustice," Niebuhr argued, and "economic power is more basic than political power." Because of these prolonged and persistent inequalities, "relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical." Social gospel thought was blind to these hard and painful truths about modern society.²⁰

The arguments of Niebuhr and the friendly prodding of Smith moved King away from his earlier attachment to the most optimistic aspects of Rauschenbusch's social gospel and George Davis's evangelical liberalism. Looking back, King later confessed that he had become "absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason." Niebuhr's more persuasive realism, however, showed him "the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence." Most importantly, Niebuhr's realistic view of power in society spoke directly to King's natural interest in Christian perspectives that accounted for the pervasiveness of racial discrimination and segregation. Just as Rauschenbusch's championing of an active social role for religion had spoken to King's desire to involve the church in struggles against American racism, Niebuhr's emphasis on the reality of human sin, particularly in the realm of social power, offered King an instructive and appealing doctrinal explanation for the actuality of racial injustice. Christian love alone clearly could not eliminate discrimination and achieve basic social change. His deep attraction to Niebuhrian realism, King wrote, "may root back to certain experiences that I had in the south with a vicious race problem. Some of the experiences that I encountered there made it very difficult for me to believe in the essential goodness of man."²¹

It is beyond the scope of this paper to sketch out in full detail how King's later life experiences during the civil rights movement repeatedly reminded him of the essential accuracy of Niebuhr's social philosophy and of the need for political coercion in combating society's injustices; careful study of King's hundreds of unpublished sermons and speeches from his movement years, however, reveals his growing realization of black America's need to pursue an aggressively coercive, Niebuhrian political strategy. These works also contain regular, extemporaneous references to Niebuhr and the analyses of *Moral Man* in particular. Indeed, while the incredibly hectic nature of King's later years virtually precluded him from undertaking any serious, time-consuming writing about weighty intellectual doctrines, King's political development can easily, accurately and fairly be labeled an increasingly Niebuhrian evolution.²²

Upon graduation from Crozer in 1951, King chose Boston University's School of Theology from among several doctoral programs he had considered. The principal attraction of Boston, King later explained, was the presence of Edgar S. Brightman, whose book *A Philosophy of Religion* had been a main text in two of George Davis's courses and whom Davis recommended highly to King. Brightman, along with other principal members of the Boston theology faculty such as L. Harold DeWolf and Peter Bertocci, was a leading proponent of personalism. As the name suggested, personalism held that the human personality, i.e., all individual persons, was the ultimate intrinsic value in the world. That emphasis was extremely attractive to King, for it placed human equality, and respect for all human individuals, at the center of the social value system. "The dignity and worth of all human personality," an affirmation which was the central tenet of personalism, was a phrase that King often used extemporaneously in his sermons and addresses over the following fifteen years. Just as was the case with those doctrines of Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr that

King found most attractive, in the case of personalism, too, it was the consonance between King's already-developed views and the principal theme of personalism that led King to adopt and give voice to that tenet so firmly and consistently.²³

The second and equally, if not more, important doctrinal influence on King during his Boston studies came from G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel's dialectical method of thesis, antithesis and synthesis became one of the most central tools in King's intellectual repertoire. As Harold DeWolf later observed, "regardless of subject matter, King never tired of moving from a one-sided thesis to a corrective, but also one-sided antithesis and finally to a more coherent synthesis beyond both."²⁴

One early reflection of King's new attraction to the Hegelian dialectical method was a Boston essay in which he dealt with each of the two major doctrines he had been attracted to while at Crozer. Now King argued that one must adopt *both* the ethical love emphasis of Rauschenbusch *and* the realists' stress upon political power. "The balanced Christian," King wrote, "must be both loving and realistic. . . . as an individual in complex social relations he must realistically meet mind with mind and power with power." The answer should not be an "either/or" choice, it should be "both/and." A love ethic could work well in direct relationships, but in the larger social setting coercive power was necessary to increase social justice. "Whereas love seeks out the needs of others, justice . . . is a check (by force, if necessary) upon ambitions of individuals seeking to overcome their own insecurity at the expense of others." Liberal theology and the social gospel, King said, confuse "the ideal itself with the realistic means which must be employed to coerce society into an approximation of that ideal. . . . Men are controlled by power, not mind alone." Despite the attractions of balance and inclusivity that the dialectical combination offered, King still leaned towards Niebuhr's analysis. Niebuhr was "unqualifiedly pessimistic about the future of things," but "his analysis of the complexity of the social situation is profound indeed, and with it I would find very little to disagree." In the years ahead, King's comments would indicate a growing appreciation for the hard-eyed insights of the Niebuhrian perspective.²⁵

In subsequent circumstances, King often employed the thesis-antithesis-synthesis format to search for a middle way between what he defined as competing extremes. Most importantly, as the Montgomery protest matured and King spent more time mulling the advice and input of outside advisers Smiley and Rustin, he came to view Gandhian nonviolence as precisely such a middle course—an active path of resistance that avoided the sins of passivity and despair in the face of injustice, but a form of resistance that also avoided the multiplication of evil that Smiley had argued would stem from a hateful response or retaliatory violence. "Like the synthesis in Hegelian philosophy," King wrote in 1958, "the principle of nonviolent resistance seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites—acquiescence and violence—while avoiding the extremes and immoralities of both."²⁶ In time King would virtually institutionalize a dialectical discussion and decision-making format within the counsels of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) by encouraging different aides and assistants to champion fundamentally opposite points of view. After allowing all participants to have their say and attack each

other's points of view, King almost without fail would speak up and outline an intermediate decision which incorporated what he had identified as the best aspects of each of the contending perspectives. No small number of SCLC strategy sessions and staff discussions thus represented the concrete application of a principle that King first encountered as an abstract formulation in Boston.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to sketch out in full form just how common and extensive King's application of that format became in later years, it is one of the most important intellectual influences on his later political and movement decision-making. Students of his movement activities need to appreciate this influence in order to understand fully the often-criticized moderation that movement colleagues privately believed King displayed when tough choices had to be made. King's deep-seated penchant for identifying at the outset two supposed extremes, and his concentration upon ascertaining an intermediate middle way, meant not only that his analytical approach was oriented toward moderation, but also, and equally importantly, that it was fundamentally inclined towards compromise. Only more extensive analysis, coupled with the most careful and precise historical review of King's movement decision-making will enable the full development of this extremely important insight into King's manner of thinking.

Perhaps the single best source from which to draw an accurate portrait of the intellectual influences that contributed to King's development prior to his immersion in the whirlwind of the civil rights movement is the extemporaneous speech King delivered at the first mass meeting of the Montgomery protest, Monday night December 5, 1955. Never published, the transcript of that address represents King's thought and voice before the influential effects of Smiley and Rustin, before friends, advisers and ghostwriters like Rustin, Stanley Levison, and Harris Wofford began taking an active hand in the drafting, editing and publication of articles and books carrying King's name. This address also shows King's thought before the ultimately harsh and profoundly challenging experiences of an active leadership role began to take their toll on King and turn him toward a more hard-eyed view of humanity and society. Finally, this speech demonstrates a fundamentally more spiritual, faith-based approach to daily life, and a clear appreciation of the fragility of his own life and the likelihood of an early death.

"First and foremost we are American citizens," King told the enthusiastic overflow crowd at Montgomery's Holt Street Baptist Church. "We are here because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth." Black Montgomery was determined to see the oppressive treatment visited upon black bus patrons eliminated. "We are here this evening because we are tired now," but "let us say that we are not here advocating violence. We have overcome that. I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are Christian people. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. . . . This is the glory of America, with all of its faults. . . . The great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right."

The bus protest, King emphasized, would be fundamentally different from the activism of white segregationists. "There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery. There will be no white persons pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and murdered. There will be nobody among us who will stand up and defy the Constitution of this nation. . . . We're going to work with grim and firm determination to gain justice on the buses. . . . We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth. If we are wrong justice is a lie." King concluded the speech by linking the themes of American democracy and the biblical notions of love and justice:

We are not afraid of what we are doing, because we are doing it within the law. There is never a time in our American democracy that we must ever think we're wrong when we protest. . . .

We must keep, and I want to stress this, in all our doings, in all of our deliberations . . . we must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our action.

And I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love. Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which would work against love. . . .

Standing beside love is always just. And we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion but we've got to use the tools of coercion. Not only is this thing a process of education but it is also a process of legislation. . . .²⁷

Three principal points can be made about this crucially important address. First, King reveals a clear and firm faith in the ability of American governmental processes to respond meaningfully to the protest. That faith presumes explicitly that justice will triumph over injustice, that success will come to those whose cause represents basic fairness. It also reflects King's deep-seated integrationist, if not assimilationist, assumptions about how the political emergence of black Americans would proceed. In the light of King's later experiences, and in stark contrast to the major themes emphasized by King in the 1965–1968 period, this first address reflects a strong underlying optimism and hopefulness that in retrospect appears somewhat naive and moderately surprising.²⁸

Second, and most important in the context of this essay, King's emphasis is upon Christianity, the teachings of Jesus, and the centrality of religion in shaping how the protest should proceed. There are no references to nonviolence, to Gandhi or Thoreau, or to any abstract intellectual traditions. Instead, King's stress is upon the Christian—the Christian Mrs. Parks, the Christian people of Montgomery, the Christian religion and faith. Some commentators have completely missed this crucial point. "From the beginning," one noted academic has written, "the philosophy King

used to provide cohesion for the black community transcended the experience of the black masses.²⁹ Almost nothing could be further from the truth. King came from and gave voice to the same heritage the common people of black Montgomery had grown up in, the Christian teachings of Jesus and the Bible.³⁰ The centrality of that heritage in shaping the attractions King felt toward aspects of different intellectual doctrines is an essential point for understanding why and how King was drawn toward and partially adopted those doctrines. The central place of this heritage need not simply be hypothesized or presumed, for the explicit evidence of it appears repeatedly in what is perhaps the most important speech King ever made. From this point forward in King scholarship, it is of the highest importance that all detailed analysis of King's usage of different intellectual influences be grounded in a firm and clear understanding of how it was his own most basic roots that shaped and indeed determined his attraction towards and adoption of those particular doctrines.

Third, the December 5th address reflects not only an emphasis on love, on persuasion and education, but also an emphasis on justice, power and coercion. Indeed, King's emphasis on those latter concepts, on the importance of legitimacy of active protest, is a clearly stronger and more repeated emphasis than that given to the love and education themes.³¹ Thus the careful student can see not only the remaining influence of Davis's liberalism and Rauschenbusch's social gospel in King's remarks, as well as his fundamental, quasi-Hegelian adoption of the "both/and" school of analysis, but also, and most predominantly, King's application of a fundamentally Niebuhrian social philosophy by means of the forms and language of the Christian Biblical tradition of the black southern Baptist church heritage out of which he came. King's stress is upon an active, socially challenging role for religion and the church, a theme that had first attracted him to Rauschenbusch, but King's stress is also upon the necessity of power and coercion for obtaining justice, the most basic insight that he acquired from Niebuhr.³²

The central argument of this essay has been that any balanced and insightful analysis of the intellectual influences upon Martin King must take place within the context of a clear understanding and appreciation of the fundamentally Christian, biblical roots from which King's most basic beliefs and assumptions sprang. Similarly, any full appreciation of the absolute centrality of King's faith experience to his entire life, and especially to his civil rights leadership role, must also proceed with those roots and that heritage clearly in mind. That faith experience, particularly the vision King experienced eight weeks into the Montgomery boycott, on Friday evening January 27, 1956, in the kitchen of his parsonage, increasingly will be seen as the major subject which requires focus for all major analyses of King's thinking and self-understanding.³³ Although a detailed analysis of that topic lies well beyond the scope of this essay, there again the centrality of King's biblical roots and black southern Baptist church heritage comes through with sharp, strong clarity. While George Davis's liberalism, Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel, Gandhian nonviolence, Boston personalism, and the Hegelian dialectic all exerted fundamental influence upon the shaping of Martin King, latter-day academic analyses of King's think-

ing and development must no longer make the grievous mistake of ignoring or minimizing the two most formative influences in King's life: the Bible and the church.

NOTES

1. Two particular, often-cited King items that must be used with the greatest caution are "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," pages 90 through 107 in *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), and *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964), with the exception of chapter five, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," the most dependable version of which appears in the *New Leader*, 24 June 1963, pp. 3-11. On the problems with "Pilgrimage," see Zepp, "Intellectual Sources" (n. 2 below), esp. 143-149 and 340; and James P. Hanigan, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Foundations of Nonviolence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 67, 160.
2. Zepp, "The Intellectual Sources of the Ethical Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., As Traced in His Writings with Special Reference to the Beloved Community," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, St. Mary's Seminary and University, 1971; Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974).
3. See, e.g., Stephen B. Oates, "The Intellectual Odyssey of Martin Luther King," *Massachusetts Review* 22 (Summer 1981): 301-320, and *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982); and John J. Ansbro, "Martin Luther King's Conception of Agape," *Gandhi Marg* (2nd series) 2 (January 1981): 556-571. Although Ansbro's subsequent book, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), makes several incidental references to Smith and Zepp, Zepp's and Smith's analyses remain considerably more insightful, complete and dependable than either Ansbro's volume or the earlier work of Hanes Walton, Jr., *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971). Critical commentaries on the Ansbro book appear in *Fellowship*, January-February 1984, pp. 32-33, by James H. Cone, and the *Journal of American History*, 70 (March, 1984): 925-926, by Steven F. Lawson. Also see Ansbro's response in the March, 1984 *Fellowship*, p. 21; and a further Ansbro piece, "Martin Luther King's Civil Disobedience—A Rejoinder," *Gandhi Marg* (2nd series) 3 (March 1982): 709-721, which is speaking to Louis Waldman, "Civil Rights—Yes; Civil Disobedience—No (A Reply to Dr. Martin Luther King)," *New York State Bar Journal* 37 (August 1965): 331-337.
4. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (New York: William Morrow & Co., forthcoming 1986), chapter one.
5. B. R. Brazeal to Charles E. Batten, 23 March 1948, Benjamin E. Mays to Charles E. Batten, 28 February 1948, and George Kelsey to Charles E. Batten, 12 March 1948, author's files.
6. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Application . . .," n.d. [ca. early February, 1948], author's files; King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," n.d. [ca. 1949], King Papers, Boston University (and reprinted in full in Mervyn A. Warren, "A Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Pastor and Pulpit Orator," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1966, pp. 269-284).
7. J. Pius Barbour Interview (David L. Lewis, September 1968, Chester, PA); David Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp. 26-36; Hanigan, *King*, pp. 116-118.
8. McCall Interview (Herbert Holmes, 31 March 1970, Atlanta, GA), p. 20, King Center; Jordan Interview (David Garrow, 14 January 1984, Atlanta, GA).
9. Smith and Zepp, *Search*, pp. 21-31, esp. 29.
10. Smith and Zepp, *Search*, pp. 33-45, esp. 41. Also see Carlyle Marney, "The Significance of Walter Rauschenbusch for Today," *Foundations* 2 (January 1959): 13-26; Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 253-263; Donovan E. Smucker, "The Rauschenbusch Story," *Foundations* 2 (January 1959): 4-12; Henry W. Bowden, "Walter Rauschenbusch and American Church History," *Foundations* 9 (July-September 1966): 234-250; and James E. Tull, *Shapers of Baptist Thought* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1972), pp. 183-207. Raus-

chenbusch's major books were *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917).

11. King, *Stride*, pp. 91-92; King, "An Autobiography . . .," n. 6 above. Later analyses that stress Rauschenbusch's influence on King include Paul R. Garber, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Theologian and Precursor of Black Theology," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1973, pp. 67-85; John H. Cartwright, "The Social Eschatology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," in Cartwright, ed., *Essays in Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Evanston, IL: Leifer Bureau of Social and Religious Research, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, 1977), pp. 1-13; and Drexel T. Brunson, "The Quest for Social Justice: A Study of Walter Rauschenbusch and His Influence on Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr.," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1980.
12. Francis Stewart Interview (David Garrow, 29 March 1984, Atlanta, GA); Kenneth L. Smith, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reflections of a Former Teacher," *Bulletin on Crozer Theological Seminary* 57 (April 1965): 2-3; King, "An Autobiography . . .," n. 6 above; Barbour Interview (Lewis), n. 7 above; Lewis, *King*, p. 354.
13. Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1980), p. 147; Coretta Scott King Interview (Charlotte Mayerson, 15 July 1968, Manchester, NH, III, pp. 51-55). Also see James P. Hanigan, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Ethics of Militant Nonviolence," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1973, p. 9; Mergione Pitre, "The Economic Philosophy of Martin L. King, Jr.," *Review of Black Political Economy* 9 (Winter 1979): 191-198; and Adam Fairclough, "Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?," *History Workshop* 15 (Spring 1983): 117-125.
14. Stewart Interview (Garrow), n. 12 above; also see King, *Stride*, p. 95; Lewis, *King*, p. 35; and Jo Ann O. Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1981), pp. 277-278. Efforts to build King's few early references to Henry David Thoreau (see *Stride*, pp. 51, 91) into an argument for a major early Thoreauvian influence on King are similarly unsuccessful; see the intelligent comments offered by Douglas A. Walker, "The Thoreauvian Legacy of Martin Luther King," Unpublished M.A. thesis, Texas Christian University, 1970; and George E. Carter, "Martin Luther King: Incipient Transcendentalist," *Phylon* 40 (December 1979): 318-324.
15. King, *Stride*, p. 96; Smith and Zepp, *Search*, pp. 47-69; King, "War and Pacifism," n.d. [ca. spring 1951], King Papers, Boston University, Box 15; King in *Peace News*, 31 January 1958, p. 2, and *Hindustan Times*, 30 January 1958.
16. Ralph D. Abernathy, "The Natural History of a Social Movement: The Montgomery Improvement Association," Unpublished M.A. thesis, Sociology Department, Atlanta University, August 1958, pp. 60-61 (copy in author's files); "Negro Leader Fails to Get Pistol Permit," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 4 February 1956, p. B3; Cliff MacKay, "Terror in Alabama," *Afro-American*, 11 February 1956, pp. 1, 8. Indeed, the most thorough review of King's copious Crozer and Boston class notebooks revealed only two references to Gandhi. Hanigan, *King*, p. 156.
17. Bayard Rustin Interviews (T. H. Baker, 17 & 30 June 1969, New York: Lyndon B. Johnson Library; James Mosby, 13 February 1970, New York: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; David Garrow, 22 April 1982, New York).
18. Glenn Smiley Interview (David Garrow, 6 April 1984, North Hollywood, CA). Also see Smiley Interview (Katherine M. Shannon, 12 September 1967, Nyack, NY, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University), and Smiley's extensive contemporaneous correspondence concerning King and the Montgomery events, located in the Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.
19. As Hanigan has nicely put it, "King was not a disciple of Gandhi. He was a disciple of Jesus Christ." *King*, p. 158. Commentaries that emphasize, and usually over-emphasize the impact of Gandhi on King include George Hendrick, "Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King," *Gandhi Marg* 3 (January 1959): 18-22; James H. Smylie, "On Jesus, Pharaohs, and the Chosen People: Martin Luther King as Biblical Interpreter and Humanist," *Interpretation* 24 (January 1970): 74-91; Donald H. Smith, "An Exegesis of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Social Philosophy," *Phylon* 31 (Spring 1970): 89-97; William R. Duggan, "Three Men of Peace," *Crisis* 81 (December 1974): 331-337; Om Dikshit, "The Impact of Mahatma

- Gandhi on Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Negro History Bulletin* 38 (February-March 1975): 342-344; and John Eubanks, "Nonviolence and Social Change," *Journal of Religious Thought* 35 (Fall-Winter 1978-79): 9-18.
20. Smith and Zepp, *Search*, pp. 71-97; Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. xxiii, 163, 210; Niebuhr, "Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective," *Religion in Life* 27 (Autumn 1958): 527-536, at 533.
21. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," *Christian Century* 77 (13 April 1960): 439-441, at 439; King, "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man," n.d., King Papers, Boston University, Box 15. Also see Emmert C. Burns, "Love, Power, and Justice as Central Elements in a View of Social Change: A Comparison and Evaluation of the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr.," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974.
22. See, e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., "Address to Operation Breadbasket Meeting at Chicago Theological Seminary," 25 March 1967, King Papers, King Center.
23. Warren, "A Rhetorical Study," p. 85, citing an August 31, 1966 interview with King; Smith and Zepp, *Search*, pp. 99-118; Joseph H. Thompson, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Christian Witness: An Interpretation of King Based on a Theological Model of Prophetic Witness," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1981, esp. p. 108. Also see Warren E. Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Nonviolence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (January-March 1973): 97-111, and Leo Sandon, Jr.'s excellent "Boston University Personalism and Southern Baptist Theology," *Foundations* 20 (April-June 1977): 101-108. While King makes many repeated bows towards personalism in his unpublished Boston University dissertation ("A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," 1955), the manuscript supplies few if any insights into King's own thinking. Unfortunately, in later years some Boston theologians have badly overstated the formative influence their instruction and personalism had on King. See, e.g., L. Harold DeWolf, "Martin Luther King, Jr. as Theologian," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 4 (Spring 1977): 1-11, at 9-10; and Walter G. Muelder, "Communitarian Christian Ethics: A Personal Statement and a Response," in Paul Deats, Jr., ed., *Toward a Discipline of Social Ethics* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1972), pp. 295-320, at 299 and 314, and, more strongly, Muelder, "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Ethics of Nonviolent Action," unpublished paper, 1985, King Center.
24. DeWolf, "Martin Luther King," p. 8. Also see Bennie E. Goodwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: American Social Educator," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974, pp. 66-67, 132; and Hanigan, *King*, pp. 80, 100-101.
25. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," 9 May 1952, King Papers, Boston University, Box 15. King added that "the more aggressively one relates the gospel to life, the more sensitively he realizes that the social unit can accommodate only justice, not agape." Some excellent comments on why Hegel's dialectical method was attractive to King appear in Ralph Levering's forthcoming essay, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Christian's Quest for Social Transformation," in Charles DeBenediti, ed., *Peace Heroes in Twentieth Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
26. King, *Stride*, pp. 213-14.
27. King, "Address at Mass Meeting," 5 December 1955, audiotape (an almost fully accurate transcript appears in Lucy A. M. Keele, "A Burkeian Analysis of the Rhetorical Strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1955-1968," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1972), pp. 299-303. Also see Joe Azbell, "5,000 at Meeting Outline Boycott," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 6 December 1955, p. A1, A6, and Azbell, "At Holt Street Baptist Church," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 December 1955, p. A4.
28. For a more extensive consideration of King's pronounced radicalism and more pessimistic view of American society during those later years, see David Garrow, *Martin Luther King: Challenging America at Its Core* (New York: Democratic Socialists of America, 1983); also see Vincent Harding, "The Land Beyond," *Sojourners* 12 (January 1983): 19-22, and Harding, "Struggle and Transformation: The Challenge of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Sojourners* 13 (October 1984): 18-21.
29. Preston N. Williams, "The Social Gospel and Race Relations: A Case Study of a Social Movement," in Deats, ed., *Toward a Discipline of Social Ethics*, pp. 232-255; at 247. Williams adds that "One needs to note especially the failure of King himself to attempt any transformation of the Negro church. Al-

though a pastor, King worked outside the black church institution. He was at one with Reinhold Niebuhr—but not with his Boston University teachers—in dismissing the church as an effective instrument of social reform." These further assertions are each similarly inaccurate and incorrect. Indeed, the organization King created to pursue his social activism—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—was largely and purposefully rooted in the black church and based upon a widespread ministerial desire to mobilize politically the black church constituency.

30. See James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King: The Source of His Courage to Face Death," *Concilium* 183 (March 1983): 74–79, and Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today* 40 (January 1984): 409–420. Also see Hortense J. Spillers, "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon," *Black Scholar* 3 (September 1971): 14–27, and Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Church, and the Black Messianic Vision," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 12 (Fall 1984–Spring 1985): 93–108.

31. One long-distance observer of the boycott who contemporaneously recognized this was Reinhold Niebuhr. King, Niebuhr wrote, "scrupulously avoids violence and calls his strategy the 'way of love.' It is the most effective way of justice. . . . One cannot help but question the definition of the boycott was the 'way of love.' Love is a motive and not a method. Love must always be intent on justice, and the boycott is one of the methods of establishing justice. It is justice, rather than love, which becomes relevant whenever one has to deal with conflicting wills and interests." "The Way of Nonviolent Resistance," *Christianity and Society* 21 (Spring 1956): 3. Also see James E. Sellers, "Love, Justice, and the Nonviolent Movement," *Theology Today* 18 (January 1962): 422–434.

32. Works that emphasize the liberation focus in King's thought and rhetoric include Allan Boesak, *Coming in Out of the Wilderness: A Comparative Interpretation of the Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X* (Kampen, Nederland: Theologische Hogeschool der Gereformeerde Kerken, n.d.); Otis Turner, "Toward an Ethic of Black Liberation Based on the Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael's Concept of Black Power," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1974; Turner, "Nonviolence and the Politics of Liberation," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 4 (Spring 1977): 49–60; Paul Garber, "King Was a Black Theologian," *Journal of Religious Thought* 31 (Fall-Winter 1974–1975): 16–32, and Garber, "Black Theology: The Latter Day Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 2 (Spring 1975): 100–113.

33. See Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, n. 4 above; also see Gardner C. Taylor, *How Shall They Preach* (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1977), pp. 88–89; and Ervin Smith, "The Role of Personalism in the Development of the Social Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1976, pp. 64–66, which appears in revised form as *The Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981). The centrality of King's faith experience and its importance to King scholarship also is emphasized in Fred L. Downing's forthcoming *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).