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The Social Vision of  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Ira G. Zepp, Jr.

PREFACE BY DAVID J. GARROW

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# Series Editor's Preface

Ira Zepp's 1971 doctoral dissertation on the intellectual sources of the ethical and social thought of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., remains, eighteen years later, the most valuable and useful study of written influences upon King yet completed. Many of Zepp's analytical insights were reflected in *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Judson Press, 1974; University Press of America, 1986), which he co-authored with one of King's own divinity school professors, Kenneth L. Smith, but Zepp's much more extensive dissertation is a crucial piece of analysis that each and every serious student of Martin Luther King, Jr., ought to be familiar with.

Much writing on King's intellectual sources has been either flat-footed quotation and summary, or single-theme perspectives which have erroneously sought to claim King for one particular school of thought—such as Boston University personalism—or another. In comparison with most of this work, Zepp's dissertation, like the modest Smith and Zepp 1974 volume, stands head and shoulders above the crowd in appreciating and reflecting the intellectual complexity and richness that helped produce the ethical and social thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Only in the late 1980s have scholars started to appreciate more fully the extent to which Dr. King was heavily influenced both by the oral sermonic traditions of the southern black Baptist church in which he grew up, and by the liberal, white Protestant preaching tradition, exemplified by New York's Riverside Church pastors Harry Emerson Fosdick and Robert McCracken, to which King was exposed by means of published collections of sermons which he studied carefully throughout his formative years. The ongoing work of scholars such as Keith Miller will increasingly shed more and more light on these heretofore under- or unappreciated sermonic influences on the

preaching and writing of Dr. King, but Ira Zepp's impressive study will still remain one of the most complete and useful analyses of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s intellectual roots ever written, no matter how extensive the shelf-full of works on Dr. King becomes in subsequent years. No King scholar should be without a carefully-perused copy of this book, and I'm extremely pleased that Carlson Publishing's eighteen volume series, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement*, is able to bring it to the attention of those scholars and libraries that will benefit from its ready availability.

David J. Garrow

## Preface

### 1989

Soon after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, I had to submit a dissertation proposal for the doctor of philosophy to the faculty of the Ecumenical Institute of St. Mary's Seminary and University. Since my concentration in graduate studies was in theology and ethics, and since I admired the witness and work of the recently slain civil rights leader, I knew I wanted to do something on Martin King. That was twenty years ago.

I had read his books by this time and was taken by the autobiographical reflections of his intellectual journey in *Stride Toward Freedom* (Chapter 6) and in *Strength to Love* (Chapter 17). In those chapters, King referred happily and gratefully to the foundation of intellectually respectable religion he found in his mentors at Morehouse College. He then notes how he continued at Crozer Theological Seminary "a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil." Then at Boston University, he discovered that personal idealism was "my basic philosophical position." It seemed to me that these chapters were fields that needed mining.

It was also clear to me that the "Beloved Community" was a central metaphor that pervaded his writing and speaking from Montgomery to Memphis. So I proposed to research the intellectual sources of King's ethical thought with a particular interest in his understanding of the Beloved Community. My intention was to provide an expansive intellectual, historical, and theological contextualization of King's seminary and graduate school years.

In many ways, the dissertation is a period piece. Therein lies its value and its deficiencies. It is limited by historical perspective, the data available at the time, and my own hermeneutical stance. Nevertheless, it has been decided, in the interest of historical integrity, to publish the dissertation virtually as it was written, "warts and all."

Two of the "warts" need to be addressed immediately. The dissertation was written before Martin King or I was conscious of sexist language. In 1970,