

# Martin Luther King: The Making of an Orator

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By David J. Garrow

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CASUAL OBSERVERS at many of each January's commemorations of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday are often left thinking—quite wrongly—that the two writers who had the greatest formative influences on King were Henry David Thoreau and Gandhi. Likewise, readers who dip into some of the pre-1986 academic analyses of King's intellectual development might come away believing that King was largely the product of those white theologians—Walter Rauschenbusch, Edgar S. Brightman—whose writings he read in seminary and graduate school.

Both conclusions are quite wrong. The writers who had the

greatest formative influence on King were named Amos, Jeremiah and Matthew—all from one volume, the Bible. Similarly, King was far more heavily influenced by the oral, sermonic tradition of the Protestant church—both black and white—than he was by any or all of the published philosophical analyses that were assigned reading during his years at Crozer Theological Seminary and the Boston University School of Theology.

Intellectually as well as rhetorically, Martin Luther King Jr. developed out of the confluence of Biblical teachings and sermonic traditions that suffused his childhood and teen-age years in and around Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, which his father—and his grandfather before him—pastored. No one who

has the opportunity to read or listen to King's first crucial civil rights oration at the beginning of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott on Dec. 5, 1955, would doubt that it was "the Christian faith" that formed King's central roots. Indeed, when King spoke then about the importance of avoiding violence, he spoke not of "nonviolence," with reference to Gandhi or Thoreau, but of Christianity, with reference to the teachings of the Bible: "We must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our action."

To emphasize the centrality of King's Christian roots and religious faith is not to make him seem soft, syrupy or saccharine—for King always emphasized that justice was as crucial a part of Christian teaching as love—but to make clear that King was first and foremost a product of the black church heritage in which he was raised. King was no "blank slate" when he began graduate school (in 1951) or even when he began seminary (in 1948), as much academic commentary at least implicitly assumes, for he had begun his own preaching at Ebenezer while he was still an undergraduate at Atlanta's Morehouse College and not yet 19 years old.

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# Making An Orator

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Instead, what King adopted from among the teachings he was exposed to at Crozer and Boston were those elements—whether from Rauschenbusch, from George W. Davis' evangelical liberalism, from Brightman's "personalism" or, especially, from Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism—that articulated and spoke to beliefs he already held from his upbringing in Ebenezer.

But King was not only a student of the Bible who drew his sense of justice from the prophets of the Old Testament and his understanding of love from the New. He was also, and equally, a speaker and preacher whose greatest contemporary influences were the black preachers in Atlanta to whom he listened repeatedly as a young man—his father, Morehouse President Benjamin E. Mays, and especially Wheat Street Baptist Church's famous William Holmes Borders—and white preachers—George Buttrick, J. Wallace Hamilton and especially Harry Emerson Fosdick, whose published collected sermons King studied carefully.

King's closest teen-age and col-



MATTHEW LEWIS—THE WASHINGTON POST

## *The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.*

lege friend, Larry H. Williams, who now pastors Atlanta's Zion Hill Baptist Church, has recalled for more than one interviewer how he and King, as young students of the art of the sermon, would attend Borders' orations at Wheat Street to see and hear the techniques of a true master of the pulpit. Similarly, Williams also tells of how he and the young Martin Luther King Jr. would work their way through different volumes of collected great sermons—especially those of New York's Riverside Church pastor Fosdick—for other pointers, themes and telling quotations that they could then adopt for their own sermons.

Today it is not uncommon for various pundits—and not only dur-

ing this most recent presidential campaign—to decry the decline of compelling oratory in American public life. Tapes of King's most powerful sermons, particularly those from Ebenezer, might prove a partial remedy for this, were they easily available (they are not). However, our literary desire to emphasize the influence of the written word should not blind us to the equal if not sometimes greater influence of oral tradition. Although, as in King's case, the tremendous importance of an oral heritage is not always copiously documented in the surviving archives, the real sources of King's intellectual and rhetorical roots should remind us that the oral tradition can be as critically influential as any book. ■