

4-15-2018

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Recommended Citation

Voges, Jordan (2018) "A Map Key to Martin Luther King Jr," *Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho/vol1/iss1/5>

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A Map Key to Martin Luther King Jr.

Jordan R. Voges

When and if one hears the name Martin Luther King Jr. at a confessional Christian school like Concordia Seminary, it is often only in passing. The most well-known leader of the African-American civil rights movement is treated much like a roadside monument to a rare geological anomaly: something worth pointing out on the way to somewhere else, worth looking at and reading a paragraph or two about, but hardly a destination for contemplation in and of itself. In addition to the casual manner with which his presence is noted along the highway of theological dialogue, most references to the man are usually made with little more insight than the speaker gleaned from a high school American history course.

But for a Christian theologian at all concerned about understanding the religious terrain of North America, to have only such cursory and nonchalant encounters with one of the most prominent American theologians of the twenty-first century is nothing if not the pinnacle of reckless and wasteful theological tourism. Rather, if Christian theologians desire to tactically approach the landscape of American religiosity, and to do so not as tourists but as guides, they do well to slow their pace and take some time to survey the testament left carved in the rockface of the American religious conscience by Martin Luther King Jr.

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to present a basic “theological map key” to King. A map key, for those of you who are unfamiliar with the term, is set aside from the rest of the map and filled with terms and images for better comprehending what a map is communicating and what can be found within the landscape a map describes. Put another way, a map key helps one better understand the map and, thereby, better navigate the landscape it is attempting to portray. A theological map key, with its terms and images, likewise helps us to understand what might be included on a theological map and to better navigate—at least in this case—what a theologian or theology left behind.

Before we begin, however, we must make a few more remarks concerning what follows. The first is that this essay (map key) is founded on a more extensive research paper (map) I wrote, surveying twelve of King’s more insightful writings, speeches, and sermons.¹ It was through the efforts of making that map that I gained the view of his theology presented here. Second, King never wrote a systematics text, and he never explicitly laid out the topography of his theology. What we have instead are the mass of occasional works King managed to pen in his short life. Therefore,

our map key, being created inductively, maintains a degree of speculation. This is not a hindrance however. The speculation is based on a valid impression of King's work, and it is in the realm of valid impressions where King, I think, has become most influential. Finally, as a reminder, the ultimate goal of this experiment in theological map key making is not a thorough analysis of every detail related to King; that is the job of an expert, not a guide. The aim of this paper is to depict some general and practical loci, from which rudimentary theological insights and opinions can be gleaned and by which new questions and explorations can be launched.

Eschatology

It may seem strange to begin our map key by speaking of eschatology; words about the end are normally expected toward—appropriately—the end. In King's case, however, to glimpse a view of his eschatology is to see the warp and woof of the rest of his theological topography (e.g. God, Jesus, humanity, salvation).

According to his essay, *The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope*,² King rejected the general tenets of traditional eschatology. In his theological opinion, there will be no physical return of Jesus, nor a final judgment, and there very well may be no personal existence beyond death—as a disembodied soul or otherwise:

We must realize that these beliefs were formulated by an unscientific people who knew nothing about a Copernican universe or any of the laws of modern science.... Therefore it is our job as Christians to seek the spiritual pertinence of these beliefs, which taken literally are quite absurd.³

An example of how this looked in practice can be found in his *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*.⁴ It is noteworthy that King did not use the words "Jesus," "Christ," or "Holy Spirit" once. He did, however, use the term "God" six times, and he devoted a short, nondescript paragraph toward what he considered the Christian expectation of "life eternal":

I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days.⁵

Instead, and for the most part, he preferred to speak about the cause for which the children were killed. Thus, when he used to term "martyr" for the four girls he did

not have a testimony to the Easter promise in mind: "This afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death.... Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream."⁶ King's eulogy was focused on aligning the significance of their deaths with the unfolding picture of the African-American civil rights movement and with what he described elsewhere as the kingdom of God. As with his eulogy, so with his eschatology; there is no second coming, there is no resurrection, there is no recreation, but there is a kingdom. And it was toward the goal of that kingdom that the lives and memories of the martyred children would live on.

The Kingdom of God

What then is the kingdom of God according to King? He again co-opted what he described earlier as the modern scientific worldview and attempted to move beyond or behind the bulk of traditional interpretations (e.g. the Son returning bodily to establish the rule of the Father). King thought he could take hold of what was fundamentally common to all understandings of the kingdom. He thereby found a spiritual significance: the kingdom of God was "the condition of things in which God's will is everywhere supreme."⁷

It is pertinent to note that with this act of spiritualizing King showed how he was influenced by mainline liberal theologians. And more than influenced by these, King was one himself. He stated as much in an essay he wrote when, with agreement, he quoted Theodore Gerald Soares, who said:

The liberal does not discard old beliefs neither does he discard the Bible. On the contrary, he seeks the truth that is in them. With supreme reverence he joyously cherishes the religious heritage of the past. Only he feels free to bring it to all critical examination of the modern historical method. Thus he attempts to make the spiritual discoveries of the Christian traditions available for modern use.⁸

To return to the topic at hand, again according to his essay, *The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope*, the kingdom "will be a society in which all men and women will be controlled by the eternal love of God,"⁹ where all relationships are governed by the principles of Jesus's life: "trust, love, mercy, and altruism."¹⁰ Gleaning from the writings of the more mature King—specifically his *I Have a Dream* speech—we might add to this depiction of the kingdom (and of the American dream) that it is a time and place where all people are treated as equals, regardless of religion or background, and where justice "flows down like waters."¹¹

How then will the eschatological kingdom be ultimately established, if not by an act of God to raise the dead and dispense an everlasting peace, or by the second coming of Christ to reign, or by a judgment of the righteous and unrighteous? As

King put it in the final paragraphs of his speech titled *If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins*, the kingdom is the result of the long “arc of the universe.”¹² It is with regard to that long arc toward the eschatological kingdom that we catch sight of King’s description of God, humanity, the place of Jesus, and the object of religious faith.

God

If the long arc of the universe tends toward the eschatological kingdom of justice and freedom, God’s place would be as its overseer and guide. As King alluded to in his speech, *Our God is Marching On*, God worked with the prophets and patriarchs in the Old Testament to direct and guide the course of Israel’s history. He presented the example of Joshua and the destruction of Jericho, comparing the march of the Israelites to the march of the protestors from Selma to Montgomery (which had occurred immediately before this speech). His point was that just as God watched over and worked with the Israelites to establish a new country, so too was God watching over and working with the marchers of 1965 to establish a new society. The kingdom which God and humanity were to establish, starting with America, would be a society “that recognizes the dignity and worth of all God’s children.”¹³

King summarized his vision of God’s place above the arc with the poetic words of James Russell Lowell (who goes nameless and uncredited in King’s speech):

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.¹⁴

Having noted earlier that King’s theology emerged from the milieu of American liberal theologians, it would be a serious error to miss the fact that King was also an inheritor of the African-American experience and of African-American theology. King was, himself, the grandson of former slaves. Both of those perspectives—being a liberal theologian and being from a minority whose perspective and theology had been uniquely influenced by their history of being oppressed—deeply influenced King’s conception of God and the story of humanity.

To be an American liberal theologian was, in part, to identify with the theological narrative of the Israelites, freed from Egypt by God and tasked with establishing a new kingdom in the promised land (QED the social gospel movement). To be African-American was, in part, to identify with the narrative of Israel’s transition from freedom to enslavement, with the hope of true freedom ever present, but still looming in the distance.¹⁵ King’s God, therefore, was the one guiding the American people—black, white, Jew, Catholic, Protestant, or otherwise—so that

they might finally establish God's kingdom, a kingdom marked not by slavery but by freedom, a kingdom of equality and justice based on the shared image of God present in all people. We see an example of this in the closing remarks of his speech, *Give Us the Ballot—We Will Transform the South*: "I conclude by saying that each of us must keep faith in the future. Let us realize that as we struggle alone, but God struggles with us. He is leading us out of a bewildering Egypt, through a bleak and desolate wilderness, toward a bright and glittering promised land."¹⁶

Humanity

There was more, however, to the establishing of the kingdom than God watching and guiding humanity along the arc toward the kingdom. King thought that humanity had to do its part. The eschatological kingdom would not come of its own accord. As an African-American, King was astutely aware of the fact that without some form of resistance and human effort, people would continue to enslave, oppress, and make war with one another. Knowing their frailties but wanting to maintain their position of responsibility, King thought people needed to cooperate with God in order for the kingdom to be established. As King said in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation."¹⁷

In King's thinking, in order for this kingdom to come—and to come to the whole world—God chose America and prepared it for archetypal work. This comes out clearly in his sermon entitled *The American Dream*.¹⁸ He began by quoting the first line of the Declaration of Independence, because in King's mind the "inalienable rights" mentioned therein were the foundation of the American dream. King contended that these rights were not derived from the powers of the state. Rather, "to discover where they came from it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity, for they are God given."¹⁹ Unfortunately, America had neither fully realized this dream nor fully appreciated the divine origin of humanity's universal worth. And, according to King, the risk of any further delay in doing so might mean the collapse of the nation: "The price America must pay for the continued exploitation of the Negro and other minority groups is the price of its own destruction. The hour is late; the clock of destiny is ticking out."²⁰

Why could King assert with such confidence that the American dream of universal equality was couched behind "the dim mist of eternity" with God and that to neglect this dream might mean the destruction of the nation? On the one hand, he understood equality as deriving from the creation of all people in the image of God.

You see, the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible.
The whole concept of the *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the
"image of God," is the idea that all men have something within

them that God injected... And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.²¹

On the other hand, America's fate was connected in with its ability to portray what universal equality means for humanity; that was America's God-given task. America was portrayed as the archetype for the world; what was possible in America would be possible for the world, and if America failed then the world would fail: "somehow if we can't solve the problem in America the world can't solve the problem, because America is the world in miniature and the world is America writ large."²² Despite the potentially dire portrayal, King still held out hope for the American dream; he still thought America could fulfill its role. And if the dream was to be realized, it would be by "a method as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi"²³—nonviolent resistance.

Jesus and Faith

King did not know Jesus as God. Instead, the mythic divinity of the Messiah was an overly literal portrayal of his personality. In a seminary paper of his (*What Experiences of Christians Living in the Early Christian Century Led to the Christian Doctrines of the Divine Sonship of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection*²⁴) King concluded that the divine sonship of Jesus was the result of several factors, including the religious influence of the Greco-Roman world and the profound impression Jesus made on his disciples. So enamored were they by his unique and loving personality that they concluded there must be something divine about him. They found something of God in this Jesus from the Galilee, but the only way for them to speak about it at that time was to literally deify him.

Of the virgin conception and birth, King stated bluntly that since Mark—the most "primitive" and therefore "authentic" of the New Testament documents—made no mention of it, and since the objective modern mind knows such things as virgin conceptions cannot happen, the virgin birth of Jesus must be rejected. Rather, it was a contrivance to explain in ways once again influenced by Greco-Roman thought why the personality of Jesus was so extraordinary.²⁵

Finally, King summarily rejected a literal reading of the resurrection based on literary, historical, and philosophical grounds. This was not important to King, though.

The root of our inquiry is found in the fact that the early Christians had lived with Jesus. They had been captivated by the magnetic power of his personality. This basic experience led to the faith that he could never die. And so in the pre-scientific thought pattern of

the first century, this inner faith took outward form.²⁶

It was that experience of Jesus during his life that had made such a lasting impression on the disciples, not a bodily resurrection. If Christ lived past his crucifixion, then it was only by the “spirit” of his personality which continued in the memories of the people he had met. It was that experience of his personality which led to the creation of the erroneous doctrine—according to King—of his bodily resurrection. But it was also those experiences and memories of love and mercy which could never be demolished or undermined, and which King thought he could lay hold of. As he would later say in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, the civil rights movement had a kinship with Jesus’s “God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God’s will.”²⁷

It was to the life of Christ and others like him that King was directing his listeners’ faith; faith that if people would live lives of such mercy and righteousness, if America would live out the dream with which it was chartered, if humanity would strive to fulfill the moral arc of the universe, then the kingdom of God would indeed come. As he said toward the end of *I Have a Dream*:

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.²⁸

Final Observations

The conclusion I have drawn about the wider map of King’s theology is that it portrays something like modern deistic synergism, or, more precisely, process theology à la Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). King and his theology were modern in the sense that they were wholly influenced by, and contributed toward, liberal theology, higher biblical criticism, and a version of the social gospel movement. King was deistic in that his God was presented as unipersonal, benevolent, and just, but still sat at a distance. His interactions were to give humanity directions through natural revelation to the goal of the universe’s moral arc. From there, humanity and the universe had to play their respective parts. And King was a synergist in that he thought people must work by their own strength in accordance with the will and love of the Creator so that the universe and human society might function properly. For when society functions properly, according to King, it mirrors the love and justice of its Creator. If people did their part, like Jesus, then the world would be transformed into the kingdom of God; if they did not, the world would continue in a never-ending cycle of oppression, slavery, and barbarism.

Put another way, King's theological rhetoric was that of a process theologian. Process theology affirms God's interaction in nature and history and does not limit him to a single act, as deism seems to do with the act of creation. However, Whitehead and others, including King, proposed a replacement of supernaturalistic theism with naturalistic theism. For Whitehead as for King, although God is present in the process of all the momentary events which constitute reality, his action is limited to inviting and persuading [events and people] to perceive eternal ideas in their coming to be. He is thus trying to direct the future of the world toward its perfect realization. However, his persuasion may be rejected by actual occasions, which explains the presence of evil in the world.²⁹

Thus, King refused to go beyond a rhetoric of the first article of the Creed and thereby did not acknowledge a Trinitarian God. He knew of a Creator and of a creation, he had an appreciation for goodness, justice and love, but anything else was only so much superstition. Thus, the whole of his theology—eschatology, ecclesiology, soteriology, Christology, etc.—had to play out within the bounds of a first article rhetoric; that is, with only the language of Creator and creature. A language which tends toward the themes of process theology.

Now, if the terms in the key of King's theology show us a topography tending toward modern deistic synergism and process theology, what value is he to the Christian theologian? Some may say King was too unorthodox and that

Thus, the whole of his theology...had to play out within the bounds of a first article rhetoric... A language which tends toward the themes of process theology.

Christians would gain little from touring what he left behind; we might as well crumple up the rest of the map and get back on the road to a more stimulating destination. I think that would be very unwise. He is certainly beyond the ken of orthodox Christianity, and most of his faith's foundation is unacceptable to us. But there is

much we can and ought to learn from King. We do ourselves no favors if we see only those things with which disagree in him and his message. On the one hand, he gives present onlookers a clear view into American religiosity (as I said at the outset of this essay). It is reasonable to think that King became so popular and influential before and especially after his death in part because his theological rhetoric and perspective had an intense draw on American hearts and minds. By understanding King we thereby better understand America's religious. And if we are to be knowledgeable about the terrain into which we carry the mission of God then we would do well to

learn its most significant features and figures, of which King most certainly is one.

On the other hand, King was a martyr for what he believed in. He was murdered for bearing witness to deep societal problems and, in part, for giving challenging answers to deeply theological questions. Whenever societal issues with interlaced theological consequences lead to someone's assassination, we do well as Christians and as theologians to pay close attention. Concerning said societal issues, we learn about the pervasive and insidious sins of entire nations and individuals which can seek to erode any monument to repentance. What he shows us is that our neighbors have needs we are unaware of, and they are often suffering from us in unknown ways; his words show us new paths down which we may walk in love toward those around us. While we may not agree with his entire perspective, we can accept his passion, learn from his prescriptions, and find power in his hopefulness that things can change, even if only in a penultimate sense. And finally, concerning said matters of theological consequence, we can take heed of how he responded to the theological questions posed in his day and which are still present in ours. We can avoid and answer the pitfalls King slipped into while still appreciating those places where his theological path was solid, even if unfamiliar to us. We are thereby empowered and encouraged to amend our own spiritual paths and to better shape our own theological topography.

Endnotes

- 1 Not referenced below but considered in that initial essay are the following speeches by King: *Acceptance Speech at Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony* and *The Drum Major Instinct*.
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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Martin Luther King, "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," accessed December 10, 2017, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/doc_eulogy_for_the_martyred_children/index.html.
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- 6 Ibid.
- 7 King, "Eschatological Hope."
- 8 Richard W. Wills, *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 48.
- 9 King, "Eschatological Hope."
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream," accessed December 10, 2017, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.pdf.
- 12 Martin Luther King, "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins," accessed December 10, 2017, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/if_the_negro_wins_labor_wins/index.html.
- 13 Martin Luther King, "Our God is Marching On!" The Martin Luther King Jr., Research and Education Institute, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>.
- 14 Ibid. For the full poem, see James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crisis," Yale Book of American Verse, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.bartleby.com/102/128.html>.
- 15 Wills, 38.
- 16 Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 197–200.
- 17 Martin Luther King, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," accessed December 11, 2017, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/index.html.
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- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Martin Luther King, "What Experiences of Christians Living in the Early Christian Century Led to the Christian Doctrines of the Divine Sonship of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection," The Martin Luther King Jr., Research and Education Institute, September 13, 1949, accessed December 12, 2017, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/what-experiences-christians-living-early-christian-century-led-christian>.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 King, "Birmingham Jail."
- 28 King, "I Have a Dream."
- 29 John Henry and Mariusz Tabaczek, "Causation," *In Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction*, ed. Gary B. Ferngren (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 386.