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The Christology of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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THE CHRISTOLOGY OF

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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CHAPTER I

THE CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Toward sunset on April 4, 1968, a 39 year old, stocky, 5'7" black man rapidly finished dressing in a Memphis, Tennessee, motel room. Soon a limousine, courtesy of a local mortician, was to take him and his associates to dinner and then on to a public rally in support of Memphis' striking sanitation workers. Right now he wanted a moment of peace, an opportunity to breathe deeply before the all too familiar press of crowds commenced. "Ben, make sure you play 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand' at the meeting. Play it real pretty. For me," and with those parting instructions to an aide Martin Luther King, Jr., stepped out on to the motel room balcony and met death almost instantly from an assasin's bullet.[1]

The American public, already well acquainted with the bullet's victim, would devote the next few days to a repetition of his achievements and an evaluation of his life's work. As for the achievements, they were Olympian and particularly amazing since he had started near the bottom of the mountain as a great-grandson of slaves and as a black child of the deep South in pre-civil rights days. Before the end came in Memphis, he had scaled the peaks as spokesman and leader of millions of America's negroes, consultant to three Presidents of the United States and influencer of Presidential elections in 1960 and 1964; a recognized

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[1]William Robert Miller, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), p. 277.

power in determining federal legislation though he held no political office; and recipient of innumerable awards, the most noteworthy being the Nobel Peace Prize of 1964. Untitled in the ranks of government, in death he received the extremely rare accolade for a private citizen of a national day of mourning proclaimed by the President of the United States.

As for evaluations of the man and his work, they ranged far and wide. On the one hand they bordered on deification; on the other demonic possession as a Communist dupe, progenitor of chaos, and even "the most notorious liar in America" according to J. Edgar Hoover of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Yet Martin Luther King, Jr., was one thing more than his acclaimers or accusers usually took heed of in their respective evaluations of him. He was a Christian clergyman and wanted to be known as such. In concluding an interview on his religious beliefs, he commented rather forlornly, "I'm glad to see that someone recognizes that I'm a preacher."[2] Ironically his detractors seem to have recognized this more readily than his admirers, claiming King masqueraded as a clergyman while using the Church to plant his own unrighteous philosophy. Typical of this line of thought was the editorial entitled "Idolatrous Praise" in The Christian News a week after his death:

> The Christian pastor who truly loves all races and accepts the historic Christian faith will spend his time proclaiming this Christ to all men rather than agitating and demonstrating. Dr.

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[2]Lee E. Dirks, "The Theology of Martin Luther King," National Observer, (December 30, 1963), 12.

> King could have done far more for both the white man and the black man if he had devoted his abilities and time to preaching the Risen Christ as man's only Savior from sin and eternal death. The world in which Jesus and Paul lived was similarly filled with social injustice and poverty. Yet Paul declared "While I was with you, I was determined to know only Jesus Christ and Him nailed to a cross" (I Corinthians 2:2).[3]

The fact remains, though, that throughout his adult life King occupied a pastorate and more significantly insisted that the call of Christian discipleship determined his word and deed: "Our hard challenge and our sublime opportunity is to bear witness to the spirit of Christ in fashioning a truly Christian world."[4]

This thesis will examine whether King personally followed that challenge in his thought as well as deed and it will do so by centering the analysis on his understanding of the Christian faith's cornerstone--Jesus Christ. The study will commence by sketching the ecclesiastical and geographical background from which King emerged. Next will be a survey of the major intellectual influences upon his theological positions and personal faith. Only after this extensive but essential prologue will the thesis address itself directly to its chief task of analyzing his Christology with sections on the theistic nature of God, the incarnation of God in Christ, Christ as Savior, and the Resurrection. The succeeding chapter is in essence a continutaion of the preceding main one on Christology as it deals with the significance of Christ for King's work. Normally this subject might be considered extraneous in a doctrinal study but in this case it is integral to the assessment of a theology

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[3]The Christian News, I (April 15, 1968), 6.

[4]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 123.

more noted for its consequences than for its content per se. The chapter prior to the conclusion compares King and Mohandas Gandhi, the two most famous exponents of non-violence in the twentieth century, searching to answer the question whether Christ or Gandhi was the real determiner of King's social action.

In presenting this thesis the author does not imagine himself contributing to Christological research insofar as aiding the Church's task of contemporary doctrinal formulation. The man whose Christology is under discussion was not an academic, creative theologian nor one for whom abstract theology was a foremost concern. He researched in the marketplace rather than the library, which unfortunately also means he produced little which will go into libraries and especially theological ones. He is a man more written about than one who wrote and understandably so since he hardly had time to read.[5] What he did, however, find time to publish provides a general, although unsystematized, statement of his religious beliefs. This thesis, on the basis of those published works, is an attempt to mold the bits and pieces gleaned from books and periodical articles on a particular topic, namely King's Christology, into a comprehensive structure. His personal papers and unpublished materials, for which Boston University is now the depository, have remained untouched in this project and for two reasons. First of all, it is outside the province of this study to enter upon an editing task, a potential thesis or dissertation assignment in itself; but secondly,

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[5]Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1964) p. 80.

published material means the author could reconsider original statements so that the resultant production is what he was willing to have stand before public scrutiny. In the case of King this is important because he operated under pressure from crisis to crisis and did the bulk of his communicating through extemporaneous speeches where the momentary situation can radically effect content. However, speeches were his mainstay in the religious realm when he published so that the most fruitful source for this project has been the book of sermons, Strength to Love, although all of his major works and many of his articles contributed. Biographies and other secondary sources were used sparingly and to elucidate ideas already contained in the primary material. One exception is the previously referred to interview for the National Observer which dealt specifically with King's theology and printed some of his answers verbatim. Another exception is the use of biographies in the chapters on King's background. He left no finished autobiography. As for the bibliography, it is by no means exhaustive in terms of his writings because much of what he authored for periodicals is strictly of a socio-political nature, as in the case of his annual reports for The Nation, and lacked any relevance for this study.

If Martin Luther King, Jr., deserves little or no recognition for scholarship, he nevertheless was and remains a landmark figure in the history of American Christianity. The Church cannot go around him as is evident by the numerous denominations, including the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, who have felt compelled to begin working through and offer position statements on the concepts, such as civil disobedience and selective conscientious objection, he helped inject into America's

bloodstream. On this score, one of his admirers rightly hails him as a monumental theologian:

> Martin Luther King was the most important throlegian of our time not because of the plentitude of his literary production, but because of his creative proposals for dealing with the structure of evil generated by modern relativism, viz., ideological conflicts. Over against this understanding of social evil, King created not only a new theology, but also new types of piety, new styles of Christian living.[6]

Still and all, King is not the man to whom one goes for insight on historic creedal issues of the Christian faith. But it is vital to discover whether the orthodox church can at least trust his social insights as coming from a fellow Christian, regardless of the theological limitations and manner of expressing that faith. Or can the Church justifiably declare him at least theologically <u>persona non grata</u> in its fellowship as one who used rather than served the Church? In other words did the Church have in its midst until that fateful night of April 4, 1968, an authentic Christian theologian whose communication to the world, whether in word or action, was an explanation of Christ for our times? This thesis is dedicated to the pursuit of that answer.

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[6]Herbert W. Richardson, "Martin Luther King, Unsung Theologian," <u>Commonweal</u>, LXXXVIII (May 3, 1968), 201.

CHAPTER II

KING'S INHERITANCE AND HIS REACTION TO IT

Before the Christology of Martin Luther King, Jr., takes form, the person and background of King should come to the foreground. Theology is never created within a vacuum devoid of the historical situation and the human personality involved, and particularly would this hold true in the theology of someone noted for sensitivity to the world around him and who directly participated in political and social issues. This chapter then, while avoiding psychological queries, seeks to grant perspective for evaluating one such individual's understanding of the sine qua non of the Christian faith, the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther King was a Baptist. This removes him denominationally from commitment to Christianity's historical creeds and to orthodox terminology in defining his Christology. "Baptists have consistently maintained that it is anti-Biblical to establish doctrinal unity by means of 'man-made' creeds and doctrinal formulations."[1] A former director of public relations for the American Baptist Church, an association which not only supported King's alma mater, Morehouse College in Atlanta, but which he officially joined in 1962, has affirmed the idea of freedom in Baptist theology:

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[1]F. E. Mayer, The Religious Bodies of America (3rd edition, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 262.

> All the Baptists are free to interpret the Scriptures as the conscience directs, and a wide margin is set in which beliefs may be modified as new light comes through science and education. It is impossible, therefore, to define Baptist churches in so many words, because each church and each member is given the privilege to worship God through Jesus Christ with an open mind and a spiritual outlook.[2]

More significant, though, than King's denominational affiliation was his geographical location within the Christian Church--the American South. If massive segments of the Southern church were not bound to official doctrinal formulations, such was not the attitude toward biblical fundamentalism which ruled on all matters of faith and life, including the race issue:

> In the South, white Protestantism became an ingrown religion, emphasizing a narrow personal piety which frowned on sex, dancing, and whiskey and which reduced the Christian brotherhood of man to a restrictive neighborliness predicated on conformity to a regional ethos of white supremacy.[3]

The theological roots of American racism extended far back and had received an ecumenical nurture. A Presbyterian divine of South Carolina, Dr. Richard Fuller, declared in 1856, "To say that slavery is at variance with the New Testament is to make the Bible contradict itself and undermine its inerrancy."[4] C. F. W. Walther of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod arrived at a similar conclusion through a slightly different route, insisting that the Christian right to spiritual freedom could not be extended to temporal freedom because

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[2]Stanley I. Stuber, How We Got Our Denominations (Revised edition; New York: Association Press, 1955), p. 173.

[3]William Robert Miller, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), p. 2.

[4]Ralph Moellering, Christian Conscience and Negro Emancipation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), pp. 50-51.

spiritual freedom could exist within the framework of a servant-master arrangement.[5] Even prominent black men acquiesced in and supported for the sake of Christianity the white man's subjugation of their race. Booker T. Washington in 1895 while president of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute asked Negroes to abandon politics and pressure tactics for improved status and to concentrate instead on being "Christian." Interestingly one of the Negro intellectuals who rejected Washington's appeal at that time was John Hope of Morehouse College.[6]

By the twentieth century and King's time,

> A dogged insistence on Biblical inerrancy and a wooden liberalism has made it possible for a century of Sunday School teachers to extend the curse of Ham to every man of color down to Martin Luther King. A harsh Calvinism obviously combined with an individualistic Arminianism made irrelevant man's horizontal relationship with men; all-consuming was the vertical relationship of the isolated individual with a judgmental God. Since life was contingent and this world transitory and since heaven and hell existed for all eternity, the preparation of the soul was unspeakably paramount to the reformation of society. And it was believed that one prepared for eternity through the cultivation of an exclusive piety and the practice of a legalistic moralism.[7]

A black Lutheran clergyman, Clemonce Sabourin, has given a close to humerous but poignant observation on the correlation if not cause and

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[5]Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[6]Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), p. 12.

[7]Robert Moats Miller, "Southern White Protestantism and the Negro," The Negro in the South Since 1965, edited by Charles E. Wynes (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 244. Robert Miller could also see the positive side of the church, thereby giving added credence to his severely negative comments: "I should like to suggest that the Church, though corrupted by denominational arrogance, social snobbery, and racial pride, by its very being has brought men and women, Negro and white, into existential confrontation with the Father of all. This is not an inconsiderable thing." Ibid., p. 232.

effect relationship between fundamentalism and segregation: "The farther South you go the thicker they [roadsigns] get: 'Jesus Saves,' 'Christ is the Answer,' 'Go to Church.'"[8] Others, without any hint of humor or mark of charity, also recognized the correlation and termed it a definite cause and effect situation that applied to white Christianity in general.

> As early as 1963, black militants like LeRoi Jones assailed non-violence as a product of what Jones called the "white missionary syndrome." . . . Jones' thesis is that whites inculcated in blacks a more pristine form of Christianity than they themselves practiced. First under Southern auspices, then through the Freedmen's Bureau by the efforts of Northern philanthropists and such church agencies as the American Missionary Association, the Negro church and Negro colleges were established on terms dictated by white Christians. Baptists, Congregationalists, and other denominations prided themselves on what they did for the Negroes, for whom they set up such schools as Morehouse, Howard, Tougaloo, and other segregated colleges and universities, selecting educators who would mould the thinking and behavior of black students to conform to the requirements of a society dominated by white men rather than to prepare them for equality. In this context, said Jones, the predisposition of the black churchgoer to nonresistance was fostered. For Jones and equally for Malcolm X, the Negro church in its traditional and characteristic form was an appendage, not of the white churches so much as of a special missionary enterprise which the latter carried on. Like overseas missions, it was not an extension of fellowship but an exercise in social control and manipulation, a means of perpetuating the inner, spiritual enslavement of the black man by instilling in him values that served the interests of the white power structure, providing the black Christian with otherworldly compensations for the acceptance of this worldly powerlessness. In this system of overtly manipulated self-abnegation, the doctrine of nonviolence, said Jones, was the linchpin of continuing white domination.[9]

Except for the last comment on non-violence Martin Luther King could have both agreed with Jones and belonged to the camp of black militancy

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[8]Clemonce Sabourin, Let the Righteous Speak (New York: Pageant Press, Inc., 1957), p. 12.

[9]William Robert Miller, pp. 282-283.

in attitudes toward the church. Part of his uniqueness, founded on his Christian faith as will be shown in the fifth chapter, is that he did not belong. In no way, though, did his separation from militancy weaken the scathing perception of his criticisms over against the modern church:

> On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practice of paganism.[10]

In two magazine articles for the secular press, he spared little in attacking ecclesiastical indifference toward racial justice. Even the articles' titles are indictments. When commenting on the riots that occurred in Oxford, Mississippi, 1962, because of James Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi, he asked in "Who Is Their God?"

> And where was the cry of the Lord's prophets? The most serious indictment is not to be made against a screaming mob propelled by bottled-up venom and hatred that was having its ultimate, tragic catharsis. Surely the abysmal silence of the church and the clergy cannot pass without its due reckoning. The New Testament admonished us that the people cannot hear if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound. What is their hope if the trumpet makes no sound at all? I have traveled much of the length and breadth of Mississippi. On lazy summer afternoons and cold mornings, I've seen tall church spires and sprawling brick monuments dedicated to the glory of God. Often did I wonder "What kind of people worship there? Who is their God?" When I review the painful memory of the last week at Oxford and cannot recall a single voice "crying in the wilderness," the questions are still the same: "What kind of people worship there? Who is their God?"[11]

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[10]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 31.

[11]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who is Their God?" The Nation, CVC (October 13, 1962), 210.

In "The Un-Christian Christian" he charged,

> If the church in the South would stand up for the Rights of Negroes, there would be no murder and brutality. The awful fact about the South is that Southerners are making the Marxist analysis of history more accurate than the Christian hope that men can be persuaded through teaching and preaching to live a new and better life. In the South, businessmen act much more quickly from economic considerations than do churchmen from moral considerations.[12]

Yet just like the disgusted black militants it was not only indifference toward but actual suppression of racial justice that aroused his ire:

> Honesty also impels us to admit that the church has not been true to its social mission on the question of racial justice. In this area it has failed Christ miserably. This failure is due, not only to the fact that the church has been appallingly silent and disastrously indifferent in the realm of race relations, but even more to the fact that it has often been an active participant in shaping and crystallizing the patterns of the race-caste system. Colonialism could not have been perpetuated if the Christian Church had really taken a stand against it. One of the chief defenders of the vicious system of apartheid in South Africa today is the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church. In America slavery could not have existed for almost two hundred and fifty years if the church had not sanctioned it, nor could segregation and discrimination exist if the Christian Church were not a silent and often vocal partner. We must face the shameful fact that the church is the most segregated major institution in American society, and the most segregated hour of the week is, as Professor Liston Pope has pointed out, eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. How often the church has been an echo rather than a voice, a taillight behind the Supreme Court and other secular agencies, rather than a headlight guiding men progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding.
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> The judgment of God is upon the church. The church has a schism in its own soul that it must close. It will be one of the tragedies of Christian history if future historians record that at

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[12]Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," Ebony, XX (August 1965), 79.

> the height of the twentieth century the church was one of the greatest bulwarks of white supremacy.[13]

Furthermore some Christians of his own race would not find exemption from this divine judgment, although for different reasons than in the case of the church's white supremacists:

> Two types of Negro churches have failed to provide bread. One burns with emotionalism, and the other freezes with classism. The former, reducing worship to entertainment, places more emphasis on volume than on content and confuses spirituality with muscularity. The danger in such a church is that the members may have more religion in their hands and feet than in their hearts and souls. At midnight this type of church has neither the vitality nor the relevant gospel to feed hungry souls.
>
> The other type of Negro church that feeds no midnight traveler has developed a class system and boasts of its dignity, its membership of professional people, and its exclusiveness. In such a church the worship service is cold and meaningless, the music dull and uninspiring, and the sermon little more than a homily on current events. If the pastor says too much about Jesus Christ, the members feel that he is robbing the pulpit of dignity. If the choir sings a Negro spiritual, the members claim an affront to their class status. This type of church tragically fails to recognize that worship at its best is a social experience in which people from all levels of life come together to affirm their oneness and unity under God.[14]

Regardless, though, of the evil he found in the church he professed an unyielding loyalty to it:

> I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.[15]

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[13]King, Strength, pp. 119-120.

[14]Ibid., p. 58.

[15]Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1964), pp. 89-90.

This miracle of allegiance to that which so severely pained and often hindered his labors resulted from faith. It allowed him to distinguish between the perversions and the essence:

> Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom.[16]

But the possibility of a distinction between the calcified and living church rested on no less a premise than the very foundation of faith, Jesus Christ, for what was the nature of that "true ekklesia?" "I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists."[17] The church might have erected obstacles then concerning the Christian faith, but in spite of them he could see through to Christ, a rather notable feat of divine grace considering the circumstances. This does not necessarily mean that King reunited with the Church because of Christ. He himself neither affirms nor negates that procedure regarding his reacceptance of Christianity. What he does make abundantly clear is that eventually he forgave and loved the Church because it is the body of Christ and through it Christ offers Himself to the world.[18]

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[16]Ibid., p. 92.

[17]Ibid., p. 91.

[18]Infra, p. 43.

The idea of reacceptance is the key to understanding King's adult relationship with Christianity for another reason besides the previously stated difficulty of the Church's history on race relations. He also has to fight through the identity crisis of a minority group member. By aspiring to higher goals than the limiting stereotypes accorded his group by the majority, he tended to feel insecure and even repulsed by his tradition. And for King his tradition and the church were inextricably wound together as has been the case for most Southern blacks. There amidst the stained glass the black man could conduct in relative safety the community rites of politics, business, recreation, and news sharing along with worship; activities the white man portioned out to courthouse squares, public parks, restaurants, newspapers, and the church. King seems never at any stage of life to have felt shame about being black but he did suffer embarrassment over certain characteristics of Negro culture, while at the same time believing the idiosyncracies many others, black and non-black alike, considered inherent in his race were only cultural phenomena. Proving that thesis meant a gentle rebellion of disassociation both from the traits as well as from their sources. In that disassociation the church, as one of the chief sources, would decline in the young man's favor. Further complications arose from the position of King's family in the church, a position which excluded the possibility of a quasi-membership on his part. His people had done more than belong; they had led through three generations of Baptist clergy. It was anticipated he would do likewise. Early in life than he realized that in his case the church demanded either total commitment involving all aspects of life, including the

professional, or detachment. Evidently he settled the professional matter first, although basing his decision on an evaluation of religion in general:

> King was repelled by the Negro religious tradition which was a major agglutinative factor in Negro life but which was scarcely more relevant to the real problems of the Negro masses than the white Christian church. King's father wanted him to be a minister, but King decided quite early that he was not going to be a minister. It seemed to him then that religion could not be intellectually respectable and socially relevant.[19]

By the time he entered college his disdain of the clerical life clearly extended to the essence of Christianity:

> As a young man he grew up in the world of preachers; by the time he went off to college, to Morehouse (father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had gone there; it was where you went) he had decided to become a doctor; he was an agnostic. Part of the reason was a contempt for the Southern Negro preacher, the low level of intellectual training, the intense emotionalism.[20]

While at Morehouse, however, one of his schoolmates records that King began reassessing his prior decisions but not enough to alter them immediately:

> Deep down inside, he wanted to be a minister, but he was still repelled by the "emotionalism," the hand-clapping, "amen-ing" and shouting of the Negro church. Moreover, he believed that there was an oversupply of "unintellectual" and "untrained ministers" in the Negro church.[21]

Finally in his junior year he decided to enter the ministry, received ordination from his father, and upon graduation in 1948 enrolled at Crozier Theological Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania.

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[19]Bennett, pp. 24-25.

[20]David Halberstam, "Second Coming of Martin Luther King," Harper's, CCXXXV (August 1967), 45.

[21]Bennett, p. 27.

The dark night of indecision had passed but it would take years before he walked with confidence in the new day. At Crozier some of the racial insecurities that had contributed to his temporary rebellion against the Southern Negro church continued but now he accepted them as a challenge on behalf of his race. In his own words,

> I was well aware of the typical white stereotype of the Negro, that he is always late, that he's loud and always laughing, that he's dirty and messy, and for a while I was terribly conscious of trying to avoid identification with it. If I were a minute late to class, I was almost morbidly conscious of it and sure that everyone else noticed it. Rather than be thought of as always laughing, I'm afraid I was grimly serious for a time. I had a tendency to overdress, to keep my room spotless, my shoes perfectly shined and my clothes immaculately pressed.[22]

These mundane concerns had certain professional and theological overtones. King was not yet ready to let himself go in terms of an emotional, salt of the earth Christianity and to re-identify with the faith of his ancestry. Towards the end of his doctoral studies at Boston University, where he had gone after graduation from Crozier, he seriously considered remaining in the North on account of its potential for a more sophisticated and intellectual ministry. The new Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., strongly endorsed the idea, having felt the same resentment toward the Christianity of her childhood in Alabama as had her husband toward his in Georgia: "I was considering joining a new church, either the Unitarians or the Quakers. Martin used to tease me. He used to say that when he met me I had almost gone over."[23] When

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[22]Ibid., p. 34.

[23]Ibid., p. 46.

King eventually decided to return to the South, he in no way intended to forfeit his standards:

> From the start, King leaned toward Dexter [in Montgomery], an upper-income congregation composed largely of professionals and teachers at Alabama State College, the state-supported institution for Negro students. Dexter offered several advantages. As a somewhat intellectual church which frowned on "emotionalism" and "amen-ing," Dexter provided an excellent forum for an ambitious young preacher.[24]

As the years progressed, King would retain his ability for intellectually sophisticated discourse in the style of a philosopher instead of a preacher, should the occasion warrant it. For instance, when he carried his civil rights program to Chicago,

> At a typical mass meeting, the Baptist preacher in him was largely translated into secular terms, geared to the accents of the secular city--post Christian in style, with "That's right!" taking the place of the churchly "Amen!" in the traditional call-and-response pattern of the Negro church.[25]

What did change with the passage of time was that that which had been the stumbling block became the professed foundation of his existence:

> I am many things to many people; Civil Rights leader, agitator, trouble-maker and orator, but in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my

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[24] Ibid., p. 49.

[25] William Robert Miller, p. 237. The writer of this thesis can bear personal testimony to Dr. King's oratorical ability before a predominantly secular audience. In the spring of 1966 King spoke at a public affairs forum in Springfield, New Jersey, which the writer attended, coming away in utter amazement at the speaker's change in style, vocabulary, and general demeanor from his better known, televised addresses in the midst of some campaign or march. King ably met the audience at the level of its philosophically sophisticated self-image, but his unfailing eloquence could not help but create an emotional response both in terms of his own goals and the Jesus he rather objectively presented.

> being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher. The Church is my life and I have given my life to the Church, but, in spite of this fact, I am greatly disturbed by the Church, and I am confused by the so-called un-Christian Christian in our midst.[26]

A disturbed servant of the church is the posture he saw for himself until death:

> The Church today is the same Church which John called "lukewarm" from the island of Patmos, and which Paul and the Disciples struggled so vigorously to save from their own sin. If such as these and our Lord can give their lives to the Church and to the redemption of un-Christian Christians, we can do no less.[27]

He also believed that what would "heat" the Church again is what had earlier helped cool his relationship with it--black Christianity:

> We Christians of Color may well have to be the salvation of Christ's Church, as indeed we already are. This is not to imply that we are the perfect Christians. We only say that God has placed us in a unique place in the history of the world! That through our suffering we have come to know of His way. As we have been cut off from the pleasures of the world we have come to appreciate the power and reality of the "things unseen" which the Apostle Paul talks about.[28]

The prodigal of Morehouse had indeed returned home to this extent:

> Throughout his adult life, he was a force within the Negro church. He shared much of its piety, embraced its old-fashioned hymns. His personal morality, his sense of propriety and fitness were largely the unexamined traditional morality of the Negro church. He was also a force within the larger body of American Protestantism. He spoke Billy Graham's language, and even more so the fusty rhetoric of liberal Protestantism, with its hoary quotations from intellectually outdated nineteenth-century figures like James Russell Lowell, Thomas Carlyle, and William Cullen Bryant. If the

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[26]King, Ebony, XX, 77.

[27]Ibid., XX, 80.

[28]Ibid.

> religious thought of Martin King were examined from the standpoint of its vulnerabilities, it would be found remarkably cliché-ridden.[29]

Clichés might well dominate the religious thought of King but this chapter has tried to show that in the light of his personal history they could hardly be unexamined clichés, accepted through indifference, nostalgia, or ignorance of anything else. The belief in any orthodox Christian tenets and incorporation of them into his social action would be not because of but almost in spite of his heritage where white fundamentalism and black emotionalism had polluted the spiritual atmosphere. A psychological study would have to bear the burden of trying to decide whether he was ever mentally or emotionally free to leave the Church as a result of his childhood nurturing. What is significant for this study is that he remained and grew, despite the problem, and that there is a positive Christology to consider about him.

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[29]William Robert Miller, pp. 284-285.

CHAPTER III

THE SOURCES OF DR. KING'S THEOLOGY

The preceding chapter delved into the historical and biographical conditions under which King and his theology grew while this chapter will seek to define the intellectual sources of that theology. Of course the sources an individual respects and permits to influence his intellectual development relate intimately with personal concerns. King, dissenter from emotionalism and dogmatic fundamentalism, had little difficulty establishing a basic criterion for good theology: "Never must the church tire of reminding men that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent."[1]

It comes as little of a surprise that Protestant liberalism had a magnetic appeal for him in his seminary days:

> In my senior year in theological seminary, I engaged in the exciting reading of various theological theories. Having been raised in a rather strict fundamentalist tradition, I was occasionally shocked when my intellectual journey carried me through new and sometimes complex doctrinal lands, but the pilgrimage was always stimulating, gave me a new appreciation for objective appraisal and critical analysis, and knocked me out of my dogmatic slumber.
>
> Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I had never found in fundamentalism. I became so enamored of the insights of liberalism that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything it encompassed. I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.[2]

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[1]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 38.

[2]Ibid., p. 165.

When providing a map of his mental maturing for The Christian Century series "How My Mind Has Changed," he reiterated the impact of that senior year: "At this stage of my development I was a thoroughgoing liberal."[3] Specifically liberalism while at Crozier meant biblical criticism and the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch:

> For Martin, what mattered most was the discovery and exploration that Crozier encouraged. The first year emphasized Biblical criticism, and coming as he did from a simple and literalistic background that he had not completely shed at Morehouse, Martin found Professor Morton Scott Enslin's liberal interpretation of the New Testament fascinating. In Enslin's teaching, the Apostle Paul emerged as a profound ethical thinker, Jesus came to life as a new kind of prophet, the life of the early Christians was delineated in the context of their times and the world around them.[4]

As for Rauschenbusch,

> I came early to Walter Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis, which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experiences. . . . It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried. It well has been said: "A religion that ends with the individual, ends."[5]

Quite readily, though, he claims to have found a basic even fatal flaw in liberalism;

> Liberalism failed to show that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking.

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[3]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence," The Christian Century, LXXVII (April 13, 1960), 439.

[4]William Robert Miller, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), p. 17.

[5]Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New Harper & Row, 1964), p. 73.

> Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.[6]

More pointedly,

> It was mainly the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. . . . I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism.[7]

The criticism extended to and included Rauschenbusch:

> I felt that he had fallen victim to the nineteenth-century "cult of inevitable progress" which led him to a superficial optimism concerning man's nature. Moreover, he came perilously close to identifying the Kingdom of God with a particular social and economic system--a tendency which should never befall the church.[8]

Neoorthodoxy in general and Reinhold Niebuhr in particular provided the antidote to all-out liberalism; but whereas King treated liberalism as an entity unto itself, neoorthodoxy was utilized as a foil and its significance stated in relationship to liberalism:

> If liberalism was too optimistic concerning human nature, neo-orthodoxy was too pessimistic. Not only on the question of man, but also on other vital issues, the revolt of neoorthodoxy went too far. In its attempt to preserve the transcendence of God, which had been neglected by an overstress of his immanence in liberalism, neoorthodoxy went to the extreme of stressing a God who was hidden, unknown, and "wholly other." In its revolt against overemphasis on the power of reason in liberalism, neoorthodoxy fell into a mood of anti-rationalism and semi-fundamentalism, stressing a narrow uncritical biblicism. This approach, I felt, was inadequate both for the church and for personal life.[9]

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[6]King, Strength, p. 166.

[7]King, The Christian Century, LXXVII, 439.

[8]King, Stride, p. 73.

[9]King, Strength, p. 166.

As for the brief flirtation with Niebuhr,

> It was at Boston University that I came to see that Niebuhr had overemphasized the corruption of human nature. His pessimism concerning human nature was not balanced by an optimism concerning divine nature. He was so involved in diagnosing man's sickness of sin that he overlooked the cure of grace.[10]

The goal then for his theology became a reconciliation between what he considered the extremes of liberalism and neorthodoxy: "An adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neoorthodoxy, but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both."[11]

His matriculation in the graduate school of Boston University continued that search for a synthesis but now within the framework of personalism. Personalism emphasized the nature of God rather than that of man but from it King could in turn evolve a theological anthropology. For a disertation topic in his doctor of philosophy program, he selected "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman." Neither the naturalism of Wieman's immanence nor Tillich's transcendence proved acceptable but rather the mediating position of his mentors, Edgar S. Brightman and Harold DeWolf, in which God is a personality who influences and defines the personality of man:

> It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy--the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence

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[10]King, Stride, p. 82.

[11]King, Strength, p. 167.

> that only personality--finite and infinite--is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical groundings for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.[12]

Through personalism then he had found a workable premise for understanding man which neither neoorthodoxy's stressing of depravity nor liberalism's belief in perfectibility provided; but of greater consequence for this study, he at least and at last postulated God as personal.

Other schools of thought would display their wares before King and from them he would extract pertinent ideas. Such was the case with existentialism:

> An understanding of the "finite freedom" of man is one of the permanent contributions of existentialism, and its perception of the anxiety and conflict produced in man's personal and social life by the perilous and ambiguous structure of existence is especially meaningful for our time. A common denominator in atheistic or theistic existentialism is that man's existential situation is estranged from his essential nature. In their revolt against Hegel's essentialism, all existentialists contend that the world is fragmented. History is a series of unreconciled conflicts, and man's existence is filled with anxiety and threatened with meaninglessness. While the ultimate Christian answer is not found in any of these existential assertions, there is much here by which the theologian may describe the true state of man's existence.[13]

Communism came off less well, although King in a sermon entitled "How Should a Christian View Communism?" appreciated its zealousness and Karl Marx's interest in the lower classes:

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[12]Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), p. 48.

[13]King, Strength, p. 167.

> In spite of his later atheism and antiecclesiasticism, Marx could not quite forget Jesus' concern for "the least of these." In his writings, he champions the cause of the poor, the exploited, and the disinherited.[14]

At its core, though, Communism is rotten. It ultimately offers nothing even in the realm of ethics and for a theological reason:

> The trouble with Communism is that it has neither a theology nor a Christology; therefore it emerges with a mixed-up anthropology. Confused about God, it is also confused about men. In spite of its glowing talk about the welfare of the masses, Communism's methods and philosophy strip man of his dignity and worth, leaving him as little more than a depersonalized cog in the ever-turning wheel of the state.[15]

What is notably missing in the development of King's theology is a real dependence upon or close attention to the historic giants of Christian thought. The limited interest he had seems to have concentrated on how such men acted rather than on what they taught, and his assessment of Luther is a case in point. According to a King biographer and one who knew him well,

> Naturally Martin Luther King would be curious about Martin Luther. He was delighted when, after extensive study, he was sure that he admired his historical name bearer. He liked Luther's courage of his convictions, when he said, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise." King feels that this is "a grand statement." He was disappointed when he read of Luther's small sympathy for the common man. He does not approve of Luther's turning against the peasants. Nor does he altogether agree with Luther's theological system. But King reminds himself that "few men, great or small, have complete consistency of character or views." To him, despite any blemishes, Martin Luther is "a great force, a great soul, one who influenced history."[16]

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[14] Ibid., p. 118.

[15] Ibid., p. 117.

[16] Lawrence D. Reddick, Crusader Without Violence, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 14.

King's disagreements with Luther's theological system and with the historic Reformation will be treated in the next chapter. The present issue is that past formulations of doctrine, whether from an Augustine, Luther, or Calvin, could not command an automatic allegiance from him, due partially to his Baptist confessional freedom but due in greater part to the requirement of theology supporting social action:

> Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind the Marxists like to see--an opiate of the people.[17]

Here is where he pinpointed the weakness of the Reformation:

> This lopsided Reformation theology has often emphasized a purely otherworldly religion, which stresses the utter hopelessness of this world and calls upon the individual to concentrate on preparing his soul for the world to come.[18]

In truth no school of theology, either historic or contemporary, could have fully satisfied Martin Luther King. Besides being a man on a mission for social reform, he had also committed himself to an intellectual pilgrimage:

> Of course there is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason.[19]

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[17]King, Stride, p. 21.

[18]King, Strength, p. 148.

[19]King, The Christian Century, LXXVII, 439.

His Christology would draw heavily on the concepts of personalism and liberalism, less definitely from neoorthodoxy, and rather imperceptibly from creedal Christianity; but the dynamism of a liberal methodology would have dominance over everything, thereby allowing for the inclusion of all new insights, experiences, and schools of thought, including orthodoxy if appropriate to his concerns.

CHAPTER IV

GOD AND CHRIST IN DR. KING'S THEOLOGY

Theistic Nature of God

Numerous sections of King's writings might easily give the impression that the essence of his God is anonymous theism. In fact at times his vagueness about the Deity has him sounding like a questioning Athenian philosopher instead of an informing Apostle Paul in the middle of Areopagus. Various titles, which are more like attributes than names, that King employs for the divine include "benign Intelligence," "creative power," "Someone," and even "whatever the name, some extra-human force." Yet at his vaguest, King emphatically asserts that God is theistic, always working for the benefit of humanity and trustworthy under all circumstances. For instance, in referring to a severe depression period in the life of Leo Tolstoi, the Russian novelist, he diagnoses as the malady that,

> Like so many people, Tolstoi at that stage of his life lacked the sustaining influence which comes from the conviction that this universe is guided by a benign Intelligence whose infinite love embraces all mankind.[1]

In explaining his personal concept of history and why the civil right's struggle must succeed, he writes,

> I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic

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[1]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 142.

> companionship. Behind the harsh appearance of this world there is benign power.[2]

And in one passage where he allows each individual to name the Deity as he chooses, King believes it was God who purposefully arranged for Montgomery, Alabama, to serve as a major protest site for civil rights:

> So every rational explanation [about why Montgomery] breaks down at some point. There is something about the protest that is suprarational; it cannot be explained without a divine dimension. Some may call it a principle of concretion, with Alfred N. Whitehead; or a process of integration, with Henry N. Wieman; or Being-itself, with Paul Tillich; or a personal God. Whatever the name, some extra-human force labors to create a harmony out of the discords of the universe. There is a creative power that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of injustice. God still works through history His wonders to perform. It seems as though God had decided to use Montgomery as the proving ground for the struggle and triumph of freedom and justice in America. And what better place for it than the leading symbol of the Old South? It is one of the splendid ironies of our day that Montgomery, the Cradle of the Confederacy, is being transformed into Montgomery, the cradle of freedom and justice.[3]

His "Someone" also takes on definite character:

> When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment and when through our folly and sin we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance. When days grow dark and nights grow dreary, we can be thankful that our God combines in his nature a creative synthesis of love and justice which will lead us through life's dark valleys into sunlit pathways of hope and fulfillment.[4]

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[2]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence," The Christian Century, LXXVII (April 13, 1960), 441.

[3]Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 51-52.

4. King, Strength, pp. 8-9.

Certainly his training in the school of personalism effected and helped produce the philosophical manner by which he often explained the Divine. That influence is particularly evident in the following quotation:

> To say that God is personal is not to make him an object among other objects or attribute to him the finiteness and limitations of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him. It is certainly true that human personality is limited, but personality as such involves no necessary limitations. It simply means self-consciousness and self-direction. So in the truest sense of the word, God is a living God. In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart: this God both evokes and answers prayer.[5]

Yet King was abundantly aware that commitment rather than contemplation, faith along with knowledge, the heart plus the mind, gave meaning to the personality of God:

> Two types of faith in God are clearly set forth in the Scriptures. One may be called the mind's faith, wherein the intellect assents to a belief that God exists. The other may be referred to as the heart's faith, whereby the whole man is involved in a trusting act of self-surrender. To know God, a man must possess this latter type of faith, for the mind's faith is directed toward a theory, but the heart's faith is centered in a Person.[6]

He further claims to have had an intimate acquaintance with this distinction on the basis of his own life:

> The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me

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[5]King, The Christian Century, LXXVII, 441.

[6]King, Strength, p. 152.

> in recent years. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, "Lo, I will be with you." When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.[7]

Then not only the concept of but faith in the powerful love of a personal God became the foundation of his daily life. Furthermore, the attributes of that God are determined by the Bible. King does not put together a conglomerate deity from all the world's religions, even when he leaves the Deity nameless or omits mentioning Christ:

> The greatness of our God lies in the fact that he is both tough-minded and tenderhearted. He has qualities both of austerity and of gentleness. The Bible, always clear in stressing both attributes of God, expresses his toughmindedness in his justice and wrath and his tenderheartedness in his love and grace. God has two outstretched arms. One is strong enough to surround us with justice, and one is gentle enough to embrace us with grace. On the one hand, God is a God of justice who punished Israel for her wayward deeds, and on the other hand, he is a forgiving father whose heart was filled with unutterable joy when the prodigal returned home.[8]

To be sure King often writes as if he never heard of the identification of God through the revelation in Christ; and this is surprising in the case of a Christian clergyman who once lamented about certain Negro congregations, "If the pastor says too much about Jesus Christ, the members feel that he is robbing the pulpit of dignity."[9] The real surprise, however, should be that this sensitive, intelligent man who had grown up in an environment of racial injustice and for whom the progression of years resulted in increased physical and emotional

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[7]Ibid., p. 172.

[8]Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[9]Ibid., p. 58.

sufferings should be led closer to a personal God. World War II has taught once again that troubles do not necessarily draw men to God as evidenced in the case of many Jews for whom God died by permitting the horrors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.[10] In considering the prolonged captivity of his people, King wondrously avoided any such charges against the Divine. Instead he believed God to be the only reliable solution: "Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it."[11] That is faith.

But how did Martin Luther King know so much about God, the God to whom he claims he entrusted his very existence? Just a "Someone" or "benign Intelligence" could hardly provide the foundation upon which to build that type of faith. The answer is profoundly Christian--Jesus Christ is the authentic revelation of the personal God. It is hard to say whether King reached this conclusion simultaneously with or before or after his vibrant theism. He does not seem to provide a neat chronology in this matter like C. S. Lewis who wrote in his autobiography that after first believing in theism for about a year,

> I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.[12]

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[10]Arthur Herzog, The Church Trap (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 158.

[11]King, Strength, p. 78.

[12]C. S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 237.

King does record one dramatic encounter with the presence of the Almighty in which he took the step of complete reliance. Late one evening during the Montgomery bus boycott, he went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee after receiving another obscene, threatening phone call. As he sat there, he felt drained of the qualities necessary for leadership in the struggle.

> With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

Then,

> At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.[13]

Of course the above event still leaves unresolved the question of whether King came to know God as personal through Christ or vice-versa, although theologically he postulated the former.[14] In his own case, there is no reason for not accepting a rather simultaneous arrangement. All his published works, which extend back to 1955 when he became a public figure, contain some reference to the personality of God depending upon the person of Christ. Yet it appears that as he grew older,

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[13]King, Stride, pp. 114-115. The same event and his reaction is also presented in King, Strength, pp. 131-132.

[14]Infra, p. 37.

his theism became less cryptic and assertions about Christ more pronounced. William Miller indirectly aids this contention: "In his last years, he was not less Christian but more, and his faith was confirmed, deepened, and broadened."[15]

The Incarnation of God in Christ

In his extensive Christological work, Jesus-God and Man, Wolfhart Pannenberg reviews the multitudinous opinions sincere Christians have expressed about the person of Jesus and new additions still arrive. Despite historic creedal answers, the question of Jesus to Peter in Matthew 16, "But who do you say that I am?" remains and poses a perpetual theological challenge according to Pannenberg:

> All statements of Christology have only metaphorical meaning. They are valid only to the extent that they are motivated by thinking through the history of Jesus. They are always only exegesis of the history of Jesus and remain in need of expansion and correction in the light of the eschatological future. Only the eschaton will ultimately disclose what really happened in Jesus' resurrection and the significance inherent in it.[16]

Yet the answer of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," establishes the irreducible significance of Jesus and determines the limits of the Christological query: "Christology deals with Jesus and the basis of the confession and the faith that he is the Christ of God."[17]

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[15]William Robert Miller, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), p. 299.

[16]Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jesus-God and Man (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968, 1968), p. 397.

[17]Ibid., p. 21.

Martin Luther King not only had a personal interpretation of Jesus but his interpretation can correctly be termed a Christology because he fulfilled the basic requirement of acknowledging Jesus as the Christ.

> O God, our gracious heavenly Father, we thank thee for the inspiration of Jesus the Christ, who came to this world to show us the way. And grant that we will see in that life the fact that we are made for that which is high and noble and good. Help us to live in line with that high calling, that great destiny. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.[18]

For the divine uniqueness of Jesus, King utilizes a number of expressions, some of them absolutely orthodox. One of the expressions is "the only begotten Son;"[19] another is "the only begotten Son of the Creator;"[20] and still another is "the innocent Son of God."[21] At other times he uses rather inane expressions, Christologically speaking, but even then a superlative uniqueness is ascribed to Jesus. Typical of this category is "the world's most precious Person."[22] Another is Jesus' "unique God-consciousness."[23] With these last two depictions of Jesus, King might be considered only a step away from crossing over into a strictly humanistic understanding of Jesus as a spiritual Übermensch and nothing more. But regardless of how close he comes, King does not take the final step. His initial biographer who exhibits

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[18]Martin Luther King, Jr., The Measure of a Man (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1968), pp. 36-37.

[19]King, Strength, p. 164.

[20]Ibid., p. 30.

[21]Ibid., p. 32.

[22]Ibid., p. 71.

[23]Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1964), p. 85.

only a casual interest in his subject's theology recognized this:

> Three of King's heroes--Jesus, Thoreau and Gandhi--supply the philosophical roots for his own theory of non-violent social change. This is the concept that pervaded the Montgomery mass movement and that has subsequently spread far and wide over the South and elsewhere.
>
> King is reluctant to list Jesus as a hero, for he thinks of him not only as a natural, that is, historical, personality but also as supernatural.[24]

It is not necessary, however, to compose King's Christology from a collection of phrases in the proverbial manner of searching for needles in verbal haystacks. Succintly and lucidly he stated an orthodox theology of incarnation:

> Where do we find this God [the eternal God involved in the universe]? In a test tube? No. Where else except in Jesus Christ, the Lord of our lives? By knowing him we know God. Christ is not only Godlike but God is Christlike. Christ is the word made flesh. He is the language of eternity translated in the words of time. If we are to know what God is like and understand his purposes for mankind, we must turn to Christ. By committing ourselves absolutely to Christ and his way, we will participate in that marvelous act of faith that will bring us to the true knowledge of God.[25]

Another biographer who takes a rather extensive interest in his subject's theology claims the above to be the genuine King:

> His vocation as a Christian minister was deeply undergirded by his sense of himself as a Christian man, as a child of God--not of a vague, generalized God, but a God who was love, whose incarnation the man Jesus was.[26]

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[24]Lawrence D. Reddick, Crusader without Violence (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), pp. 14-15.

[25]King, Strength, p. 93.

[26]Miller, p. 299.

The Incarnation is hardly an afterthought for King but instead grants a consistency to his emphasis on intelligent theology. Sincerity has its place but it must be informed sincerity to have value. Therefore in the revelation of God in Christ the mental foundation exists for erecting a zealous faith. The following is taken from a sermon on Jesus' death as a result of men failing to recognize Jesus as the Christ:

> But if we are to call ourselves Christians, we had better avoid intellectual and moral blindness. Throughout the New Testament we are reminded of the need for enlightenment. We are commanded to love God, not only with our hearts and souls, but also with our minds. When the Apostle Paul noticed the blindness of many of his opponents, he said, "I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." Over and over again the Bible reminds us of the danger of zeal without knowledge and sincerity without intelligence.[27]

While the emphasis in the above is on moral ignorance, King makes clear that the darkness in various areas of human life is a result of turning away from the general illumination Jesus brings from God:

> Light has come into the world. A voice crying through the vista of time calls men to walk in the light. Man's earthly life will become a tragic cosmic elegy if he fails to heed this call. "This is the condemnation," says John, "that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light."
>
> Jesus was right about those men who crucified him. They knew not what they did. They were inflicted with a terrible blindness.[28]

It is nevertheless a twisting of the evidence to present King as an endorser of the Nicene or Chalcedonian or for that matter any

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[27]King, Strength, p. 38.

[28]Ibid., p. 39.

ecumenically accepted definition of the person of Jesus. For one thing, King really was not interested in the doctrinal issues which had engaged and frequently embroiled the church in the past. In 1963 he granted a rare interview on his religious beliefs; and the lone reporter involved left with the overall conclusion that "To him [King] the traditional issues of theology--sin and salvation, the divinity of Christ, His virgin birth, His bodily resurrection--are peripheral. Love is central."[29] This is a rather fair summary and properly indicates that King, in spite of a doctorate in systematic theology, viewed religious beliefs, including doctrine, as a means to the end of social change and worthless without that goal. Whereas he would go out of his way to create opportunities for declaring his moral convictions, it would seem that mainly upon request or when antagonistically questioned about his Christianity did he bring forth a doctrinal stance. Even then he would deal briefly and almost impatiently with the subject in order to hasten on to further elaboration of his social ministry. Probably he had heard too many exhortations from churchmen about right belief but churchmen in whom he could discern little transference of their theology into concrete Christian action. This explanation for King's sparcity of doctrinal statements and disinterest in fleshing out his beliefs is more than pure conjecture. At least one of his encounters with such a clergyman reflects that attitude. During the

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[29]Lee E. Dirks, "The Theology of Martin Luther King," National Observer, (December 30, 1963), 1.

Montgomery boycott in December, 1955, the mayor arranged a meeting between leaders of the black and white communities. Representatives from the white community included a local Methodist clergyman whom King classified as one of that denomination's most outspoken segregationists. As the meeting progressed, the white minister appealed for an end to the boycott with pious rhetoric about the Christmas story and challenged the Negro clergy to concentrate on the Babe of Bethlehem and lead their people "to a glorious experience of the Christian faith" instead of in a boycott. King struck back:

> Again I felt the need of answering. "We too know the Jesus that the minister just referred to," I said. "We have had an experience with him, and we believe firmly in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. I can see no conflict between our devotion to Jesus Christ and our present action. In fact I see a necessary relationship. If one is truly devoted to the religion of Jesus he will seek to rid the earth of social evils. The gospel is social as well as personal. We are only doing in a minor way what Gandhi did in India; and certainly no one referred to him as an unrepentant sinner; he is considered by many a saint.[30]

The real reason, though why King cannot be considered a true subscriber to historic orthodox formulations of Christ's person goes deeper than indifference. The real reason is simply that his interpretation differed fundamentally. When King affirms Jesus' uniqueness with the Father, whether in terms of His being the only-begotten Son of God in the flesh, he does not have in mind an Athanasian Christology. Liberalism had affected more than his scholarly procedure which allowed the exploration that fundamentalism denied. It had also grounded his theology in the humanity rather than divinity of the Christ. About

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[30]King, Stride, pp. 97-98.

Jesus' uniqueness there is no doubt and for King, unlike crass liberalism, it is a uniqueness that surpasses just possessing an extraordinary human nature. God made Jesus the Christ and through Jesus exclusively revealed His will; but this divine aspect of Jesus is due not mainly to His essence but to His active and total obedience before the Father. Somewhere during Jesus' life, God chose Him for the task of revelation: "I don't think anyone else can be Jesus. He was one with God in purpose. He so submitted His will to God's will that God revealed His divine plan to man through Jesus."[31] But did Jesus' ability for such amazing obedience stem from God having endowed Him from birth with an uncommon will not possessed by the rest of humanity? A phrase like "the only begotten Son of the Creator" would tend to support that possibility in King's thought but the question goes begging for a definitive answer. The same might be said about the preexistence of Christ from eternity. What does become clear is that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is non-essential to King's Christology. Jesus' obedience rather than his origin constitutes His unique and unrepeatable relationship with the Father. King therefore has no difficulty in describing the Virgin Birth as the mythological story by which the early Christians explained that uniqueness.[32]

Is this Jesus of human birth, who is chosen by the Father for divine revelation because of His absolute obedience, adequate for the essential task of the Christ, namely salvation? For that matter, does

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Dirks, 1 and 12.

man need redemptive salvation or only moral enlightenment through the Christ? The next section of this chapter deals with those questions and in the process reflects back upon the nature of Jesus. Christ's activity rather than His ontology was King's primary interest in determining Jesus' value and use in his theology.

Christ as Savior

Sin is an awesome reality for Martin Luther King and its proper dimension is a divine-human conflict which in turn creates the evil that humanity inflicts upon itself. Any analysis of social and personal evil that confines its probing to the horizontal relationship of man versus man instead of concentrating on the vertical with man against God is guilty of cheap sentimentality and a superficial diagnosis:

> There are times even in our theological thinking when we have become all too sentimental about man. We have explained his shortcomings in terms of errors or lags of nature. We have sometimes felt that progress was inevitable, and that man was gradually evolving into a higher state of perfection. But if we are honest and realistic, we must admit that it isn't like that, for man is a sinner. We take the new depth psychology, and misuse it to explain our bad deeds. We find ourselves saying that they are due to phobias, to inner conflicts. Or, in Freudian terms, we say that man's misdeeds are due to a conflict between the id and the superego.
>
> But when we look at ourselves hard enough we come to see that the conflict is between God and man.[33]

Though man is the origin of this rebellion, he cannot resolve it through his own efforts. God must extend His grace for the reconciliation because, by misusing his God-given freedom, man has become a slave to

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[33]King, Measure, pp. 27-29.

sin. A Savior therefore is needed if man is to live joyfully again in freedom, and throughout history God has been at work on this liberation effort:

> Christianity affirms that at the heart of reality is a Heart, a loving Father who works through history for the salvation of his children. Man cannot save himself, for man is not the measure of all things and humanity is not God. Bound by the chains of his own sin and finiteness, man needs a Savior.[34]

In Jesus the Christ, God has provided that Savior and through acceptance of that Savior numerous blessings ensue. One of these blessings is forgiveness; another is hope; and it is the church's fundamental task to proclaim before the world this Christ and His gifts:

> Many men continue to knock on the door of the church at midnight, even after the church has so bitterly disappointed them, because they know the bread of life is there. The church today is challenged to proclaim God's Son, Jesus Christ, to be the hope of men in all of their complex personal and social problems. Many will continue to come in quest of answers to life's problems. Many young people who knock on the door are perplexed by the uncertainties of life, confused by daily disappointments, and disillusioned by the ambiguities of history. Some who come have been taken from their schools and careers and cast in the role of soldiers. We must provide them with the fresh bread of hope and imbue them with the conviction that God has the power to bring good out of evil. Some who come are tortured by a nagging guilt resulting from their wandering in the midnight of ethical relativism and their surrender to the doctrine of self-expression. We must lead them to Christ who will offer them the fresh bread of forgiveness.[35]

And along with a new beginning, Christ can produce a new being: "If any man is in Christ, he is a new person, his old self has gone, and he becomes a divinely transformed son of God."[36] Yet such a new being does

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[34]King, Strength, p. 115.

[35]Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[36]Ibid., p. 154.

not come about solely through the regenerating power of God; man has to play an active role in cooperation with Christ. The pervading pattern of King's salvation schema is a gradual bridging of the divine-human gap with both sides constructing the bridge. Man's part is to activate, with the help of God, his sin-infected but still existent freedom:

> Man is no helpless invalid left in a valley of total depravity until God pulls him out. Man is rather an upstanding human being whose vision has been impaired by the cataracts of sin and whose soul has been weakened by the virus of pride, but there is sufficient vision left for him to lift his eyes unto the hills, and there remains enough of God's image for him to turn his weak and sin-battered life toward the Great Physician, the curer of the ravages of sin.[37]

Sin then may be slavery but it is not a bondage of the will, for sin causes illness, especially the disease of moral blindness, rather than spiritual death. Furthermore this moral blindness from sin is self-imposed and has nothing to do with the inherent nature of man:

> Unlike physical blindness that is usually inflicted upon individuals as a result of natural forces beyond their control, intellectual and moral blindness is a dilemma which man inflicts upon himself by his tragic misuse of freedom and his failure to use his mind to its fullest capacity.[38]

Does King realize his variance with Reformation theology concerning the ravages of sin upon free will? The answer is a resounding, "yes." He has purposefully assumed a contrary position from sixteenth century Protestantism and its theologically loyal descendants. This is to be expected from someone who found twentieth century neoorthodoxy overly pessimistic and let a synthesis between it and liberalism's optimism

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[37] Ibid., pp. 150-151.

[38] Ibid., p. 39.

serve as his anthropology.[39] In evaluating the Reformation King has transposed the issue of sin backwards by four centuries with the Reformation in league with neoorthodoxy and the Renaissance the precursor of liberalism. He makes no distinction, however, between a Lutheran and a Calvinist position in this evaluation even though the Lutheran Confessions also disagree with Calvinism regarding the complete erasure of the imago Dei and the subsequent denigration of man into an automaton under God's sovereign will.

> The second idea [the first idea was the Renaissance's emphasis on man's goodness] for removing evil from the world stipulates that if man waits submissively upon the Lord, in his own good time God alone will redeem the world. Rooted in a pessimistic doctrine of human nature, this idea, which eliminates completely the capability of sinful man to do anything, was prominent in the Reformation, that great spiritual movement which gave birth to the Protestant concern for moral and spiritual freedom and served as a necessary corrective for a corrupt and stagnant medieval church. . . . The Renaissance was too optimistic, and the Reformation too pessimistic. The former so concentrated on the goodness of man that it overlooked his capability for evil; the latter so concentrated on the wickedness of man that it overlooked his capacity for goodness. While rightly affirming the sinfulness of human nature and man's incapacity to save himself, the Reformation wrongly affirmed that the image of God had been completely erased from man.
>
> This led to the Calvinistic concept of the total depravity of man and to the resurrection of the terrible idea of infant damnation. So depraved is human nature, said the doctrinaire Calvinist, that if a baby dies without baptism he will burn forever in hell. Certainly this carries the idea of man's sinfulness too far.[40]

As in just about everything that Martin Luther King believed, practical considerations commanded top priority and the issue of free will is no exception. What would best motivate men to change and then to change

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[39] Supra, pp. 23.

[40] King, Strength, pp. 148-149.

the world? Would not teaching the enslavement of the will lead to impotent despair and an ensuing disinclination for solving earthly problems in anticipation of heavenly glory?

> This lopsided Reformation theology has often emphasized a purely otherworldly religion, which stresses the utter hopelessness of this world and calls upon the individual to concentrate on preparing his soul for the world to come.[41]

On the other hand, announcing men capable of responding to God's grace stimulates initiative: "This is the glory of our religion: that when man decides to rise up from his mistakes, from his sin, from his evil, there is a loving God saying, 'Come home, I still love you.'"[42] The divine invitation possesses transforming power but to rely solely upon God for restoration from sin results in disillusionment. King extensively explains:

> Many of you know what it means to struggle with sin. Year by year you were aware that a terrible sin--slavery to drink, perhaps, or untruthfulness, impurity, selfishness--was taking possession of your life. As the years unfolded and the vice widened its landmarks on your soul, you knew that it was an unnatural intruder. You may have thought, "One day I shall drive this evil out. I know it is destroying my character and embarrassing my family." At last you determined to purge yourself of the evil by making a New Year's resolution. Do you remember your surprise and disappointment when you discovered, three hundred and sixty-five days later, that your most sincere efforts had not banished the old habit from your life? In complete amazement you asked, "Why could not I cast it out?"
>
> In despair you decided to take your problem to God, but instead of asking him to work through you, you said, "God, you must solve this problem for me. I can't do anything about it." But days and months later the evil was still with you. God would not cast it out, for he never removes sin without the cordial cooperation of

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[41] Ibid., p. 149.

[42] King, Measure, p. 33.

> the sinner. No problem is solved when we idly wait for God to undertake full responsibility.
>
> One cannot remove an evil by mere resolution nor by simply calling on God to do the job, but only as he surrenders himself and becomes an instrument of God. We shall be delivered from the accumulated weight of evil only when we permit the energy of God to come into our souls.
>
> God has promised to co-operate with us when we seek to cast evil from our lives and become true children of his divine will.[43]

Along with the practical reasons, King theologically defends his insistence on man cooperating with God in the acceptance of divine grace. For one thing, total reliance on God perverts His nature. Instead of trusting him as loving Father, total reliance installs him as dictator:

> The real weakness of the idea that God will do everything is its false conception of both God and man. It makes God so absolutely sovereign that man is absolutely helpless. It makes man so absolutely depraved that he can do nothing but wait on God. It sees the world as so contaminated with sin that God totally transcends it and touches it only here and there through a mighty invasion. This view ends up with a God who is a despot and not a Father. It ends up with such a pessimism concerning human nature that it leaves man little more than a helpless worm crawling through the morass of an evil world. But man is neither totally depraved, nor is God an almight dictator.[44]

Secondly, the absence of cooperation means faith ceases and superstition controls:

> The belief that God will do everything for man is as untenable as the belief that man can do everything for himself. It, too, is based on a lack of faith. We must learn that to expect God to do everything while we do nothing is not faith, but superstition.[45]

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[43] King, Strength, pp. 153-154.

[44] Ibid., p. 151.

[45] Ibid.

Yet while openly disavowing the salvation procedure as proclaimed in the sixteenth century's Protestant sola theology, King nevertheless claimed to endorse justification by faith:

> The doctrine of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers are towering principles which we as Protestants must forever affirm, but the Reformation doctrine of human nature overstressed the corruption of man.[46]

Evidently he did not consider the spiritual deadness of man the corollary to justification by faith. This connection he could avoid making because of his definition of faith:

> Faith is the opening of all sides and at every level of one's life to the divine inflow.
>
> This is what the Apostle Paul emphasized in his doctrine of salvation by faith. For him, faith is man's capacity to accept God's willingness through Christ, to rescue us from the bondage of sin. In his magnanimous love, God freely offers to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Our humble and openhearted acceptance is faith. So by faith we are saved. Man filled with God and God operating through man bring unbelievable changes in our individual and social lives.[47]

Jesus Christ is indeed essential to salvation but not precisely in terms of a vicarious atonement, although King does allude to a substitutionary value in Jesus' death:

> Calvary is a telescope through which we look into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking into time. Out of the hugeness of his generosity God allowed his only-begotten Son to die that we may live. By uniting yourselves with Christ and your brothers through love you will be able to matriculate in the university of eternal life.[48]

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[46] Ibid., p. 148.

[47] Ibid., pp. 152-153.

[48] Ibid., p. 164.

The main role of Christ is His affirming the forgiving nature of a gracious God and thereby summoning men into a cooperative venture with God. The culmination of that affirmation is His death, an event which has greater significance in King's work than in his theology, as will be shown in the following chapter:

> Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of unswerving devotion to truth. It causes me to say with John Bowring:
>
> In the cross of Christ I glory,
> Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
> All the light of sacred story
> Gathers round its head sublime.
>
> It would be wonderful were I to look at the cross and sense only such a sublime reaction. But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that cross without also realizing that it symbolizes a strange misture of greatness and smallness, of good and evil. As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but of man at his worst. We must see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness.[49]

Converting the cross into a symbol seems to negate any saving action on the part of Christ, except to inspire. Such might also be the general conclusion about King's Christology of Jesus as Savior, unless one bears in mind his concept of salvation. He is not struggling with the issue of how and when God declares men righteous before Himself, nor dissecting the whole of salvation into justification and sanctification with the former the punctum mathematicum of Luther and the latter a consequential process of that punctum. Instead for King salvation itself is a process and at all stages embodies both justification and

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[49] Ibid., pp. 39-40.

sanctification but the stress is definitely on the latter. The salvation of either an individual or of the world means a developing conformity to God's will and the establishment of His plans for human existence. Therefore salvation, in King's frame of thought, is a goal toward which man and God together strive instead of its being a declaration believed by man:

> Neither God nor man will individually bring the world's salvation. Rather, both man and God, made one in a marvelous unity of purpose through an overflowing love as the free gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin.[50]

Jesus the Christ has made this salvation possible by relating once again man to God through the cross which empowers men to do God's will and announces that God works through suffering:

> There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly yet proudly say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."[51]

Resurrection

The suffering and death of Jesus Christ provide the genuine, supreme example of commitment to God's will and testify emphatically to God's love for sinful mankind. The significance of Good Friday permeates King's social philosophy, but Good Friday by itself presents a picture of futility and despair. Easter must transform the hideousness

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[50] Ibid., p. 152.

[51] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Suffering and Faith," The Christian Century, LXXVII (April 27, 1960), 510.

of the Crucifixion into the beautiful assurance that God's will ultimately prevails:

> Christianity clearly affirms that in the long struggle between good and evil, good eventually will emerge as victor. Evil is ultimately doomed by the powerful, inexorable forces of good. Good Friday must give way to the triumphant music of Easter.[52]

The historic conquest of Easter he then applies to the contemporary scene:

> We have lived under the agony and darkness of Good Friday with the conviction that one day the heightened glow of Easter would emerge on the horizon. We have seen truth crucified and goodness buried, but we have kept going with the conviction that truth crushed to earth will rise again.[53]

King reaches the pinnacle of eloquence when he explores the theme of Easter as witnessed in the following passage:

> This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith which reminds us that Good Friday may reign for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the Easter drums. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. So in Montgomery we can walk and never get weary, because we know that there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.[54]

At times in fact the poetic illusion seems to overshadow the reality of the Risen Christ and turn Good Friday and Easter into little more than

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[52]King, Strength, p. 72.

[53]King, Stride, p. 72.

[54]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Non-violence and Racial Justice," The Christian Century, LXXIV (February 6, 1957), 167.

a drama, or one might even say a "myth," for interpreting history and gaining courage from that interpretation to face life:

> If there is to be peace on earth and goodwill toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. Something must remind us of this as we once again stand in the Christmas season and think of the Easter season simultaneously, for the two somehow go together. Christ came to show us the way. Men love darkness rather than the light, and they crucified Him, and there on Good Friday on the Cross it was still dark, but then Easter came, and Easter is an eternal reminder of the fact that the truth-crushed earth [sic] will rise again. Easter justifies Carlyle in saying "No lie can live for ever." And so this is our faith, as we continue to hope for peace on earth and goodwill toward men: let us know that in the process we have cosmic companionship.[35]

As the preceding passages indicate, King considered Easter the event of Christ's resurrection whereby history has been split into B.C. and A.D. What remains uncertain, though, is exactly what this resurrection involved. To employ Rudolph Bultmann's phrase, is Easter the "resuscitation of a corpse" or the establishment of a spiritual truth about God's mercy and conquest of evil? Obviously and forthrightly King accepted the latter but this does not necessarily mean he rejected a physical resurrection. Of course, the over-all liberal tone of his theology and his renouncing the literal factuality of the Virgin Birth make such a denial of a bodily resurrection probable in his case. On the other hand, he recognized the difference between a Christian and Platonic attitude on corporeality:

> There is nothing derogatory in having a body. This assertion is one of the things that distinguish the Christian doctrine of man from the Greek doctrine. Under the impetus of Plato, the Greeks

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[35]Martin Luther King, Jr., The Trumpet of Conscience (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 75.

> came to feel that the body is inherently evil and that the soul will never reach its full maturity until it is freed from the prison of the body. Christianity, on the other hand, contends that the will, and not the body, is the principle of evil. The body is both sacred and significant in Christian thought.[56]

Yet as almost to be expected with King, the appreciation of man's physical nature in this instance is relegated to endorsing earthly well-being and has no connection with a doctrine of resurrection. If anything, it is used to downplay an interest in the hereafter:

> In any realistic doctrine of man we must be forever concerned about his physical and material well-being. When Jesus said that man cannot live by bread alone, he did not imply that men can live without bread. As Christians we must think not only about "mansions in the sky," but also about the slums and ghettos that cripple the human soul, not merely about streets in heaven "flowing with milk and honey," but also about the millions of people in this world who go to bed hungry at night.[57]

One of King's most explicit references to the Resurrection of Christ is similarly cast in a negative mold:

> What has happened too often is that men have responded to Christ emotionally, but they have not responded to His teachings morally. The notion of a personal Savior who has died for us has a great deal of appeal, but too often Christians tend to see the Resurrected Christ and ignore the man Jesus, turning His face to Jerusalem and deliberately accepting crucifixion rather than deny God's will and give in to the pressures of the Scribes and Pharisees to take back much of what He had taught concerning all men as sons of God.[58]

Frankly, King just didn't appear interested in working out a systematic doctrine of Christ's resurrection. If this sounds by now in this paper like a well traveled escape route from giving definite answers on many facets of King's Christology, it is regrettable but unavoidable on the

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[56]King, Strength, p. 108.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," Ebony, XX (August, 1965), 78.

basis of the evidence and the nature of the man. Actually the strongest attestation on King's part to Christ's Resurrection is an indirect one. Jesus has to be alive now in order to do all that King expects of Him on the contemporary scene, a subject dealt with in the next chapter. At any rate, the essence of King's teaching on Easter is that it heralded a new era. Now men of faith can confidently trust God's power over evil when they encounter their respective Good Fridays in doing God's work.

This divine conquest reigns over the worst manifestation of evil, death itself. King testifies to eternal life for human beings and considers the church the bearer of the good news.

> Some who knock on the door of the church at midnight are tormented by the fear of death as they move toward the evening of life. We must provide them with the bread of faith in immortality, so that they may realize that this earthly life is merely an embryonic prelude to a new awakening.[59]

At times, to be sure, his references to eternity can be written off as homiletical slogans. For instance, when memorializing an elderly Negro woman who had buoyed his spirits during the Montgomery boycott by her participation and maternally encouraging words, he reminisces, "Since that dreary night in 1956, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known very few quiet days."[60] Another time he composed a pseudonymous "Paul's Letter to American Christians" and concluded, "It is improbably that I will see you in America, but I will meet you in God's

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[59]King, Strength, p. 59.

[60]Ibid., p. 144.

eternity."[61] But homiletics aside, the promise of eternal life is unmistakably affirmed by him and also occupies a potent influence in regard to ethical demands. This promise is the wellspring of hope and the motivator for enduring sacrificial discipleship because, while a dedicated individual may find his Christ-inspired dreams for earth unfulfilled within his lifetime, he now knows the ultimate and unfailing completion of the Christian life will come in eternity through Christ:

> Our capacity to deal creatively with shattered dreams is ultimately determined by our faith in God. Genuine faith imbues us with the conviction that beyond time is a divine Spirit and beyond life is Life. However dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstance, we know we are not alone, for God dwells with us in life's most confining and oppressive cells. And even if we die there without having received the earthly promise, he shall lead us down that mysterious road called death and at last to that indescribable city he has prepared for us. His creative power is not exhausted by this earthly life, nor is his majestic love locked within the limited walls of time and space. Would not this be a strangely irrational universe if God did not ultimately join virtue and fulfillment, and an absurdly meaningless universe if death were a blind alley leading the human race into a state of nothingness? God through Christ has taken the sting from death by freeing us from its dominion. Our earthly life is a prelude to a glorious new awakening, and death is an open door that leads us into life eternal.[62]

Though this attempt to make eternal life a rational necessity stems from old line Protestant liberalism, King Christologically exceeded the usual argument by specifically stating, "God through Christ has taken the sting from death by freeing us from its dominion."

Easter then is certainly more than a literary myth, because its power extends beyond one ancient event and its significance beyond

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[61] Ibid., p. 164.

[62] Ibid., p. 104.

confidence in facing temporal problems. Through Christ, God has made eternal life a reality for human beings and the church must not only proclaim that reality but must also never forget its ministry to the world is a result of its heavenly citizenship:

> The church must remind its worshipers that man finds greater security in devoting his life to the eternal demands of the Almighty God than in giving his ultimate allegiance to the transitory demands of man. The church must continually say to Christians, "Ye are a colony of heaven." True, man has a dual citizenry. He lives both in time and in eternity; both in heaven and on earth. But he owes his ultimate allegiance to God. It is this love for God and devotion to His will that casteth out fear.[63]

In other words, King does not want Christianity to forget its eternal destiny while laboring at mundane improvements. Rather Christians should realize they are free to love, serve and die if so required for the sake of their fellow man precisely because permanent glory awaits. At the same time, in anticipating heavenly bliss there must be no cessation of attempts and no blurring of vision in transforming earth into a transitory heaven. King does lean strongly toward utopianism and most memorably in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

> I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaimed the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid." I still believe that We <u>shall</u> overcome![64]

And then there is the haunting conclusion of his last public address on the night before his death in which the promised land is identified as an earthbound possibility:

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[63]King, <u>Stride</u>, p. 184.

[64]Lerone Bennett, Jr., <u>What Manner Of Man, a Memorial Biography</u> (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 142.

> Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land.
>
> I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.[65]

Nevertheless he operated with eschatological hope along with apocalyptic vision:

> Thank God for John who, many centuries ago, lifted his vision to high heaven and there saw the new Jerusalem in all of its magnificence. God grant that we, too, will catch the vision and move with unrelenting passion toward that city of complete life in which the length and the breadth and the height are equal. Only by attaining this completeness can we be true sons of God.[66]

If the theme of resurrection seems muted in comparison to King's fixation upon the example of redemptive suffering in Jesus' death, the cause is not a denial of or indifference toward eternal life. The perspective of his interest, to use a line from a spiritual, was to make certain the church kept in mind, "You can't wear the crown if you don't bear the cross."

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[65]Miller, pp. 275-276.

[66]King, Strength, p. 94.

CHAPTER V

CHRIST IN DR. KING'S WORK

General Influence

As Martin Luther King, Jr., knew only too well, it is possible to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Master and yet to proscribe His influence on one's life. In fact King's major message to the church might be classified as a compassionate but passionate diatribe against this inconsistency. Still, was the accuser himself guilty, certainly not for espousing the same specific sins as those he indicted, but for deriving his motivation and inspiration from a source other than the Christ he acknowledged verbally and to whom his public position as a Christian clergyman indicated loyalty?

Various candidates nominated for the office of muse in his life have included Henry Thoreau, Leo Tolstoi, Mohandas Gandhi, and any school of humanism. As for Gandhi, a case unto itself, the following chapter will discuss that influence. As for secular humanism, King admired but rejected it.

> Man by his own power can never cast evil from the world. The humanist's hope is an illusion, based on too great an optimism concerning the inherent goodness of human nature.
>
> I would be the last to condemn the thousands of sincere and dedicated people outside the churches who have labored unselfishly through various humanitarian movements to cure the world of social evils, for I would rather a man be a committed humanist than an uncommitted Christian. But so many of these dedicated persons, seeking salvation within the human context, have become understandably pessimistic and disillusioned, because their efforts are based on a kind of self-delusion which ignores fundamental facts about our mortal nature.

> Nor would I minimize the importance of science and the great contributions which have come in the wake of the Renaissance. These have lifted us from the stagnating valleys of superstition and half-truth to the sunlit mountains of creative analysis and objective appraisal. The unquestioned authority of the church in scientific matters needed to be freed from paralyzing obscurantism, antiquated notions, and shameful inquisition. But the exalted Renaissance optimism, while attempting to free the mind of man, forgot about man's capacity for sin.[1]

Thoreau predated all other intellectual influences in the realm of non-violence:

> During my student days at Morehouse I read Thoreau's Essay on Civil Disobedience for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. This was my first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolent resistence.[2]

But a man who declared independence by isolation at a Massachusetts pond and led no one but himself in rebellion would have an extremely limited effect on someone leading mass movements in the hearts of cities. Thoreau passes rapidly into the background of King's writings and remains there. The same can be said to Tolstoi, although he exerted a constant, indirect influence on King through Gandhi, a subject touched on in the next chapter.[3]

Jesus the Christ did have that long range, ever increasing effect and to that extent this chapter might bear the title "Soteriology." For King, the redemption of an individual or of a nation meant involvement by the redeemed in those concerns and actions which this chapter

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[1]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), pp. 147-148.

[2]Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 73.

[3]Infra, pp. 84-85.

will study. To be in Christ is to realize the unity of mankind, the power of nonviolence, the necessity of nonconformity toward injustice, and the responsibility of bringing others to Christ and then to act accordingly. Whether King talked of unearned suffering as redemptive or expressed a zeal to save America's soul, he was thinking in terms of what he was doing. To him such involvement indicated a trusting relationship with God, a relationship made possible through Christ's saving grace.

> Faith is man's capacity to accept God's willingness through Christ, to rescue us from the bondage of sin. In his magnanimous love, God freely offers to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Our humble and openhearted acceptance is faith.[4]

King's whole program therefore relied on Jesus and in a manner far exceeding simple inspiration.

To be sure, this dependency was often hard to detect. King could talk and write voluminously without any such indication, although one can detect at all times the hint of a religious temperament instead of an outright political attitude. For instance, in a television interview that was later published in book form along with similar interviews involving James Baldwin and Malcolm X, King gave an elaborate discourse on agape but never once related this type of love to Christ. However, in an epilogue to the book which compares the three participants, the interviewer remarked, "Martin Luther King speaks as a committed Christian."[5] At other times, King went out of his way in rather unlikely

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[4]King, Strength, p. 153.

[5]Kenneth Clark, The Negro Protest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 50.

situations to suggest the relationship of Christianity to his social concerns as when he wrote a congratulatory note to President Dwight Eisenhower for the sending of federal troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, to assure the integration of Central High School in that city:

> Even the small and confused minority that oppose integration with violence will live to see that your action has been of great benefit to our nation and to the Christian traditions of fair play and brotherhood.[6]

The recently baptized President omitted any such religious inferences in his response. King also concluded his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," despite the immediate audience to whom it was addressed including a rabbi, with a request to be recognized primarily as a Christian:

> I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother.[7]

The name of the organization he headed underwent a change to reflect an involvement with the church and a Christian orientation. Up to 1957 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was the Southern Negro Leadership Conference but at the prompting of King and regardless of fears from some members that the change would frighten away the support of other religions, "Negro" was dropped and "Christian" inserted.[8]

These nebulous attestations of Christian faith might readily be dismissed as pious jargon which secular figures spew forth for an

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[6]Lawrence D. Reddick, Crusader without Violence (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 205.

[7]Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1964), pp. 89-90.

[8]Reddick, p. 204.

embellishment of their personal character; but in King's case they are the above the surface foliage of a social philosophy that was deeply rooted in Christian theology.

Unity of Mankind

To understand anything about Martin Luther King, Jr., requires awareness of his cardinal precept for human life. It was that all mankind are brothers through Christ. Any of his social concerns, whether decent living conditions for the underprivileged, civil rights, or an immediate end to the Viet Nam war, stemmed from that belief.

Little weight is given to the idea of an hereditary unity of mankind through the natural fatherhood of God. The rebellious children of the Creator have forfeited their birthright for all practical purposes and act accordingly. If the human race is to reestablish a sense of community, it needs a reidentification with the Father and then with one another. This has happened through the Christ who has destroyed all forms of parochialism:

> Christians are also bound to recognize the ideal of a world unity in which all barriers of caste and color are aboloshed. Christianity repudiates racism. The broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel makes both the theory and practice of racial injustice morally unjustifiable. Racial prejudice is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ, for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, Negro nor white.[9]

Jesus, first of all, pointed the way to this universal brotherhood by the example of his earthly life:

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[9]King, Strength, p. 119.

> In our quest to make neighborly love a reality, we have, in addition to the inspiring example of the good Samaritan, the magnanimous life of our Christ to guide us. His altruism was universal, for he thought of all men, even publicans and sinners, as brothers.[10]

Secondly, Jesus the Christ made this universal unity of mankind an accomplished fact, although King pleads ignorance as to the exact process of that achievement: "But in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. In Christ there is neither Communist nor capitalist. In Christ, somehow, there is neither bound nor free."[11] Another mystery is how King could incorporate non-Christians into that unity of Christ. It would seem that if non-Christians espoused the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, as in the case of Jewish rabbis, he considered them on the right track, a track which might eventually lead to the source of the truth they professed:

> I have nothing but praise for these ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ and rabbis of the Jewish faith who have stood unflinchingly before threats and intimidations, inconvenience and unpopularity, even at times in physical danger, to declare the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. For such noble servants of God there is the consolation of the words of Jesus: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."
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> Here, then, is the hard challenge and the sublime opportunity: to let the spirit of Christ work toward fashioning a truly great Christian nation. If the church accepts the challenge with

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[10] Ibid., p. 29.

[11] Martin Luther King, Jr., The Trumpet of Conscience, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 72.

> devotion and valor, the day will be speeded when men everywhere will recognize that they "are all one in Christ Jesus."[12]

King, though, was not really bothered by those who ignore the creed but live the ethics of Christianity:

> I should like to talk with you about a good man [the Good Samaritan], whose exemplary life will always be a flashing light to plague the dozing conscience of mankind. His goodness was not found in a passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in a life-saving deed; not in a moral pilgrimage that reached its destination point, but in the love ethic by which he journeyed life's highway. He was good because he was a good neighbor.[13]

His spiritual nightmares came from those who endorse the creed and ignore the social implications of Christianity as happened at the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia, when in 1965 it barred Negroes from worshipping there. An exasperated King asked,

> How can Christians be so blind? How can they not see that the very Word of God has called for the "Oneness of the Church," and that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," but all are one.[14]

The hellishness of segregation in the Church was not that it added one more sin to an infinite repetoire; segregation struck at the very essence of the Church:

> Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ. It substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship, and relegates persons to the status of things. It scars the soul and degrades the personality. It inflicts the segregated with a false sense of inferiority, while confirming the segregator in a false estimate of his own superiority. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. The underlying

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[12]King, Stride, p. 187.

[13]King, Strength, p. 3.

[14]Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," Ebony, XX (August, 1965), 77.

> philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of racial segregation.[15]

Yet when individuals acknowledge one another as brothers, significant as that insight is, they have only begun the pilgrimage of discipleship, for now they must care for one another as brothers:

> When we, through compassionless detachment and arrogant individualism, fail to respond to the needs of the underprivileged, the Master says, "Inasmuch as yet have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."[16]

Nevertheless a major and initial victory has occurred when individuals recognize the presence and needs of others so that their moral blindness is ended and they become able to see their proper service toward brothers:

> Jesus frequently illustrated the characteristics of the hardhearted. The rich fool was condemned, not because he was not toughminded, but rather because he was not tenderhearted. Life for him was a mirror in which he saw only himself and not a window through which he saw other selves. Dives went to hell, not because he was wealthy, but because he was not tenderhearted enough to see Lazarus and because he made no attempt to bridge the gulf between himself and his brother.[17]

All the causes Martin Luther King supported were his way of attesting to the unity of mankind in Christ and of caring for others in the name of Jesus. In this way his use of Christ equaled and exceeded his understanding of Jesus' nature. Doctrinally the emphasis was on Jesus' human obedience to the Father; His divine nature, while not denied, received scant attention. Yet in the realm of social concerns King

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[15]King, Strength, p. 160.

[16]Ibid., p. 12.

[17]Ibid., p. 6.

needed a cosmic Lord who embraces all humanity and in whom resides the power to overcome humanity's brokenness.

Nonviolence

Unfortunately the world does not bend naturally or readily to the will of God. Hardheartedness and selfishness dominate the secular order and so it is futile naivete to rely solely upon the good graces of those in power for godly change. Jesus knew this and prepared his disciples accordingly:

> Jesus recognized the need for blending opposites. He knew that his disciples would face a difficult and hostile world, where they would confront the recalcitrance of political officials and the intransigence of the protectors of the old order. He knew that they would meet cold and arrogant men whose hearts had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism. So he said to them, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." And he gave them a formula for action: "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." It is pretty difficult to imagine a single person having, simultaneously, the characteristics of the serpent and the dove, but this is what Jesus expects.[18]

For King, that synthesis of toughness and tenderness was Christian nonviolence. The term Christian, though usually omitted, is rightfully inserted here because Christianity alone, according to King, gave birth to his nonviolent crusades:

> From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of these expressions was mentioned; the phrase most often heard was "Christian love." It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance,

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[18] Ibid., pp. 1-2.

> that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.[19]

As the movement unfolded, the methodology of Gandhi took hold but King tried to keep the basic motivating philosophy Christian and to have both his followers and dissenters aware of that inspiration. Sometimes this reminder was made symbolically as in the Birmingham, Alabama, store boycott of 1963: "We decided that Good Friday, because of its symbolic significance, would be the day that Ralph Abernathy and I would present our bodies as personal witness in this crusade."[20] In the same Birmingham campaign the reminder was specifically stated when he had the volunteers sign a Commitment Card that began,

> I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF--MY PERSON AND BODY--TO THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT. THEREFORE I WILL KEEP THE FOLLOWING TEN COMMANDMENTS: 1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of JESUS.[21]

In a 1957 explanation of nonviolence he stressed to advocates the philosophy, "Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons."[22]

This reliance on Christianity was partially due to seeing in Jesus an authentic, effective example of nonviolence:

> Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most

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[19]King, Stride, p. 66.

[20]King, Why, p. 71.

[21]Ibid., p. 63.

[22]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Most Durable Power," The Christian Century, LXXIV (June 5, 1957), 708.

> potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security.[23]

Especially did the Cross exemplify the radicalness and power of non-violence in a vengeful world. By His willingness to suffer and die, Jesus asserted the victorious strength of God over the evil of man. His death did not result from helplessness against enemies but was a positive act of obedience to the Father and therefore a fulfillment of His earthly mission.

> The moment of testing emerges. Christ, the innocent Son of God, is stretched in painful agony on an uplifted cross. What place is there for love and forgiveness now? How will Jesus react? What will he say? The answer to these questions bursts forth in majestic splendor. Jesus lifts his thorn-crowned head and cries in words of cosmic proportions: "Farther, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This was Jesus' finest hour; this was his heavenly response to his earthly rendezvous with destiny.
> . . . . . .
> What a magnificent lesson! Generations will rise and fall; men will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the altar of retaliation; but ever and again this noble lesson of Calvary will be a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate.[24]

King, though, wanted to do more than use Jesus as an example for communicating his own ideas; a Gandhi could have performed the same function. He wanted to follow that example of Christ on account of his commitment to Christ. Because Christ had so lived, he must do likewise:

> We must not return violence under any condition. I know this is difficult advice to follow, especially since we have been the victims of no less than ten bombings. But this is the way of Christ; it is the way of the cross. We must somehow believe that unearned suffering is redemptive.[25]

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[23]King, Strength, p. 49.

[24]Ibid., pp. 32-33.

[25]King, Stride, p. 156.

Christ is more than primus inter pares concerning martyrs for righteous causes. His absolute guilelessness throughout a totally unjustified ordeal does merit respect and offers the unsurpassable example of nonviolence. But what transformed King's respect into worshipful commitment was that by means of Jesus God gave unearned suffering a new meaning. It is no longer a sign of divine indifference but a channel of divine redemption which draws men into harmony with God's will. Therefore Jesus Christ is the foundation for praise and emulation of all other heroic sufferers. Without the resurrection action of God towards Him, martyrdom would suggest only futility and deserve the response of pity.

From the particularized event of Calvary and its aftereffects, King had found a generalization about all unearned suffering. Herein lies an implicit testimony by King to Jesus as the authentic revelation of God, which in turn makes King's Christology more explicit. As the Father dealt with His only-begotten Son, His adopted children may expect the same treatment because of the Son.

Civil Disobedience

Few persons of any religious persuasion would probably be upset over King's interpretation of Jesus as a nonviolent figure, although they themselves might interpret the Sermon on the Mount and any other injunction by Christ for nonviolence as sheer hyperbole unworthy of pragmatic consideration. The storm of controversy and outright antagonism which surrounded King's public life resulted to a great extent from his connecting the concept of nonviolence with that of civil

disobedience, or as King was more prone to saying, with nonconformity and resistance. Such nonconformity, though, when properly understood, he felt to be the genuine witness of faith:

> We need to recapture the gospel glow of the early Christians, who were nonconformists in the truest sense of the word and refused to shape their witness according to the mundane patterns of the world. Willingly they sacrificed fame, fortune, and life itself in behalf of a cause they knew to be right. Quantitatively small, they were qualitatively giants. Their powerful gospel put an end to such barbaric evils as infanticide and bloody gladiatorial contests. Finally, they captured the Roman Empire for Jesus Christ.[26]

The early Christians actually had no choice for their revolutionary behavior; emulation of Jesus Christ demanded this:

> This command not to conform comes, not only from Paul, but also from our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ the world's most dedicated nonconformist, whose ethical nonconformity still challenges the conscience of mankind.[27]

The clash between the Christian and society is inevitable. The two are on disparate courses with contrary goals. Christianity derives its cues from eternity; society from time and the momentarily acceptable. Therefore as Christians,

> Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-saving music of eternity?[28]

Even more succintly, "As Christians we owe our ultimate allegiance to God and His will, rather than to man and his folkways."[29]

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[26]King, Strength, p. 15.

[27]Ibid., p. 11.

[28]Ibid., p. 98.

[29]King., Stride, p. 98.

King admitted the possibility of abundant dangers in his advocacy of nonconformity. The only danger, however, to which he accorded a theological respectability was the potential for arrogant self-righteousness on the part of nonconformists. Yet the avoidance of this pitfall in no way rested with a weakening of the rebellious spirit but with a transforming of it through the Gospel:

> By opening our lives to God in Christ we become new creatures. This experience, which Jesus spoke of as the new birth, is essential if we are to be transformed nonconformists and freed from the cold hardheartedness and self-righteousness so often characteristic of nonconformity.[30]

As for the complaints of what he might do to the structure of orderly society through a program of dissension, he placed the burden of responsibility on those he opposed and declared his dissension an act of Christian obedience in reaction to their heathen tranquility. When a prominent white citizen of Montgomery protested during the bus boycott, "Over the years we have had such peaceful and harmonious race relations here. Why have you and your associates come in to destroy this long tradition?" King gave the following defense:

> My reply was sinple: "Sir," I said, "you have never had real peace in Montgomery. You have had a sort of negative peace in which the Negro too often accepted his state of subordination. But this is not true peace. True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice. The tension we see in Montgomery today is the necessary tension that comes when the oppressed rise up and start to move forward toward a permanent, positive peace."
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> I went on to speculate that this was what Jesus meant when he said: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Certainly Jesus did not mean that he came to bring a physical sword. He seems to have been saying in substance: "I have not come to bring this old negative peace with its deadening passivity. I have come

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[30]King, Strength, p. 16.

> to lash out against such a peace. Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new. Whenever I come, a division sets in between justice and injustice. I have come to bring a positive peace which is the presence of justice, love, yea, even the Kingdom of God."
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> The racial peace which had existed in Montgomery was not a Christian peace. It was a pagan peace and it had been bought at too great a price.[31]

Of course, some critics thought King was basically right in his concerns; his mistake was in over-reacting to situations and a failure to temper his demands with patient diplomacy. For those critics he also had a Christ-centered answer, along with references to other notable personages:

> Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand: I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a buthery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." and Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for life, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.[32]

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[31] King, Stride, pp. 24-25.

[32] King, Why, p. 88.

The very causes and proceedures then which made King controversial and openly detested in many quarters of society and even of the church he attributed directly to the influence and example of Jesus Christ. This was true for the last major and perhaps most controversial crusade of his life--opposition to the war in Viet Nam. King expressed shocked dismay that anyone should fail to realize the intrinsic relationship between his overall Christian philosophy in civil rights and his attitude toward the war:

> For those who ask the question "Aren't you a civil rights leader?" --and thereby mean to exclude me from the movement for peace--I answer by saying that I have worked too long and hard now against segregated public accomodations to end up segregating my moral concern. Justice is indivisible. It must also be said that it would be rather absurd to work passionately and unrelentingly for integrated schools and not be concerned about the survival of a world in which to be integrated. I must say further that something in the very nature of our organizational structure in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led me to this decision. In 1957, when a group of us formed that organization, we chose as our motto: "To save the soul of America." Now it would be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war.
>
> As if the weight of such a commitment were not enough, another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1964: I cannot forget that the Nobel Prize for Peace was also a commission--a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for "the brotherhood of man." This is a calling which takes me beyond national allegiances, but even if it were not present, I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.[33]

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[33]King, Trumpet, pp. 24-25.

In other words, King refused to be locked in with and limited by issues. Though an array of specific problems commanded his energies, he did not asses himself in terms of actions and titles from these actions but as a Christian person. Faith in Christ changes the nature of the believer who in turn desires to change the nature, rather than certain aspects, of human relationships. For King any limitation of his concerns would be a disunity of himself as a person. Conversely his diverse and at times seemingly unrelated crusades testified to his personal wholeness and his brotherhood with the whole of humanity, and once again the unity of mankind in Jesus Christ had formed that understanding:

> We are all one in Christ Jesus. And when we truly believe in the sacredness of human personality, we won't exploit people, we won't trample over people with the iron feet of oppression, we won't kill anybody.[34]

Furthermore, Christian discipleship involved war against any manifestation of sin, regardless of the malefactor's status, a particular sin's numerical acceptance as the status quo, or personal consequences for the dissenter who dares to stand before the world's Davids in the mantle of a Nathan.

> I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.[35]

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[34] Ibid., p. 72.

[35] King, The Christian Century, LXXIV, 709.

King also knew that angry indignation, justified as it may be, will accomplish little and actually work to the detriment of the desired goals; but love at work through the medium of nonviolence can perform the reformation task:

> Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you." If we fail to do this our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history, and its memory will be shrouded with the ugly garments of shame.
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> . . . . . .
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> If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, "There lived a great people--a black people--who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization." This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.[36]

Evangelism

A minute addendum in comparison to the rest of his work is King's interest in Christian evangelism. A "come to Jesus" solicitation received little play in his writings and the same may be said for church membership recruitment. King believed, though, that the changes he desired in the world must come through the transformation of individuals <u>via</u> the Gospel:

> Like the early Christians, we must move into a sometimes hostile world armed with the revolutionary gospel of Jesus Christ. With this powerful gospel we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.[37]

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[36]King, <u>Stride</u>, p. 48.

[37]King, <u>Strength</u>, p. 123.

At heart all of his labors were evangelistic to his way of thinking because he saw himself bearing witness to Christ in picket lines and jail cells as well as in a pulpit. The contemporary church disturbed him on account of its circumscribed arena for witnessing and its reluctance to suffer for the cause:

> We must recapture the spirit of the early church. Wherever the early Christians went, they made a triumphant witness for Christ. Whether in the village streets or in the city jails, they daringly proclaimed the good news of the gospel. Their reward for this audacious witness was often the excruciating agony of a lion's den or the poignant pain of a chopping block, but they continued in the faith that they had discovered a cause so great and had been transformed by a Saviour so divine that even death was not too great a sacrifice.[38]

King obviously differed from traditional evangelism programs on the nature and method of the witnessing as well as with the results he wanted his testimony to produce. True evangelism for him involved more than conveying the vocabulary of the Gospel. It also sought social change through personal example. In commenting on the role of the churches in the Montgomery crisis, he rejoiced that,

> Negro ministers, with a growing awareness that the true witness of a Christian life is the projection of a social gospel, had accepted leadership in the fight for racial justice, had played important roles in a number of N.A.A.C.P. groups and were making their influence felt throughout the freedom movement.[39]

As for his own social ministry, he considered it totally in accord with Biblical mission efforts.

> But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries

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[38] Ibid., p. 122.

[39] King, Why, p. 35.

> of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.[40]

King, despite his amazing oratorical ability and Christian commitment, will not be remembered as an evangelist nor will history in all likelihood place him alongside a David Livingstone or Robert Moffat who brought the Gospel to benighted tribes for the first time. Of course it might be seriously questioned whether King had a less spiritual ministry by confronting civilized and even church going pagans with the social meaning of Christ than if he had introduced primitives to the name of Jesus. At any rate, King himself viewed his social efforts as mission testimonies to Jesus Christ and an expansion of His kingdom, and he urged all Christians to engage in that task to dethrone false ideologies and to let Christ reign.

> Finally, we are challenged to dedicate our lives to the cause of Christ even as the Communists dedicate theirs to Communism. We who cannot accept the creed of the Communists recognize their zeal and commitment to a cause which they believe will create a better world. They have a sense of purpose and destiny, and they work passionately and assiduously to win others to Communism. How many Christians are as concerned to win others to Christ.[41]

That last question is Christologically notable for what it omits--Jesus' ethics. King's exhortations in all areas of concern were consistently in reference to the person of rather than to the concepts of Jesus. One must first encounter the personhood of Christ before proceeding on to His moral teachings. In fact, Christian ethics, as in the

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[40] Ibid., p. 77.

[41] King, Strength, p. 121.

case of nonconformity, can become blatantly un-Christian when attempted by those who are not new creatures through Christ.[42] King may have avoided definitive doctrinal statements but his dependence on Christ as the power of God in social matters provides a strong and perhaps the best declaration of how he really thought of Jesus Christ--a teacher, an example, yes, but very definitely and primarily the living and redeeming Lord.

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[42] Supra, p. 71.

CHAPTER VI

CHRIST OR GANDHI

Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., never met in person. When the Indian leader died from an assasin's bullet on January 30, 1948, the black American was completing his senior year of college with twenty more years to live before suffering the same fate. Nevertheless, the similarities between Gandhi and King are striking, even in detail. Besides the common nature of their deaths, they had analogous life styles as youths. Both detested from early childhood their minority status in white dominated societies and decided to rise above the suppresive systems through education at predominantly white institutions. For Gandhi this involved schooling in England, for King, Crozier in Pennsylvania and later Boston University. They also shared a scrupulosity in dress to overcome negative impressions about their minority groups. King's behavior on this matter has already been presented,[1] but the last sentence of his reminiscence about Crozier days bears repeating: "I had a tendency to overdress, to keep my room spotless, my shoes perfectly shined and my clothes immaculately pressed."[2] A biographer of Gandhi's described his subject's appearance before a South African court in almost identical terms: "Entering court in the frock coat and Bengali turban which he habitually wore, he was better

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[1] Supra, p. 17.

[2] Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), p. 34.

dressed than a coolie had any right to be. His shoes shone, his trousers were pressed."[3] Most noteworthy, of course, was their mutual adherence to nonviolence. Once certain of their own individual identities they both sought to elevate their respective races with the Oriental serving indirectly as the mentor of the younger Occidental.

King, however, was definitely not a duplicate of Gandhi under the guise of western dress and western Christianity. The two men had basic differences including the fact that Gandhi was much more directly politically involved in affairs of state. He made his impact through legal ingenuity as a trained lawyer along with moral persuasion whereas King maintained a rather detached position over against direct political involvement. Legal manuverings were pretty well left to other individuals and other organizations while King himself concentrated on the ethical issues, although he certainly would participate in the legal and political programs of the others. Their later life styles also radically diverged:

> No ascetic, he [King] enjoyed good living in all its forms and accoutrements. Gandhi embraced celibacy and other monastic rigors, garbing himself in the homespun dhoti as a sannyasin. Not Martin King. He was only too conscious of the sacrifices he made . . .[4]

Of greatest significance for this thesis was their fundamentally diverse religious philosophies. For King religion basically meant Christianity, a faith he had reaccepted after a period of disenchantment; for Gandhi religion was something derived from all sources of knowledge and

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[3]Geoffrey Ashe, Gandhi (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), p. 50.

[4]William Robert Miller, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), p. 99.

centered in experience rather than in a personal God: "My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than truth."[5] Or in the summation of a Gandhian biographer,

> To most religious believers, God exists and enjoins us to think and do certain things. To agnostics, he probably does not exist and is in any case an irrelevance. To Gandhi, he existed, but as the goal of a quest to be carried on in perfect freedom. Man should not live by the alleged presence or absencr of the Absolute, as a given law of life like breathing, but by its possibility.[6]

Despite his theological relativism or maybe because of it, Gandhi espoused various artifacts and worship aids of the Christian religion. For instance, later in life the sole decoration in his room was a picture of Christ.[7] At the end of a fast in 1924, he had a Christian missionary sing for him "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," which gradually supplanted "Lead, Kindly Light" as his favorite Christian hymn.[8] When a delegation of American Negroes visited him in 1935 he requested they sing "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"[9] Even when the Pope refused him a private audience at the Vatican in 1931, Gandhi felt overwhelmed by a crucifix in the Sistine Chapel and remarked, "That was a very wonderful crucifix. One can't help being moved to tears."[10]

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[5]Mohandas K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiements with Truth (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 503.

[6]Ashe, p. 389.

[7]Ibid., p. 351.

[8]Ibid., p. 244.

[9]Bennett, p. 4.

[10]Ashe, pp. 312-313.

This fascination on the part of the Mahatma with Jesus could have created the possible impression that if Gandhi had worked among American Negroes he would have sounded as Christian as King, or that King in India would have relegated his Christianity to an appreciative Gandhian tolerance. This is an unwarrented impression. Gandhi's spiritual pilgrimage was not leading toward nor anywhere nearly approaching Christian affirmation as King claims his did. Both men in their youth found the organized church an obstacle but with King the obstacle was concerning faith. Gandhi, on the other hand, had difficulty tolerating much less believing in Christianity. In the latter's childhood home representatives of every religion were welcome but,

> Only Christianity was at the time an exception. I developed a sort of dislike for it. And for a reason. In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this. I must have stood there to hear them once only, but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment. About the same time, I heard of a well known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptized, he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one's own clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.[11]

Eventually he developed a respectful tolerance but never proceded beyond that point in regard to Christianity. This was not due to ignorance or indifference. Gandhi had studied the Bible and Christian doctrine and

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[11]Gandhi, pp. 33-34.

displayed an objective grasp of the essentials. Furthermore, in evaluating the tenets of faith he disavowed a conscious distaste for Christianity because of some less than pleasing exposures to the church and individual Christians. Instead he claimed an admiration for many aspects of Christianity and especially for Jesus. What he emphatically refused to countenance was any type of uniqueness either for Jesus or for the faith. Uniqueness to him meant exclusiveness, the source of social ills and the opposite of religion's responsibility to harmonize all creation. Gandhi therefore renounced the divinity of Jesus, His vicarious atonement, and the Church as the repository of revealed truth. The first two elevate Jesus above the rest of humanity and the last does the same for His followers. Of course, this sounds familiar to the western mind on account of humanism's influence; and if that is the problem, did not King also rely on humanism during his period of agnosticism but proceed on to Christian affirmation? The coup de grace, though, to that possibility in Gandhi's case is delivered with an Oriental stroke. Gandhi believed other living beings besides human beings possessed souls. The significance of this disagreement with the Church is that it shows Gandhi was not a humanist lacking or seeking a theology but rather had a theology at variance with Christianity.

> It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself. My reason was not ready to believe literally that Jesus by his death and by his blood redeemed the sins of the world. Metaphorically there might be some truth in it. Again, according to Christianity only human beings had souls, and not other living beings for whom death meant complete extinction; while I held a contrary belief. I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the

> most perfect man ever born. His death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it my heart could not accept. The pious lives of Christians did not give me anything that the lives of men of other faiths had failed to give. I had seen in other lives just the same reformation that I had heard of among Christians. Philosophically there was nothing extraordinary in Christian principles. From the point of view of sacrifice, it seemed to me that the Hindus greatly surpassed the Christians. It was impossible for me to regard Christianity as a perfect religion or the greatest of all religions.[12]

Besides the sacrificial example of Jesus, he did credit Christianity with another important contribution to his spiritual development. Actually it is an ironic contribution because while Gandhi found Christianity repressively dogmatic, he claims Christians were the ones who stimulated his lifelong religious quest:

> Though I took a path my Christian friends had not intended for me, I have remained for ever indebted to them for the religious quest that they awakened in me. I shall always cherish the memory of their contact. The years that followed had more, not less, of such sweet and sacred contacts in store for me.[13]

There is an additional irony concerning Gandhi's relationship with western Christianity. When nonviolence became a social force on the American scene, it would be labeled an Eastern import from the Ashram of the emaciated brown man in a loincloth. In truth western culture was only bringing back a refined, systematized Eastern version of what it had originally exported:

> Gandhi in 1894 definitely did not believe in non-violence on Hindu grounds; it took a westerner to convert him. Tolstoy's Kingdom,

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[12] Ibid., pp. 136-137.

[13] Ibid., p. 138.

by putting the idea in New Testament terms, showed how rules of action might be deduced from it.[14]

Martin Luther King did not meet the return ship at the dock. He learned of the cargo gradually and through various sources. Reinhold Niebuhr as early as 1932 had suggested the value of Gandhi's methods for the American Negro's equality struggle and Gandhi himself had earlier expressed the same possibility.[15] As for King, his first personal contact with an exponent of Gandhi's principles seems to have come in 1950. Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson, then president of Howard University, lectured at Fellowship House in Philadelphia on Gandhi and pacifism after having attended a World Pacifism Meeting in Bengal, India, the year before and then travelling extensively through that country. Up to this time King had paid little attention to Gandhi, but following the Johnson lecture he purchased and studied several books on the Oriental's philosophy. In Gandhi he recognized a practical and realistic method of effecting social change through nonviolence, but King as a seminarian realized his challenges for the forseeable future would be academic rather than practical.[16] Gandhi for the most part passed into the shadows of King's mind until December, 1955, the advent of the Montgomery bus boycott. Then upon being chosen as chief spokesman for the boycott, a most practical situation indeed, King remembered vividly the martyred Indian.

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[14]Ashe, p. 65.

[15]Miller, p. 19.

[16]Ibid.

> In accepting this responsibility my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. This principle became the guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.[17]

It was not King, however, who publicly related Gandhi to the Montgomery movement. That honor belongs to a Juliette Morgan, a while librarian who, in a letter to The Montgomery Advertiser which appeared in the December 12, 1955, issue, compared the Negroes' tactics with those of Gandhi's.[18] Thereafter Gandhi's name became inseparable from the movement:

> People who had never heard of the little brown saint of India were now saying his name with an air of familiarity. Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating idea.

But once again there appears King's standard phrase for concluding statements on Gandhi's influence: "In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method."[19] Gandhi's particular influence upon King would continue until the end of the latter's life. At the last meeting with his staff on the afternoon of his death, King discoursed at length about the suffering and steadfastness of Gandhi and Jesus.[20]

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[17]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence," The Christian Century, LXXVII (April 13, 1960), 440.

[18]Miller, p. 41.

[19]Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 67.

[20]Miller, p. 276.

Yet regardless of how high King exalted Gandhi and in spite of his often mentioning Jesus and the Mahatma in the same breath, King made a sharp delineation between the respective roles of Christ and Gandhi in his nonviolence activity. As previously stated, Christ alone provided the spirit and motivation; Gandhi only provided a magnificent method for implementing the will of Jesus on the secular scene. In one passage, he elaborates on this role of Gandhi:

> Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. For Gandhi love was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months. The intellectual and moral satisfaction that I failed to gain from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin, the social-contracts theory of Hobbes, the "back to nature" optimism of Rousseau, and the superman philosophy of Nietzsche I found in the nonviolent resistance philosophy of Gandhi. I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.[21]

King himself did not confuse the significance of Christ and Gandhi in his own thinking, though friends and critics alike may have thought otherwise. To Gandhi he owed human gratitude; to Jesus he gave his life in discipleship.

> I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. There are some who still find the Cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly, yet proudly, say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."[22]

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[21]King, Stride, pp. 78-79.

[22]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 172.

CHAPTER VII

THE LEGACY

From a twentieth century perspective with its awareness of two thousand years of Christian doctrine, the Christology of Martin Luther King, Jr., certainly coincides with Christologies of the past that have received the designation of heresy. Furthermore, it is not improper to measure King's theology by orthodox standards. Despite his Baptist noncommitment to creeds, he himself appealed to historical Christianity concerning civil rights and flung the epithet of "heresy" against those who violated the Church's teachings on human equality.

> The really tragic thing about the un-Christian Christian is that he has really convinced himself that he is right in his sin and heresy. He thinks of the Church as his own private country club and not the Body of Christ with two thousand years of history and doctrine.[1]

In his understanding of Jesus he obviously is the one at variance with the Church's doctrinal history. Should there be a desire for a traditional label to classify King's particular Christology, the closest approximation is probably "adoptionism," in which God the Father declared the human person Jesus the Son of God after His birth. This interpretation was definitively repudiated in the eighth century because of the formal acceptance of a doctrine King repudiated, the Virgin Birth. Adoptionism, though, had enjoyed an earlier respectable status in the Church: "That Jesus <u>according to his humanity</u> had been the Son of God

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[1]Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," <u>Ebony</u>, XX (August, 1965), 78.

only by adoption had been considered self-evident for a long time in the patristic church."[2] By the standards then of primitive Christianity, King would have been embraced by the church without the stigma of heretic, although the early fathers limited the idea of adoption to Jesus' human nature while leaving intact Christ's eternal divine essence and unity with the Father. King generally ignores that aspect of Christ and one can only speculate whether he too took it for granted or denied it.

What does become apparent is that King had more in common with the spirit of primitive faith than of later doctrinal sophistication. He wore well the garb of liberal erudition but underneath the intellectual attire there was a man of the spirit rather than of the mind. To call King's faith primitive has nothing to do with ecclesiastical chronology; it is an assessment of his personal faith's pilgrimage and of where he was in that journey when it ended on the night of April 4, 1968. A survey of King's past and his adolescent groping for a personal God makes it seem as if Helmut Thielicke had someone exactly like the young King in mind when he preached:

> If you take Jesus just as he is on first impression, if, in other words, you think of him in quite human terms and see him as a brother of man who loves unselfishly, who lives only by love, and who takes his mission to give men a new meaning for their lives so seriously that he dies for it--if you think of him in that way, you surely have not yet seen him face to face, but you have at least touched the fringe of his garment. And whoever holds to him,

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[2]Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jesus-God and Man, translated by Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p. 120.

> however tenuously, whoever has touched him even peripherally, to him he turns and says, "You belong to me; now come and walk with me. And if you walk with me, with each passing day you will perceive more and more clearly who I am."[3]

As time went by, King assuredly saw the Lord "face to face;" he perhaps had not yet clearly discerned His features. Whether additional time would have improved vision, God alone finally knows, but it is reasonably safe to assume that the King who had progressed in faith so far in such a short time would have continued in that direction.

This by no means implies that eventually King would have passed an orthodox colloquy. His interests in doing so were nil and not because of his Baptist affiliation but really because of being black. The doctrinal issues which had formerly captivated the imaginations of Christianity's finist minds and produced dramatic confrontations between an Athanasius and as Arius or a Luther and an Eck belonged for the most part to a white Christianity. King himself may not have so sharply stated the case because of his ceaseless striving after reconciliation between all segments of humanity. When, though, in the summer of 1969 a group of black Christian theologians convened in Atlanta, Georgia, to work out a distinctive black theology there were unmistakable echoes of King's priorities and position.

> One participant in the session, Preston N. Williams of Boston university, explained: "The black man cannot divorce theology from social action. Whites say, 'That's not theology at all.' The real question is who is going to define the norms of theology." Some Negro churchmen feel that theology created by white men views God's action through honkie eyes, making it meaningless for for the Negro situation. Says Methodist Bishop Joseph A. Johnson:

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[3]Helmut Thielicke, I Believe: The Christian's Creed, translated by John W. Doberstein and H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 13-14.

> "We affirm our blackness, recognize that our experience is authentic and create a theology based on our experience."[4]

The most difficult issue that King helped lay at the door of the contemporary church, surpassing civil disobedience and selective conscientious objection in complexity, is whether orthodox faith can still have relevance to the black man. Although this thesis has not sought an answer to that question, it has tried to show that an understanding of King and in particular his Christology requires at least an awareness of the problem. Otherwise his theological indefiniteness will unfairly be interpreted as indifference rather than as a positive, but exploratory, contribution toward resolving on the contemporary scene what is and is not essential for Christian faith. Of course, the question is not basically a racial one nor a new one but is a reassertion of the traditional tension between creeds and deeds. Yet on the modern scene race, along with numerous other factors like economic status, national geography, and denominational affiliation, is part of this tension. If orthodoxy insists on rigid conformity to a dogmatic system which the black man believes developed out of a historical process alien to his own people and without their participation, orthodoxy may have lost those of the black community whose color is soul-deep. On the other hand, there is the possibility of a black theology emerging which considers worthwhile only confrontations over decent housing and equal employment opportunities. An assessment of an individual's Christianity would depend solely on his stance in these confrontations regardless of

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[4]*Time*, XCIV (July 4, 1969), 58.

what he believed. Should that happen the orthodox will feel utterly estranged and correctly suspect that the very nature of historical Christianity, reaching back to Jesus' "doctrinal" statements about Himself, is under attack.

It is regrettable from a human point of view that the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., with his tender, ecumenical understanding will not be around to serve as a reconciling guide to the whole Church. Fortunately that which does remain and will continue, besides the remembered magnificence of the man, is his theology of the Cross. Instead of being a utopian, he believed that betterment in the human realm could only occur when men ceased striving after their own version of Paradise and began to suffer voluntarily for the sake of each other. To him the Cross of Christ deserved more than adoration. It demanded emulation as the continuous means of God's reconciling work among mankind and particularly in the Church. And as for the Church, it's task is to live up to its professed Christology and thereby serve as the divine agency of this reconciliation.

It might rightfully be contended that King spent and finally lost his life as an advocate of such conformity. The conclusion of this thesis, though, is that King unwittingly violated his own demand. Yet even here he maintained an honorable uniqueness. Instead of trust lagging behind testimony, he reversed the problem as his active dependence on Christ exceeded his formulated Christology. The theology King spoke and wrote generally belonged to his first intellectual love--late nineteenth-early twentieth century Protestant liberalism. But King's work and dreams required more than a vague, symbolically resurrected

Jesus. Instead he actually relied on a living Christ who continuously provides forgiveness and has power to fulfill hopes, a cosmic Lord who actively draws mankind to Himself for the sake of harmony among mankind, a protective Shepherd who watches over the oppressed and into whose hands King was willing to commit his causes and his life. Implicitly all of this is also present in his speeches and writings, as this thesis has sought to indicate. Underneath the top soil of Protestant liberalism was the nurture of a vital Christology and a living Christ. By probing beneath the surface rhetoric one can discover this about King, but more convincing and evident is what emerged above the surface in terms of King's attitude toward his programs and visions. He espoused those programs and visions with a confidence and hope in Christ that gave the lie to his faith being rooted in the shallow Jesus of Protestant liberalism. Instead he depended quite explicitly in his work on the most orthodox and profound of Christian doctrines--Jesus Christ is Lord.

This thesis, therefore, ends with the conviction that in Martin Luther King, Jr., the Church possessed an authentic Christian theologian whose communication to the world, whether through word or action but especially <u>via</u> the latter, was an explanation of Christ for our times.

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