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Martin Luther King, Jr., Liberation Ethics In a Christian Context

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, there is a persistent concern among community leaders, educators, theologians and ethicists alike of the necessity to reexamine the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. The difficulty in rational reflection upon any one phase of King's thought lies in the fact that so much has been written *about* his philosophy and theology and his contribution to the non-violent freedom movement of the last two decades. It is never easy to find one's way into another side or dimension of a person's thought. Yet as we attempt to discover more "promising moral indicators" for the future, we are compelled by the sway of events to investigate, critically and appreciatively, the ethical dimension of the thought of King.

From my own vantage point in ethics, the most significant single contribution of King to our understanding of the moral life, in a Christian *context*, is perhaps the growing awareness that he — more than any of his contemporaries, black or white — dared to believe the American Dream of "freedom, equality, and justice for all" by deliberately internalizing those values in his own personal life as the arch-symbol of ethical conduct.

For the Black Christian the meaning of ethics, as a critical tool of self-reflection, must be concrete and contextual. The point of departure for Black Christian social ethics is the community in which black folks find themselves and what they believe about Jesus Christ in their struggle to make sense out of the American experience. Thus our reflection upon the ethics of King must necessarily begin with Christian beliefs and the appropriation of the ethical teachings of Jesus to the moral life in Black. For the Black Christian, therefore, one's ethics must be avowedly Christian ethics. Otherwise, the agent's engagement in "ethical talk" about Christian faith, and its relevance for social change, is senseless.

In any event, to speak of the ethical-side of King's thought will involve an attempt on the part of this writer to delineate his social ethics as the major focus of reflection. However, I may point out that this writer is also cognizant of the fact that one of the corollaries in King's thought is the inseparability of Christian theology and ethics, on the one hand; and the implications of ethical principles for involvement in social action, on the other. So then, the fundamental thesis of this essay is the position that the ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. — viewed largely as an expression of liberation ethics *par excellence* —

cannot be adequately understood apart from a Christian *context* and those forces which gave rise to the civil rights revolution.

Obviously, the ethical thought of Dr. King provides the occasion for sober reflection. For the Black social ethicist, it invites one to undertake a difficult task. The seriousness of the ethical task involves nothing less than what Professor Herbert O. Edwards calls "telling the truth"¹ about the black experience in white America. It seems to me that the ethics of King is also important to come to grips with because it enables the agent to more cogently identify the normative basis for "digging into" the funky facts of black life in one's quest for truth and human liberation. Here our reflection shall be limited to an explication of two primary moral considerations in our struggle to understand the social ethics of Dr. King, namely, (1) the principle of love-monism as the controlling norm of the moral life; and (2) the concept of the "beloved community" as a formidable paradigm in the achievement of liberation in black-white relations.

THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE-MONISM

Although Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was trained as a theologian, he was primarily concerned with the business of Christian social ethics,² especially as he struggled to resolve one of the most perplexing problems to needle the American conscience: race. In varying degrees, his ethics arises out of his theology; indeed, there is a sense in which his theology exercises nominalistic control over his social ethics. However, the process is not a static-deductive relation but a dynamic interplay between his ethics and theology as he sought to respond to the pull of contemporary events.

Concretely, I believe that the essential structure of King's ethics is expressed, at least at the beginning, primarily in his volume *Strength to Love*. It appears that the basic ethical theme permeating the whole of this classic book of sermons, *Strength To Love*, is the principle of agapeistic love. In fact, the love-ethic seems to be at the center of his social thought. As we reflect here upon the ethics of King there are at least two critical questions that must be posed. First of all, the fundamental theoretical question from a contextualist's viewpoint is not what is love, but rather what does love *require* in the situation of oppression? Secondly, what does love *do* in light of the struggle on the part of black folk for liberation?

The principle of love in Dr. King's social ethics is fairly consistent as the key integrative criterion for involvement in social action. I believe however that evidence would suggest that the norm of love appears to be far more visible and functional during the early stages in the development of the civil rights movement than the latter ones.

¹ Herbert O. Edwards, "Toward a Black Christian Social Ethic," in *The Duke Divinity School Review*, (Spring, 1975), p. 107.

² J. Deotis Roberts, Sr., "Black Theological Ethics: A Bibliographical Essay," in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, (Spring, 1975 vol. 2), p. 86.

Analytically, one of the problematics with the ethics of King, in light of its contextual relation to the Christian faith, is the traditional manner in which he begins by telling the reader or explicating, theologically, what love *is* rather than what love *requires* on the part of the agent.

For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in *Strength to Love*, outlines three basic ideas on the concept of love — following essentially Nygren's ethico-theological interpretation. In reflecting upon the Greek New Testament analysis of the term love, King argues that

... Love is something much deeper than emotional bosh. . . . The word *eros* is a sort of aesthetic or romantic love. In Platonic dialogues *eros* is a yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. The second word is *philia*, a reciprocal love and the intimate affection and friendship between friends. . . . The third word is *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. . . . *Agape* is the love of God operating in the human heart. At this level . . . we love every man because God loves him. . . .³

Obviously, Dr. King conceptualized the concept of love as a basic principle for both his ethics and Christian theology. In his last book *Trumpet of Conscience*, King speaks of the principle of love as cognate to his theology and basic understanding of man in human society. Since human dignity is viewed as one's brithright in the ethico-theological thought of King, every man is a child of God with equal value and worth. For King, the importance of agapeistic love for the moral life is dramatized when it operates in the human heart. "When you rise to this level," says King, "you love all men not because you like them, not because their ways appeal to you, but you love them because God loves them."⁴ Here King's social ethics reminds us that love is much greater than liking; it is constructive in human community and universal character.

Critically discerned, there are perhaps two serious theoretical problematics in his thought thus far. First, the sensitive student of Christian social ethics would, undoubtedly, observe the *prima facie* difficulty, I think, with King's overwhelming emphasis on the norm of love — resembling a kind of "love monism" — in his particular mode of ethical delineation. His formal point of departure, as we have already observed, attempts to outline what love *is* without equally, though inadvertently, identifying with sufficient clarity what love *requires* for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

In recalling the crisis that plagued the civil rights movement during the mid-sixties, Vincent Harding, a perceptive interpreter of the black experience, reports hearing a Black Power advocate saying — in terms of King's dramatic emphasis on the love-ethic in race relations — that "Martin Luther King was trying to get us to love white folks before we learned to love ourselves, and that ain't no good."⁵

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 44.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 73.

⁵ Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power," in Donald Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation: 1968*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 4.

Whether this report is a mere expression of candid anger uttered by one disillusioned black man is not the point. What seems to be important here is a failure of perspective to clearly delineate what love demands in a society where the oppressed black man has been forced, historically, to look-up to his oppressor as the "Great White Father." To be sure, I am not implying here that Dr. King's social ethics does not radically repudiate the superordination-subordination syndrome traditionally characteristic in black-white relations. It does, without doubt. Neither I am suggesting that King does not relate love and justice as a theological possibility. Ultimately, love and justice are inseparable in his ethico-theological thought.

What I am suggesting, to begin with, is a somewhat uneasy feeling that King's ethics reflects an overcommitment of agapeistic love as the ultimate norm — without giving equal attention to the concept of justice in the black man's quest for freedom and first-class citizenship in America. I think that J. Deotis Roberts is essentially correct in his observation that "Dr. King built his theological ethic mainly on his examination of the concept of love."⁶

The second theoretical difficulty here in our analysis is in part derivative from the first. That is to say, Dr. King's stress upon agapeistic love as redemptive goodwill, at least sociologically considered, tends to be obscured when applied to the funky facts of life in a white-dominated society. On the one hand, the love-ethic places, perhaps, an unrealistic burden on oppressed blacks to "love your enemy"; while on the other hand, the oppressor is left to interpret love as "sentimentality" as he continues to operate with racist attitudes — often disguised under the cloak of goodwill and liberal paternalism.

Again, we must return to the basic question, "What does love require in a situation of oppression?" In one's attempt to respond, creatively, to the ethical requisites of love, there are perhaps three primary considerations that claim attention in our assessment of King's ethics as a kind of "agapeistic love-monism." Accordingly, the principle of love implicit in the thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. requires justice, faith, and forgiveness as minimum preconditions for the moral life and meaningful participation in the liberation struggle.

In the first place, love demands justice as its chief instrument in dealing with complex social structures; it is rudimentary and elemental in any viable system of Black Christian social ethics. Obviously, a number of social ethicists in the long tradition of the Christian faith have spoken of the relationship of love to justice in terms of polar tensions. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr, one of King's intellectual mentors, speaks of love as the ultimate fulfillment of justice, but never a substitute for justice.

Concretely, the concept of justice in the ethico-theological thought of King, though not clearly defined, appears to be deeply rooted in

⁶J. Deotis Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p. 86.

Biblical faith. Apparently, the structure of Biblical faith informs King's social ethics as he attempts to make sense out of black suffering in white America. For King, the idea of justice is contained in the idiomatic symbol of the prophet Amos. In poetic language Dr. King emphatically proclaims:

. . . I still have a dream today that one day justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. I still have a dream today that in all of our state houses and city halls men will be elected to go there who will do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. . . .⁷

While the eschatological motif of hope is ever-present in the thinking of Dr. King the accent falls on *justice* as the righteousness of God, penetrating the political, socio-economic and religious structures of history. Ultimately, Dr. King felt that God would make right what men make wrong because "the arch of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." As an instrument of love, justice means — in the classical sense — giving to each man his due. In human society where rational men must adjudicate the merits and demerits of conflicting claims between social groups, the rightful "due" of each person is equality.

In any event, the divine love of God as understood in the thinking of King includes a passionate concern for social justice embodied in human institutions. Thus justice is not only an instrument of love, it is also the end-goal of racial struggle.⁸ As a Christian social ethicist, Dr. King, in his volume *Why We Can't Wait*, affirms the interrelated character of love and justice in a crisis-packed society of prejudice and cultural racism. Dr. King believed that too long had the white establishment insisted that black folks "wait" for their civil rights — as on some sort of installment plan — while other social groups enjoyed the full moral blessings of the Declaration of Independence.⁹ Here it seems to me that King's social ethics is a piquant reminder to the nation and world communities that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."¹⁰ In a society where people of color are penalized and oppressed because of their ethnicity, the norm of justice must be the norm of the social order.

Perhaps the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr may be noted here with reference to King's understanding of justice as a moral requisite of love. Professor Niebuhr advocates that justice is a possible attainable goal for human society and an approximation of love. Niebuhr writes:

The social justice which Amos demanded represented a possible ideal for society. Jesus conception of pure love is related to the idea of justice, as the holiness of God is related to the goodness of men. Pure love and holiness transcend the possible and historical.¹¹

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 76-80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 37.

In the second place, love requires faith. For King, the Sermon on the Mount is the central normative paradigm for the moral life. The admonition to love one's neighbor — by perceiving the human need — also implies an abiding faith in one's neighbor. Here a few questions seem appropriate to raise, namely, What does it mean to have faith in one's neighbor? Faith in God? Faith in the possibility of human community? The ethics of King suggests that the meaning of Christian morality in the area of neighbor-relation cannot be authentic outside the establishment of a real fellowship of trust and confidence between men of goodwill. Further, it is reasonable to assume that the motif of faith as reflected in the ethico-theological thought of King arises out of his basic convictions concerning the nature of God.

Paradoxically, the believer's perception of the love of God is somehow incomplete and ethically mis-guided without the mutual requirement of faith in God as expressed in one's brother. For King, faith and love are inseparable because they are rooted theologically in the believer's understanding of God — a God who is deeply concerned about the poor and oppressed of the land. This particular ingredient is expressed by Dr. King's declaration that “. . . faith will sustain us in our struggle to escape from the bondage of every evil Egypt. This faith will be a lamp unto our weary feet and a light unto our meandering path. Without such faith, man's highest dreams will pass silently to dust.”¹² The important thing here is the recognition that faith provides the oppressed with the moral impetus to change the conditions of their lives — especially the faith we discover in ourselves which leads to self-respect.¹³ In short, faith is action-oriented; it is not passive submission to the yoke of oppression as the black man's lot. For King, faith is trust and reliance upon God which manifests itself in a kind of belief in the basic integrity of the neighbor because it wills the neighbor's good. Theologically, faith is the inner assurance of knowing that “as we struggle to defeat the forces of evil,” says King, “the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it.”¹⁴ So then, the element of faith as trust is both a requirement of love as well as a moral requisite for human life.

Thirdly, the expression of forgiveness is relevant and important in terms of our understanding of Dr. King's social ethics in a Christian context. Forgiveness is the fruit of divine love in the human heart. Ethically, King is suggesting that anyone who takes the Christian gospel of liberation seriously must be open to forgiveness which leads to the possibility of reconciliation between blacks and whites in America. Forgiveness however is contingent upon repentance which involves a change in mind and intention. Obviously, the crucial question in black-

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love*, p. 81.

¹³ *Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection*, (Division of Special Collections: Mugar Library, Boston University, File Drawer IV, no. 18), p. 1.

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love*, p. 78.

white relations is simply this: Can the white man repent of his racism and the demoralization of the oppressed black man? And since the wounds or marks of oppression are so deeply carved into the black man's soul, can he find the courage to forgive?

I think that forgiveness, in a Christian context, is perhaps the highest virtue of agapeistic love — if for no other reason than human fragility and man's tendency toward self-centeredness. We find it "hard" to forgive the enemy, and even much less to love one's enemy. Yet it is a requirement of the moral life if we are to take the Christian norm of love, as reflected in the thought of King, seriously. Dr. King's expression of the meaning of Christian social ethics demands that we forgive because God forgives. We are to love because God's love is impartial. Further, he felt that forgiveness, as a fruit of love, is initiated by God. "Man is a sinner in need of God's forgiving grace," writes King, "this is not deadening pessimism; it is Christian realism . . . God's unbroken hold on us is something that will never permit us to feel right when we do wrong or feel natural when we do the unnatural."¹⁵ To be sure, the motif of forgiveness as a value in the ethical thought of King is indispensable because it incorporates the spirit of reconciliation; it anticipates the establishment of community. Here we shall turn to perhaps the central eschatological, normative goal in King's ethics: the achievement of the beloved community, the true home of human liberation.

THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: LIBERATION IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

In treating King's ethical thought as informed by his writings, the notion of the "beloved community" is, undoubtedly, a dominant eschatological paradigm. The compelling dream implicit throughout King's thought, both for America and the world, was the dream of the beloved community. Thus far in our analysis we have already explicated the position that the norm of love requires justice, faith, and forgiveness as minimum requisites for the moral life. Now it seems appropriate that we consider here the key question, "What does love demand that we do?"

First of all, King believes that love is not passive and submissive but active and regenerative. Love serves as the motivating force in creating the basis for the realization of the beloved community; the power of love is the only human force that has the capacity to bring community into existence. Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, in their volume *Search For The Beloved Community*, illustrate this particular viewpoint concerning the ethical thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁶ Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *The Search For The Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1975), pp. 119-130.

From a theological and ethical perspective, King's vision of the beloved community is in part symbolized in the cross which brings hope and new life to all, especially the poor and dispossessed. He contends that

The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history.¹⁷

Secondly, the principle of love in King's social ethics has what may be called a "transformative-creative-character" of its own with reference to individual and social structures. "Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security,"¹⁸ writes King.

Thirdly, the essence of the moral life in the beloved community is primarily informed by love — a type of love that liberates and reconciles. There is a peculiar manner, in one's reflection upon race relations in America, in which King spoke of liberation (authentic freedom), reconciliation, and the love-ethic as intricately related to the concept of the beloved community. He wrote:

Love may well be the salvation of our civilization. . . . It is true that as we struggle for freedom in America, we will have to boycott at times. But we must remember . . . that a boycott is not an end in itself. . . . But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding good will that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age.¹⁹

Dr. King's conception of the beloved community is the vision of the "new age" — the age of liberation for all oppressed people. Ethically, the new age is one in which racial hatred is rejected and brotherly love projected. King believed that it is only by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives that we will be able to "cut off the chain of hate." Perhaps his perception here of agapeistic love reveals a "higher good" implicit in the term *liberation* than traditionally ascribed by many contemporary black theologians. It may very well disclose a type of liberation *par excellence*, because its essential nature characterizes what he calls disinterested love — completely self-giving, expecting nothing in return. For King, it is this type of love that represents the genuine source of human liberation.

Agape as disinterested love seeks to restore and renew broken relationships in human community. In his work, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King put it this way:

¹⁷ Cited in K. L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *The Search For The Beloved Community*, p. 131.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love*, p. 49.

¹⁹ Cited in William R. Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Life, Martyrdom and Meaning for the World*, (New York: Avon Books, 1968), p. 66.

Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is a willingness to go to any length to restore community. . . . It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community.²⁰

Here the concept of agapeistic love, in the ethics and theology of King, is envisaged as that force which moves man toward the creation and development of the beloved community. Agape is that type of love which cements broken relationships and restores a sense of community among the children of God. In short, King makes no distinction between friend and enemy; agape is directed toward both.

This brings us to a rather critical juncture in our analysis of the concept of the beloved community, namely, the indispensibility of the principle of reconciliation in dealing with the race question in America. Evidence suggests that King did not develop — in any systematic way — a doctrine of reconciliation. But if one takes seriously King's ideal of Christian brotherhood and his vision of the beloved community beyond racism, oppression and injustice, then it seems to me that reconciliation between blacks and whites is a logical correlation of genuine liberation. King's view of reconciliation is informed by the Judeo-Christian faith, particularly the radicalizing of the ethics of Jesus, which emphasized the gospel of liberation for the poor under the Fatherhood of God and the Lordship of Christ.

Theologically and ethically, universalism is an ever-present strand in the thought of King. As a prophetic voice in the cause of freedom, social justice, and brotherhood, King declared: "now the judgment of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools."²¹

In the black man's struggle for racial justice in American society, Dr. King held the conviction that ultimately our loyalties must transcend the narrow confines of race, class, and nation. In striking a universal note, he suggested that men of conscience must be concerned about developing a "world perspective" in the cause of freedom, justice and love — the genuine hallmarks of the beloved community.

In the final analysis, Dr. King believed that the basic truth undergirding the development of a "world perspective" stems from the claim that all life is interdependent. No individual or nation can live alone. With a moral-philosophical ring, King struck the chord of reconciliation in his vision of the beloved community when he said to America:

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.²²

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958), p. 87.

²¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 68.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

