

## Martin Luther King, Jr., The Black Church, and the Black Messianic Vision

All of the studies of Martin Luther King, Jr. thus far have failed to adequately treat the black experience and the black church as sources in the shaping of his life, thought and commitment to social justice. Those who have written books and articles about King have strongly emphasized his debt to Biblical categories, to Mahatma Ghandi, to American democratic principles, and to liberal Christian theology and ethics, thereby giving the impression that he owed little to his cultural heritage as a black American.<sup>1</sup> I want to suggest that the black experience and the black tradition are essential to an understanding of King—that these were immensely important influences in determining who he was, what he believed, and the strategy he adopted in his struggle to translate an ethical ideal into practical reality. Furthermore, I want to submit that some of King's ideas can be found in pristine or primal form in antebellum slave thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Only fleeting references are made to the influence of the black experience and the black church on King even in studies like David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers, 1970); Stephen B. Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982); Kenneth Slack, *Martin Luther King* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1970); and John H. Smylie, "On Jesus, Pharoahs, and the Chosen People: Martin Luther King as a Biblical Interpreter and Humanist," *Interpretation: Bible and Theology*, XXIV (January, 1970). Major studies of King's intellectual sources have almost completely ignored the impact of his cultural background on his development. See Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974); and John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of A Mind* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982). At this writing, Dr. James H. Cone of Union Theological Seminary, New York City, was in the process of publishing an article in *Theology Today* which deals with the black church roots of King's theological perspective. His article will prove an exception to the sources mentioned above. He expressed surprise that he and I were "moving along the same lines in our interpretation of King independently of each other."

King was the product of a strong family background. He was born into a middle-class black family in Atlanta, Georgia early in 1929. By his own admission, very early in his life he developed an intense dislike for the brutal realities of white racism:

As far back as I could remember, I had resented segregation, and had asked my parents urgent and pointed questions about it. While I was still too young for school I had already learned something about discrimination. For three or four years my inseparable playmates had been two white boys whose parents ran a store across the street from our home in Atlanta. Then something began to happen. When I went across the street to get them, their parents would say that they couldn't play. They weren't hostile; they just made excuses. Finally I asked my mother about it.<sup>2</sup>

In response to his sincere, straightforward questions concerning his white playmates, King's mother, Alberta, provided him with early insight into the nature and the history of the thought forms and institutional practices which kept blacks and whites separated:

My mother took me on her lap and began by telling me about slavery and how it had ended with the Civil War. She tried to explain the divided system of the South—the segregated schools, restaurants, theaters, housing; the white and colored signs on drinking fountains, waiting rooms, lavatories—as a social condition rather than a natural order. Then she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: "You are as good as anyone."<sup>3</sup>

The sheer impact of his mother's words—"You are as good as anyone"—left an indelible mark on the memory of young Martin, and helped give him a foundation for the abiding faith, optimism, and self-confidence which he later exemplified in his effort to transform and regenerate human society.

The greatest influence on King in his early years was probably exercised by his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., a successful Baptist minister. Martin, Sr., born the son of a Georgia sharecropper, was known for his defiance of the racial convention of the South even before Martin, Jr. was born:

From before I was born, my father had refused to ride the city buses, after witnessing a brutal attack on a load of Negro passengers. He had led the fight in Atlanta to equalize teachers' salaries, and had been instrumental in the elimination of Jim Crow elevators in the courthouse. As pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he still presides over a congregation of four thousand, he had wielded great influence in the Negro community, and had perhaps won the grudging respect of the whites. At any rate, they had never attacked him physically, a fact that filled my brother and sister and me with wonder as we grew up in this tension-packed atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

As a child, King was deeply affected by two incidents involving his father's bout with racism. On one occasion he saw his father storm out of a store after a white clerk insisted that he had to sit in the Negro section before being served. "This was the first time I had ever seen my father so angry," King recalled. "I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered, 'I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it'." On another occasion, King witnessed his father's very indignant reply to a white policeman who referred to him as "a boy." From his father, young Martin learned how to resist the system which sought to rob him and his people of every vestige of their humanity:

With this heritage, it is not surprising that I had also learned to abhor segregation, considering it both rationally inexplicable and morally unjustifiable. As a teenager I had never been able to accept the fact of having to go to the back of a bus or sit in the segregated section of a train. The first time I had been seated behind a curtain in a dining car, I felt as if the curtain had been dropped on my selfhood. Having the usual growing boy's pleasure in movies, I had yet gone to a downtown theater in Atlanta only once. The experience of having to enter a rear door and sit in a filthy peanut gallery was so obnoxious that I could not enjoy the picture. I could never adjust to the separate waiting rooms, separate eating places, separate rest rooms, partly because the separate was always unequal, and partly because the very idea of separation did something to my sense of dignity and self-respect.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from his family background, the black church had a formative influence upon King. He was born in a Christian home, and had the distinction of being the son and grandson of Baptist preachers. He was nurtured in the fundamentalist tradition of Black Baptist Protestantism in the South long before he ever attended a seminary. King joined the Ebenezer Baptist Church under his father early in 1934, when he was only five years old.<sup>6</sup> This church had been pastored years earlier by his grandfather, A.D. Williams. Stephen B. Oates has said the following about King's involvement in the church during his childhood:

The church was M. L.'s second home. All his close friends were in his Sunday-school classes. In those classes, unlettered women in bright dresses and high-heeled shoes, smelling of sweet perfume, instructed him in fundamentalist precepts, exhorting him to accept the literalness and infallibility of the Scriptures. After Sunday school came regular worship in the sanctuary, a voltage-charged affair in which the congregation swayed and cried (*Amen, yes!, that's right, well?*) as Reverend King preached in remarkable oratorical flourishes, his voice ranging from a booming baritone to a near shriek. M. L. looked up to his father with a mixture of awe, respect, intimidation, and embarrassment. He thought Daddy awfully emotional.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>6</sup> Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound*, pp. 3-9; and Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound*, pp. 3-4.

The simplistic piety and emotionalism of the black church as experienced by King in his youth did not provide him with full spiritual and intellectual satisfaction. He needed something more, as evidenced by his initial decision to choose law or medicine instead of the Christian ministry as a vocation.<sup>8</sup> Only after entering Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1944, where he was exposed to the influence of liberal and progressive-minded black churchmen like George Kelsey and Benjamin Mays, did King give serious consideration to becoming a minister. The theological liberalism to which he was exposed at Morehouse, and later at Crozer Seminary and Boston University, afforded him an attractive alternative to the extreme fundamentalism of the black church.<sup>9</sup>

The problems King had with the shortcomings of the black church as a youngster did not lead him to abandon that institution. His first major decision after completing the residential requirements for the doctorate at Boston University in 1954 was to accept the offer to become pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. As King discovered, this church did not fit the mold of the typical black rural congregation in the deep South at that time:

The church was comparatively small, with a membership of around three hundred people, but it occupied a central place in the community. Many influential and respected citizens—professional people with substantial incomes—were among its members. Moreover it had a long tradition of an educated ministry. Some of the nation's best-trained Negro ministers had held pastorates there.<sup>10</sup>

The image of Dexter Avenue as a middle-class black church disturbed King from the outset. As he put it:

I was anxious to change the impression in the community that Dexter was a sort of silk-stocking church catering to a certain class. Often it was referred to as the "big folks' church." Revolting against this idea, I was convinced that worship at its best is a social experience with people of all levels of life coming together to realize their oneness and unity under God. Whenever the church, consciously or unconsciously, caters to one class it loses the spiritual force of the "whosoever will, let him come" doctrine, and is in danger of becoming little more than a social club with a thin veneer of religiosity.<sup>11</sup>

Convinced that Dexter Avenue had to expand its mission priorities and embrace the entire black community, King decided to depart from "the traditional way of doing things":

I was also concerned with broadening the auxiliary program of the church. These

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 147; and Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders Since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), pp. 109-110; and King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

activities, when I arrived, consisted chiefly of the Sunday School, where adults and children assembled to study the tenets of Christianity and the Bible; the Baptist Training Union, designed to develop Christian leadership; and the Missionary Society, which carried the message of the church into the community. Among the new functions I decided to recommend were a committee to revitalize religious education; a social service committee to channel and invigorate services to the sick and needy; a social and political action committee; a committee to raise and administer scholarship funds for high school graduates; and a cultural committee to give encouragement to promising artists.<sup>12</sup>

What disturbed King most about Montgomery's black churches soon after he arrived there was their failure to deal in a responsible way with the bleak social and economic realities confronting the black community. As he saw it,

The apparent apathy of the Negro ministers presented a special problem. A faithful few had always shown a deep concern for social problems, but too many had remained aloof from the area of social responsibility. Much of this indifference, it is true, stemmed from a sincere feeling that ministers were not supposed to get mixed up in such earthly, temporal matters as social and economic improvement; they were to "preach the gospel," and keep men's minds centered on "the heavenly." But however sincere, this view of religion, I felt, was too confined.<sup>13</sup>

The Dexter Avenue Church provided the initial organizational context for King to act on his conviction that religion should be concerned not only with the souls of individuals, but also the social and economic conditions that damn the soul.<sup>14</sup> It all began on December 1, 1955 when Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, was arrested for her refusal to relinquish her bus seat to a white male passenger. The incident triggered a 381-day bus boycott involving 50,000 black people. At the beginning of the protest, King was chosen as the spokesman. The eventual success of this movement among black church people satisfied King's intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil:

The experience in Montgomery did more to clarify my thinking in regard to the question of nonviolence than all of the books that I have read. As the days unfolded, I became more and more convinced of the power of nonviolence. Nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many issues I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now resolved within the sphere of practical action.<sup>15</sup>

Beginning with the Montgomery struggle, the method of nonviolent direct action was institutionalized in the black church in America. King was always quick to acknowledge that the black church furnished the arena for the dissemination of the Ghandian philosophy of nonviolence

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapters III-IV.

<sup>15</sup> King, *Strength To Love*, pp. 151-152.

during the 1950s and 60s. In an address before the National Conference on Religion and Race in January, 1963, he said:

I am happy to say that the non-violent movement in America has come not from secular forces but from the heart of the Negro Church. This movement has done a great deal to revitalize the Negro Church and to give its message a relevant and authentic ring. The great principles of love and justice which stand at the center of the nonviolent movement are deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian heritage.<sup>16</sup>

Three months later, in his celebrated "Letter From The Birmingham City Jail," King reiterated this point: "I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro Church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle."<sup>17</sup> Through the black church, Gandian principles, Christian ethics, and social activism were combined in a struggle to overcome racism, classism, and other barriers which kept people from realizing their essential "oneness" as children of God. King and his followers called upon the spiritual disciplines of the black church, uniting the prayer circle and the picket line. Black churches gave rise to organizations like the Montgomery Improvement Association and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and provided funds, staff, demonstrators, food, meeting space, and lodging for the movement.<sup>18</sup> They supported the civil rights activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Urban League, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and other agencies. In a word, black churches formed the power base of the civil rights movement.

The tremendous impact of the black church on the civil rights struggle was symbolized to a great extent in the fact that that institution was the source of much of what was vital and creative about King. It is impossible to understand King's interpretation and appropriation of the Bible, of Ghandi, of Reinhold Niebuhr, of the principles of American participatory democracy, and of Personalistic and Social Gospel concepts without some reflection on how the black experience and the tradition of the black Christian Church shaped his thought and his vision. I want to support this claim by focusing on certain major themes in King's thought which bore the marks of his cultural tradition.

Peter J. Paris has suggested, and rightly so, that the most dominant

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<sup>16</sup> Mathew Ahmann, ed., *Race: Challenge To Religion* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1963), pp. 164-165.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1964), p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Fairclough, "The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Second Reconstruction, 1957-1973," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (Spring, 1981), pp. 177-194; and J. Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 70-71.

theme in King's thought was his idea of the personal God of love and reason.<sup>19</sup> Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr. seem to imply that King inherited this idea from Personalist philosophers and theologians like Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. King did admit that these men "gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God," but his conviction about the *reality* of a personal God was instilled in him by the black church long before he heard of Brightman, DeWolf, and the philosophy of Personalism.<sup>20</sup> The concept of a personal God of infinite love and unlimited power "who works through history for the salvation of His children" has always been central to the theology of the black Church. The slaves were known to sing about this God:

He's so high  
 You can't get over Him,  
 So wide  
 You can't get around Him,  
 So low  
 You can't get under Him,  
 You must come through by the door.

King was an heir of this tradition. In times of distress, uncertainty, and discouragement, he turned to the personal God of the black church for courage, inspiration, and hope. In one of his recordings King recounted that one night during the Montgomery Bus Boycott his courage was weakened by a telephone call from a racist who threatened to kill him and bomb his home. In the midst of that experience he encountered the personal God:

I got to the point where I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. And something said to me, "You can't call on daddy now—he's up in Atlanta, a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on mama now. You've got to call on that Something and that Person that your daddy use to tell you about—that power that can make a way out of no way." And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me—I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down that night—I never will forget it. Oh, yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right—I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage." It seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and, lo, I will be with you even until the end of the world."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Peter J. Paris, *Black Leaders in Conflict: Joseph H. Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (Philadelphia: The Pilgrim Press, 1978), p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, Chapter V; and Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound*, pp. 3-9.

<sup>21</sup> *A Record Album* of Excerpts from "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Most Famous Speeches, With the Clara Ward Singers," IXMNIXMI, 809 (London: Benash Record Company, Limited, 1971); and Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, pp.

Closely related to King's God-concept was his notion of "the dignity and worth of all human personality." Although Brightman and DeWolf gave him a metaphysical basis for this concept, it is equally true that this concept was based on an understanding of humanity which King's slave forebears had.<sup>22</sup> From their reading of the Bible, the slaves caught the significance of the fact that every human being has dignity and worth in the sight of God. This view found powerful expression in slave narratives, songs, sermons, and tales, and it explains how slaves were able to maintain their essential humanity despite that wall of assumptions and definitions which white society sought to impose.<sup>23</sup> King reaffirmed this sense of the dignity and worth of all persons with a faith and an eloquence that were indomitable, and this is why he could give his life for the ideal of the "Beloved Community."

King's idea of freedom and justice was also rooted in a faith, a hope, and an activism that developed out of the black religious experience. This is not to deny the influence of liberal Christian theology and of American participatory democracy on this aspect of his thought. But if Lawrence N. Jones is right in saying that the slaves *dreamed of* and *struggled for* a community where the freedom, justice, and equality guaranteed by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence would prevail, then it was in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the "Beloved Community" that the greatest heritage of their ideas is to be found.<sup>24</sup> In other words, in their struggle against slavery, black people made a significant contribution by providing a prophetic vision of freedom, justice, and equality which continued to challenge the American society through the life and work of King. In a manner similar to his slave ancestors, King drew on the experiences of Moses and the Israelites in Egyptian captivity as evidence that God ultimately triumphs over evil and oppression to liberate his people. When he proclaimed that "although the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice," and when he sang "We Shall Overcome," King was participating in a *Christian optimism* concerning the future of humankind and human so-

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107-114.

<sup>22</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 100; Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, In.: Friends United Press, 1975), pp. 17-19, and Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," in Eric Foner, ed., *America's Black Past: A Reader in Afro-American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 99ff.

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual*, pp. 17-19; and Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore," pp. 99-102.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence N. Jones, "They Sought a City: The Black Church and Churchmen in the Nineteenth Century," *The Union Theological Seminary Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1971), pp. 253-272.



ciety which the slaves gave expression to in their spiritual songs.<sup>25</sup>

The impact of the slaves' vision of freedom and justice on King was suggested largely in the way he sought inspiration from slave songs. As in the case of his "I Have A Dream" Speech, King frequently quoted from slave spirituals, and he carefully explained in one of his books why the slave songs of antebellum days were the ones sung by blacks in the civil rights crusade:

In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang—the sorrow songs, the shouts of joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are as inspired by their words. "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom" is a sentence that needs no music to make its point. We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that "We shall overcome, black and white together, We shall overcome someday." I have stood in a meeting with hundreds of youngsters and joined in while they sang "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round." It is not just a song; it is a resolve. A few minutes later, I have seen those same youngsters refuse to turn around from the onrush of a police dog, refuse to turn around before a pugnacious Bull Connor in command of men armed with power hoses. These songs bind us together, give us courage together, help us to march together.<sup>26</sup>

For King, the genius of the slave songs was revealed not only in how these songs inspired the black struggle for freedom, but also in how they reflected the agony and the ecstasy of the black experience. In one version of his sermon, "A Knock At Midnight," delivered at the all-black Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio a year or so before his death, King alluded to how the slaves, in their spirituals, spoke of their faith that the *midnight* of oppression and despair would one day give way to the bright *morning* of freedom and hope. Noting how slaves combined heartache and hope in their songs, he exclaimed:

Our slave foreparents taught us so much in their beautiful sorrow songs, one of which you sang so beautifully this morning. They looked at the midnight surrounding their days. They knew that there were sorrow and agony and hurt all around. When they thought about midnight they would sing

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<sup>25</sup> Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, p. 112; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," *New South*, Vol. 16 (December 1961), p. 10; and David Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death and Heaven in the Slave Community, 1700-1865," *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), pp. 163-183.

<sup>26</sup> King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 61. While attending a school concert on American sacred music on one occasion, King was disappointed that the slave spirituals were completely ignored. For a very brief but important reference to King's passionate love for black Baptist music as a boy, see Martin Luther King, Sr. and Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 127.

Nobody known the trouble I see, Nobody knows  
but Jesus.

But pretty soon something reminded them that morning would come, and they started singing

I'm so glad, Trouble don't last always.

And drawing on the wisdom which vibrates from the writings of Howard Thurman, King continued with a reference to how his slave forefathers and mothers captured the mood of discontent and triumph in the Prophet Jeremiah

Centuries ago Jeremiah, the great prophet, raised a very profound question. He looked at the inequities around and he noticed a lot of things. He noticed the good people so often suffering, and the evil people so often prospering. Jeremiah raised the question: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is no physician there?" Centuries later our slave forefathers came along, and they too were confronted with the problems of life. They had nothing to look forward to morning after morning but the sizzling heat—the rawhide whip of the overseer—long rows of cotton. But they did an amazing thing. They looked back across the centuries, and they took Jeremiah's question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point. And they could sing

There is a balm in Gilead,  
To make the wounded whole.  
There is a balm in Gilead.  
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Then they came with another verse

Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
And feel my work's in vain.  
But then the Holy Spirit,  
Revives my soul again.

King ended this sermon with an explanation of how his faith and optimism arose out of a similar insight.<sup>27</sup>

Another comment concerning King's "Beloved Community" concept is in order in light of the general argument that his ideal of human community sprung from a tradition that started with his enslaved forebears. The belief that all humans are related by creation, and are therefore responsible for each other, was expressed in a forceful way in the religion of the slaves. This is why some slaves were willing to assist their masters in times of sickness, to say nothing of the willingness of some slaves to forgive their oppressors after slavery was abolished. Convinced that "God's gonna bring together the nations," the slaves gave voice to their

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<sup>27</sup> *A Record Album* of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon, "A Knock At Midnight," Delivered at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Cincinnati, Ohio, LP 3008-A (Nashville: Distributed by Nashboro Record Company., n.d.); and Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual*, pp. 59-60. The "A Knock At Midnight" sermon appears in another version in King, *Strength To Love*, pp. 56-66.

sense of community in spirituals like:

Let us break bread together  
On our knees,  
As we face the rising sun.

and

Walk together children,  
Don't you get weary,  
There's a great camp meeting,  
In the Promised Land.<sup>28</sup>

It was to this vision of community that King gave eloquent utterance in his "I Have A Dream" address:

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are Free at last."<sup>29</sup>

The concepts of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation are vital to an understanding of what King meant by the "Beloved Community," as a part of the foregoing discussion indicates. For clarification of and support for these concepts, King relied heavily on the teachings of Christ and on the writings of theologians and ethicists such as George Davis, L. Harold DeWolf, Anders Nygren, Paul Ramsey, and Paul Tillich. He was also aware that there was some basis for these conceptions in the black religious tradition, especially when one studies the lives and activities of early black church persons like Frederick Douglass and William Whipper. Another major black source to which King turned was black theologian Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. King discovered in Thurman's profound reflections on the relationship between love, forgiveness, and reconciliation a powerful exposition of what he had come to believe.<sup>30</sup> As King saw it, black people had to be willing to embrace the

<sup>28</sup> Excerpts from a Sermon Delivered by Dr. Gardner C. Taylor at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, New York, January 15, 1974. I am indebted to Dr. Taylor for much of this idea.

<sup>29</sup> Flip Schulke, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Documentary . . . Montgomery To Memphis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), p. 218. Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp conclude that "King's 'intellectual' categories were not those of African religion and philosophy." While this may be true, it is also clear that King's notion that all life is interrelated was consistent not only with the worldview of his slave foreparents, but this notion has also been an essential part of the African worldview. This notion of the interrelatedness of all life formed the basis of King's "Beloved Community" vision, and it reflected to the highest degree his idealism. Like his slave forebears, King was an intriguing blend of the idealist and the realist. See Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Chapter I; and Larry G. Murphy, "Howard Thur-

*agape* love ethic, to forgive, and to be reconciled with whites as a precondition for the full realization of the "Beloved Community." He felt that the black church and the civil rights movement afforded a context for the practical application of these concepts, which formed the core of Christian faith. He held that white people could also contribute to racial harmony by overcoming fear and by expressing allegiance to the love (*agape*) ethic of the black church:

If our white brothers are to master fear, they must depend not only on their commitment to Christian love but also on the Christlike love which the Negro generates toward them. Only through our adherence to love and nonviolence will the fear in the white community be mitigated.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that King envisioned the possibility of blacks assuming a special role in bringing about the "Beloved Community." He believed that black people had an excellent opportunity to take the lead in redeeming and transforming humanity. In his *Stride Toward Freedom*, King set forth his vision of the messianic role of black people:

This is a great hour for the Negro. The challenge is here. To become the instruments of a great idea is a privilege that history gives only occasionally. Arnold Toynbee says in *A Study of History* that it may be the Negro who will give the new spiritual dynamic to Western civilization that it so desperately needs to survive. I hope this is possible. The spiritual power that the Negro can radiate to the world comes from love, understanding, good will, and nonviolence. It may even be possible for the Negro, through adherence to nonviolence, so to challenge the nations of the world that they will seriously seek an alternative to war and destruction. In a day when Sputniks and Explorers dash through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, nobody can win a war. Today the choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. The Negro may be God's appeal to this age—an age drifting rapidly to its doom. The eternal appeal takes the form of a warning; "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."<sup>32</sup>

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man and Social Activism," in Henry J. Young, ed., *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, In.: Friends United Press, 1983), pp. 154-155. Joseph R. Washington claims that "King did not come to love or to Jesus through the eyes of the Christian faith." This conclusion is typical of the kind of erroneous conclusions this author arrives at in Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 11. For a source which shows the close similarity of King's views to Whipper's, see Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 252-260.

<sup>31</sup> King, *Strength To Love*, p. 121; Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, Chapter VI; and King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, Chapter VI.

<sup>32</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 224. Aside from the famous British Historian, Arnold Toynbee, other white thinkers who have raised the possibility of blacks playing a messianic role in the world include John Wesley and Rabbi Abraham Heschel. See Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (New York: Tract Society, 1774), pp. 6-7; and Heschel, "The Religious Basis of Equality of Opportunity—The Segregation of God," in Ahmann, ed., *Race: Challenge To Religion*, p. 70. We are in serious need of a study which focuses on black messianism—one which links this theme with black religion and black nationalism.

To fulfill this messianic vocation, King felt that there was an absolute necessity for black people to remain true to the tenets of the Christian faith, a course that had not been followed by the vast majority of white Christians in America. In *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, put it this way:

Martin believed that *white* Christianity had failed to act in accordance with its teachings. However, my husband felt that it was not the Christian ethic which must be rejected, but that those who failed Christianity must be brought—through love—to brotherhood, for their own redemption as well as ours. He believed that there was a great opportunity for black people to redeem Christianity in America.<sup>33</sup>

Three additional points should be made as a way of further clarifying King's black messianic hope. The first is that his vision was based on a Biblical understanding of the messianic people and nation. That is, King thought of messianism in terms of those who have a sense that by providential design they have been called to a common mission on behalf of all people.<sup>34</sup> There is reason to believe that he regarded his own nonviolent movement on behalf of the poor and oppressed as a means of preparing black people and the black church for such a mission.

The second point is that King was not the first black thinker to raise the possibility of black people assuming moral leadership in the regeneration of humankind. Black messianic thought stems at least as far back as David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Slaves in Four Articles*, in which he asserted that

It is my solemn belief, that if ever the world becomes Christianized, (which must certainly take place before long) it will be through the means, under God of the blacks, who are now held in wretchedness, and degradation, by the white Christians of the world. . . .<sup>35</sup>

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The most impressive assaults on this theme thus far are provided in Vincent Harding, "W. E. B. DuBois And The Black Messianic Vision," *Freedomways*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter, 1969), pp. 45-58; Sterling Stuckey, "The Spell of Africa: The Development of Black Nationalist Theory, 1829-1945," Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois, August, 1973; Albert J. Raboteau, "Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands: Black Destiny In Nineteenth Century America," A Lecture at Arizona State University, January 27, 1983 (Tempe Az.: Arizona State University's Department of Religious Studies, 1983); and Leonard I. Sweet, *Black Images of America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976). Any study of this nature would have to take into account Martin Luther King's perception of Afro-Americans and the role he felt they could play in world civilization, especially as set forth on the last page of his *Stride Toward Freedom*.

<sup>33</sup> Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 260.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent Harding has made this contention with regard to W. E. B. DuBois, and I owe much to him for this idea. See Harding, "W. E. B. DuBois And The Black Messianic Vision," p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Charles M. Wiltse, ed., *David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles Together with A Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965; origi-

But unlike King the integrationist, Walker the nationalist believed that a divinely sanctioned violence would be required before oppressed blacks could be free to fulfill their messianic role, other ideas concerning black messianism were expressed by nationalists like Robert Alexander Young, Alexander Crummell, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Henry McNeil Turner, John E. Bruce, Alexander Walters, W.E.B. DuBois, Claude McKay, and Paul Robeson. King echoed the messages of these men with respect to the potential of black Americans as a humanizing force, though it is true that King was the only one who strongly emphasized love and nonviolence as being essential to the fulfillment of the black messianic hope.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, King was not so prophetic and romantic in his messianism that he overlooked the faults of black people. With that boldness of vision which has historically enabled blacks to "be honest enough to admit that our standards do often fall short." He wrote:

Our crime rate is far too high. Our level of cleanliness is frequently far too low. Too often those of us who are in the middle class live above our means, spend money on nonessentials and frivolities, and fail to give to serious causes, organizations, and educational institutions that so desperately need funds. We are too often loud and boisterous, and spend far too much on drink. Even the most poverty-stricken among us can purchase a ten-cent bar of soap; even the most uneducated among us can have high morals. Through community agencies and religious institutions Negro leaders must develop a positive program through which Negro youth can become adjusted to urban living and improve their general level of behavior. Since crime often grows out of a sense of futility and despair, Negro parents must be urged to give their children the love, attention, and sense of belonging that a segregated society deprives them of. By improving our standards here and now we will go a long way toward breaking down the arguments of the segregationist.<sup>37</sup>

King's comments about the black church at times were no less critical. A reference to his criticism of the otherworldliness of certain black churches was made earlier. In his sermon, "A Knock At Midnight," King declared that occasionally the black church had been just as guilty as the white church of "leaving men disappointed at midnight" by failing to provide "the bread of peace, freedom, and justice." In terms revealing enough to deserve extended quotation, he said:

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 traveller has developed a

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nally issued in 1829), p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> I am indebted to Sterling Stuckey for this idea. See Stuckey, "The Spell of Africa," p. 170.

<sup>37</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 223.

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. At midnight men are altogether ignored because of their limited education, or they are given bread that has been hardened by the winter of morbid class consciousness.<sup>38</sup>

King's critical statements about black people and the black church must not be misinterpreted. He felt that in spite of the shortcomings of black Americans, "black is beautiful" and black people are in a better position morally and spiritually than whites to be the vanguard of a movement to create a new humanity. According to his Wife,

He shared with the nationalists the sure knowledge that "black is beautiful" and that, in so many respects, the quality of the black people's scale of values was far superior to that of the white culture which attempted to enslave us.<sup>39</sup>

It was King's conviction that what black people have to offer this country and the world in terms of values and a worldview is grounded in their experience of suffering—a fresh and genuine spirituality, humanitarian spirit, a prophetic vision of democracy, an incurable optimism, and a way of viewing humanity as a whole.

I conclude by emphasizing that we all have been touched by the power, the presence, and the personality of King, and by the dream that he so diligently pursued through the activism of the black church. He gave us a new vision of humankind by showing us how to look beyond class, race, sex, nation, religion, and other human categories to embrace the transcendent moral ethic of love. He exemplified to the fullest the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ by giving his life for the poor and the oppressed. In so doing, he bestowed a fresh credibility upon the Christian faith at a time when white Protestant theologians such as Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton were proclaiming the death of God. C. Eric Lincoln captured the depth of King's contribution to the black church and to Christianity as a whole when he wrote:

The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did more than anyone in modern times to exemplify the spirit of Christianity and this tremendous benefit was to all of Christendom, not just the Black church. Christianity itself was against the wall and King's high moral leadership and eventual martyrdom did more to re-establish credibility and interest in the faith than all of the councils and pronouncements of the last hundred years. The late Dr. King demonstrated that being is more substantial than words, and

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<sup>38</sup> King, *Strength To Love*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>39</sup> King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 260.

doing is more convincing than good intentions.<sup>40</sup>

King's dream of a new society has not yet been fully realized. The world is still haunted by the painful realities of classism, racism, sexism, and religious persecution. Nuclear war remains a frightening possibility. But there is hope in the fact that King's message of love and nonviolence is still motivating many who are actively engaged throughout the world in a crusade for peace and human community. Nonviolent advocates everywhere are drawing on the insight of King, and anti-nuclear demonstrators as far away as Germany have been seen carrying pictures of him. If such is an indication that King's dream still lives, then there is hope for tomorrow.

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<sup>40</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, "The Black Church And A Decade Of Change: Part II," *Tuesday At Home* (March, 1976), p. 7.