

Book Review

Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance

(by Rufus Burrow, Jr.)

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\$39.95.

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Rufus Burrow's most recent book, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theology of Resistance*, is an important contribution to the growing field of King scholarship, especially in its comprehensive treatment of King as a theological social ethicist grounded in the tradition of Boston personalism. Burrow argues that to truly appreciate King's theology of resistance, it is imperative to come to terms with his basic personalist ideas of God, the world, and humanity. Furthermore, he invites his readers to see how King took personalism and expanded it in his own distinctive ways by not merely echoing his personalist predecessors but taking those ideas to task in confronting a trilogy of social problems—racism, economic injustice, and militarism—in his non-violent civil rights movement from Montgomery to Memphis. Burrow, then, extends the conversation further and explores how King's personalist theology may be strategically positioned to address pressing matters of black-against-black violence and ongoing struggles of African-Americans against racism.

There are three parts in the book: Part One "Man of Ideas and Ideals" examines King as a theological social ethicist in the tradition of personalism; Part Two "Pursuing the Dream" analyzes how King's personalist ideas inform his dream and pursuit of the beloved community; and Part Three "Where Do We Go From Here?" explores the significance of King's personalism for the challenges in black communities. I will primarily focus on Part One (17-109) and briefly comment on Parts Two and Three.

What is unique about Burrow's contribution in the book is that he brings together his expertise in both Boston personalism and King Scholarship to construct King's thoroughgoing personalism. He was initially shaped by a homespun version of personalism early in his life, then by the instruction of Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey at Morehouse College, followed further by exposures at Crozer Theological

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Seminary, and finally by a formal study of personalism under the influences of Borden Parker Bowne, Edgar Brightman, and Harold DeWolf at Boston University Divinity School, then the bastion of personalism. Burrow suggests that in examining King's intellectual development from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Boston University, there is a progressive movement toward personalism in the formal academic sense.

This observation is significant in light of recent developments in King Scholarship. For instance, on the one hand, David Garrow has asserted the significance of King's formative, pre-academic influences on his theological development and, on the other hand, John Ansbro has primarily stressed the theological and philosophical influences upon King without due regard for the influence of the black church, family, and southern cultural and social experiences. Without rejecting their insights, Burrow seeks to sketch a more comprehensive portrait of King as a thinker-activist in the personalist tradition whose homegrown personalism was reinforced and intensified through his formal study of personalism. He presents King as a thoroughgoing personalist theological ethicist who articulates and embodies a mature personalist metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics in his pursuit of the beloved community.

What, then, is the King type of personalism that Burrow has in mind? Burrow identifies five basic traits of the mature King's personalism: belief in a Personal God, significance of freedom, absolute dignity, interrelatedness of persons, and the faith that the universe is value-fused under a loving purpose (81).

According to Burrow, King espoused theistic personalism which maintains that the metaphysical reality of God is most properly understood through the category of personality. Personality is the ground and essence of the world and, therefore, the key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. King writes, personalism means "that there is a creative personal power in this universe who is the ground and essence of all reality..." (75). This is not to turn God into a particular finite being among other beings but to take the highest that can be humanly thought and ascribe it to the divine. Borden Parker Bowne, the father of Boston personalism, suggests the fullness of power, knowledge, and selfhood as the essential factors of the conception of personhood and attributes their perfect existence in God, but without transferring the limitations and accidents of human personality (61). Similarly, King understands

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personality as “self-consciousness and self-direction” (81). He specifies further and says that the person as a self is consciousness which can rationally deliberate in freedom and power to formulate plans and work toward their fulfillment.

These theological and anthropological claims about personality have enormous moral implications. First of all, this universe is a moral universe with an objective moral order fashioned according to God (36). The moral foundation of the world supports its structures of justice and peace. Hence, King reverberated Theodore Parker’s saying, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (24). Such strongly held convictions about a moral universe profoundly shaped his posture toward the world as friendly and his struggle for social justice. What needs to be highlighted here is the kind of moral universe it is as created by a Personal God. That God as the supreme person, not any other, has created the world as its ground and essence makes all the difference to the character of this moral world framed by the essentials of personality, i.e., consciousness, rationality, freedom, and power. This is important for King because any theoretical account or practical embodiment of a moral world must evidence how these essentials are addressed.

Secondly, God’s creation of a moral universe includes the making of human beings as persons in God’s own image, endowing them with analogous essentials of personhood fit for a moral world. Self-consciousness, reason, power, and freedom not only provide the basis for inherent human dignity and sacred worth but also enable persons to function as moral agents according to the moral laws set in motion in the universe (46). Among the personalist essentials, King was intensely interested in the value of human freedom. He maintained that freedom and humanity are integrally related; to be human is to be free. Freedom is essential to humanity because it is what enables self-understanding and self-direction to be possible. Hence, Burrow writes, “Freedom is a capstone of personalism” (62). In the context of the civil rights movement, freedom comes to concrete expression in the power to deliberate, to decide, and to take responsibility for one’s response. King stressed such specific, concrete expressions of freedom because, though the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, he knew that “[h]uman progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers of God....” (28).

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And lastly, Burrow explains that King's view of reality as thoroughly social, relational, or communal has immense significance for moral undertakings (62). All persons have been imbued with God's creative, personal power and, therefore, related to God and one another in a network of interrelations. Persons are none other than beings-in-community; to be human is to be interwoven with others in a community of mutual regard and love. This is the thrust behind the idea of the beloved community. Everyone is interrelated and included, without exception, in a community of mutual giving and receiving borne of respect and honor. Commenting on the interconnectedness of all persons, King poetically expresses, "all [persons] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny" (45). To truly take the interdependence of all persons seriously means to fully recognize that whatever affects one, whether positively or adversely, affects all others and, therefore, seek the wellbeing of one for all and all for one, especially the victims of our society.

In Part II Burrow provides a rich and comprehensive treatment of King's appropriation of the notion of the beloved community by addressing the following: one, whether King thought the beloved community is achievable in history; two, the Roycean contribution to King's use of the nomenclature; and three, the problematic of the other in the beloved community, i.e., race, class, and gender. To point out just one among Burrow's numerous insights into King's interpretation of the beloved community, it is important to note that King not only became captivated by the notion and embraced it, but united it with his training in the social sciences at Morehouse. His social scientific orientation helped him to raise critical questions about the actual state of affairs of the human condition and what ought to be as informed by the Christian ideal of agape (94-100). He traversed from "is" to "ought" by observing gathered data on socio-economic and political realities, critically analyzing them, and making judgments accordingly. It is this coming together of his social-scientific method and the overarching vision of the beloved community which ignited the spark that illuminated King's pursuit of the civil rights movement.

Burrow, then, explores in Part III the relevance of the King type personalism for the challenges facing the African-American community today, such as sexism, intra-community black violence, and white racism. This is an intriguing part of the book where the contemporary significance of personalism comes alive. To begin with, a retrieval of

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King's personalism for today would entail a renunciation of sexism as the sacred worth all persons includes women, too. To be authentically committed to the ideals of personalism means there cannot be vacillation between traditional views of women and the ideal of the beloved community that embraces all, especially the marginalized. Burrow assigns King to the ranks of recovering sexist "aligning behavior with moral principles" (199).

Concerning the issues of black on black violence and racism, Burrow says they are two sides of the same problem of white supremacy ideology. Systemic humiliation, exploitation, and violation of blacks lead to an erosion of self-worth, frustration, and hopelessness which eventually erupt in violent ways against the oppressors and even in self-destruction (220). In the face of such suffering and even death, King argued that "unearned suffering is redemptive." King seems to valorize and endorse passive acceptance of suffering, which feminist and womanist theologians have rightly criticized. According to Burrow, King did not believe that suffering in itself is redemptive but can be made to be redemptive when used toward nonviolent struggle against oppression in the interest of building the beloved community. This entails asserting one's worth, identifying injustice and holding those in positions of power accountable, and assuming responsibility for the future. However, the onus of racial reconciliation should not rest solely on the shoulders of African Americans but all Americans, especially white liberals and moderates. Burrow recalls King's deep disappointment with white Christians and ministers who remained publically silent. King wrote, "The ultimately tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people" (237). But this need not be, nor racial division and violence, because as James Baldwin once said, we made the world as it is and "we have to make it over."

Burrow's book nicely captures the ethos of King's personalism for the ongoing work of African American struggle for justice. It is a collection of occasional pieces that suffers now and then from redundancy which can be a distraction for some. Also, it would have been helpful to provide the following: one, a more complete survey of the general contours of personalism and situate King's type of personalism in that landscape; two, a discussion of the current state of personalism in theology and the difference it makes toward racial reconciliation. In light of recent events in Ferguson, New York City,

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Baltimore and elsewhere, Burrow's work is apropos to the ongoing work of embodying an ethic of black dignity and black self-determination.