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## The Influences and Implications of Dr. King's Theology on the Black Church and Its Children

### Introduction

What is social consciousness? Where does it come from? What inspires it? Who influences it? What moves an individual to make those choices that are part of its makeup?

From the "Who inspires it?" category comes a man who had a dream; a man who believed you should be driven by the need to contribute to the betterment of society; a man who felt that the content of your character is more important than the color of your skin; a man who believed that each person should be allowed to reach his greatest potential.

This man was Martin Luther King, Jr. The son of a Baptist preacher. A young man who was raised under the yoke of segregation. A gentleman scholar. A pastor. A preacher. A civil rights worker. A Nobel Peace Prize winner. A husband. A daddy. A lover. A social activist. A humanitarian. A friend. A man of God . . . and a prophet.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man who inspired millions of people to social action. The raising of social consciousness is always social action. When a group of us have our social consciousness raised simultaneously, it often results in a social movement. Dr. King raised our social consciousness. He inspired a movement.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served as an inspiration to Black people during the late 1950's and 1960's through his work in the Civil Rights Movement and his non-violent social action doctrine for the achievement of equal rights for all people. His legacy is that his life served as an example for those who continue in the fight for equality and justice in this country; a fight that will not end until equal rights is a reality for all people.

The Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be

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self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Dr. King's belief was that these rights were not just for the "haves" of this country, but extended to the "have nots" as well. These rights were not only for the "white" skinned people of this nation, but also for the people of color. His belief was that these rights came not only from the cornerstone documents of the United States — the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — but most importantly were ordained by God.

The history of this country has told a different story, however. There has been and still is a double standard in America: one standard for people of color and the economically oppressed, and one for white people and the economically privileged. It was this double standard that Dr. King fought against and for which he gave his life.

Twenty years later there are those people of color who are doing just fine (or so they think). There are also those who are doing worse than before. There is no equality for the poor or for Blacks. Many believe that the seeds that were planted in the 1950's, that had begun to sprout in the 1960's, have been choked off in the 1970's and 1980's by apathy and complacency on the part of Black people. This can be partly seen by the resurgence of overt racist activities and racial attacks which seem to be sanctioned by society as well as allowed by Black people in these days and times.

There are those of us who say the dream is dead. A few of us believe the dream lives, but its pulse is weak. I believe that "the Dream" is not dead. I see evidence everyday that the dream that Dr. King held so dear still lives in this country. Some of the consciousness of the fifties and sixties has grown and matured and has produced a new consciousness in the children of America. These children have been exposed to and influenced by the ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr. This exposure to the teachings of Dr. King has come from their families, through the schools, and the Black Church in particular where he is revered and where his ideas are taught.

In this paper I would like to discuss the influences which shaped Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and theology and the legacy and challenge that he has left to the Black Church.

### I. The Influence of the Black Church

Martin Luther King, Jr. was brought up in a deeply religious family. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all ministers. His mother and grandmother were very active in the church. They taught Martin and his siblings about Jesus and God. The children were taught self-esteem. They were taught to love their fellow sisters and brothers

and to treat them fairly. "The basic message of [King's] religious heritage was that God has created the universe in love. Man fulfills his moral responsibility as he reflects this love in his social relationships."<sup>1</sup>

Young Martin heard these words constantly in one form or another as he was growing up. Martin, his brother A.D., and his sister Christine attended Sunday School and sat in the pews of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, every Sunday. This was his church home and his extended family. The members of the congregation spoiled Martin and his siblings. Here he was always surrounded by love, the kind of love that he had learned that God visited on humanity. It was in the Black churches of Atlanta, Georgia that the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. began to take form. It was also in the church that he learned moral and social responsibility.

In this sense, Martin stood in a "long line of tradition" with these learnings and influences he received from his church, because the Black Church is a long standing and educationally relevant institution in the Black community. It is the one constant in every neighborhood. Rarely do you see a church go out of business. You've seen the same churches when you've "gone home" that were there when you were a child. The congregation may build a new building, but the "old church" still stands. They are always your landmarks. In addition, almost everyone went to church as a child; either faithfully or with some "serious prodding." Attending a church regularly meant you usually went to Sunday School, a place that fast becomes one of the biggest influences on a young child's life. The magical stories of the Bible always fascinate children. Through those stories we were told of God's love for us. That he sent his son to earth in human form to show us his blueprint for life in a practical way. His son Jesus showed us how to love mankind. He made friends of people in all stations of life, and never judged. He performed miracles of healing. He fed the hungry and clothed the naked. Through all of his ministry, he knew he was destined to die, and died willingly at the hand of humanity. He did all of this with the promise that we would have eternal life with God at the end of our physical life on earth if we only believed in him. Three days after his physical death, he was seen by all kinds of people. This was proof of God's promise to us.

It was in Sunday School and church that we first heard these stories. It is there that we heard the basic tenets of Christian faith. In Mark 28:30-31, Jesus says:

"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There

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<sup>1</sup> Ervin Smith, *The Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 1.

is no other commandment greater than these.”

It is on these principles that the Christian church is based and it is this message that we as Christians carry around with us. It is this message that young Martin heard and remembered all his life. He took this message to heart and tried to live it in his daily life. It was on this message that he based his theology.

## II. Societal Influences

Martin had experienced racism first hand at the age of six when he was barred from playing with the white children who had been his friends all his life. When he went to his mother to find out why these children who had been his friends could no longer associate with him, his mother had to explain the harsh realities of life to him. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of this incident in a sermon in his adult life:

“Every parent at some time faces the problem of explaining the facts of life to his child. Just as inevitably, for the Negro parent, the moment comes when he must explain to his offspring the facts of segregation. My mother took me on her lap and began 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>2</sup>

From that point on he had to deal with discrimination every day of his life. He remembered the words his mother said and never lost sight of who he was. However, he could not accept that the color of his skin was more important to people than the kind of person he was inside.

Today Black people have had the same experiences as Martin King. There is still segregation — technically not legally — but segregation all the same. In the big cities of our country, there is a Black section and a White section of town. Often the housing in these areas is substandard and social services are intermittent. Areas that appear to be middle class are either all Black or all White. The inner city school system is usually between 80-90% Black. Less is spent per pupil in the inner city schools than in surrounding predominately White suburbs. School buildings are old and in disrepair. Crime is a norm. The majority of Black people lag behind whites economically. Those who are managing to keep up do it by working a variety of jobs constantly. In a lot of areas, medical help is scarce, nutritious food limited, and disease runs rampant. Drugs are

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<sup>2</sup> Coretta Scott King, *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1983), 29.

overrunning our neighborhoods and destroying everything it touches. It is into this society that Black children are being born, a society that ignores them and neglects them. A society that says that the color of one's skin is important by never hesitating to remind them by its actions that color is really all that matters.

In today's world there are very few people who explain to children the harsh realities of this world. More often than not, children are exposed to T.V. and movies where they see Black people on the stage or playing field making millions of dollars. They see some Blacks in positions of responsibility, but they have no idea what the cost has been to those people, or what dues have been paid. Parents fool their children by not telling them of the history of their people. They pretend that color is not an issue. They tell them that they are wonderful and try to shield their children from the ugliness of racism. When these children are finally confronted with racism, overt or covert, they are confused and hurt. Then there are those children who are exposed to the ugly truths daily, yet no one tells them that they are "as good as anyone."

### III. Educational Influences

Martin's family also stressed education. Both of King's parents were college educated. They insisted that their children get the best schooling possible. He and his siblings went to the best schools the segregated system in Atlanta had to offer. His parents believed that a good education would shield their children somewhat from the horrors of racism by providing them with the means to make a good living in the Black community.

Young Martin was an excellent student. He loved reading and the knowledge that could be gained in a book. He was at the top of his high school class and graduated at fifteen. He was admitted to Morehouse College, but was disappointed to find that despite his academic achievements, he was only reading on an eighth grade level.

During his years at Morehouse, the seeds of his theology began to bloom. He studied philosophy and religion. He read the works of the great thinkers of history. Most of all he loved the intellectual stimulation.

From Morehouse College, he went on to Crozer Seminary for his Divinity degree. While at Crozer he came in contact with the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violent resistance as a means for social change. Gandhi believed that there was "more power in changing one's enemy through love for common humanity than in attacking him with the same hate and violence he showed for

you."<sup>3</sup>

Martin found this notion of love intriguing. "He discovered that the ancient Greeks had a special word for this kind of love, *agape*, which meant redeeming good will for all men. To King it was the same love that Christianity taught. When Christ said to love thine enemy, King thought, *agape* is exactly what he meant."<sup>4</sup>

After graduating from seminary, he headed for Boston University to study for his doctorate. Here he continued his search for a theological model to combat social injustice in America. Armed with his convictions and a strong theological and philosophical education, he returned to the South to pastor his first church.

The national holiday that celebrates the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has resulted in the schools acknowledging the work of a great man. Children are exposed to the teachings of this man through the curriculum. The result of this is that youth from all walks of life have an opportunity to hear the ideas of Dr. King, no matter what their race, creed, or color may be. This curriculum extends to preschoolers as well. It is impressive to show a group of three-year olds a picture of Dr. King and see their eyes light up in recognition. They all know who he is and that he wanted everyone to love each other. Here the seeds of social consciousness have been planted. Those of us who are Christians see our role as facilitators of this process of raising social consciousness. At a time when there are serious problems in the school systems of America there are those people who work tirelessly to perpetuate Dr. King's dream.

The dream is being manifested in people like Norma Green, director of the Laurelton-Springfield Community Daycare Center in Queens, N.Y., who believes that we as educators, administrators, parents and Christians should be dutybound to teach self-esteem and social responsibility to our children. If parents participate in our schools, if teachers and principals are really involved in their schools, then the children will know it, they will know that we consider them important and they will respond. They will then become productive members of society.

Children are responding to the dream of Dr. King. At the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City some of the children wrote the following:

"Martin Luther King's non-violent leadership style was recognized by other minority groups such as the handicapped, the women (ERA), deaf people and other similar groups. If it wasn't for Dr. King, these above

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Shuker, *Martin Luther King* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

groups wouldn't have as many rights as they have today. In addition, the public is more aware of the needs of these other minority groups."

Michelle Nappi

"M.L.K. wanted all people to live together. He said fighting was crazy. He wanted peace for everybody."

Tyrone Curry

"Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a courageous man. He was a successful man for more then 30 years. Also he had a unique dream which was integrating the black and white people. This issue was important to him because he wanted civil rights for all people. Now the people must never forget about him because he helped the blacks and whites be united."

Carlos Huff

"Martin Luther King, Jr. was a good man because he had a dream for all people. He believed that no matter what color you was [sic] everyone was to be free. That we all could walk hand in hand for freedom. My mother said that Martin Luther King, Jr. believed we were all equal. Never look at a person's skin. But what is inside their heart. His march was for people to have rights, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize. He believed in peace. And his marching was always done with peace and respect. I wish we could live together in peace and happiness."

Pauline Saunders

These are just some examples of the kinds of things that the youth of the U.S. are thinking about. Dr. King wanted his dream to extend to all people of our country, especially the children. We as people of God must see it as our duty to prepare our children for the future. Most adults believe education is the key to a better life, just as Martin's parents believed that a good education would provide a better life. But social responsibility is an important part of education. Dr. King wrote an article for his school newspaper when he was at Morehouse College called "The Purpose of Education." In it he said:

"We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education . . . ."<sup>5</sup>

#### Conclusion

The major influences that shaped Martin Luther King, Jr.'s theology were his family, the church, society, and education. From his family he received self-esteem. From the church he gained a love of God and humankind — a social consciousness. From society, the harsh realities of

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

injustice and racism. From education, the tools to combat the evils of society. It was this combination that contributed to the formation of Dr. King's theology and his doctrine of non-violent social action.

Dr. King challenged first the Christian church to stand on its faith. "In spite of the noble affirmations of Christianity, the church has often lagged in its concern for social justice and too often has been content to mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. It has often been so absorbed in a future good 'over yonder' that it forgets the present evils 'down here.'"<sup>6</sup>

"It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons, challenge the status quo, and break the mores when necessary. The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable must confronting the church today."<sup>7</sup>

The Black church heard his challenge and responded. In the early days of the civil rights movement, it was the Black church that stood at the forefront of the fight for justice. Black congregations registered to vote together, boycotted together, marched and sat-in together. They fed, housed, and clothed their comrades in the struggle. They gave their time, their talents, and their money to the cause. But most of all, they presented a unified front dedicated to the eradication of oppression.

The Black church today must remember that injustice is not dead in America. The spirit of the 1950's and 1960's seems to be a dim memory to many of the Black churches in this country. There are Black churches involved in social change, but far too few. There have been times when Black Christians have come together for a common goal. Jesse Jackson's presidential bid is one such example. Jackson's strongest support came from the Black church. But these examples of a unified front are rare. It is more often the case to see Black churches shuttered Monday through Saturday, and their doors open only for Sunday service. It is more often the case that congregations are more interested in building a beautiful new edifice than providing service to the community in which they worship.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy to the Black church is a challenge. A challenge to truly be Christians. A challenge to raise our social consciousness and the social consciousness of our children. A challenge to really walk in the path of Jesus. To care for our fellow brothers and sisters as we would want to be cared for. To teach our children about the world in which they live and equip them with the tools they will need to make a contribution to society. The Black church must dedicate itself to fighting injustice and oppression everywhere. These are the ideals for

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<sup>6</sup> Lotte Hoskins, ed., *"I Have a Dream;" The Quotations of Martin Luther King* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1968), 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life. He suffered no less than we do today. If we are truly the Black church we must accept Dr. King's legacy and challenge, otherwise he has died in vain.