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## Cosmic Companionship in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Theology of Social Change<sup>1</sup>

### I. Prologue.

I want to begin with a brief tableau, a description of a typical situation in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. We are in a black church somewhere in the Old South of the United States.

Before adjourning, the people cross their arms in front of them, joining their hands to the hands of their neighbors on either side, while they sing:

God is on our side,  
God is on our side,  
God is on our side, today,  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe,  
We shall overcome, someday.<sup>2</sup>

The hour is late. The sanctuary is packed with people, singing, clapping, and swaying. These people marched today. There were ugly confrontations with angry crowds of whites, brutality from law enforcement officers, and many arrests. They were afraid earlier today, but here, singing together in the church, they are radiant.

The young preacher in the pulpit has spoken to them about the significance of today's activities, the objectives of the present campaign, and about their discouragement. "We have moved all these months," he said, "in the daring faith that God is with us in our struggle."<sup>3</sup> He has reminded them, in familiar terms, of their commitment to love and nonviolence.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered by the author at the Conference on Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America, University of Paderborn, West Germany, 30 July 1986. It is reprinted with permission. Professor Mikelson is an ordained Unitarian Universalist Minister completing doctoral work at Harvard University.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most famous of the civil rights songs. Other verses are: "We are not afraid;" "We shall all be free;" "We'll walk hand in hand."

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 50.

. . . the nonviolent approach does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives . . . new self respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage . . . Finally, it so stirs the conscience of the opponent that reconciliation becomes a reality.<sup>4</sup>

At the end, he shared with them his dream of a beloved community in which all persons are free to become what God intended them to be, where none are constrained by oppressive racism, poverty, militarism, or materialism.

In recent days, he has traveled thousands of miles, given many speeches, attended strategy meetings in New York and Atlanta, and worried about funds for the campaign. In spite of his weariness, his words have lifted the people here and their singing now lifts him. He is Martin Luther King, Jr., and these people are part of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

The date could be any year from the beginning of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama (December 5, 1955), until the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee (April 4, 1968). This church could be any one of hundreds in which such gatherings are held. This town could be Birmingham, Alabama; St. Augustine, Florida; Philadelphia, Mississippi; or any one of scores in the deep South of the United States where civil rights campaigns are conducted.

Many of the leaders here are ministers of black churches and many of the people are members of black churches. The spontaneous harmonies and stirring rhythms of the music resemble black gospel hymns and the spirit of the meeting is unmistakably suggestive of worship. The singing, the speaking, the invocations, the themes and values, and the meeting house itself, are suggestive of black church life.

The movement under King's leadership has a spirituality of love, courage, the redemptive value of unmerited suffering, the infinite worth of every person, reconciliation, and confidence. This spirituality is an inclusive construct with roots in the black integrationist tradition of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.); in the nonviolent protest tradition of Gandhi and Thoreau; in Protestant liberal theology; and in the gospel of the black church.<sup>5</sup> Its primary roots are in his family, his church, and his theological education. That explains why the targets of most terrorist bombings by the Klu Klux Klan and white citizens coun-

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XL (1986): 22. See also, Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984). Morris describes the extensive organizational network upon which the movement was based and the central role of black churches and black ministers in that network.

cils are black churches or the homes of black preachers.

## II. *King's Religious and Intellectual Background*<sup>6</sup>

There were three formative influences in King's religious and intellectual development: his family, his church, and his education for the ministry. Because his father, grandfather, and great grandfather were ministers before him, the influences of family and church were intertwined and both led naturally to the ministry.

From the beginning of his life, the church was "a second home" to him, a world of associations and values.<sup>7</sup> He understood himself most deeply as a preacher.

I am many things to many people; Civil Rights leader, agitator, trouble-maker and orator, but in the quiet resources of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, and the great grandson of a Baptist preacher. The Church is my life and I have given my life to the Church . . .<sup>8</sup>

King remembered his parents as loving and intimate and he was close to his "saintly grandmother [his mother's mother]." In his family, he writes, "love was central" and "lovely relationships were ever present." As a graduate student, King wrote that this family background had prepared him to think of "God as loving" and the "universe as friendly." It was easy, as he said, for him "to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences." As he wrote of his own religious development:

Conversion for me was never an abrupt something. I have never experienced the so-called crises (sic) moment. Religion has just been something I grew up in. Conversion for me has been the gradual in-taking of the noble ideals set forth in my family and my environment, and I must admit that this in-taking has been largely unconscious.<sup>9</sup>

King's birthplace and longtime home city was Atlanta, "the capital of the state of Georgia and the so-called 'gateway to the south.'" In his

<sup>6</sup> There are several biographies of King. At present, the best one available is by Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). A detailed, two-volume biography will be published in October of this year by David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986). The author has briefly examined uncorrected galley proofs of Garrow's volumes. Valuable biographical information about King is found in Martin Luther King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development." This seven page, unpublished document is found in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Special Collection, Mugar Library, Boston University. It was written by King during his graduate school years.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," *Ebony*, August 1965, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development."

neighborhood, most people were "of average income" and were "deeply religious." All of his regular playmates were "regular sunday (sic) school goers."<sup>10</sup> In Atlanta, his grandfather and father before him were part of the core of elite black leaders who actively represented the interests of their people. Between 1906 and 1910, Reverend Adam Daniel Williams had led marches and economic boycotts against an Atlanta newspaper, *The Georgian*, because of its insults to people of color. Reverend Williams was also an early member of the N.A.A.C.P., which was founded in 1909 under the leadership of W.E.B. DuBois and others. In the 1930's, King's father, Reverend King, Sr., led a voting rights and voter registration movement for black people in Atlanta. He led an effort to increase the compensation of Atlanta's black school teachers. And he helped to establish a coalition of black and white leaders to encourage "excellent" race relations in the city. Planning sessions for some of those activities took place in the King home during the years when Martin Luther King, Jr. was a child and a youth.<sup>11</sup> He saw with his own eyes the intimate side of an effectively organized black religious and civic leadership network.

King's father was a Christian fundamentalist preacher. At an early age, however, King began to question the concepts of fundamentalism. ". . . At the age of 13 I shocked my sunday (sic) school class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus."<sup>12</sup> At Morehouse College, where he matriculated at age 15, he was exposed to the ideas of liberal theology.<sup>13</sup> His major field of study was sociology, but he also studied religion with Professor George Kelsey and attended regularly the chapel sermons of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President of Morehouse College and a friend of

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> King, Sr., *Daddy King*, pp. 98-111.

<sup>12</sup> King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development."

<sup>13</sup> The best sources for learning about the formal theological education of King are: Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1974), and John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982). However, King's thought is discussed by Ansbro without adequate regard for the sequence of his development. For an excellent discussion of the scholarly interpretation of King's education and thought, see David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentary," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XL (1986): 5-20. Stephen Oates, in the first long chapter of *Let the Trumpet Sound*, entitled "Odyssey," has dealt with these issues but somewhat unreliably. See also James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today*, XL (January 1984): 409; and "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," 21. In his 1984 article, Cone rightly argues that the black church must be considered as an important source of influence on King's theology. He fails, however, to see the dynamic blend of sources in King's thinking as an authentic synthesis. In his 1986 article, his presentation is more balanced. See also William D. Watley, *Roots of Resistance: The Nonviolent Ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1985).

the King family. Both men were trained in modern liberal theology and King responded with curiosity.<sup>14</sup> In the Morehouse setting, he decided to follow the path of his father into the ministry and selected Crozer Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, for his theological education.

It was in my senior year of college that I entered the ministry . . . My call to the ministry was not a miracukous (sic) something, on the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity. I guess the influence of my father also had a great deal to do with my going in the ministry . . . my admiration for him was the great motivating factor; he set forth a noble example that I didn't mine (sp?) (sic) following. Today I differ a great deal with my father theologically but that admiration for a real father still remains.<sup>15</sup>

At Crozer Seminary, King was exposed more fully to the world of modern, liberal Christian theology. He was influenced especially by the teaching and writing of Professor George A. Davis, an "evangelical liberal" in his views. King took 34 of his required 110 course hours with Davis and the influence was significant. Zepp and Smith have analyzed the Davis-King connection and compared the major emphases of Davis' theology with the emphases of King's later published writings.

Most of the major themes of Martin Luther King were the themes of evangelical liberalism. His stress upon the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the centrality of religious experience, the concern of God for all life, the rights of man and moral feeling, the humanity of Jesus and his emphasis on love, the dynamic nature of history and God's actions therein, his essential optimism about human nature and history, the tolerance and openness of the liberal spirit, his tolerance toward pluralism of world religions—all of these were key themes of evangelical liberalism embraced early in his intellectual pilgrimage.<sup>16</sup>

Also at Crozer, King read some writings of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Walter Rauschenbusch with interest. He was influenced from that time on by Niebuhr's view of human sinfulness and Rauschenbusch's emphases on prophetic Christianity, on the church as an agent of active social change, and on the Kingdom of God as an attainable ideal.<sup>17</sup> Gandhi's work made its strongest impact on King later in his career, as we will see below. He read and considered the work of Barth, but preferred the general approach of liberal theology.<sup>18</sup> His teacher, George Davis, provided for King a first serious exposure to the

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Mays related to the author that King, as a college student, often came to his office after chapel services for a discussion of the ideas in the sermon. Interview with Benjamin F. Mays, Atlanta, Georgia February 25, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development."

<sup>16</sup> Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 29. See also David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," pp. 23-24.

writings of the Boston "personalists," especially Edgar Sheffield Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf.

King graduated as valedictorian of his seminary class and entered a program at Boston University for a Ph.D. degree in systematic theology. At Boston University, in seminars with Brightman, DeWolf, and Peter Bertocci, King studied closely the writings of personalist thinkers and those others, especially Hegel, upon whose work personalism depends. King's later work reflects a definite influence of Hegel's dialectical approach.<sup>19</sup> At Boston University, he became a personal idealist in his theology. As he later wrote,

I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf . . . It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position.<sup>20</sup>

As a dissertation, King chose to analyze, compare, and evaluate the conceptions of God in the theologies of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman.<sup>21</sup> His critique of Tillich's and Wieman's thinking is based largely in the philosophy of personalism.<sup>22</sup>

As we turn to the next part of our discussion, we are going to see how these factors—family, church, and education for ministry—were integrated by King into a coherent theological position which provided effective legitimation for social change.

### III. *Cosmic Companionship.*

Two approaches have dominated the study of King's theology up to the present. Scholars such as Zepp, Smith, and Ansbro have tried to

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<sup>19</sup> For discussions of the influence of Hegel see Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind*, passim; and Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," pp. 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman." (Ph.D. diss. Boston University, 1955).

<sup>22</sup> The author disagrees with Garrow about the worth of the dissertation as a source for understanding King's thought. Garrow believes it contains "many repeated bows toward personalism," but little of "King's own thinking." I find the dissertation more revealing of King's concerns than does Garrow. It reflects a growing influence of personalism on King, an influence that lasted throughout his life and even deepened in his later years. There is little doubt, as Garrow writes, that personalist scholars have tended to inflate their own importance for King's mature thought. That should not blind us concerning the contribution of personalism to King's developing thought, either at the time of his dissertation or later, as a subsequent section of this essay will show. There is, in fact, need for further scholarly examination of King's personalism. See Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," p. 19, note 23.

identify the intellectual figures who influenced King's thinking.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, James H. Cone, Paul R. Garber, and William D. Watley have attempted to show that King's theology is influenced more by his black church heritage than by his theological education in predominantly white institutions, and certainly more than earlier interpreters of King recognized.<sup>24</sup>

To my knowledge, no one yet has presented a holistic interpretation of King's theology which shows that, in his growth and development as a theologian, there is an intimate relating and blending of sources that occurs over a period of time. In most instances, it is difficult to identify and extract single sources of influence in King's writings. In his recent essay, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Cone sees more clearly than before, and more clearly than most other interpreters, the importance of considering together, and as a whole, multiple sources of influence on King's theology.

A third approach, the approach of this discussion, is to concentrate primarily on King's theological ideas with secondary attention to textual and biographical influences on his thought.

In this section, we will examine King's conception of God in his dissertation, in his book, *Strength to Love*, and in some unpublished King manuscripts, mostly prepared texts of speeches and transcriptions of recorded speeches. *Strength to Love* is a collection of sermons, all of which were written for King's "former parishioners in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama, and [his] . . . parishioners in the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia."<sup>25</sup> I am not using King's better known books, articles, and speeches because some scholars believe they were edited (by King and his editorial assistants) in a way to make

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<sup>23</sup> Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, and John J. Ansbrosio, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind*. Having identified sources of influence on King, e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr, George A. Davis, Walter Rauschenbusch, and the personalists, these interpreters attempt to explicate and extend King's ideas by showing how the others developed their ideas. The great danger of this approach is to overvalue accessible written sources of influence on King's thinking and to undervalue King's creative intellect as well as the unwritten and/or less accessible sources of influence upon his thinking.

<sup>24</sup> James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology, Black Church," and "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr." Paul R. Garber, "King Was a Black Theologian," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 31 (Fall and Winter 1974-75): 16-32 and "Black Theology: The Latter Day Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 2 (Fall 1980). William D. Watley, *Roots of Resistance*. The difficulty of this approach, especially in Cone's essays, has been knowing how to value those aspects of King's thought which rather obviously are products of his formal education. A second problem is that evidence for influence of the black church on King's thinking is sometimes indirect, inferential, and difficult to establish.

<sup>25</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. ix.

them more acceptable to supporters of the civil rights movement, especially white liberals. As we analyze some of these lesser known writings, we will see some differences between them and the better known writings.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Some scholars hold that King's published writings, especially his books and key articles, were influenced by editors such as Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levison, and Harris Wofford. See Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," p. 5. A second argument is that King spoke and wrote one way to black audiences (King's authentic self) and another way to white audiences (an assumed intellectual posture). See James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," p. 28, and "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Black Theology—Black Church," the entire article but especially, p. 411. There are two issues here. The first is whether writings under King's name represent King's thought or an editorial point of view. The second issue is whether King's writings were slanted for particular audiences, especially for white liberal audiences from whom King (and/or his editors) wanted to garner financial support for the civil rights movement. These scholars believe that we are more likely to discover King's mind either in writings and recordings of speeches composed and delivered before King became famous (before he depended heavily upon editorial assistance) or in unpublished texts and recordings of speeches which were prepared for and delivered to predominantly black audiences. On the other hand, one can take the position that writings which bear King's name, certainly his books and major articles, were closely inspected by King after any editing and before their release to publishers. They can, therefore, be taken as expressions of his thought. Preston N. Williams has taken this position in lectures at Harvard University and in personal conversation with the author. The scholarly question is about the extent of editorial assistance, the range of editorial freedom, and the aims of the editors as well as King's own aims in different settings. There are justifiable questions of editorship concerning King's writings but present evidence does not support a firm scholarly resolution. One example of an editorial problem is King's speech at Holt Street Baptist Church on December 5, 1955. This was his first speech as President of the Montgomery Improvement Association on the first day of the Montgomery bus boycott. The speech is reported in one version in *Stride Toward Freedom* and in a somewhat different version on an audio tape of the actual occasion three years earlier. The audio tape and a typescript of it are found in the King Archives in Atlanta. David J. Garrow discusses this issue in "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," 5. In the unpublished original (1955), King spoke of justice and justifiable coercion. He was optimistic, and expressed his values in straightforward Christian terms. In the published version (1958), justice themes are supplanted by emphasis on love, there is mention of "persuasion" rather than "coercion," and there is more "abstract intellectual" content." Garrow suggests that this indicates editorial influence. Garrow does not seem to consider that some of the differences between the two texts may indicate authentic changes in King. It is possible that King, reflecting and writing in 1958, conflated the beginning and the end of the Montgomery boycott. As I shall discuss below, King's thinking about love and nonviolence changed significantly during the period of the year-long boycott. As King's thinking about and practice of love sharpened, his thinking became more radical, not less. When Garrow says that the early, unedited King "gave voice to the same heritage the common people of black Montgomery had grown up in," he overlooks the fact that King, at that time, was a trained theologian with a Ph.D. It is far too simple to overlook the problem of the intellectual in leading mass social movements. The King who went to Montgomery was a different King from the one who left home to attend Morehouse College ten years earlier. His theological education and his intellectual growth played no small part in that change. The extensive congruence of the bulk of King's pub-



King struggled throughout his life to understand God, experientially and theologically. During his seminary years, as we have seen, King reflected on factors that had shaped his understanding of God—his family, his church, and his neighborhood associations. Then, in his doctoral dissertation at Boston University, he examined the conceptions of God in the theologies of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. His choice of the dissertation topic and his handling of it show King's growing concern for the question of God. And after his theological education, the question of God is a focal concern in many of King's sermons.

If we examine King's writing and preaching, we find our major emphases in his conception of God. God is omnipotent, good (both moral and benign), personal, and active in human events. This does not describe the God of either Tillich or Wieman. It comes close, however, to describing the God of evangelical liberalism, personalism, and the black church.

#### A. *God's Power.*

In his dissertation, King applauds Tillich for preserving the omnipotence of God and criticizes Wieman, and even Brightman, for sacrificing it in order to preserve God's goodness.

Wieman is right in emphasizing the goodness of God, but wrong in minimizing his power. Likewise Tillich is right in emphasizing the power of God, but wrong in minimizing his goodness . . . God is not *either* powerful *or* good; he is *both* powerful *and* good.<sup>27</sup>

In a later sermon, he writes:

At the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and in history . . . The God whom we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigantic waves of opposition and to bring low prodigious mountains of evil.<sup>28</sup>

#### B. *God's Goodness.*

It is not enough for King, however, that God is powerful. King's Christian God is both benign and moral. We wish to know, King says in his dissertation, whether God "is good, bad, or indifferent."<sup>29</sup> Again and again during the movement years, King said and wrote that the universe "is on the side of right," "the universe is on the side of justice," and "the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice." This prom-

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lished writings with the bulk of his unpublished writings will, in the long run, make us reasonably confident that we can discover in them an authentic Martin Luther King, Jr.

<sup>27</sup> King, Dissertation, pp. 297-298.

<sup>28</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> King, Dissertation, p. 299.

inent theme is more than encouragement to discouraged followers. In a brief journal article in 1958 he wrote, it was this "faith in the future" that could enable the nonviolent resister "to accept suffering without retaliation."<sup>30</sup> And to his congregation he preached:

Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days, and the vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God . . . Above the manyness of time stands the one eternal God, with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us, and love to keep us. His boundless love supports and contains us as a mighty ocean contains and supports the tiny drops of every wave.<sup>31</sup>

### C. *God as Personal.*

King's God, as we would expect from his church background and his study with personalist thinkers, is personal. For King, that means that God possesses, in some transcending sense, the qualities of personality—intelligence and freedom, with primary emphasis on freedom and will.

To say that this God is personal is not to make him a finite object besides other objects or attribute to him the limitations of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him.<sup>32</sup>

King argues against both Tillich and Wieman in his dissertation.

The religious man has always recognized two fundamental religious values. One is fellowship with God. The other is trust in his goodness . . . True fellowship and communion can exist only between beings who know each other and take a volitional attitude toward each other . . . Fellowship requires an outgoing of will and feeling . . . Life as applied to God means that in God there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart; this God both evokes and answers prayer.<sup>33</sup>

In his later preaching, the same theme is accented.

Christianity affirms that, at the heart of reality is a Heart, a loving Father who works through history for the salvation of his children.<sup>34</sup>

King's experience of God as personal became increasingly real during the years of the movement. His suffering and the suffering of movement workers deepened his faith in God's personalness and clarified his theological expression of it.<sup>35</sup> In the context of discussing suffering and the

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Out of the Long Night of Segregation," *Advance*, February 28, 1958, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> King, *Dissertation*, p. 272.

<sup>34</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> See Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," p. 16. Garrow recognizes the importance of King's faith experience for his theological understanding and calls attention to an experience in King's home in the early weeks of the Montgomery boycott, on January 27, 1956 (see *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 134-35). Many other criti-

agonizing moments of the movement, he writes:

In the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has become profoundly real to me in recent years.<sup>36</sup>

#### D. God's "Cosmic Companionship."

This powerful, good, and personal God means "cosmic companionship" to those who struggle for justice. This God, whose very character is the moral law of the universe, is engaged in the struggle against evil. Whoever struggles against evil and for justice will experience God's cosmic companionship. This idea is substantially present in King's speech at Holt Street Church in Montgomery, on December 5, 1955.

We must keep God in the forefront . . . Justice is love correcting that which would work against love. The Almighty God himself is . . . not the God just standing out saying, 'Behold Thee, I love you Negro.' He's also the God that standeth before the nations and says: 'Be still and know that I am God, that if you don't obey me I'm gonna break the backbone of your power, and cast you out of your international and national relationships.' Standing beside love is always just. And we are only using the tools of justice.<sup>37</sup>

Six months after the beginning of the Montgomery boycott, in June of 1956, King addressed the Annual Convention of the N.A.A.C.P. in San Francisco.

We have the strong feeling that in our struggle we have cosmic companionship. This is why our movement is often referred to as a spiritual movement. We feel that the universe is on the side of right.<sup>38</sup>

In April of 1961, at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, King said, switching his style near the conclusion of his speech,

But if you will allow the preacher in me to come out now . . . we must have faith in the future, the faith to believe that we can solve this problem, the faith to believe that as we struggle to solve this problem we do not struggle alone. But we have cosmic companionship . . . The God we worship is not merely a self-knowing God, but he is an ever-loving God, working through history for the salvation of man. So with this

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cal moments in King's life and faith experience could be cited to support this point of view. E.g., the night of the bombing of King's home in Montgomery (see *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 135-37), and King's experience at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham when the movement appeared to be at an impasse and King had to decide whether to go to jail or to go on a speaking tour to raise money (see *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 70-72).

<sup>36</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 141. This chapter of the book is reproduced from his earlier book of 1958, *Stride Toward Freedom*.

<sup>37</sup> King, Speech at Holt Street Church, December 5, 1955. The speech was extemporaneous. A recording and transcript of the recording are in the King Archives, Atlanta.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Address to the Annual Convention of the N.A.A.C.P., Civic Auditorium, San Francisco, June 27, 1956, 8. King Archive, Atlanta.

faith we can move on.<sup>39</sup>

In September of 1963, a few weeks after the conclusion of the Birmingham campaign, a few days after the most famous March on Washington and King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, four young black girls were killed by a Sunday morning bomb blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. In King's eulogy at the funeral, he said:

At times, life is as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and painful moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of a river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. Like the everchanging cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of the summers and the piercing chill of its winters. But through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to life (sic) you from fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.<sup>40</sup>

King's theology consistently expresses his faith that God is powerful, good (benign and moral), and personal; to express these notions together, God is a source of "cosmic companionship" in the struggle for justice. Those same themes are corroborated in the better known books and articles which we have omitted from this study. These themes are indigenous to King's black church tradition and they are central in the formal theologies which he preferred and in which he was academically trained. This theology, especially as expressed by King, was the spirituality of the civil rights movement. As people suffered in the struggle to change an evil system, their religion reminded them of a powerful, friendly, moral, personal God who walked and struggled with them, and who was able to transform their "dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace."

For King, personality (freedom and intelligence) is God's primary quality. It is God's nature to create processes and structures which produce and sustain personality. Personality presupposes and depends upon a community of love, "beloved community," as King called it; hate destroys community. God is committed to "beloved community" in all of its ramifications. To speak of God's power and God's moral nature means that God has the capability to sustain personality against any and all opposition. Therefore, a person who struggles for personhood and person-producing community, has the promise of God's "cosmic companionship." In his book, *Where Do We Go From Here*, King wrote:

Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the creator . . . The essence of man is found in freedom . . . Nothing can be more diabolical than a deliberate attempt to destroy in any man his will to be a man and to withhold

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Address" at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 19, 1961. King Archives, Atlanta.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Eulogy For the Four Girls Who Were Murdered in the Church in Birmingham-1963." King Archives in Atlanta.

from him that something which constitutes his true essence.<sup>41</sup>

#### IV. Nonviolence.

Until quite recently, largely due to somewhat misleading accounts of the Montgomery boycott in King's books and articles, scholars believed that King, during his academic training, was deeply impressed by and influenced by Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaigns and his writings. Then, because of that early influence, scholars believed that King introduced nonviolent values and tactics into the Montgomery boycott from the beginning. We now know this is not a true account.<sup>42</sup>

The civil rights movement, and the churches' involvement in it, can be dated from immediately following the opinion of the United States Supreme Court in, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, which legalized and legitimated "separate but equal," the despised principle of Jim Crow.<sup>43</sup> Black nationalism (Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Marcus Garvey especially), the Niagara Movement (1905), N.A.A.C.P. (1909), black unions, the attempts to desegregate the United States defense industry (1941) and the United States military forces (1946), attempts to desegregate public schools (1950-54), and attempts to desegregate interstate transportation carriers (1947)—these were all civil rights efforts, frequently supported by black church people, employing methods that were nonviolent. In that entire picture, there is, in fact, no evidence of violent methods.

We must note one other thing. Many black leaders in the United States had been observing Gandhi's work carefully and comparing the plight of untouchables in India with the situation of black people in the United States. Several well known black persons had visited Gandhi in

<sup>41</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 97-99.

<sup>42</sup> Aldon Morris, in *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, provides the best account of how nonviolent values and tactics were introduced into the Montgomery boycott by Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley. David Garrow also stresses this later interpretation of nonviolence in Montgomery in his, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," and we can anticipate a full treatment of the matter in his forthcoming book, *Bearing the Cross*. The author has discussed this aspect of the early months of the Montgomery boycott with Bayard Rustin in an interview in New York City, June 4, 1984.

<sup>43</sup> In speaking here of the beginning of the civil rights movement, I am not speaking of the whole long struggle of black people in the United States for justice and freedom. That struggle is nearly four centuries old and the civil rights movement can be seen as a recent period in the overall struggle. My point here is that the civil rights movement began much earlier than is often recognized and the black churches were involved in it. For understanding the close link between black religion and the black struggle for justice and freedom, see Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1981). See also, Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, revised ed., 1984).

India and interviewed him. Others had been trained in Gandhian methods. Benjamin Mays, Morehouse College president and friend of the King family, was one;<sup>44</sup> Howard Thurman, Chaplain at Boston University and a friend of King all during the civil rights movement, was another. Bayard Rustin, who would play a key role in Montgomery, was another.<sup>45</sup> And black union leader, A. Philip Randolph, who had a close, long-time relation to E.D. Nixon, President of the N.A.A.C.P. in Montgomery during the bus boycott, was yet another.<sup>46</sup>

When we talk about nonviolent values and methods in Montgomery and the civil rights movement that followed, therefore, we are dealing with an established tradition—a blend of the black integrationist tradition, the Gandhian nonviolent movement, and the tradition of the black churches.<sup>47</sup> At the beginning of the Montgomery boycott, however, King's leadership was couched in terms of Christian love and a kind of tough justice. In his Holt Street Baptist Church speech, he said:

Mrs. Parks is a fine Christian Person . . . we are a Christian people. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest . . . we're going to work with grim and firm determination to gain justice . . . If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth. If we are wrong justice is a lie.<sup>48</sup>

In that original speech, King said, "we've got to use the tools of coercion." But in the published version, three years later, the speech reads, "Our method will be that of persuasion, not coercion."<sup>49</sup> Something had changed.

Within a few weeks after the beginning of the boycott, Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley, two veterans of Gandhian nonviolent resistance who worked with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), came to Montgomery and remained to play important roles as close advisers to King and trainers in the philosophy and method of nonviolence. In the fall of 1956, James Lawson, another FOR staff person, also joined King as a trainer in nonviolence.<sup>50</sup> Although King, during his years as a student, had listened to inspiring lectures on Gandhi by A. J. Muste and Mordecai Johnson, had read Gandhi, and had written a paper on Gandhi, it was in the movement that he learned most about Gandhi and about nonviolent

<sup>44</sup> The author interviewed Benjamin F. Mays concerning his trip, in 1936, to visit Gandhi, in Atlanta, February 25, 1982.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Bayard Rustin, June 4, 1984, New York City.

<sup>46</sup> Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 157-58.

<sup>47</sup> See James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr."

<sup>48</sup> King, "Holt Street Baptist Church Address," December 5, 1955. King Archives, Atlanta.

<sup>49</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 62.

<sup>50</sup> See Aldon Morris, "The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement," pp. 157-166.

method. Lawson recalls that King came frequently to training sessions, sitting on the front row with his notebook in hand.<sup>51</sup>

Nonviolence as King writes about it and *satyagraha* as Gandhi writes about it have many elements in common. Gandhi understood how close *ahimsa* is to the Christian understanding of love. Self suffering, *tapasya*, is close to King's understanding of the redemptiveness of "unmerited suffering." King's God, the moral power who is on the side of justice, is near to Gandhi's concept of Truth, *sat*. The goal of the ideal community, *ram rajya*, in Gandhi's view, is close to the goal of "beloved community" in King's dream. The agreement of ends and means, the reconciliation of the enemy, and the willingness to "pocket insults" in order to promote the ultimate end of community—all of these factors are shared in common by Gandhi and King.<sup>52</sup>

It would not be accurate to say that King learned all of these things from Gandhi. As has been pointed out earlier, the practice of nonviolence, in many forms (strike, march, boycott, freedom ride, confrontive negotiation, civil disobedience and going to jail) already pervaded the black civil rights movement before King. We can say that King found in Gandhi a compelling synthesis of philosophy and method compatible with the value of Christian love.

I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.<sup>53</sup>

This insight almost surely rests on the Montgomery experience with the training in nonviolence by Smiley and Lawson and King's ongoing experience with nonviolence in the movement.

King's nonviolence undoubtedly was reinforced and expanded through his engagement with Gandhian concepts and methods. All evidence indicates, however, that we must look more closely at the black community in the United States and its career with nonviolence, both Christian nonviolence and Gandhian nonviolence, if we are to understand the fertile soil in which the greatest nonviolent leader of the United States put down his roots.

#### V. Conclusion.

Clearly, King's nonviolence was reinforced and expanded through his engagement with Gandhian concepts and methods, and that influence

<sup>51</sup> Interview with James Lawson, University of Southern California, April 27, 1984.

<sup>52</sup> For an excellent presentation of Gandhi's religious thought, see Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>53</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 138.

was already present in the black community in the United States. King was a Christian theologian, however, before his serious engagement with Gandhian *satyagraha*, and his nonviolence is an expression of his Christian theology. His God is a personal God of power and goodness who is committed to the sustenance of personality and its communal ground. That God is served through love which reconciles and builds beloved community. Nonviolence seemed to King the only means of social transformation adequate to his understanding of God. His God was the God of his family and his church tradition; and it was the God he had struggled to comprehend through the long process of his intellectual development.

As those traditions merged in his thought during his years of public leadership, God's "cosmic companionship" became experientially more real and intellectually more compelling to him. This illumines his firm opposition to the hateful elements in the black power movement and his widening concerns about poverty and the Vietnam War.