The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Centuries ago Jeremiah raised a question, 'Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician?' He raised it because he saw the good people suffering so often and the evil people prospering. Centuries later our slave foreparents came along and they too saw the injustices of life and had nothing to look forward to morning after morning, but the rawhide whip of the overseer, long rows of cotton and the sizzling heat, 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.'

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a theologian and preacher of the black church. No one can understand his theology apart from the history of the black religious experience. This is not to deny other important influences in his thinking; but because most of King's interpreters ignored or belittled the place of the black church in his intellectual development, it is necessary to establish the claim that the faith of the black church was the most important source of King's theology.

It seems clear that the major obstacle in viewing Martin King as a creative theologian (and one of the most important in American history) is the narrow, elitist, and racist definition of theology which limits its methods and subject matter to problems that whites identify. If by contrast one insists that the struggle for freedom is the only appropriate context for doing theology, then King's importance as a theologian can be appreciated.

King was no armchair theologian. He was a theologian of action, an engaged theologian, actively seeking to transform the structures of oppression. His thinking emerged from his efforts to establish a just society. Therefore, it is possible to analyze his thought only in connection with such events as the successful Montgomery bus boycott (1955–56), his defeat in Albany (1961), the Birmingham demonstrations (1963), the Selma March for voting rights (1965), his encounter with racism in Chicago (1966), his dialogue with black power advocates during and after the Meredith Mississippi March (1966), his preparation for the Poor People's March on Washington (1967), his stand against the Vietnam War (1967–68), and his last march with garbage workers in Memphis (1968). In each of these crises, King refined his theology according to the needs of the people with whom and for whom he was struggling. His theology was not permanent or static but was dynamic, constantly emerging from the historical circumstances in which he was engaged.
King's theology focused on the themes of justice, love, and hope, all grounded in the black church's faith in Jesus Christ. In addition to the black church tradition, King drew from other intellectual sources, namely, black "secular" integrationism, Protestant liberalism, and the nonviolent protest tradition of Gandhi and Thoreau. From these four sources, King created a coherent theology in the midst of the freedom struggle. The first part of this essay consists of an examination of the four sources and their contributions, including the themes of justice, love, and hope. The second part examines the function and interrelationship of the sources. The third part shows the development of King's thought from 1955 to 1968. I will conclude with a brief assessment of King's importance as an American theologian.

THE SOURCES OF KING'S THEOLOGY

1. The Black Integrationist Tradition.

It is important to recognize that there has been a black integrationist tradition in this country for a century and a half, related to the black church but often at odds with it. It was founded in the black abolitionism of Frederick Douglass and redefined for this century in the protest of W. E. B. DuBois and his allies against Booker T. Washington's accommodationism. It was institutionalized in the NAACP and the National Urban League. This line of black thought precedes by decades the Social Gospel movement within liberal Protestantism, which in any case seldom included the liberation of blacks in its agenda.

No one embodied in his life and thought the central ideas of the integrationist tradition more clearly than did Martin Luther King, Jr. No one proclaimed the vision of an integrated society with the oratorical power comparable to his sermons and speeches. In this regard, his greatest moment was his "I Have a Dream" address in Washington in 1963. King gave many versions of this speech before and after the Washington address, because his idea of the "American Dream" was the political symbol for his theological claims about the "beloved community." While Walter Rauschenbusch and other liberal theologians influenced his views regarding the American dream and the beloved community, the integration tradition of Douglass, NAACP, and the Urban League was more decisive in determining King's ideas.

The integrationist tradition shared the political optimism of Protestant liberalism and, even more than the latter, embraced the values of the American democratic tradition as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, providing a bridge for King's approach to white America. Furthermore, integrationist thought resonated with the black church tradition, particularly in its sense of hope and the worth of the human personality, leading many blacks to see King as the prophet of a new day.

2. Protestant Liberalism.

This tradition made far less impact on King's thought than most of his interpreters have claimed and than King himself suggested. Nevertheless, it contributed significantly to the process of his intellectual development.
First, liberalism showed King how to deal with elements of naive conservatism in the black church that had repelled him even as a child. Liberal theology rejected both rigid orthodoxy and modern humanism, each of which emerged in response to the secular spirit of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, largely defined by the rise of scientific thinking. Liberal theologians who influenced King included Walter Rauschenbusch, George Davis, and L. Harold DeWolf. They applied the critical spirit of rational reflection to theology and the Bible and insisted upon the reasonableness of the Christian faith. They rejected almost everything that the fundamentalist and orthodox theologians were affirming as essentials of the faith: the inerrancy of the Bible, virgin birth of Jesus, substitutionary theory of atonement, bodily resurrection of Jesus, miracles, and similar creedal formulations.

Secondly, liberal thinkers introduced King to Hegel’s dialectical method of analyzing history. King went to Boston University to study with Edgar S. Brightman, who guided him in a serious study of Hegel. After Brightman’s untimely death during King’s first year of graduate study, King continued his study of Hegel under the direction of Peter A. Bertocci and L. Harold DeWolf. King said of Hegel: “His contention that ‘truth is the whole’ led me to a philosophical method of rational coherence. His analysis of the dialectical process . . . helped me to see that growth comes through struggle.”4 It also gave his own theology a dialectical quality. King’s thought, like Hegel’s, emerged out of his encounter with two opposites and his endeavor to achieve a synthesis of the truth found in each. For example, King’s philosophy of integration and his strategy of nonviolent direct action were developed out of his rejection of both the accommodationism of black conservatives and the separatism of black nationalists. Black conservatives failed to realize that passivity in response to injustice merely contributes to its continued existence. Black nationalists failed to realize that a just community cannot be created in an atmosphere of hate and violence. A just community is an integrated community, black and white together, and it can be created only through nonviolence (love) and not violence (hate). Jesus and Gandhi provided a synthesis that moved beyond two opposites—powerless love and loveless power. Robert Penn Warren correctly said of King that “his philosophy is a way of living with intense polarity.”5

Thirdly, liberalism showed him, as the classical integrationists could not, a rationale for relating religion to social change. King found his own concern for ethics and justice present in liberal theology, especially that of Walter Rauschenbusch. There is no doubt that Rauschenbusch’s Christianity and the Social Crisis (1907) made a profound impact on Martin King’s theology, particularly Rauschenbusch’s interpretation of the message of the Hebrew prophets and the “social aims of Jesus.”6 King’s admiration of Brightman grew from an appreciation of the ethical implications of Brightman’s philosophy of personalism. “It [personalism],” said King, “gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.”7

King shared the liberals’ rejection of the neo-orthodox theology of the middle decades of this century. Though he probably did not study Barth seriously, he regarded Barth as anti-rational and semi-fundamentalist.8 To be sure, King read
Reinhold Niebuhr and was deeply influenced by his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), especially Niebuhr's analysis of the self-interested orientation of groups when compared to individuals. He was also deeply moved by Niebuhr's critique of pacifism. Nevertheless, King felt that Niebuhr's estimate of human nature was too low and his view of love was restricted to relations between individuals and not applicable to society.⁹

In his essay entitled, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," King analyzes the impact of liberal theology upon his thinking. The influence of liberal theology can be seen clearly in many of the major emphases of his theology: optimism regarding human nature, accent on the beloved community, love as the central meaning of the gospel, the "unique God-consciousness of Jesus," the value of human personality, ethical activity as a necessary corollary of the Christian faith, God's imminent presence in the world—all of these ideas are prominently present in liberal Protestant thought.


Though liberal theology influenced King's philosophical understanding of love, it was the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, the "little brown man" from India, as King called him, who provided the intellectual justification and the methodological implementation of his perspective on nonviolent direct action. Thoreau provided the philosophical justification for civil disobedience in the context of the North American democratic tradition. Martin King was introduced to Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* during his student days at Morehouse and to the importance of Gandhi as a student at Crozer Seminary and, in a special way, at a lecture by Mordecai Johnson during the same period. Under the influence of Bayard Rustin and Glen Smiley, King became a firm devotee of Gandhi's theory of nonviolence. He connected Gandhi with Jesus and began to see his philosophy of nonviolence as similar to Jesus' suffering love on the cross. The idea that "unmerited suffering is redemptive" emerged as a dominant theme in King's theology as he constantly reminded blacks that they would experience a "season of suffering" before justice is achieved.¹⁰

The centrality of Gandhi and Jesus, nonviolence and the cross in his speeches and publications undergirded King's messages to blacks that there will be no freedom apart from suffering. The idea that the unearned suffering of blacks was redemptive appeared early in his theology and remained dominant throughout his life. When the bombing of his house aroused blacks to the potential for violence, King gave the anxious crowd in Montgomery a message that he would emphasize many times during his ministry:

> We must not return violence under any condition. I know this is difficult advice to follow, especially since we have been the victims of no less than ten bombings. But this is the way of Christ; it is the way of the cross. We must somehow believe that unearned suffering is redemptive.¹¹
A similar emphasis on the necessity for suffering is found in Gandhi. Explicating satyagraha (soul force), Gandhi wrote: "[It] is the vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one’s self. . . . Rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood."

After much reflection on Gandhi’s philosophy, and following a journey to India during which he discussed his views with many scholars there, King began to speak more forthrightly regarding the inevitability of black suffering through nonviolence before the goal of an integrated, beloved community can be achieved. No statement expressed this idea more forcefully than his often repeated statement:

We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children; send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities and drag us out on some wayside road, beating us and leaving us half dead, and we will still love you. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.\(^\text{12}\)

There is no doubt that King was deeply influenced by Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence as a potent weapon for the practical implementation of Jesus’ idea of love in the context of the black struggle for justice. But it is obvious that his unshakeable commitment to nonviolence and the inevitability of black suffering was much more appealing to liberal whites than to oppressed blacks. Many black scholars, like Kenneth Clark, warned King of the psychological damage to black personality when black people are urged to assume the heavy burden that his theology required.\(^\text{13}\)

King’s use of Thoreau’s concept of civil disobedience was to come later in the course of his political development. Open disobedience to the law happened first during the sit-ins (1960), freedom rides (1961), and the Birmingham demonstrations (1963). Civil disobedience was initially limited to regional laws of discrimination against blacks in the South.

Thoreau said that “it is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have the right to assume is to do at anytime what I think right.” A firm opponent of slavery, Thoreau was also jailed for his refusal to pay taxes to support the war with Mexico. When his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, reportedly asked, “Thoreau, why are you in jail?”, Thoreau replied, “Emerson, why are you out of jail?”

Although Martin King could apply Thoreau’s logic of civil disobedience in his protest against regional segregation laws of the South, he had more difficulty applying it to federal laws, because he used the federal laws as the basis for his disobedience of discriminatory laws of the South. He expected and received the legal support of the federal courts, the President, and the Congress in the achievement of black people’s civil rights. His concern about federal support probably accounted for his
retreat in the second attempt to cross the Pettus Bridge during the Selma to Montgomery march. In Memphis, however, he resolved to disobey a federal injunction against the march but was assassinated before it actually happened.


Without seeking to minimize the importance of the other three sources, they should be interpreted in the light of the faith of the black church which decisively influenced the development and final shape of King’s theology. King’s theology was defined by the themes of justice, love, and hope. The meaning of each, while influenced by the other sources, achieved their distinctiveness as King attempted to fulfill his vocation as a black preacher. He believed that the gospel demanded that he speak the truth and that he work toward its establishment in human relations.

Justice, love, and hope are central themes in the history of the black religious tradition. It was black people’s concern for justice in the church and society which led them to organize independent churches during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was their concern for love in human relations which prevented their fight for justice from degenerating into an attitude of vengeance and violence. It was black people’s focus on God’s eschatological hope that enabled them to “keep on keeping on,” fighting for the right with love in their hearts, even though the achievement of justice seemed bleak and doubtful.

Martin King deeply internalized the values of the black religious tradition in which he was born.

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. . . .

The distinctiveness of King’s ideas of justice, love, and hope were developed in the context of his vocation as pastor of Dexter and Ebenezer Baptist Churches and as president of SCLC, an organization composed mainly of preachers. His theology, therefore, can be properly understood only from the vantage point of his belief that he had been set aside by God to be the leader of blacks, the people whom he believed God had chosen to “save the soul of America.” His belief that black people were called by God to redeem America through their suffering love was derived from the black religious tradition.

The most appropriate way to decide what was primary for King’s theology is to identify the source to which he turned in moments of crisis during his fight for justice. Where he turned when his back was up against the wall and when everything seemed hopeless will tell us far more about his theology than the papers he wrote in graduate school. Engulfed by the “midnight of despair,” where did he receive the hope that “morning will come?”

The evidence is clear: Whether we speak of the Montgomery bus boycott, the
Birmingham demonstrations, the Selma march, black power or Vietnam, King turned to the faith of the black church in moments of frustration and despair. His existential appropriation of black faith occurred a few weeks after the inauguration of the Montgomery bus boycott. He not only referred to this event in his writings but especially in many of his sermons in black churches. One night, January 27, 1956, King received a nasty telephone call: “Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now and if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going blow your brains out and blow up your house.” Though he had received many similar threats (about forty daily), for some reason that one stunned him, preventing him from going to sleep. He began to realize that his wife and newly born baby daughter could be taken from him or he from them at any moment. He got up out of bed and went to the kitchen to heat some coffee, “thinking,” he said, “that coffee would give me a little relief.”

In the midst of one of the most agonizing experiences of his life, he searched for a place that he could stand. “I started thinking about many things; I pulled back on the theology and philosophy that I had just studied in the universities trying to give philosophical and theological reasons for the existence and the reality of sin and evil, but the answer didn’t quite come there.” Unable to cope with his frustration and despair, King turned to the God of the black faith that he had been taught as a child:

Something said to me, you can’t call on daddy now; he’s in Atlanta, a hundred-seventy-five miles away. . . . You’ve got to call on that something, on that person that your daddy used 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 and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. 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, and I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage they will begin to get weak.’

It was in the midst of this crisis of faith that King experienced the liberating presence of God as never before. He heard an inner voice saying: “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.” After that liberating experience he said: “I was ready to face anything.” From that point onward, King never doubted God’s presence in the struggle for justice, reassuring him that love and nonviolence, despite the odds, will triumph over hate and violence.

King’s theology was defined by an eschatological hope, God’s promise not to leave the little ones alone in struggle. In his sermons, he spoke often of “midnight,” “darkness,” and the “cross,” usually referring to racism, poverty, and war. But in spite of the great difficulties he encountered in fighting these evils, King was certain that “we shall overcome,” because “truth crushed to the earth will rise again.”

Sometimes I feel discouraged. And I don’t mind telling you this morning that sometimes I feel discouraged. I felt discouraged in Chicago. As I moved through
Mississippi and Georgia and Alabama I feel discouraged. Living everyday under the threat of death I feel discouraged sometime. Living everyday under extensive criticism, even from Negroes, I feel discouraged sometimes. Yes, sometimes I feel discouraged and feel my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

**THE FUNCTION AND INTERRELATIONSHIP OF THE SOURCES**

The black religious tradition always remained at the heart of King's thought and practice, even though he rarely articulated its importance in most of his writings and speeches. He seldom referred to the theological significance of the black church, because almost everything he published was intended primarily for a white audience who had doubts about the legality and morality of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience. Many whites complained about the violence which civil rights demonstrations evoked, and they strongly urged King to "wait," "cool off," and "not to move too fast." Martin King's frequent appeals to Gandhi and a variety of Euro-American theologians and philosophers, were intended to persuade the white public that he had sound philosophical and Christian reasons for his nonviolent demonstrations. He wanted to demonstrate that his claim that "segregation is a cancer in the body politic" as well as a "tragic evil which is utterly unchristian" was not simply the rhetoric of a black preacher but was derived from the most influential thinkers in the West.

On the other hand, when Martin King spoke to an audience in a black church, he may have referred to white theologians and philosophers, but they were secondary to his overall purpose. Blacks did not need to be persuaded that segregation was morally evil and contrary to democratic values and thus should be eliminated. They needed inspiration and courage to struggle against tremendous odds. It was black people's faith that "God can make a way out of no way" which King knew in his heart and articulated so well in his sermons.

Focusing primarily on the themes of justice, love, and hope as they are grounded in faith, King integrated the four sources into a coherent whole, with each theme emerging as dominant at different periods of his life as he sought to communicate his ideas to black and white audiences. Protestant liberalism and the philosophies of Gandhi and Thoreau were the sources which provided the intellectual structure that King used to interpret his ideas and actions regarding nonviolence and civil disobedience to the white community. They gave him a method of fighting for justice that was consistent with American democratic values and the theological and philosophical tradition of the West.

When King spoke to a black audience, his chief source was the Bible, as mediated through the black church tradition. It can be said that as long as King was confident that justice would be achieved in a reasonable amount of time and with the support of the federal government, white moderates of the South and North, labor, and the churches, he relied primarily on liberal protestantism, Gandhi, and Thoreau to express his theology. The dominant theme was always love with justice and hope
interpreted in its light. But when the problem of injustice seemed insurmountable and the white support for justice was not visibly present, King turned to the faith of the black church, with an emphasis on God’s eschatological promise to “transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows,” “the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.”

The faith of the black church and the integrationist tradition in black history provided the political and religious sources for expressing King’s views to the black community. Because white racists controlled the centers of sociopolitical power, many blacks were paralyzed by the fear of loss of property and life. They were uncertain of their courage to challenge the white power structure and of their spiritual strength to sustain themselves in that challenge.

Furthermore, some blacks were not sure that integration into white society was the most appropriate goal of the civil rights movement or whether nonviolence was the right method for achieving that goal. The black political tradition of Frederick Douglass and the NAACP provided the rationale that integration was the correct political goal and that nonviolent direct action was the only way to achieve it. But it was the faith of the black church that provided black people with the courage to fight against great odds, giving them the hope that the goal of justice would eventually be achieved.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN KING’S THEOLOGY

The function and interrelationship of the sources are illuminated when seen in the context of an analysis of the continuity and change in King’s theology. The character of King’s theological development was shaped by two overall concerns: what he was fighting against and what he was fighting for. He began his public ministry by fighting against racism, and the events of the 1960s forced him to connect it with poverty and militarism. Though King’s theology went through several developmental changes between 1955 and 1968, this aspect of his thought should be analyzed in relation to the continuity in his thinking. As the changes can best be illuminated in relation to what he was fighting against and the strategies he developed to overcome evil, so the continuity in King’s theology can best be demonstrated when it is analyzed in relation to what he was fighting for. King’s goal was not simply the elimination of racism, poverty, and war, but rather the establishment of an integrated community of persons of all races, working together toward the building of the kingdom which he called the “beloved community.” Everything King did and said regarding the church and society was intended to create a new community in which love and justice defined the relationship between all people.

Martin King began his public career with an emphasis on the justice of God. He derived its meaning from the Hebrew prophets, as interpreted in the faith and history of the black church and liberal protestant theology. He also used the American democratic tradition, especially as found in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. As blacks in Montgomery began the bus boycott, King based their actions on the theme of justice in the Christian faith, and love and hope were
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interpreted in its light. But shortly after the boycott began, white and black advisors, concerned about the development of a method of social change that would avoid violence, urged King to adopt Gandhi’s method of nonviolent direct action and thereby place love at the center of his thought. During this period, love replaced justice as the dominant theme, and King derived its meaning from the life and teachings of Jesus and Gandhi. Also useful were the theologians and philosophers he studied in graduate school. With an emphasis on love strongly influenced by liberal Protestantism, justice was defined as the absence of segregation and the establishment of an integrated community, and hope became similar to the liberal optimism that King studied in graduate school.

When King realized that the life-chances of the poor had not been affected by the gains of the civil rights movement, that the federal government was not nearly as committed to fighting the war on poverty as it was to fighting the war in Vietnam and that white moderates were not as concerned with the establishment of justice in the North as they had been in fighting legal segregation in the South, the idea of hope became the dominant theme in his theology. His reflections on hope were derived almost exclusively from biblical religion as mediated through the faith and history of the black church. Hope was carved out of the suffering and disappointments he experienced in fighting injustice in urban ghettos (especially Chicago), in dialoging with black power advocates, and in taking his stand against the war in Vietnam. He placed love and justice in an eschatological context, with an emphasis on bearing witness to God’s coming freedom by taking a stand for justice now, even though the odds against its establishment are great.

Between 1955 and 1968, Martin King moved from an optimistic integrationist to a temporary separatist; from a social reformer to a militant nonviolent revolutionary; from an intellectual dependence on classical western philosophy to a call for the study of black philosophers; from a naive belief that southern white moderates (especially ministers) would join him in the struggle for an integrated society to a deepening skepticism regarding whether even white northern liberal Christians, labor, and government officials had the moral sensitivity to understand the depth of the disadvantages that African-Americans must overcome in order to survive in a society that does not recognize their humanity; from his inspiring “I Have a Dream” oration to his despairing assertion that “the dream I had in Washington back in 1963 has often turned into a nightmare;” from his silence about the Vietnam war to his well-known “Beyond Vietnam” speech at New York’s Riverside Church (April 4, 1967), proclaiming that “America is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

To understand the character of King’s theological development, it is important to note its three phases, with each being defined by an emphasis on justice, love, and hope. When he reluctantly became the leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, he was not an advocate of nonviolent direct action or a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Indeed, as white violence increasingly emerged as a threat to his life, King applied for a license to carry a gun in his car but was refused by the Montgomery police department. The guiding principle for his initial involvement in the bus boycott was
the justice of God as defined by the prophets and Jesus Christ. Reflecting back on the preparation for his first major speech at Holt Street Baptist Church (December 5, 1955), King said that his chief question was: "How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fever within controllable and Christian bounds?"25

After referring to the "right to protest" as an inherent part of American democracy, and then connecting what happened to Rosa Parks with the "long history of abuses and insults that Negro citizens had experienced on the city buses," King creatively articulated the balance between active protest and appropriate moderation with the passion and rhythm so typical of the best in the black church tradition. As he increased the volume of his voice, seeking to allow himself to be used by God’s Spirit to empower poor blacks to “walk the streets in dignity rather than ride the bus in humiliation," King said:

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time... when people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life’s July and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November. We are here this evening because we’re tired now.26

Martin King justified the boycott on both legal and moral grounds, emphasizing that the “great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right” and that the Christian faith demanded that black people “stand up for their rights.” In sharp contrast to King’s later description of this speech in Stride Toward Freedom in which he said “love your enemies” was his chief emphasis,27 my examination of the tape and printed text revealed that justice, and not love was his major theme.

We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist... We’re going to work with grim and firm determination to gain justice on the buses of this city. And we are not wrong... in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. 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... We are determined... to work and fight until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.28

There is a great difference between King’s report of this speech in Stride Toward Freedom and the tape of what he actually said on that occasion. Even as King urged blacks to keep “God in the forefront,” his emphasis remained on justice and not love, coercion and not persuasion.

I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love. Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which would
the justice of God as defined by the prophets and Jesus Christ. Reflecting back on the preparation for his first major speech at Holt Street Baptist Church (December 5, 1955), King said that his chief question was: “How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fever within controllable and Christian bounds?”

After referring to the “right to protest” as an inherent part of American democracy, and then connecting what happened to Rosa Parks with the “long history of abuses and insults that Negro citizens had experienced on the city buses,” King creatively articulated the balance between active protest and appropriate moderation with the passion and rhythm so typical of the best in the black church tradition. As he increased the volume of his voice, seeking to allow himself to be used by God’s Spirit to empower poor blacks to “walk the streets in dignity rather than ride the bus in humiliation,” King said:

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time . . . when people get tired of being flung across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life’s July and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November. We are here this evening because we’re tired now.

Martin King justified the boycott on both legal and moral grounds, emphasizing that the “great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right” and that the Christian faith demanded that black people “stand up for their rights.” In sharp contrast to King’s later description of this speech in Stride Toward Freedom in which he said “love your enemies” was his chief emphasis, my examination of the tape and printed text revealed that justice, and not love was his major theme.

We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist . . . We’re going to work with grim and firm determination to gain justice on the buses of this city. And we are not wrong . . . in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. 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. . . . We are determined . . . to work and fight until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

There is a great difference between King’s report of this speech in Stride Toward Freedom and the tape of what he actually said on that occasion. Even as King urged blacks to keep “God in the forefront,” his emphasis remained on justice and not love, coercion and not persuasion.

I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love. Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation.
work against love. The Almighty God ... is not ... 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, and if you don't obey me I'm gonna break the backbone of your power, and cast you out of the arms of your international and national relationships.' Standing beside love is always justice. And we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion but we've got to use the tools of coercion.²⁹

On the tape of King's Holt Street address, there is no mention of Gandhi's method of nonviolent direct action and no reference to Jesus' command to "love your enemies." His stress was almost exclusively on justice as defined by the American democratic tradition of equality and the biblical theme of the righteousness of God.

As King's involvement in the Montgomery bus boycott deepened and the appeal for white support was accentuated, the Christian idea of love emerged as the central theme of his theology. Love became the modifier of justice as he sought to eradicate the fears of both blacks and whites regarding violence. By the time King wrote Stride Toward Freedom (1958), he had become an international figure, with white and black advisors assisting him in his work, including the editing of his book manuscript and addresses. I am convinced that the change in emphasis from justice to love was partly due to the editorial hand of his advisors.³⁰

As the boycott proceeded, King's practical concern about the dangers of violence, along with his acceptance of the naive optimism of liberal theology, caused him to change his primary emphasis from justice to love. While acknowledging the important role of the black church and the absence of any reference to Gandhi, King seemed to have forgotten about his original accent on justice. For example, in Stride Toward Freedom, he recalls:

The first days of the protest ... the phrase most often heard was 'Christian love.' It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.³¹

Likewise, King's focus on Gandhi and nonviolent resistance was a later development, emerging simultaneously with his new emphasis on love. The connection between Gandhi and the Montgomery bus boycott was suggested initially by Juliette Morgan's letter to the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser. Later on, nonviolent direct action was intellectually defined and practically implemented when Bayard Rustin and Glen E. Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) joined Martin King as advisors about two months after the boycott began.³²

During the phase in which love was dominant in King's theology, he defined racism as segregation and designated it as America's "chief moral dilemma." But the more he fought racism the more he came to realize that it was much more complex than the discrimination laws in the South. To King's surprise, he not only found racism in the North, but discovered also that northern racism, though less visible,
was more destructive to human personality and also more deeply embedded in the sociopolitical structures than what he had seen in the South.

After the Selma March and the passage of the Voting Rights Act (1965), several events caused King to undertake a deeper analysis of racism, which in turn disclosed the severe limitations of what had been achieved in the southern-based civil rights movement. Five days following the signing of the Voting Rights Bill by President Johnson (August 6), the Watts riot erupted (August 11), initiating a radical change in King's perspective regarding the nature of racism and what would be needed to eliminate it. His struggle and frustrations in Chicago, the rise of black power, drastic cuts in the domestic budget, and a rapid escalation of expenditures for the war in Vietnam—all these events contributed to King's movement toward the left. His analysis of racism disclosed its global manifestations, especially its connection with two other evils: poverty and war. King began to acknowledge publicly the limitations of his earlier views and started to connect racism with "class issues, ... the privileged as over against the underprivileged," and even openly advocating democratic socialism.33

When King saw the depth of the problem of racism as reflected by extensive poverty in the northern ghettos and its devastating effects on the self-worth of black people, he became so incensed that he could no longer keep silent regarding the moral contradictions involved. It was during the period between the end of 1965 and his assassination in 1968 that Martin King entered a revolutionary path that led him to declare "God's judgment ... on America" because of its failure to use its vast economic resources for life rather than death.

There is something wrong with our nation. Something desperately wrong. . . . There is confusion in the land. . . . This is why we've made a decision to come to the seat of government . . . [and] will seek to say to the nation that if you don't straighten up, and that if you do not begin to use your vast resources of wealth to lift God's children from the dungeons of despair and poverty, then you are writing your own obituary. We are coming to Washington to say to America, 'straighten up, and fly right.'34

The primary source for King's prophetic critique of President Johnson's war policies was the black church tradition. There is nothing in liberal protestant theology, Gandhi or Thoreau, or even the integrationist tradition of Douglass and the civil rights organizations that can explain the content and the style of King’s devastating critique of America's involvement in Vietnam. He was unrelenting in his criticisms, and he refused the advice of any of his black and white friends who warned him about his lack of competence in foreign policy and the danger of mixing peace and civil rights. Some even questioned his patriotism. But King was quick to respond that he was speaking out against the war not because he was a civil rights activist or an expert in foreign policy. He spoke solely in the name of God’s righteousness and human decency. As a minister of the God of Jesus, he could not keep silent, for the truth of the Gospel was at stake.
Although his "Beyond Vietnam" address was perhaps his greatest hour and best known indictment of U.S. policies in Vietnam, it is in his unpublished sermons that one can clearly observe the depth of the agony of King's concerns and the source of his theological criticism. Most of these sermons were delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Hardly anyone can read them or listen to the tapes and fail to acknowledge the decisive impact of the black and biblical traditions upon the content of his sermons and the forcefulness in which he delivered them. They include: "Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," "Mastering Our Fears," "The Drum Major Instinct," "A Knock at Midnight," "Standing by the Best in an Evil Time," "Who is My Neighbor?", "Unfulfilled Dreams," and "But If Not . . . ."

In these sermons, King takes his stand with the prophets of the biblical tradition and rejects the advice of many of his friends and followers in SCLC, NAACP, labor, government, and even black and white churches, all of whom told him to keep silent about the war in Vietnam, because he was alienating President Johnson and the financial supporters of SCLC. With prophetic passion, so typical of the best in the black church tradition, King told them:

I'm sorry, you don't know me. I'm not a consensus leader. I don't determine what is right and wrong by looking at the budget of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or by taking a Gallup Poll of the majority opinion. Ultimately a genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.35

King deeply believed that just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to take their stand against King Nebuchadnezzar and refuse to worship the King's golden image, even though they faced the flames of the fiery furnace, so he, Martin King, had to take his stand against Lyndon Johnson's war policies and refuse to bow down to the economic and political pressures of the State department and its supporters. As the intensity of the pressures increased, even to the extent that the FBI was trying to force him to commit suicide, King turned to the God of black faith, because he believed that, as was true of the "three Hebrew children," God could deliver him "if it be so" (Daniel 3:17).

Using the response of the three Hebrews to Nebuchadnezzar as a sermon title, "But If Not . . . ."36, King made it clear that he was prepared to give his life for the truth of God. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was more important to Martin King than speaking and doing the truth. The more he was pressured to keep silent, the more forcefully he spoke out against the evils of racism, poverty, and war. In fact King became so disturbed about injustice that many of his biographers and some close friends have suggested that he was on the verge of a mental breakdown. I am sure that many contemporaries of the Hebrew prophets had similar feelings about them. The nature of the prophets' vocation almost always threw them into conflict with the values of their time. Prophets of every age are truth-tellers, and the "powers that be" never want to hear the truth in a world based on their lies. When Whitney Young of the Urban League, a colleague and friend, cornered King in public and reprimanded him about his views on Vietnam, King responded sharply: "Whitney, what you are
saying may get you a foundation grant but it will not get you into the kingdom of truth.”

One cannot understand correctly Martin King’s convictions about Vietnam, black power, racism, and poverty without a keen knowledge of the role of the “preacher as prophet” in the black community. When the black preacher is true to his/her vocational calling, he/she must speak the truth of God regardless of who is affected by its judgment. That was why King’s most severe indictments against the evils of racism, poverty, and war were delivered as sermons. As a prophet of God, he had no choice but to speak the Word of God. In the sermon, entitled “Standing by the Best in an Evil Time,” King made a forceful and prophetic statement on why he could not keep silent on the evil of America’s involvement in Vietnam.

I’ve decided what I’m going to do. I ain’t going to kill nobody in Mississippi . . . [and] in Vietnam. I ain’t going to study war no more. And you know what? I don’t care who doesn’t like what I say about it. I don’t care who criticizes me in an editorial. I don’t care what white person or Negro criticizes me. I’m going to stick with the best. On some positions, cowardice asks the question ‘is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question, ‘is it popular?’ But conscience asks the question, ‘is it right?’ And there comes a time when a true follower of Jesus Christ must take a stand that’s neither safe nor politic nor popular but he must take that stand because it is right. Every now and then we sing about it, ‘if you are right, God will fight your battle.’ I’m going to stick by the best during these evil times.37

CONCLUSION

As Americans begin to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday as a national holiday, seminary students and faculty, church leaders and Christians throughout the world should not forget his importance as theologian, perhaps the most important in American history. In saying this, I do not wish to minimize the significant contribution of other theologians—whether Jonathan Edwards, Walter Rauschenbusch, or the Niebuhr brothers. There are three reasons which make Martin King a candidate for the status of America’s most outstanding theologian.

1. If theology is a disciplined endeavor to interpret the meaning of the gospel for the present time, and if the gospel is God’s liberation of the poor from bondage, then I would claim that no one has articulated the Christian message of freedom more effectively, prophetically, and creatively in America than Martin Luther King, Jr.

2. Unlike many American theologians who often look toward Europe in order to identify theological problems which require disciplined reflection, Martin King’s theological perspective achieved its creativity by engaging uniquely American issues. He was truly an American theologian and not simply a theologian who happened to live in the United States. No theologian has made a greater impact on American culture than Martin Luther King, Jr. The making of his birthday a national holiday merely symbolizes that fact.
3. Unlike most white theologians who do theology as if their definitions of it are the only ones and as if their problems are the only ones which deserve the attention of disciplined theological reflection, Martin King did not limit his theological reflections to the problems of one group. While he began with a focus on the racial oppression of blacks, his theological vision was universal. He was as concerned about the liberation of whites from their oppression as oppressors as he was in eliminating the racial oppression of blacks. He was as concerned about the life-chances of brown children in Vietnam as he was about black children in America’s cities. King’s vision was truly international, embracing all humanity. That is why his name is invoked by the oppressed around the world who are fighting for freedom. Teachers of theology do themselves, their students, and their discipline a great disservice when they ignore the outstanding contribution that King has made to American theology and to all who are seeking to understand the gospel today. For if one wishes to know what it means to be a theologian, there is no better example than Martin Luther King, Jr.

NOTES

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Thou Fool,” 27 August 1967, an unpublished sermon delivered at Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, p. 11. Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers, Series III, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter referred to as King Center Archives).

2. Although Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974) is a reliable interpretation of the impact of King’s graduate studies upon his thinking (especially liberal protestant theology), this text is seriously flawed by the authors’ failure to place the black religious tradition at the center of his theology. However, in a conversation with Professor Smith, he indicated that he agrees with my claim regarding the importance of the black religious tradition in determining the content and shape of King’s theology and plans to make this point in a revised edition of this text.

Although it suffers from the same weakness as his joint text with Kenneth Smith, I found Ira Zepp, Jr.’s “The Intellectual Sources of the Ethical Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., as Traced in His Writings with Special Reference to the Beloved Community,” (Ph.D. diss., St. Mary’s Seminary and University, 1971) especially useful in regard to influences of King’s graduate studies upon his theology.

I was particularly disappointed with John Ansbro, The Making of a Mind: Martin Luther King, Jr., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982). See my review in Fellowship, Jan–Feb. 1984 and his response in ibid., March 1984. A similar weakness is also found in James P. Hanigan, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Foundations of Nonviolence (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).