

Preface

So great a person was Martin Luther King Jr., and so profound were his contributions and legacy to this country and the world, that volumes of books have been and will be written on him. There was a time when I believed that the market could not contain more publications on King. I therefore concluded that there was nothing I could add that had not already been said or was being said about King and his civil rights ministry. However, when I began reading book after book after book on King, I discovered one of two things to be true: either no one was actually addressing the issues that most interested me or seemed most important to me, or no one approached a given topic on him in quite the way I would. In either case, I soon concluded that, owing to his monumental contributions toward the improvement of individuals and communities, areas of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. will continue to cry out for exploration.

Indeed, I came to believe, along with renowned King scholar Lewis V. Baldwin of Vanderbilt University, that if one takes a topic-specific approach to King the field is fertile and wide open to the curious, creative, energetic mind. I do not know how creative I am in this regard, but over the past two decades one of the two most interesting and significant persons in theological and ethical studies to me has been Martin Luther King Jr.¹ This is why I continue to study, teach, and write about King, and why I have written this book, with its focus on King as man of ideas and nonviolent direct social action.

In all of my years of teaching, thinking, and writing about King, I have been mindful that he was an imperfect earthen vessel who, given his particular set of strengths and limitations, was able to provide such significant leadership

1. The other significant person of interest is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972). King and Heschel met for the first time in 1963 at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago. Both men delivered keynote addresses in which they revealed the strong influence of the Hebrew prophets, most especially Amos. Both expressed their commitment and determination to fighting for justice and civil rights for blacks. The two men became fast friends and colleagues in the civil rights struggle, as King later appealed to Heschel to join him and SCLC in the famous march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. Although I have not written as much on Heschel to this point, my co-authored book with Mary Alice Mulligan, *Daring to Speak in God's Name: Ethical Prophecy in Ministry* (Pilgrim, 2002), is heavily influenced by his ideas on the Hebrew prophets and their meaning for us today. In addition, there are so many similarities between Heschel and King that I hope to write a book on the two men.

and contributions to what came to be the civil rights movement. His determination to be faithful to his ministerial call and his willingness, right or wrong, to sacrifice all to this end—including responsibilities to wife and children—has been a constant reminder of just how important is the vocation of ministry—the most important in the world according to King—and what is required of those who are called by God. To a large extent, King set the standard in this regard.

Over the years, I have been fond of telling my students in the class I teach annually on King that he was an ordinary human being who did some very extraordinary things as he endeavored to be true to his calling from God. I like putting it this way because it is true to the facts about the man—the human being. He was not perfect, and did not pretend or presume to be. He was not a saint, did not want to be, and insisted that the Ebenezer Baptist Church congregation not think of him as such. He had no desire to be placed on a pedestal of any kind. He was born of a woman and a man, and thus was thoroughly human, with strengths and weaknesses similar to those of other human beings. He was an earthen vessel, and thus in any given moment could be weak or strong. He was a sinner like every human being, missing the mark, despite how vigilant he was in trying to hit it. And yet, he stood out from most human beings because in the barely thirty-nine years he lived he refused to give up trying to hit the mark—sometimes coming quite close, and at other times missing the moral mark wide of center. Indeed, theologian Cheryl Kirk-Duggan has rightly observed: “King had unique gifts; King was human. Like many leaders, he left powerful legacies and was a flawed person. People who live large, often have considerable flaws.”²

From the time that Martin Luther King Jr. was a little boy he exhibited signs of precociousness as well as a desire to help his father to fight racism. When a white Atlanta policeman tried to insult his father by referring to him as “boy,” the younger King, who was beside him in the car, knew from his father’s reaction that something very serious had just occurred that elicited both anger and resistance from Daddy King. In addition, King Jr. observed that the policeman himself was so shocked by Daddy King’s reaction that he failed to complete his business and left the scene. When Daddy King explained to his son that he would never passively accept such treatment, and that he would always resist it, King Jr. responded that he would do what he could to help

2. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “Drum Major for Justice or Dilettante of Dishonesty: Martin Luther King, Jr., Moral Capital, and Hypocrisy of Embodied Messianic Myths,” in *The Domestication of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Clarence B. Jones, Right-Wing Conservatism, and the Manipulation of the King Legacy*, ed. Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Burrow Jr. Foreword by Adam Fairclough (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 100.

him eradicate racism. On the surface, this seemed innocent enough coming from a young boy. But this particular boy had both witnessed many other acts of racism and had been on the receiving end of it multiple times as a child. Although just a boy when he told his father he would help him fight racism, Martin Luther King had actually been quite serious. Because he and his siblings were early taught the value of education, as well as the obligation to resist anything that undermined their sense of humanity and dignity, there is every reason to believe that even as a young boy King sensed that there was a connection between ideas gleaned from a good education and the liberation of his people from segregation and deeply entrenched racism.

For a long time in King Studies, the tendency for most scholars and others who wrote on Martin Luther King was to present him as the quintessential Christian social activist in the civil rights movement. He was social activist, not “theologian” (read *man of ideas*) as such. The thinking seemed to be that although King earned the Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston University, his primary work was in social activism rather than the typical activities of the traditional theologian, for example, teaching in the academy and writing esoteric articles and books, which often have little to do with human beings’ daily life struggles and God’s expectation that justice be done. In part, this view of King was due to narrow thinking about what it means to be a theologian. But it was also due to racism in the theological academy and the sense that blacks could be appointed to every position in a school’s curriculum except systematic or philosophical theology, an area reserved primarily for white men. I have known many blacks and a number of Hispanics who were formally trained in theology, but found themselves in positions such as ethics, theology and culture, theology and ethics, and so on, but not theology or systematic theology. Only in fairly recent years has this practice changed.

Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged being many things: father, husband, civil rights leader, author, recipient of the Ph.D. and dozens of honorary degrees, the Nobel Peace Prize, and so on. More important than all of these, he made it crystal clear that he was fundamentally a Baptist preacher; a man of the cloth; “a religious man, formed to the bone marrow in the Christian faith of his black Baptist tradition.”³ At the very center of King’s life and civil rights ministry were his religious faith and theological convictions, most particularly his sense of God as personal, just, and loving creator and the source of the inviolable sacredness of human beings as such. Inherent in this is also King’s sense that God is concerned about both the spiritual and material condition of

3. James W. Fowler, Foreword, in *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Frederick L. Downing (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), ix.

human beings, most particularly those counted among the least of the sisters and brothers. This book takes that stance for granted, focusing as it does, on Martin Luther King as man of ideas *and* nonviolent social activism.

Much of my previous writing on King has focused on what I call the *man of ideas* genre. I have focused on this primarily because I have not been satisfied with much of past and present scholarship on King, which has not given enough attention to him as a thinker-theologian who loved ideas. Indeed, when Kenneth L. Smith, Ira Zepp Jr., and John J. Ansbro did stress the intellectual influences on King in 1974 and 1982, respectively, they implied but did not expressly present him as a man of ideas. Their emphasis was primarily on how European and European American thinkers influenced his intellectual maturation. Moreover, they failed to include the informal influences from King's family and black church upbringing, as well as the influence of the southern black cultural environment that he loved so much. Nor did they consider the influences of historically black Morehouse College. The fact that King learned the importance of thinking about his faith-claims at Morehouse, for example, gave him a considerable academic advantage over most southern Baptist students he met when he entered the predominantly white Crozer Theological Seminary. To address this and other limitations I wrote *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) and later, *Martin Luther King, Jr. for Armchair Theologians* (Westminster John Knox, 2009). However, neither of these books stressed the theme of King as man of ideas *and* nonviolent social activism. The present book aims, in part, to fill the gap left by my previous books on King. It gives more attention to the family roots of King's commitment to nonviolent protest against dehumanizing treatment, and examines the contributions of some of those who paved the way for him in Montgomery, the beginning of his civil rights ministry.

Much of pre-1980s scholarship on King, such as the work of August Meier and David L. Lewis, was typical of the concern expressed above in that it focused primarily on his contributions as social activist, with little positive acknowledgment and attention to the fact that he was also a first-rate theologian and a very good thinker, although of a different type than theologians, ethicists, and philosophers who influenced him during his formal intellectual pilgrimage. A number of those thinkers, whose ideas and what they meant to King will be examined at some length in this book, were strong advocates for social justice and provided helpful ideas that the student King would appeal to in an effort to ground his social conscience theologically. It was left to Mahatma Gandhi, however, to provide a method or technique to

actually resist injustice; a method that King honed and made his own. The white thinkers who influenced King's thought did not, like King, literally and systematically apply and refine their ideas through nonviolent direct action campaigns to set at liberty oppressed black people.

Pre-1980s studies on King generally highlighted his contributions as social activist but to the exclusion of his ability and contributions as thinker and lover of ideas and ideals. King was not only influenced by the ideas of a number of Western thinkers. He was himself a man of ideas who creatively melded together what he considered the best in the ideas of others with his own ideas and experiences and produced a theology that was reflective of, but in some ways went well beyond the contribution of others. He was able to do this in large part because of his direct engagement in the struggle for justice as he sought to apply his best ideas to the civil rights struggle. Without question, King learned much about the theory of love and justice during his formal academic preparation, but these took on a deeper meaning when he sought to apply them through nonviolent direct action campaigns. At the very least, he had to adjust his understanding of love and justice and what was possible to achieve through their application. He learned firsthand (in the hot furnace of the civil rights struggle) that love is very nearly an impossible ideal to actualize in group relations, and yet unlike some thinkers who influenced him (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr), King insisted on its applicability to individuals as well as groups of all sizes, including the largest, most complex of all—nations.

More than anything else, Martin Luther King's love for ideas had to do with what he believed they could contribute toward making the most of persons-in-community, and because of what he knew the best ideas and ideals actually require of human beings as they relate together in community. What can ideas contribute toward helping us to live together in civilized and beloved community-making ways? This is what intrigued and energized Martin Luther King. For in his view, it was not enough to merely be the recipient of a quality education from a top university, for example. Vast numbers of people are formally educated, and yet seem to have no moral qualms with racism, inequality, and other forms of systemic oppression. They are more committed to political correctness than to moral rightness. King believed that the truly educated person is aware of her responsibility to do all in her power to be a good citizen and to make better persons and communities. Minimally, this means that one should do all in her power to resist and eradicate whatever undermines human dignity. It is wonderful to be able to say that one has earned the doctor of philosophy degree in systematic theology from a prestigious university as King had, but at the end of the day he believed that it was more important

to know what difference having such a degree could make in a society where people of Afrikan descent are systematically beaten and crushed to the earth in what is ostensibly the greatest democratic nation in the world.⁴ The values instilled in King by his parents and maternal grandmother, his observation of how his father and other southern black preachers did ministry, as well as how two of his mentors in college represented the Christian ministry, convinced him that as important as education and ideas are, they mean little if one does not put them to the task of making persons and the world better than they were before one was born. Moreover, as literary artist James Arthur Baldwin tried to teach, we humans can be better than we are, and we do not have to leave the world in the same condition we found it when we came into it.

Because Martin Luther King was an Afrikan American who grew up in the blatantly racist and violent Deep South and experienced racism and racial discrimination firsthand, it is important to remember that in virtually every case, he filtered the ideas gleaned from formal academic training through his own sociocultural grid, thus making them more relevant to his context and that of his people. Only in this way could he adapt these ideas to what he and his people confronted on a daily basis in a nation that was essentially hostile toward them. For King, the ideas must aid in the quest to help liberate his people from racial and other forms of oppression.

For all the publicity that was his from Montgomery, Alabama to Memphis, Tennessee, King did not act alone. Although the media and others sometimes erroneously implied otherwise, King himself never pretended that he either started the civil rights movement or that he was its sole, or even its most important leader. Rather, he acknowledged on more than one occasion that in Montgomery, for example, circumstances and the sweep of history were such that the boycott in that city would have occurred even had he not appeared on the scene. Nor did he hesitate to praise the contributions of other leaders, including student activists and local grassroots leaders. King was aware that others followed the ground for him, an important point that seems often to elude people who talk about him and the civil rights movement today. In

4. The use of “c” in the spelling of “Africa” is the Anglicized spelling: that letter does not exist in West Afrikan languages. I use the “k” out of homage and respect for those who struggled for freedom and liberation in the 1960s. During the Black Consciousness Movement of this period, a number of proponents adopted the use of “k,” which was consistent with the usage of many groups on the Afrikan continent. The spelling is still prevalent among some Afrikans on the continent and in diaspora. For example, this is the preferred spelling in a publication I received from Accra, Ghana (*The Afrikan Crusader*), where on every page the spelling is “Afrikan.” I adopted this spelling for my own writing after the publication of my first book in 1994 and have consistently used it in my writing.

this regard, this book will discuss and analyze—among others—the role of the Rev. Vernon Johns, and the women of the Women’s Political Council (WPC), since only in fairly recent years has attention been given their outstanding contributions.

This book takes for granted that in many instances there were phases of the movement that developed and flourished without King’s leadership. Examples include the contributions of black youths as illustrated by the student sit-ins and Freedom Rides in early 1960 and mid-1961, respectively. In addition, it was the young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that launched the voter education–registration campaigns in the very dangerous Mississippi Delta and Selma, Alabama. On more than one occasion, King found himself in the position of having to publicly defend the contributions and technique of nonviolent civil disobedience advanced by the students and other youths. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that King was never eager to engage in public confrontation with his youthful colleagues in the movement, but generally preferred to iron out differences behind closed doors.

For Martin Luther King Jr., then, ideas and nonviolent social activism went hand in hand. Indeed, King’s daily living was a creative admixture of both, and in my estimation he actually wrote the book on what it truly means to be a theological social ethicist who is in touch with the everydayness of life, and thus understands that theory and ideas mean little if their purpose is not to make people and the world better. King was also unequaled when it came to modeling what it means for the theologian to be actively involved in resistance to injustice, thus testing his basic ideas in the fire of the struggle for racial equality. This is what set him apart from other theologians who also staunchly advocated the relevance of the Christian ethic to the social question and the obligation to apply its principles to solving social problems. No theologian whose ideas had a deep impact on King came close to the way he did this—not Walter Rauschenbusch, not Reinhold Niebuhr, not L. Harold DeWolf (his teacher–mentor in personalistic studies at Boston University). King organized and led nonviolent direct action demonstrations against social injustice, putting his ideas to work and his life in jeopardy each and every time.

Because I actually see an ongoing dance between King’s ideas and his nonviolent social activism, I presently find it impossible to speak and write about him without making it unequivocally clear that he was at once a man of ideas *and* a man of relentless nonviolent social activism. Therefore, he had no choice but to seek justice and righteousness for systematically oppressed people. A number of important ideas affiliated with social gospel Christianity, Christian realism, Christian agape, and the philosophy of nonviolence influenced the

development of King's social ethics and how he put these ideas to work in his civil rights ministry. This book will provide a deeper and more informed discussion on these intellectual sources and how they affected King's thought and practice than appears in my previous writings, and in the writings of an earlier generation of scholars who addressed this topic, but for whom King's unpublished papers were not as readily accessible as today. Although references are made in this book to the philosophy of personalism and some of its basic ideas, there is no in-depth discussion of it here. The influence of the philosophy of personalism on King is taken for granted in this text, since I have written two books on the subject. My introductory text on personalism situates King in the moral law tradition of his personalist teachers at Boston University.⁵ The other book focuses explicitly on the mutual influence between King and personalism and how he sought to apply it in his civil rights ministry.⁶

5. See Rufus Burrow Jr., *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 218–22.

6. Burrow, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).