

## The Contribution of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Fields of Christian Theology and Ethics\*

Luther D. Ivory<sup>1</sup>

### Overview

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Martin Luther King, Jr. is widely known and admired for his leadership in the Modern Civil Rights Movement (MCRM) of the 1950s-1960s in America. His participation, along with other agents of cultural change, in numerous “campaigns” of resistance against the unjust treatment of blacks and the disparate treatment of the poor during this period has been well-documented. His highly visible, proactive efforts to achieve legal, social, political, and economic justice for marginalized and undervalued Americans have been equally chronicled. What deserves more attention, however, is a focus on the underlying, less visible concepts, beliefs, values, and principles which provided the metaphysical grounding and impetus for the social activism that occurred. When viewed together, these elements will provide a clearer picture of the nature and content of King’s impact on Christian thought and practice.

As a Christian minister/pastor, theologian, and ethicist, King’s reformulation of the doctrine of love as a proactive force for personal redemption and social change became foundational for his understanding of God. This God-concept catalyzed his theology of radical involvement wherein love became the essence of a God who is proactively working in the universe to achieve cosmic harmony. This theology, in turn, became foundational for an ethic of community which privileged agape love as requisite for aggressively confronting and countering brokenness in human relationships and restoring genuine community. These perspectives play out in the public square through twelve years of recalcitrant struggle in selected cities across America. King’s efforts result in one of the uniquely innovative contributions made in both Christian theology and ethics by an American thinker and social change agent in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Because of the generative tensions it induces, King’s perspective continues to wield significant influence on resistance struggles in multivariate geopolitical contexts around the globe.

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### Introduction

It is the first week of April 2018, in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis is nationally known as the land of the delta blues, southern-style barbeque, and artesian well water. It is internationally recognized as the home of the King of Rock and Roll, where well over a million people descend upon its environs each August to pay homage to Elvis Presley. This week, however, the city’s focus is directed at another King—Martin Luther King. It has been fifty years since Rev. Dr. King was brutally assassinated as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis. A week of events in the city and across the United States, aptly called MLK50, have been scheduled to celebrate the efforts of King and others in the 1950s-1960s incarnation of the modern civil rights movement to eradicate injustice in America. These events are also aimed at challenging the participants to move beyond mere reflection and celebration towards a renewed commitment to engage in activism on behalf of peace and justice.<sup>2</sup>

At its conclusion, MLK50 left scholars and activists with an acute sense of the unfinished agenda of Dr. King and the social justice movement he led. The general consensus on issues remaining to be resolved included numerous local, national, and global problems: racism, violence, war, sexism, homophobia, poverty, police brutality, and illiteracy, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> These problems represent difficult, seemingly intractable realities which continually re-present themselves as impediments to justice and genuine community. Humans in every global context would certainly be much better off without having to navigate any of these social problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Retired, Adjunct Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College of Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>2</sup> “A Complete Guide to Memphis Week”, April, 2018 (<https://www.memphistn.gov>: April 2018)

<sup>3</sup> John Beifuss and Daniel Connolly, “National, International, Media Highlighted Problems and Potential of Memphis During MLK50”, *The Commercial Appeal*, April 6, 2018.

And yet, they re-present precisely the point of departure for acquiring a more profound understanding of Martin Luther King's bold and radical vision for America and the world, his discomfiting analyses, and his novel prescriptions for healing a deeply flawed, morally dis-eased society.

Dr. King was an ordained black, Christian, Baptist pastor and activist who promoted the inseparable connection between religious faith and social and political engagement. As a result, his theological perspective would serve as the edifice upon which he would construct his ethical program. His theology catalyzed an inner, combative spirituality that sought to exposé, confront, and eliminate the dysfunctional interpersonal elements and malevolent societal forces at work during his time. Fueled by this theological perspective, his ethic would lead inevitably to the conviction that only a morally responsible response to the myriad incarnate moral evils in the human community would be redemptive and lasting. To construct this moral superstructure, King re/appropriated Christian principles, filtered these through the prism of the black religious experience, and fused both with selected concepts and themes from philosophical ethics, Gandhian nonviolent resistance, and American civil religion. This protean mixture was then refined through the crucible of struggle and resistance. The process resulted in an innovative ethical approach that King would continue to hone and utilize to address the intransigent moral-social problems of his day.<sup>4</sup>

This essay is concerned with the question, "What was Martin Luther King's distinctive contribution to the fields of Christian theology and ethics"? Providing an answer to this question will necessitate a brief consideration of King's familial roots, religious and pastoral experience, and association with the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s-1960s in the United States. Further, achieving clarity about the content of King's ethic and the impact it has made on the Christian tradition will require a clearer understanding of his theological perspective and how it informed and guided his ethic. Finally, the question of King's ethical contribution will be enhanced by giving due credence to the developmental nature of the ethic's public expression as King continued to mature as a theologian, strategist, and tactician. As the reader moves through the stages of this journey, a clearer image and more profound understanding of King as an innovative theological and ethical formulator and public moral agent is expected to emerge.

### **Contextualization: the Socio-Political and Religious Roots of King's Theological-Ethical Approach**

The initial context of King's emergent theology and ethic is located in his family of origin's residence within, and navigation through, the sociopolitical dynamics of the Southern region of the United States from the late 1800s through the 1950s. As an African American family, whose generational roots lay in the state of Georgia, the King family had, for decades, lived under the weight of a malevolent system of white segregation designed to oppress blacks legally, socially, politically, and economically. Segregation was driven by a white supremacist ideology that devalued black ontology and valorized white skin privilege as God-given. In the aftermath of the Plessy court decision in 1896, the Southern states of the U.S. had acted to construct an elaborate web of social norms, mores, and legal precedent which created and reinforced two separate worlds: one black-one white, separate and unequal.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, in every sphere of existence, blacks were relegated to an inferior position and systematically denied fundamental human and civil rights. In the areas of voting, employment, public transportation and travel, housing, education, political office, legal, and wages, blacks were subordinated to an inferior status.<sup>6</sup>

Martin Luther King grew up in this existentially debilitating social ethos, and like his great grandparents, grandparents, and parents, developed a heightened aversion to the dehumanizing social conditions which blacks had continued to endure.

<sup>4</sup> Luther D. Ivory, "Call and Response in Contemporary Life: Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The Rhythm of Discipleship*, Foundations of Christian Faith (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2008), 60-70.

<sup>5</sup> The 11 member Kerner Commission (named after its Chair, Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner) was established by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 28, 1967 in the aftermath of Summer Riots that had been sweeping through the big cities of the U.S. since 1965. The Commission was tasked with finding answers to three questions: What happened? Why did it happen? What could be done to rectify and prevent the occurrence of summer riots? See Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, February 29, 1968. The findings and recommendations of the Commission were largely ignored by President Johnson, Congress, State Governors and City Mayors in America. Two (2) subsequent Reports entitled *The Millennium Breach and Locked in the Poorhouse* were sponsored by the Eisenhower Foundation in 1998 to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kerner Report. These two reports found that the racial divide, inner city poverty, unemployment, and incarceration, quality of education for urban blacks had worsened over the decades since 1968 and were, in fact, at crisis levels. In September 25, 2018, in a lengthy essay published in Brookings Institute, Marcus Casey and Bradley Hardy revisited the question of how much had improved in America since the 1968 Kerner Report. They reported that while "the country has seen much progress...the [1968] report outlined concerns that are still relevant... racial segregation...higher unemployment...lower wages...huge disparities in wealth...persist at levels near those described by Kerner and his colleagues five decades ago."

<sup>6</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011).

Like numerous activist blacks before him (including his grandfather and father who were activist-pastor-preachers) who actively resisted the segregation system and worked to dismantle its laws and customs, King asserted a moral imperative for comprehensive societal reform. His activist bent was planted and born in his childhood, fueled by his family's influence, and found additional impetus in the church and formal education. King's theology and ethic would gradually materialize from a dynamic interplay between several factors. Primary among these are his lived experience as a black man, his familial connections, collegiate experience, and the black church/religious tradition. As he pursued formal education at several institutions (Morehouse College, Crozer Seminary, Boston University), the encounter with progressivist professors, liberal Christian thought, American civil religion, and Gandhian nonviolent resistance would clarify and deepen his commitment to a theological perspective and an ethic that championed both personal redemption and social-institutional transformation.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Emergence and Ascendancy of a Unique Theological Voice in America**

### **First Words**

In 2018, King continued to enjoy an iconic stature in both national and international arenas. Since the meteoric rise of King's public persona after the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, his hallowed status has been ubiquitous and pervasive in public consciousness. Bridges, buildings, and streets are named in his honor. Books have been written and movies have been made about him. A national holiday is celebrated in his honor. He remains among the most quoted personalities in human history. While it is tempting to interpret his importance through the lens of his static, gargantuan stature, such a view would obscure and distort the developmental nature of King's perspective and its contribution to Christianity. King's theological understanding and ethical approach were forged gradually through the fires of dissent and protest, emerging from the crucible of justice "campaigns" from 1955-1968. Since his theology and his ethic are symbiotically related, we will be required to begin with a consideration of the theological perspective which provided the grounding for King's ethic.

### **King's Developing Theology**

Theology, as a discipline, has traditionally been understood as rational discourse about the nature of the Divine. Martin King, however, would come to understand theology in a more complex, nuanced, and dynamic way. As such, theology would take on paramount importance for his efforts to make sense and meaning of reality. King graduated from Morehouse College as a sociology major and was infused with a sense of responsibility to work for racial equality and social justice. After experiencing a "call" to the ordained ministry at age 17, King pursued studies at Crozer Seminary. While there he developed a keen interest in courses in theology. Harboring a heightened sense of racial and social uplift which he had inherited from his family and Morehouse college, he began to gradually develop a concern with theological relevancy. King's burning theological questions became, "What is God concerned about?" and "Where and how is God present in the affairs of human history?"

From Crozer forward, King's theology was consumed with worrying about the things that he felt God was worried about.<sup>8</sup> He entered graduate studies at Boston University to study a theological-philosophical perspective known as Personalism.<sup>9</sup> This school of thought held that the clue to the universe's ultimate meaning was to be found in conceptualizing all reality (including God) as personality. Personalism also provided the grounding for King to understand God as metaphysical Personality who had created not only physical reality, but who had continued to govern and redeem the cosmos. In fact, God had purposively established moral laws, which provided the universe with moral coherence, ensured its harmonious functioning, and kept alive the possibilities of moral redemption. King's studies had given him clarity not only about Divine intentionality and care (providence and theodicy), but human responsibility (ethics) as well.<sup>10</sup> The personalist conviction held that the universe had been structured intentionally by God through higher moral law to operate as a "moral cosmos".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Luther D. Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 16, 26-41.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Our God Is Able", in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, ed., (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 540-509.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change* (New York: Orbis Press, 1982), 18-26, 37-70, 71-86.

<sup>10</sup> Rufus Burrow, Jr. *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theology of Resistance*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2015, 17-109.

<sup>11</sup> On the idea of moral cosmos, see David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning*, Oxford University Press, 2016; see also *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* by Katie G. Cannon and Anthony Pinn, editors, Oxford University Press, 2014; on the idea of a black sacred cosmos see

*The Black Church in the African American Experience* by Lawrence Mamiya, Duke University Press, 1990.

King embraced and affirmed this belief which, for him, had been further corroborated through his lived experience, the Black church, and his reading of the Biblical narratives of creation, exodus, Prophets, and crucifixion-and-resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

As he read the Biblical narrative, and other theologians, King began to imagethe nature of the Divine Personality as agape love. This Divine love expressed itself as radical-love-in-action. Further, this love demonstrated God's interest, investment, and radical involvement in the cosmos and human affairs. It was this understanding of God as radical-love-in-action that provided the underpinning for King's ethic of community. This ethic insisted that the expression of radical, extremist love among humans was to be understood as a Divine imperative. When applied to human relationships, agape love represented the only viable path to the redemption of fragmented community. I Corinthians 13 identified this love as agape, and King described it as "creative, redemptive, understanding, goodwill for all humanity".<sup>13</sup>

As he continued to reflect upon what he had learned from the black religious tradition and correlated these insights with his reading of the Bible, history and his daily lived existence, King was able to affirm several related notions: 1. God intended the universe to be a moral cosmos where love provided the guiding norm for both Divine and human action. 2. God structured the universe through the moral law of love. As such, the universe was morally coherent since its very existence was owed to a cohesive element (love) that operated continuously to prevent it from splintering into fragmentation and chaos. 3. Despite the forces of unprincipled self-assertion, distorted and imbalanced group/tribal egoism, and unbridled institutional callousness and self-absorption, God mandated humans to act in accordance with the moral law of love to establish and maintain harmonious relationships (genuine community). These underlying theological beliefs about God and the moral capacity of humans (guided by radical love) to achieve moral improvement symbiotically inform King's ethical vision and practice.

When King returned to the South as a pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, he was hurled into the swirling and unsettling dynamics of a bus boycott aimed at defeating white supremacy ideology and the accompanying segregation statutes which had devalued blacks for decades. In this context of justice struggle, King continued to hammer out a theological basis for public engagement. Gradually, the resonance between the theology he was asserting and the ethic he was practicing became solidified. Although they would undergo increasing "radicalization", King's core theological themes, beliefs, concerns, assertions, and ethical commitments remained largely intact throughout the 12-year period from 1955-1968.

### **King's Theology of Radical Involvement**

From the very beginning of his choice to assume the vocation of Christian ministry, King became obsessed with achieving theological clarity. He wanted to know what God was up to in the world. He wanted to worry about the things that God worried about. As a black theologian situated in the deep South, King was understandably concerned with God's perspective on race and racism. His formal studies culminated in a dense doctoral dissertation about the nature of God in two influential philosophical Christian theologians, Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman.<sup>14</sup> King combined the concepts he had unearthed from this study with beliefs and themes he had come to embrace from the black religious tradition, liberal Christianity, American civil religion, and Gandhian nonviolence.<sup>15</sup> He then applied these insights towards a quest to find solutions to the existential plight of blacks in the southern U.S.

What emerged was a theological perspective that place heavy accent on the proactive bent of a God whose essential nature was love-agape love – the love God expressed towards all humanity. Agape love was transformative in nature and effect, working with intentionality to create, recognize, and enhance value in every context in the created order. This Divine love not only established the moral basis of cosmic reality through moral law, but it also remained imminent, acting in historical moments to achieve the realization of God's ultimate objective: the creation of moral harmony in the universe and the Beloved Community among humans. This love was always operating with the guiding norms of valuation, justice/equity, and peace.<sup>16</sup> For King, agape love was an active, revolutionary force, available in all situations, especially those with heightened contrast between love and hate, justice and injustice, good and evil. This was King's God, and this God was understood as essentially radical-agape-in-action.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 30-31, 84-95.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", in Washington, 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall L. Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Life* (Penguin: New York, 2002), 19-44.

<sup>15</sup> Luther D. Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 35-38.

<sup>16</sup> Ansbro, 1-36.

<sup>17</sup> See King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in Washington, 293-294; Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 107-110.

The notion of God as loving, caring Personality working actively to bring moral harmony out of cosmic discord, predisposed King to develop and promote a theology of radical involvement.<sup>18</sup>

King's theology of radical involvement proceeded from the belief that the universe was morally-based, morally-driven, and morally-coherent. This theology placed God at cross-purposes with anything that was not in alignment with the Divine moral order. With regard to purposive human actions, God was definitively AGAINST actions which were antithetical to Divine intent, and FOR those that were in harmony with Divine intent. When assessing dehumanizing customs, laws, institutions, and systems created and perpetuated over time such as white supremacist ideologies, slavery, segregation statutes, and social customs and mores championed by Jim Crow laws, King was convinced that God was AGAINST these realities because they discounted and short-circuited the cluster of norms which God had chosen as the moral compass to guide the universe's proper functioning.

In fact, the universe itself was ALSO operating in CONTRADISTINCTION to such oppressive realities since they were unjust and in violation of moral law.<sup>19</sup> King's theological position was clear, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice".<sup>20</sup> This theological perspective also gave King the metaphysical criteria by which to view racial xenophobia and segregation as theological-moral problems involving justice rather than mere sociopolitical issues involving self-interest and expediency. King was able to place racism on the table of discourse in the Christian community, as a moral dilemma and a spiritual malady, in need of BOTH God's redeeming power and believers' urgent attention.

By connecting the two aspects of divine providence and human responsibility symbiotically, King made a significant contribution to Christian theology. He would now identify and promote a two-fold concern for theology. First, theology must be attentive to the movement of God in the historical situation. The theological task could not escape the moral mandate to engage in situational analysis in order to ascertain truth about WHAT was happening, and WHY it was happening in the present moment. Further, the theological task required a discernment about what God was doing in the situation to bring about restoration. Second, in a context of human brokenness, the theological task could not remain an aloof, detached spectator or onlooker, content to offer sanitized, innocuous doctrinal positions. Rather, theology must now echo God's call to become an engaged, radical lover and co-worker who joins God through radical action to redeem and restore community to an alignment with the moral norms of love, justice, and peace.<sup>21</sup>

King re-imagined theology as more than simply rational discourse about the nature of God and other related doctrines. The point of theology, for King, was to serve God in the concrete historical situation. King's theology of radical involvement innovatively linked the worship of God and service in the Church to emancipatory struggle in the society aimed at restoration of human relationships in personal, interpersonal, and structural-institutional relationships. King elevated social activism in service to the defeat of injustice to its prominence at the CENTER of the Christian gospel. A very different understanding of the vocation of the theologian had emerged. The theologian must now hold together with equal vitality, inner, contemplative spirituality and outer, prophetic social action. Responsibility for moral transformation in individual lifestyle and corporate structures was no longer the sole province of the Divine. Humanity had its own Cross to bear as well. King had now elevated orthopraxy (right action) to a place of CO-EQUAL importance with orthodoxy (right belief).

In this way, King's theology of radical involvement promoted the notion that the redemption and restoration of broken human community, was now a CO-RESPONSIBLE imperative for BOTH God and humankind. The defeat of moral evil and the establishment of love, justice, and peace in history, for King, was NOT achievable without the dual, concerted efforts of God AND purposive human action.<sup>22</sup> As difficult as it might be for humans to understand or accept, God DOES choose sides in situations where there is a struggle between justice and injustice. In such situations, God expects humans to engage in hard analysis, make difficult choices, and actively participate on the side of justice. This claim of Divine preference for justice and against IN-justice would have profound implications for King's developing ethic.

### **King's Ethic of Community**

#### **Ethics, Christian Ethics, and the Christian Life**

Ethics concerns itself with the bases of human behavior. The primary ethical question is, "What ought

<sup>18</sup> An emphasis on Divine interest, investment, and radical involvement in human history to bring about the just, loving community.

<sup>19</sup> See King's "The Power of Nonviolence", and King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail", in Washington, 12-15 and 289-302.

<sup>20</sup> See King's "Our God is Marching On", in Washington, 230.

<sup>21</sup> Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Ivory, *Towards A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 122-125.

I/we to do?” or “How ought I/we behave?”. Christian ethics concerns itself with moral norms and standards of behavior for humans who have explicitly embraced the Christian religious tradition.<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther King’s life was decisively shaped by his family’s and his own immersion in and commitment to the black Christian religious and black church traditions.

It is this commitment that drove him, as a member of an oppressed group in America, to search for a method of social change which was grounded in and consistent with the moral values and principles in these traditions.<sup>24</sup> King’s ethical concerns were also rooted in the broad Christian tradition. However, King would challenge the ethical approaches of the Christian community and push the tradition towards an agonizing self-appraisal. King RE/framed the primary ethical question as, “What would the God of Jesus Christ have me/us to do in the context of struggle with moral evil?” King’s answer to this question provided an innovative Re/formulation of broad, strategic emphases, and a RE/fashioning of particular tactical agendas for the Christian community.

Armed with the theological belief in a morally-based, morally-coherent universe, King read the Bible, Christian tradition, and human history as ONE long, continuous narrative of God’s intentional efforts to overcome the deleterious effects of moral evil and to realize a community based upon radical, agape love. This theological conviction provided the content for King understands of the ethical task. Radical involvement theology demanded a morally responsible human response to the “call of God” in the concrete situation. The Christian ethicist, especially, should be concerned not merely about what God was up to in the world, but also what radical love required of the believer. The ethicist should be worried about the things that worried God. For King, the question for the Christian ethicist was not “What would the God of Jesus do in this situation?” Rather, the question was, “What would the God of Jesus have ME/US do in this situation?” The answer mandated a proactive approach, especially in situations where human thought and action operated at cross-purposes with Divine intent. Consequently, apathy in situations of injustice was sinful, idolatrous, and a sign of spiritual impoverishment, social irresponsibility, and moral hypocrisy.<sup>25</sup>

### **King’s Primary Ethical Concerns, Themes, Emphases 1955-1964**

King’s theology and ethic were so inseparably interconnected that his ethic flowed fluidly from his theology as water from a cistern. Therefore, radical involvement theology became the underpinning for King’s ethic of community. An emphasis on the transformative power of radical agape love in his theology leads inevitably to his belief in a socially active faith. This, in turn, fueled King’s insistence that the whole of the gospel aimed at both personal and social salvation. When King posed the ethical question, “What would God have me/us to do in this situation?”, the answer was clear and unequivocal. God was continuously calling the Christian to become a radical lover, to discover where God is actively at work in the human condition, to join God in the effort to restore a morally fragmented cosmos, redeem broken humanity, and help God bring into realization the Beloved Community. The primary ethical concern for King, was HOW to assist God, as a co-responsible moral agent, in the establishment of a community driven by the values of love, justice, and peace.

The ethical emphases, themes, and methods embraced by King from 1955-1964 are characterized by his fixation on the notions of love and justice. During this time, King’s ethic presents itself as more existentially naïve and ideological. Most of his public statements and methods emphasize the power of nonviolence and moral suasion to disrupt and dismantle Southern segregation. Without question, his mood is more optimistic relative to the possibilities for societal change, and his faith in liberal reformism and the Christian church especially is clearly more substantial.<sup>26</sup> King’s ethical orientation is clearly more tame and moderate when compared to the analyses and methods he advocated and utilized after 1964. Nevertheless, even at this early stage, the methods promoted and used by his ethic marks a radical departure from past approaches to social change in America, and represent a significant contribution to Christian ethics.

First, King was able to provide moral grounds for resistance efforts against segregation in America. Prior to King, the Christian church had primarily offered theological statements on racial reconciliation and had done little else in terms of a sustained, collective public witness against racial injustice.

<sup>23</sup> See Stephen D. Long, *Christian Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> William D. Watley, *The Nonviolent Ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985), 47-61.

<sup>25</sup> Ivory, *Towards A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 118-122.

<sup>26</sup> See James H. Cone’s insightful essay, “Demystifying Martin and Malcolm”, *Theology Today, Sage Journals*, Volume 51, Issue 1, April 1994, 27-37; and Chapter 5 of James H. Cone’s *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or A Nightmare*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

King brought a fresh, new voice that applied moral-spiritual resources to indict America and the Christian tradition for their too-easy acceptance of the status quo. King argued for a socially active faith which mandated active confrontation against incarnate moral evil. The church and the nation were urged to take sides in the struggle against injustice and for the cause of equality. There could be no neutrality for the Christian church in the context of blatant oppression against black Americans. In a way that had never been experienced, King's ethic of community narrowed the comfort zone of the Christian church. King steered the church away from sterile conference tables, hotel suites, and sanctuaries, and into the swirling, confrontational dynamics of streets, highways, local businesses, and halls of government.

He insisted that the Christian religion had to be embodied, lived, and practiced, rather than merely dispassionately memorized and piously mouthed in worship services on Sunday mornings.<sup>27</sup>

Radical agape love emphasized the moral obligation of the believer to assume a posture of NONcooperation with evil, and to become a CO-worker with God's justice activity.<sup>28</sup> King's ethic insisted that Divine sovereignty and human responsibility were inseparably interconnected. Thus, active prayer for God's companionship in the struggle against evil was efficacious ONLY when accompanied by prayerful human acts. Finally, since the ethic of the "early" King emphasized means-ends coherence, the violence option was considered both immoral and impractical in the movement. Heavily influenced by a focus on love, moral power, the sanctity/sacredness and interrelatedness of human life, King's ethic stressed NONviolence as the ONLY morally acceptable option available to oppressed people in the struggle. Love, justice, and freedom became the language while nonviolent direct action became the method for an ethic that was revolutionary for its time.

At the successful completion of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, King asserted that the only way to combat hatred, bitterness, and injustice, was, "by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives".<sup>29</sup> This transformative love was pivotal in King's efforts to "redeem the soul of the nation"<sup>30</sup>, and catapulted him beyond the leadership of the highly successful 381-day bus boycott and on to the Presidency of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. During the next nine years, King's ethic would employ the moral law of love in nonviolent direct action "campaigns" in cities across America to confront and defeat recalcitrant, incarnate moral evil. The ultimate GOAL of this ethic, however, was NOT nonviolence, but the realization of a BELOVED COMMUNITY of freedom, equality, and justice.<sup>31</sup>

When King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he stressed the notion that peace itself was NOT the primary objective of the movement. Rather, the ultimate goal was "to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice".<sup>32</sup> Consequently, peace, while an integral component, was but one element of a larger, more comprehensive, objective. The overarching ethical concern of King is evidenced in his riveting acceptance speech:

"I accept this award on behalf of a civil rights movement which is moving...to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice...I am mindful [of]...the right to vote...debilitating and grinding poverty...the need for man (sic) to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression...to discover a way to live in peace...[to]...evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation....I refuse to accept the view that mankind (sic) is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war...that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality...that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits...that nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land...as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom."<sup>33</sup>

By 1964, King's ethical concerns had moved well beyond racial justice to include voting rights, employment, poverty, hunger, militarism, war, police brutality, and education. King's incessant search for a method to address the problem of racial inequality had already begun to expand.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Expanding Horizons and Gradually Increasing Radicalization of King's Ethic: 1965-1968**

<sup>27</sup> See "Stride Toward Freedom", in Washington, 438-450, and "Letter from Birmingham City Jail", in Washington, 296-300.

<sup>28</sup> Washington, 48, 296.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>30</sup> The motto of the SCLC was "to redeem the soul of the nation". See Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> See King's statements in Washington, 7-8, 12-13, 118

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther King, "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech", in Washington, 224.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 224-226.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Stride Toward Freedom", in Washington, 37.

King's ethic, situated (initially) in the context of segregation, matured gradually as he was exposed to other incarnate forms of moral evil which had to be confronted, challenged, and addressed. While King's core theological beliefs remained relatively stable throughout his tenure, the analyses and tactical methods employed by King's ethic gradually morphed into increasingly more novel, dynamic, and radical expressions over time. This is especially the case after 1964 when his contextual analysis gained more sophistication and became more nuanced as a result of his widening experience in acts of public resistance against segregationist laws and practices. Accompanying this development is King's more profound grasp of the systemic, intersectional, web-like nature of the triple moral evils of racism, poverty, and war-violence. This new insight forced King to incorporate novel concepts, analytical tools, emphases, strategies, and tactics which were substantively more radical in nature, and which further delineate King's distinctive contribution to the field of Christian ethics

King's Nobel Prize acceptance speech is instructive for pointing to the evolutionary nature of King's ethical orientation. The year was 1964.<sup>35</sup> America was shedding its cultural innocence. So too was Martin Luther King with respect to his understanding of the pervasive, intransigent, and systemic-structural nature of sin and evil incarnated in the "triple moral evils". Nine years into the "movement", King had acquired a more conscientized awareness of the depth and scope, not only of what Myrdal identified as the "American dilemma"<sup>36</sup>, but the related social ills of poverty, violence, and war. King understood more clearly how the "triple evils" were interconnected and inter-structured. Consequently, he was now more astute in his social, political and economic analyses of American society. King also acknowledged that the remedial approaches of the last nine years were not entirely adequate for addressing the root causes of the recalcitrant problems which the movement sought to address.

In 1964, King underwent a decisive "shift" in both his social analyses and ethical program.<sup>37</sup> The pre-1964 King or "early King", the somewhat naïve ideologue, who championed language which highlighted love and justice, was morphing into the post-1964 King, the "late King", who now employed language which highlighted love, justice AND power! This King was a more sophisticated, nuanced analyzer of culture who understood the nature of, as well as the need for POWER (as a social-political resource) in the efforts to achieve social reform. These two Kings are BOTH continuous and DIS-continuous. While the same theological and ethical themes, emphases, and methods are present in both, the post-1964 King's ethical program takes on a more pronounced and gradually deepening radicality in its public expressions.<sup>38</sup> A few years later, in 1967, when asked to reflect upon important lessons the movement had learned since 1955, the post-1964, "late" King's response was both revealing and instructive:

"When a people are mired in oppression, they realize deliverance only when they have accumulated the power to enforce change...The nettlesome task of Negroes today is to discover how to organize into compelling power...We must frankly acknowledge that in past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power...Now we must take the next major step of examining the levers of power which Negroes must grasp to influence the course of events".<sup>39</sup>

In essence, the movement had lacked an adequate power analysis. With a revised emphasis on the need for power, the post-1964 King recalled the biblical God who infused love with power and utilized both to effect cosmic justice.<sup>40</sup> This insight pushed King's ethic to incorporate power in a more serious way. The ethic now assumed a more radical character which was reflected in both King's public discourse and his highly visible methods of social engagement. The public witness of the "late King", especially during the years 1965-1968, was marked by a gradually deepening radicality that includes the following elements:

<sup>35</sup> The cinematographic historian Stephen Ives has appropriated Jon Margolis' description of 1964 as "America's last innocent year". See "1964", PBS, *The American Experience*, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Vol. 1 (London: Transaction Publishers, 1944).

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that the embryonic stages of this 'shift' is evident in the years immediately prior to 1964. Note the strident, impatient tone in "The Case Against Tokenism" in 1962. In King's classic epistolary "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in 1963, King's harsh critiques of white liberals and the white church and its leadership illumine his increasing frustration with liberal sociopolitical agendas and timetables for achieving justice for blacks in America. See Washington, 106-111, 289-302.

<sup>38</sup> Radicality may be understood as the quest for comprehensive transformation by addressing the root causes of problems rather than treating them symptomatically. For a fuller discussion of this development in King's ethic as well as an explanation of the concept of radicality in King's theology and ethic, see Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 107-129.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Black Power Defined", in Washington, 303.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 52-55.



1. An increased awareness & recognition of the deeply ingrained nature of racism in American society.
2. An increasing disenchantment with whites & a deepened disappointment and frustration with white liberals and the white church.
3. A more publicly visible ‘disturbance’ - dissatisfaction, restlessness with the principles, values, and effects of status quo monopoly capitalism.
4. A more sophisticated, nuanced critique of America’s political & economic institutional practices. A recognition of the ‘inter-structuring’ of oppression.
5. A broadening or expansion of the ‘horizons’ of his ethical program to include all of the ‘triple evils’.
6. A more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the nature and role of power as a human resource in efforts to achieve justice. Power analysis becomes a very important element in King’s strategic emphases and tactical agendas after 1965.
7. A more intense inner struggle with liberal reformist approaches. This included a troubling critique of integration as a viable goal and possibility in America (“temporary segregation”).
8. An increased openness to consider alternative models of societal critique, political methodologies to achieve justice, and economic arrangements. For example, black consciousness, mass civil disobedience, and democratic socialism.
9. More frequent & pronounced public jeremiads (prophetic critique). Increasingly critical of policies and practices of institutional structures.
10. A movement from nonviolent direct action to massive civil disobedience that included increasingly riskier forms of public agitation & protest in order to dramatize the ‘triple evils’ of racism, poverty, and war-violence in the society.
11. A more pronounced shift in the basis of hope—a movement away from America’s moral capacity and appeals to goodness of humans – towards faith in the biblical God of love, justice, and peace that is promoted in the black religious tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Together these elements coalesced and resulted in a profound shift in tactical methodology in King’s ethic. Strategically, the telos or aim remained the same: the realization of the Beloved Community of love, justice, and peace. Tactically, there emerged deepening radicality in King’s application of the ethic of community to address the pressing moral, social, political, and economic problems of his time. In terms of deepening radicality of analysis and activism, the ethical approach of the King of 1955-1963 was to the King of 1965-1968 as lavender is to purple. By the time King arrived in Memphis in 1968, the strategic emphases and tactical agendas of his ethical perspective had taken on a more strident, nuanced sophisticated, and publicly-forceful CHARACTER. In turn, his ethic of community sponsored a bolder and more radical VISION which resulted in a more mature, penetrating, and challenging analysis of American culture. King’s ethic now championed more UN conventional, radical, extremist, and disruptive types of political engagement and social activism.<sup>42</sup>

### **King’s Distinctive Contribution to Christian Ethics**

What can we learn about King’s approach that not only makes him a unique theological voice in contemporary culture, but also highlights his distinctive contribution to the field of Christian ethics? In answering this question, several areas may be highlighted in this regard. First, King’s ethic of community highlighted the RELEVANCY of the Christian faith to the crises of the culture of the day. While Christian identity remained an important consideration, King’s belief in the sociality of human life and the interconnectedness of reality led to his privileging of relevancy as a concern equally as important as identity. Since King’s God was interested in the redemption of the world (not merely Christians), the question of identity remained inseparably linked to relevancy. King spoke often of the “world house”, and his ethic employed the tools of situational analysis in order to address and remedy the injustices of racism, poverty and war-violence for ALL people. King’s ethic also challenged the inordinate fixation on interior spirituality and its narrow focus on privatism and personal salvation. His ethic promoted a SOCIALLY ACTIVE FAITH which was equally attentive to contextual realities.<sup>43</sup> Social responsibility was no longer viewed as peripheral. King’s ethic had moved it to a place of centrality in the Christian life. In this way, King promoted a public morality that took seriously sin in its corporate dimensions.

King elevated LOVE as a force not only for personal redemption, but for social transformation as well. He RE/configured radical, agape love as foundational for personal conversion, interpersonal reconciliation, and social, institutional change. He RE/conceptualized love beyond sentimentalism into an active, organic force operating at the very heart of God and the center of the universe. This love was interested, invested and radically involved in the redemption and restoration of the human community, and it demanded a way of being and doing that was in alignment with that communal vision. In this way, King’s ethic promoted a type of extremism, dissatisfaction, restlessness, nonconformity, and maladjusted-ness – a SPIRITUALITY OF BELLIGERENCE - with policies, actions, judgements that were misaligned with the moral norms of love, justice, and peace.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Taken from lecture notes for the course, “The Theology and Ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr., taught by Luther Ivory at Rhodes College, Memphis, Tn., 1996-present.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther King, “Where Do We Go From Here?”, in Washington, 555-633.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 617

<sup>44</sup> See King’s, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail..”, in Washington, 356, 296-298

King's ethic of community also accentuated the moral dimension in the struggle for justice. The insistence upon radical agape love was wedded to the notions of ahimsa and satyagraha which King appropriated from Gandhi. This combination resulted in an unshakeable adherence to "means-ends coherence" philosophy. In addition, the anthropological assertions of the "Imago Dei" (Image of God) and the absolute worth and dignity of all human personality meant that, for King, MORALITY AND MILITANCY must remain inseparably connected as two sides of the same coin.<sup>45</sup> The "end" of creation of a beloved human community disallowed use of violent, unjust, immoral "means" in efforts to achieve love, justice, and peace. In this way, King's ethic promoted the notion of "moral militancy" or "militant morality". While nonviolence was NOT the primary objective of the ethic of community, it was without question an indispensable tool in the process. The end of this ethic was the defeat of unjust systems rather than individuals who had been shaped by those systems.

Since King believed that ALL humans possessed a potential for goodness, were bearers of the image of God, and carried a sacred status, the use of any method which devalued or dehumanized others was considered morally improper and anathema (morally out of bounds) in his ethic.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, King was a religious innovator who exhibited the traits of an organic spiritualist. As a RELIGIOUS INNOVATOR, King's ethic unapologetically privileged the voice of those who lived at the margins of the community—the "least of these", the truly disadvantaged, the voiceless, powerless poor, the disenfranchised. Historically, Christian ethics had been written predominantly by privileged, educated elites situated in the academy, serving the interests of the powerful at the centers of the society. Rarely, had America witnessed a highly educated personality who cast lots in solidarity with the suffering poor and mistreated blacks. This ethical point of departure would serve as a precursor to the action-reflection oriented, liberationist theologies and ethics of the late 1960s emerging out of Latin America.<sup>47</sup> In this way, as a religious innovator, King's ethic connected religious faith to social and political praxis in a way that few had done in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. As an ORGANIC SPIRITUALIST, King's ethic linked the worship of God to the active life of the mind, in service to both personal redemption and the transformation of public institutions.<sup>48</sup>

## **The Continuing Relevance of Martin Luther King's Christian Theology and Ethics**

### **Martin Luther King in the New Millennium: Empowerment Figure or Empty Icon?**

In a public conversation examining King's social justice legacy, Jesse Jackson (a member of King's inner circle of "lieutenants" in the SCLC)<sup>49</sup>, observed that King, unlike any leader before him, had moved mass action, mass sacrifice, and the changing of laws and public policies from the margins to the center of Christian tradition of dissent and challenge to moral evil.<sup>50</sup> When asked whether Martin Luther King had become another empty icon, stripped of his power to dislodge societal complacency relative to social justice challenges, Jackson offered a provocative response for the Christian church:

"He has not become empty...many of the celebrations have become empty and diversionary and de facto conservative. I've been in too many churches that have a picture of Dr. King in the vestibule, Malcolm X in the study, and Falwell theology in the pulpit. Just downright retarded."

Michael Eric Dyson extended this line of argument, and pushed it farther with a hard challenge to American culture:

"I think that we are incapable in America of acknowledging the genuine threat of a militant figure who wedged on the one hand the most serious language and vocabulary of American democracy and yokes that to a very serious revolutionary tradition generated out of the belly and the womb of an African American spiritual tradition. That was a profound marriage.

<sup>45</sup>See Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 57-61; Richard W. Wills, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God* (Oxford: University Press, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther King, "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience", Washington, 43-53.

<sup>47</sup> Among these liberationist theologians and ethicists, Gustavo Gutierrez is perhaps the most well-known and influential. See his *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Orbis, 1985).

<sup>48</sup> On the notion of organic spirituality, I am influenced by Edward W. Said in *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Random House, 1994), and Ivory's notion of engaged piety in Ivory, *Rhythm of Discipleship*, 19-29.

<sup>49</sup> The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was an organization formed in 1957 in Atlanta, Georgia. It was comprised primarily of Black Christian ministers, and worked on issues of social, political, and economic justice in the Southern region of the U.S. King served as SCLC President from its inception until his untimely death in 1968.

<sup>50</sup> "Martin Luther King, Jr., Lecture in Social Justice", panel discussion with Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, moderated by Tukufu Zuberi at University of Pennsylvania, January 22, 2004, <https://youtu.be/cthn-9y0oAl>.

So when I think about Martin Luther King, Jr., and I think about his challenge and his legacy, and I think about what the state of that dream is, no we are not celebrating the incredible dream of [King] we have frozen [King], ...frozen him into a narrow framework that says he was talking about a dream in 1963....we have frozen Dr. King's legacy to a single moment...we have turned King into a rhetorical ventriloquist. We are using him to speak words that he articulated without the meanings that he intended....So I don't think we have a. comprehended the complexity of that dream, b. we've frozen King into a narrow moment, and c. we haven't talked about the third movement beyond that dream which was economic and social justice...."

### **The Continuing Contribution of King's Christian Theology and Ethic: Generative Tensions, Radical Involvement, and the Beloved Community**

The insights of Jackson and Dyson (both Christian pastors and activists) are illuminative for a clearer understanding of the impact and continuing relevancy of King's theology of radical involvement and ethic of community. Their comments point to an ambivalence and a confusion both within the ecclesial community and beyond relative to King's vision and program.

Although King's rhetoric and strategic/tactical agenda was promoted with a high degree of clarity in the public square, America appears to suffer perennially from a myopic understanding of his vision for human community. His emphatic insistence on the inseparable linkage between social responsibility and the Christian faith as suffered heavy redaction, and in many instances, has been almost completely excised from current religious dialogue. Likewise, King's public discourse on the intimate interconnections between the moral, political, and legal domains appears to have evaporated from communal consciousness. We appear to remain encapsulated within a thin, recurring, intellectual "fog" relative to the Kingian agenda in contemporary culture.

And yet, despite this lack of clarity in religious and secular realms, King's theological and ethical legacies, in fact, continue to wield substantive influence on global initiatives for peace and justice. Without question, King's impact upon progressivist political reformers and social activists around the world cannot be overstated.<sup>51</sup> These movements for freedom, justice, and equality provide prima facie evidence of the continued relevancy of King's legacy for resistance movements and mass efforts aimed at societal transformation.

King's perspective offers a variety of forms of activist engagement. However, I believe that the most enduring aspect of King's contribution lies in the generative tensions that his program continues to exert on the collective consciousness of communities that persist in cultural work to complete the unfinished agenda of King's Beloved Community. A GENERATIVE TENSION is "a tension, the presence of which continually re/creates or re/induces a heightened, compelling mandate for resolution. It re/presents those issues or concerns that arise inevitably at points in human history, assertively re/introducing themselves, seeking redress of the unsettling psychic stress, moral turbulence, and social conflict that accompany that generative tension's arrival."<sup>52</sup> I want to highlight two (2) examples of generative tensions in King's program that continue to serve as important moral challenges to the Christian church, nation-states, and global communities.

First, the generative tensions in King's theology and ethic challenge the Christian church to recapture, recover, and recommit to the progressivist strand of analysis, critique, and engagement found in the Prophetic wing of the Christian tradition. Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann has argued persuasively that the canon of the Hebrew Bible in its FULL expression must serve as THE model for biblical education.<sup>53</sup> This includes a Prophetic VISION that is emergent FROM and speaks a transformative Word TO situations of injustice and devaluation. Brueggemann's challenge has important implications for how the Christian church and its leadership interprets not only the Bible, but the prevailing social context as well. The hermeneutics engendered by such an approach has a decisive impact upon how the Christian church understands its function and its task in the society. King's reading of the public jeremiads of the Prophets Jeremiah, Amos, Isaiah and others as they hurled scathing indictments against the social injustices of their time, led to his emphasis on the moral imperatives of justice and righteousness. In fact, the imaginations and public utterances found in the Prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), provided the paradigm for King's public, moral challenges to the Christian church and to America (a self-described Judeo-Christian nation).<sup>54</sup>

However, as King explained painfully in the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in 1963, and as theologian Amy Erikson pointed out in 2015, most Christian churches, "live in a world that is too small, too easy, and too polite....congregations...become familiar, bland, and so utterly predictable that there is little room for

<sup>51</sup> Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ initiatives, anti-poverty, anti-death penalty, anti-gun violence, and global peace initiatives, to name a few

<sup>52</sup> Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 148-149.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as Model for Biblical Education*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015).

<sup>54</sup> See Ivory, *Rhythm of Discipleship*, pp.30-40, 63-64.

growth or change....[hence] the tendency to become settled, and to silence or marginalize the voices that threaten or disrupt our narrow but secure perceptions of truth.”<sup>55</sup> King argued that the Christian church has a message and a witness unlike any other cultural institution. The prophetic tradition of critique, resistance, and challenge will enable the Church to remain true to its identity and to its mission of loving, healing, reconciling, and redeeming. The Church’s interests will proceed from “below” rather than “above” relative to the hierarchies of power in the society. In this way, the Church will find itself casting its lot with the powerless, poor, and marginalized and giving vision, voice, and a vocation of service on behalf of justice and righteousness. King’s program pushes the contemporary church to assume its unavoidable identity as a public moralist<sup>56</sup>, accenting the norms of love, justice, and peace.

Second, generative tensions in King’s theology and ethic promote the necessity of a RE/examination of BOTH the church’s AND the culture’s systems of values. Interestingly, this perspective highlights the notion of the Suffering Servant found in Isaiah 53.<sup>57</sup> The suffering motif expressed through this redemptive figure is critically re/appropriated by King, and re/interpreted through a pairing of the servant hood ethic promoted in the narrative of Mark, chapter 10.<sup>58</sup> The “political reading” of these texts allowed King to make sense and meaning of gratuitous human suffering. King emerged with a new interpretive principle which privileged the redemptive possibilities in ALL suffering which AIMED at the DEFEAT of suffering itself. This type of suffering was intentional, purposive, and UNEARNED. As such, it took on a new, different, UN-conventional VALUE because of its usefulness in the EFFORT to overcome senseless, gratuitous suffering. This interpretation of suffering and its role in justice struggles DE-ROMANTICIZES suffering as an existential reality. In so doing it DE-EMPHASIZES the FACT of suffering IN FAVOR OF the TELOS or AIM of a particular TYPE of suffering. For King, ONLY suffering that is experienced as the RESULT of a struggle AGAINST suffering is somehow redemptive in a morally based, morally coherent universe.

Suffering now had profound social AND personal VALUE for those who had opted to live the purpose-driven life of a RADICAL LOVER. In the hands of a Sovereign, Providential God and the efforts of a co-worker for justice, love, and peace, suffering incurred through a radical DECISION TO LOVE could now be deemed efficacious. A particular FORM of suffering emerging from a specific AIM could now have a redeeming value. ANYONE who willingly took such suffering upon themselves would experience the strange, reconciling, healing ways of radical love. King understood this type of suffering as NORMATIVE for the Christian life, and he argued that participation in this type of suffering was a moral mandate for anyone who was serious about achieving the Beloved Community. This type of suffering entailed a radical CHOICE.

King referred to the commitment to engage in this type of radical suffering as “a decision to LOVE”.<sup>59</sup> For King, admittedly this decision amounted to a NON-conventional approach to living. Radical love and its complementary value system certainly ran COUNTER to those values embraced and promoted by the prevailing culture. The decision to love meant a choice for an oppositional lifestyle with values that were counterintuitive to the times.<sup>60</sup> However, those who decided to love and suffer in this way, even while not fully understanding HOW it worked, could take refuge and hope in the belief that God was somehow working IN the experience. God’s radical love was somehow actively creating value out of pain, triumphantly bringing order out of chaos, redeeming life in the midst of all of its brokenness, pain, and death.<sup>61</sup>

While he believed the prophetic and synoptic texts in the Bible were morally compelling for Christians, King also asserted their applicability to ANY human being engaged in resistance efforts against the super-personal forces of evil. To be a cultural worker on behalf of justice in a morally based universe, for King, means that one must be prepared to eventually encounter forces that work in opposition to the beloved community.

<sup>55</sup> Amy Erikson, “Preface to the Second Edition”, Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> On the notion of public moralist, see Robert Michael Franklin, *Liberating Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African American Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>57</sup> See Isaiah 53<sup>rd</sup> Chapter in its entirety. For a fuller explication of the Suffering Servant Motif, see Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66, A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 253-269.

<sup>58</sup> See Mark, Chapter 10:32-45, *Word Study Greek-English New Testament*, Paul R. McReynolds (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998), 166-168.

<sup>59</sup> See Washington, 250. King echoes this decision during his final and most “radical” SCLC presidential address in 1967 entitled, “Where Do We Go From Here?”. It is noteworthy that although it is near the end of his life, King still promotes the redemptive nature of unearned suffering in this address.

<sup>60</sup> In April, 1967 in a speech entitled, “A Time to Break Silence” King presented his opposition to the Vietnam War, and argued that America must “undergo a radical revolution of values”. See Washington, 240. Later this year in his final SCLC address, King also argues that America must undergo a radical restructuring of American society and its values, placing love at the center. See Washington, 245-252.

<sup>61</sup> King makes this faith claim powerfully during his somber sermon, “Eulogy for the Martyred Children”, at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963 at the funerals of four girls who were killed by a church bomb during the Birmingham Campaign. See Washington, 221-223.

When this encounter occurs, the imperatives of service, risk, sacrifice, and suffering must assume primacy as nonnegotiable values in the life of the resister.

However, when covenanting to join God as a CO-RESPONSIBLE MORAL AGENT in the work of redemption and restoration, one is obligated to follow a path of MORAL MILITANCY. This path requires a commitment to moral coherence--namely, means-end coherence--whereby the objective one seeks to achieve is already pre-existent in the methods one uses in the process. Consequently, the justice worker is compelled to rule as anathema any strategy or tactic which does NOT honor the sanctity/sacredness of humanity, the interrelatedness of all life, and the primacy of love, justice, and peace.

At bottom, this generative tension has to do with values. A VALUE may be understood as any reality which guides, orients, or motivates human behavior. King's program stressed the imperative to accent the moral dimension in struggle. Therefore, he highlighted those UN-conventional, NON-market moral values (e.g. noninjury, suffering, moderation, equity, valuation) which ran counter to the prevailing cultural norms. King's notion of extremist love promoted COUNTER-cultural values of human worth, dignity, compassion, and egalitarianism, while rejecting the conventional values of force, dominance and supremacy which were deeply embedded in the instrumental use of violence in all of its expressions.<sup>62</sup>

Herein lies the generative tension for the contemporary moment. Does nonviolent direct action represent the only viable path towards a just society? Without question, the radical lover and resister will be faced with retaliatory violence in multivariate forms by the guardians of the status quo. In addition, the current statistics on violent crimes and gun use in the U.S. alone are staggering and alarming. Should private citizens value arming themselves with guns in order to fight against the guns that they believe are intent to rob and kill them? How does the value of self-defense relate to this issue? Will more guns, bombs, planes, police, SWAT units armed with assault weapons and tear gas cannisters, and more privatized prison systems result in a more safe, sane, just, and peaceful society? How DOES a society concerned with liberty and justice for ALL maintain the balance between militancy and morality?

This generative tension is also applicable when one considers King's values of suffering and moderation. In a society that valorizes comfort and convenience, and is inordinately fixated with wealth, acquisition, and status, what role will NON-market moral values such as love, justice, fairness, equity, excellence, divestment, diversity, service, and moderation play? When we think about suffering in societies, we can easily calculate the astronomical COSTS associated with the violence of poverty, domestic abuse, illiteracy, war, underemployment, wage inequity, lack of access to health care, etc. There is a great deal of suffering that is built into the very systems and structures we create and perpetuate in human communities. King's ethic promoted the value of redemptive suffering in the struggle AGAINST suffering.

For King, there certainly ought to be sustained, serious efforts to alleviate suffering. However, these efforts must be prepared to take on suffering in a way that is devoid of the intent to cause more suffering, while privileging the needs of those who suffer most in the society. Because of the way in which the universe operates, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice."<sup>63</sup> Therefore, unearned suffering in the struggle against suffering is somehow redemptive in nature.<sup>64</sup> This view represents a new, innovative way of interpreting gratuitous suffering that is experienced as a result of the radical lover/resister's proactive struggle AGAINST suffering and FOR justice! In this view, the role and ultimate meaning of suffering SHIFTED from a meaningless, negative to a redemptive, positive value. Near the end of his life in 1967, King argued for a comprehensive "revolution of values" in the society by which to begin the SHIFT to a more just and humane community.<sup>65</sup> King was emphatic in his insistence that a new paradigm that nudged humans from a "thing-oriented" to a "person-oriented" system of values was now a moral necessity for America and the world.<sup>66</sup> The shift in value paradigms would result in "suffering" for those who had benefitted for centuries from the current arrangements of power. However, this notion of "suffering" would shift the locus of responsibility for the elimination of poverty to the "haves" and "comfortables".

<sup>62</sup> See King's "The Power of Nonviolence", in Washington, 12-15.

<sup>63</sup> See King's "Our God Is Marching On", in Washington, 13-14, 230.

<sup>64</sup> See King's "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience", in Washington, 47.

<sup>65</sup> See King's "A Time to Break Silence", in Washington, 240-244; and "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?", in Washington, 629-633.

<sup>66</sup> On King's value of unmerited suffering and its redemptive effect, see Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 71-75; a fuller treatment on the value of suffering is found in Mika Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering: The Roots and Implications of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Theodicy* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017).

This perspective would open a path towards redemption that would enable love, justice, and peace to become empirically verifiable realities in the society for EVERY-one, including the “have nots” and “UN-comfortables”.

The emergent generative tension here is clear and unavoidable. What does it mean to embrace a value of redemptive suffering in the context of massive psychic dislocation, social disintegration, violence, and devaluation in the world? How might the importance of this value be judged in the wake of conspicuous consumerism and unbridled materialism in the society? Given America’s stress on individual freedoms, how can we begin to value and practice redemptive suffering in our personal lifestyle choices as well as in our nation’s economic policies, and legislative and political agendas? How would this approach be applicable to the goal of alleviating gratuitous human suffering in our societies?

These are the kinds of thorny, nagging questions that the generative tensions in King’s work continue to raise for our time.<sup>67</sup> I believe that these questions are unavoidable for persons who are serious about transforming the society into a place of value, dignity, justice, and peace for present and future generations. Further, I believe that these types of questions result from generative tensions which will NOT allow us to be indifferent or apathetic without dire consequences. What a serious, unavoidable challenge to our cultures’ churches, synagogues, mosques, academies, and secular institutions of every stripe.

These questions and challenges emerge from King’s perspective, and their relentless RE/occurrence demonstrates that King’s perspective continues to make a unique, substantive, and lasting contribution to the field of Christian theology and ethics.

Without question, King’s activist perspective and program of militant moral redemption aimed at the creation of a Beloved Community moves beyond the boundaries of the Christian community. Because King was a systematic theologian as well as a philosopher of religion whose scholarship borrowed eclectically from multivariate sources, many of his insights and applications defy easy encapsulation within the limits of a singular faith perspective. However, King WAS a Christian minister, theologian, prophet, and ethicist.<sup>68</sup> His faith community of origin certainly began IN and emerged FROM the community of faith known as the Black Christian tradition. Without question, this fact must be readily conceded.

Nevertheless, the scope and trajectory of his thought and practice re/present a re/imagining of and a significant move BEYOND Christianity itself. In fact, King’s contributions and legacy transcend the religious sphere altogether. Consequently, his insights, challenges, and strategies and tactics remain highly relevant to non-religious and/or more “secular” efforts aimed at the transformation of religious, political, economic and social-cultural values, relationships, and institutions in human communities around the world today.

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<sup>67</sup> For a fuller discussion of the multivariate generative tensions raised by King’s theological and ethical program, see Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, 150-179.

<sup>68</sup> See works by Mika Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering: The Roots and Implications of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Theodicy*, Lexington Book, 2017.; James Cone, *Malcolm and Martin and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, Orbis, 2001; William D. Watley, *Roots of Resistance: The Nonviolent Ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Judson, 1985; Ed Searl, *Searl Sermons: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Prophetic Tradition*, BLOG, January 17, 2018; Luther Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement*, Abingdon, 1997.