

*God* AND  
HUMAN DIGNITY

The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics  
of Martin Luther King, Jr.

RUFUS BURROW, JR.

*Foreword by Lewis V. Baldwin and Walter G. Muelder*

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Dozens of dissertations, articles, and books have been written on various aspects of the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and yet there are many areas of his thought that still merit attention. A published Princeton Theological Seminary master's thesis written by Ernest Shaw Lyght is the earliest book-length examination of the philosophical and religious roots of King's thought.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., provided a vastly more informed scholarly treatment of intellectual influences on King's thought, including the philosophy of personalism.<sup>2</sup> This philosophy was developed and taught at Boston University from 1876 to roughly the end of the 1960s. I date the decline of the influence of personalism to about the time of King's assassination and the retirement of third-generation personalists under whom he studied. In a 1981 book, Ervin Smith also addresses some of the intellectual influences and includes a fine chapter on the significance of a personal God as the source of King's ethics.<sup>3</sup> Smith does an admirable job of discussing the personalistic foundations of King's ethics. Also, unlike other King scholars, Smith includes a chapter which suggests implications of his personalistic ethics for specific social problems such as racism, economic exploitation, war, marriage, and family. In addition, Smith begins his book by discussing the importance of King's religious and family upbringing. The discussion is only a couple of pages long, but in them Smith provides important context. He knew that by the time King attended college, seminary, and graduate school some of his most important religious and ethical convictions—e.g., that God is personal and persons are sacred—had already been shaped through the influence of his family and black church upbringing.

Of the earlier texts, the best and most comprehensive book addressing the formal intellectual influences on King, as well as why he addressed social problems as he did and proposed the solutions he did, was published by John J. Ansbro in 1982.<sup>4</sup> Ansbro essentially shows King to be a consistent social personalist in the way he

developed and implemented his doctrine of nonviolence, inasmuch as he tried to live the meaning of personalism's two fundamental dicta: ultimate reality is personal and loving; and persons are the highest intrinsic values and thus are inherently precious.

The chief criticism that has been made against the work by Smith and Zepp, as well as Ansbro, is that they failed to acknowledge the black cultural, familial, and church influences on King's intellectual development. This criticism, made by black liberation theologians such as James H. Cone and church historian and King scholar Lewis V. Baldwin, is quite legitimate and needed to be made. Until the mid-1980s, white scholars were notorious for either excluding Afrikan Americans' contributions to whatever subject they were writing or teaching on, or for including one or more Afrikan Americans while treating only white western influences on their thought development.\* Indeed, King scholars, regardless of race, tended to be guilty of this practice prior to the early- to mid-1980s. One need merely recall the otherwise fine work by the Afrikan American scholar David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (1970). Afrikan American scholars were quite right to critique this tendency. Of course, since the Lewis text appeared barely two years after King was assassinated, he did not have access to King's unpublished papers at Boston University and the SCLC collections at the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. Nor did he have access to a host of other resources that would later be available to historian Stephen B. Oates when he did the research for what is arguably the best biography on King at present: *Let the Trumpet Sound* (1982).<sup>5</sup>

In fairness to Ansbro, however, we should be clear about what he sought to do in his work. He acknowledged that his book focused on providing a systematic discussion of King's doctrine of nonviolence. To get at this, he sought to examine "central insights from ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary thinkers who moved [King] to construct his own strategy."<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging that a number of scholars had already addressed the influence that Mahatma Gandhi, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Reinhold Niebuhr had on King's intellectual development, Ansbro felt that not nearly enough attention had been given the influence of personalism. He also believed that

\* 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 respect and in honor of those who struggled for liberation in the 1960s. During the Black Consciousness movement of this period, a number of proponents adopted the use of "k" in the spelling of "Afrika," which was consistent with the usage of many groups on the Afrikan continent as well. 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 consistently use it in my writing.

more attention needed to be given to other philosophers and theologians whose ideas influenced King's philosophy of nonviolence. The vast majority of those included in Ansbro's otherwise excellent book are Europeans and Euro-Americans. Although he did not examine the more formative black church and familial contributions to King's intellectual development, Ansbro included some of King's reactions to Afrikan American thinkers and leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Stokely Carmichael, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X. Yet, one wonders why Ansbro did not think it important to include even a discussion of the obvious non-violent stance of King's parents and maternal grandparents. The same cannot be said about his paternal grandparents James and Delia King who, respectively, threatened a white mill owner with a shotgun and physically fought with him for hitting their son (Daddy King).<sup>7</sup> The point is that the nonviolent approach to addressing social ills had been modeled for King by maternal family members, as well as local black pastors such as William Holmes Borders, long before he was introduced to the work of Henry David Thoreau in college and Gandhi in seminary.

At a time (the mid-1980s) when black liberation theologians and religious scholars were highly vocal and critical of the failure of white scholars to address the cultural, family, and black church influences on King and other major Afrikan American personalities, it could be argued that Ansbro's failure in this regard was simply inexcusable. One wonders whether he was even listening to the voices of these critics, and if he was, why did he not heed their advice and reflect it in his work? Indeed, after the Black Consciousness movement of the 1960s, one could also argue similarly regarding the publication of Smith and Zepp's book in 1974. These scholars, including Ansbro, should have—at the very least—included a brief statement noting the significance of the critique of black scholars, while declaring that they themselves would be focusing on the European and Euro-American influences on King's thought. That they did not do this might be indicative of white male arrogance, as well as the continued presence and influence of racism and unearned white privilege.

There is presently no better systematic treatment of King's theory of dignity than Garth Baker-Fletcher's book on the subject.<sup>8</sup> Baker-Fletcher gets at some of the important family and church roots of King's doctrine of "somebodiness." He then proceeds to address the philosophical underpinnings. Although the study leaves something to be desired in terms of accuracy of interpretation of personalist ideas, it clearly provides important foundation for future exploration of the theme of dignity in King's thought and work.

At any rate, although much has been written about King, there are many aspects of his thought that have been ignored or insufficiently addressed. The doctrine of God, the chief tenets of personalism, moral laws, and the objectivity of reality are some of the many specific topics that deserve far more attention. My book seeks to

address a number of these and related matters, and how they played out in King's thought and ministry.

My discussion is informed by my intensive study of personalism at Boston University with two third-generation giants in that tradition, Peter A. Bertocci (1910–89) and Walter G. Muelder (1907–2004). In addition to being taught by these two men—who did not simply teach personalistic ideas, but consciously lived these ideas and their deepest meaning—I had the good fortune to be tutored by each of them for a two-week period during the summer of 1989, after I had been a seminary professor for six years. Bertocci tutored me in the metaphysics and epistemology of Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910), who systematized American personalism and developed it into a philosophical method. After my time with Bertocci, Muelder gave me two fascinating weeks of instruction in Bowne's ethics. The quintessential teacher, Muelder, then in his early eighties, was simply incredible in his recall of the basic ideas of Bowne's ethics, reciting a number of long passages from the text verbatim. This was an invaluable and memorable month of study and tutorials that continue to affect my scholarly development in ways I could not then have imagined.

I also regularly teach a course on personalism at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Since I long ago adopted personalism as my fundamental philosophical stance, I intentionally include its basic principles in all courses that I teach. In addition, I have written many articles and a book on the subject.<sup>9</sup>

There is yet another important reason why my discussion on these influences on King's thought is not a mere duplication of what has already been written. As an Afrikan American, my own familiarity with black family, cultural, and church values—and my application of these values—positions me to provide a richer examination of such topics as the doctrine of God and the objectivity of moral laws, how they influenced King, and how King influenced them in turn. White scholars who have written on King and personalism have read much of the basic literature on personalism, but they were either not able, or quite possibly not willing, to filter the meaning of this literature through the Afrikan American experience (if only vicariously). On the other hand, most Afrikan Americans who have written on King's thought have done little more than read secondary sources on personalism. Moreover, some of those who have in fact read some of the primary sources misread or misunderstood the texts. This is my judgment of Garth Baker-Fletcher's discussion of personalistic influences on King in his otherwise fine book, *Somebodyness: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Theory of Dignity*.<sup>10</sup> In addition, although his book does not specifically address King, the late Major J. Jones erred frequently in his discussion of personalistic ideas about God in *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*.<sup>11</sup>

I bring to this study an interpretation of personalistic and other influences on King's thought and ministry that is different from others who have written on him.

For example, I discuss what I call King's "homespun personalism." This, I argue, is what caused him to gravitate so easily to the formal study of personalism in seminary and graduate school, for its basic tenets had been instilled in him through his black church and family socialization. The formal instruction he received in the academy simply provided him a reasonable philosophical framework on which to ground his boyhood convictions that the universe is fundamentally good, God is personal, and persons possess infinite worth as beings imbued with the image of God.

### KING'S PUBLISHED AND UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS

The claim of King scholars such as James H. Cone and David J. Garrow that the most reliable view of King's thoughts and ideas are found in his many extemporaneous unpublished speeches and writings no longer applies.<sup>12</sup> Much careful archival research and scholarly writing has been done, especially since the 1980s, so that now one can get as clear a picture of the authentic King in his published writings and speeches.<sup>13</sup> The first five volumes of the King papers have appeared, which make available skillfully edited versions of the previously unpublished writings, sermons, and speeches of King. The King Papers Project has also produced *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson (1998); a volume of sermons by King, *A Knock at Midnight* (1998), edited by Carson and Peter Holloran; and a volume of "landmark speeches," *A Call to Conscience* (2001), edited by Carson and Kris Shephard. More speeches, sermons, and writings are forthcoming. Therefore, anybody who reads King's previously unpublished works, as well as the writings of scholars such as Cone, Baldwin, Oates, Garrow, Baker-Fletcher, Taylor Branch, and Stewart Burns, will get an authentic sense of King's ideas.

A number of King's writings and speeches were ghostwritten. How well do these works represent King's thoughts? Baldwin and Baker-Fletcher make the convincing case that even those speeches were written with King's approval, "and there is no evidence that he disclaimed any of these texts." Furthermore, Baldwin contends that his own archival research reveals "no important discrepancies between what appears in King's edited and sometimes ghostwritten works and what is included in his extemporaneous, unpublished texts. King's personality and the basic outlines of his thought are evident in both."<sup>14</sup> The ghostwriters did not so much put words into King's mind and mouth, he says, as "they took words out of his mouth." These ghostwritten statements are more reliably King than Garrow thinks.<sup>15</sup> By all accounts, King was a man of tremendous intellectual acumen and could be sharply analytical. Surely had he disagreed with the ghostwriters he would have taken issue with what they wrote, rather than uncritically accept their ideas as his own.

The foregoing discussion is important because much of my own work on King primarily reflects my reading and study of his published works, as well as what I consider to be the best published scholarship on his life, thought, and work, most of which is based on thorough and painstaking archival research by the authors consulted. It is also true, however, that my work is based on a critical reading of many of King's unpublished papers, speeches, and sermons. Here I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Lewis V. Baldwin, a most astute, careful, and thorough King scholar, whose work on the cultural roots of King's thought and ministry is surpassed by no other.

#### A PRELIMINARY WORD ON PERSONALISM

Long before King heard the term "personalism," he had been introduced to the idea of a personal God and the concept of the absolute dignity of persons through his family upbringing and teachings at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father was pastor.<sup>16</sup> King implied in his first book that by the time he studied the philosophy of personalism in a formal systematic way at Boston University, he already possessed a deep faith in two of its fundamental tenets: the infinite, inviolable worth of persons as such, and a personal God to whom people are of supreme value. This is why I argue for the idea of King's "homespun personalism," which stresses the family and black church roots and which made it easy for him to embrace the more formal, academic personalism he encountered in seminary and graduate school.<sup>17</sup> There is indication that even as a student at Morehouse College, King was introduced—however casually—to the work of the outstanding personalist, Edgar S. Brightman.<sup>18</sup> This introduction may have taken place in one of two philosophy classes taught by Samuel Williams during the 1947–48 school year,<sup>19</sup> or the previous year in his Bible course with George Kelsey.<sup>20</sup> In any case, it is more important for our purpose that we remember what Lewis Baldwin has said about the influence of King's sociocultural and familial roots on his speaking and writing. "When he spoke, he was speaking not only his own words but also the words of his parents and grandparents. Their dream became his dream, and their struggle, his struggle."<sup>21</sup> By the time King finished graduate school, his words and dreams were an amalgam of his familial and cultural roots as well as the more formal teachings of Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University Graduate School. These would be refined and filtered through King's own personality and cultural lens during the civil and human rights movements.

When telling the story of the Montgomery struggle, King wrote that "personalism strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality."<sup>22</sup> The phrase "strengthened me in two



convictions” is an important reminder that these were already deeply ingrained in King even before he studied the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical foundations of personalism in seminary and graduate school. Therefore, personalism primarily provided for King a philosophical framework for his long-held beliefs, ones instilled in him by his maternal grandmother, parents, the black church, and teachers at Morehouse College. Once introduced to systematic personalism in graduate school, however, King found himself “wholeheartedly committed” to it.<sup>23</sup> The basic principles of personalism were therefore indelibly etched into his being.

Personalism teaches that persons are the highest intrinsic values, and ultimate reality is personal. If one is also a theist, as King was, it means, further, that God is both personal and is that Being on which all other beings depend for their existence. God is the fundamental source of the whole of reality as well as the ground of human dignity. King is not selective in this regard. That is, his conviction is that *every* person, regardless of race, gender, class, ability, age, health, or sexuality is a being of absolute worth, because every person is created and loved by a supremely personal God. Each person is infinitely valuable to God, and therefore should be treated as such.

There are at least a dozen types of personalisms. I enumerate and discuss eight of these in *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (1999).<sup>24</sup> Theistic personalism, which influenced King, is represented in the work of a number of philosophers and theologians who taught or studied at Boston University. These include Bowne; John Wesley Edward Bowen (1855–1933), the first Afrikan American academic personalist, and a student of Bowne’s (although there is no indication that King knew of Bowen); Edgar Sheffield Brightman (1884–1953), the first Borden Parker Bowne Professor of Philosophy at Boston University, chief expositor and interpreter of Bowne’s personalism, academic advisor to King, and the reason that King desired to earn his doctorate at Boston University; and L. Harold DeWolf (1905–86), theologian and Christian ethicist who became King’s academic advisor when Brightman suddenly died, and who was King’s mentor, confidant, and friend throughout his leadership in the civil and human rights movements.

### INCONSISTENCIES IN KING’S PRACTICE OF PERSONALISM

The argument of this book is that King was generally a thoroughgoing personalist in both theory and practice. One of his distinctive contributions was his application of basic principles of personalism to major social problems of his day. In this regard he played second fiddle to no one, including his teachers at Boston University. Nonetheless, chapter 5, “Dignity of Being and Sexism,” focuses on one significant area where King’s practice was not consistent with his personalism—more specifically his

doctrine of human dignity. One could rightly argue that there were at least two other areas of King's practice that were inconsistent with his ethical personalism: the plagiarism in many of his writings and speeches, and his extramarital relations throughout much of his leadership in the civil rights movement. Because of the sheer volume of scholarly and popular works that have been published on these two matters, I do not discuss them in the body of this book. It does seem reasonable, however, to devote brief attention to them here.

### King's Appropriation of Sources

Concerns about King's footnote style—not plagiarism—were raised as far back as courses he took with Walter Chivers at Morehouse College. Chivers noted in one of King's papers that he needed to learn acceptable footnote style.<sup>25</sup> We know from reports of Clayborne Carson and other staff of the King Papers Project at Stanford University that King's pattern of "selective use of appropriated passages dates from the Crozer period."<sup>26</sup> The same practice is evident in the sermons, speeches, and writings during his public ministry. It would therefore be ludicrous to pretend that this did not happen, or that King was not aware that failure to give attribution for the use of sources was wrong. Many scholars have sought to determine why King engaged in such practices. The truth, however, is that *all* responses can only end in speculation.

Although the plagiarism story broke in late 1990, it is also known that King was chided periodically by some seminary and graduate school professors for failing to properly attribute appropriated sources. While in graduate school I recall reading an article that DeWolf wrote in 1977: "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Theologian." DeWolf implied that some of King's theological ideas were similar to his own and stated, "occasionally I find his language following closely the special terms of my own lectures and writings."<sup>27</sup>

Although DeWolf did not expressly accuse King of plagiarism, this is an issue that has received a tremendous amount of press and energy since 1990. Considering the amount of attention already given this subject by Carson and Garrow, as well as Theodore Pappas, Michael Eric Dyson, Richard Lischer, Keith D. Miller<sup>28</sup>—and the more than 100 pages devoted to the subject in the June 1991 issue of the *Journal of American History*<sup>29</sup>—I see no need to duplicate what has already been done.

A pattern of the appropriation of the written work of others is an important challenge to King's ethical personalism. This entire book is based on substantiating the significance of personalism for King—homespun, academic, and his own modifications of it—and how he *lived* it in the face of degrading social problems. Deviations from the standards of the personalism that King forged should not be relegated

to a footnote. There is no question that King's plagiarism is inconsistent with his personalism and doctrine of dignity. Garrow, a member of the advisory board for the King Papers Project under Carson's direction, claims to have been so distraught over the discovery that King persistently plagiarized that his view of King as person has changed. Moreover, Garrow is quoted as saying that the discovery "had a tremendous shaking, emotional impact on me." He said further: "It's disconcerting, because it is fundamentally, phenomenally out of character with my entire sense of the man."<sup>30</sup> This reaction notwithstanding, Garrow claimed to retain his sense of high regard and respect for King's courage and commitment to the struggle for civil and human rights.

Dyson addresses this topic in *I May Not Get There with You*, written primarily for a more popular audience, with a strong appeal to the sensational. There is not much that I disagree with regarding his discussion of King's plagiarism, but I do find it both problematic and interesting that Dyson seems eager to remind his readers over and over that *he* recognizes King's moral failure regarding plagiarism.<sup>31</sup> It is as if Dyson felt the need to impress this point upon establishment readers of his book, as if to say: *This is one Afrikan American scholar who is critical of King's plagiarism!* What is more, Dyson makes unsubstantiated claims about plagiarism and other Afrikan Americans who earned academic doctorates at Boston University. He claims for example, that, "the wonder is not that King cheated" under some rather tough conditions, "but that C. Eric Lincoln, Samuel Proctor, Evans Crawford, Cornish Rogers, Major Jones, and thousands of other blacks did not."<sup>32</sup> While I concur that vast numbers of blacks did not, and do not, cheat in this way, the problem arises when Dyson names individual Afrikan Americans. To put it the way Dyson does merely sensationalizes the matter where King is concerned.

David Bundy is a white theological librarian and early church historian. He was librarian and professor of church history at Christian Theological Seminary where I teach. In September 1991, I wrote Bundy to thank him for the use of his personal copy of the issue of the *Journal of American History* devoted to the plagiarism matter. In his handwritten response Bundy put his finger on the issue that concerned me most: that the discovery of plagiarism in King's work will make it too easy for King detractors to dismiss the many very important things that he accomplished in the area of human rights. Without minimizing the gravity of the plagiarism issue, I close this part of the discussion on limitations in the practice of King's ethical personalism with Bundy's response.

I suspect King was a graduate student in a hurry. A Ford Foundation study indicated only 5% of dissertations were free of problems. I personally have found five other plagiarized Harvard Ph.D. dissertations—two of which were written by people who have become productive contributing, *even original* scholars.

Knowing that, when I heard King's story, I was not so much shocked as saddened that many would use this lamentable behavior to undermine *all* of what King stood for and-or use it as an excuse to dismiss his own original contributions. My admiration for King remains untarnished . . . from my Holiness background I suppose I'm more keen to see a whole life rather than a single moment of either brilliance or defect. Faithfulness to God . . . is a long term project! I see King as a faithful person.<sup>33</sup>

### **Alleged Extramarital Affairs**

For reasons similar to those noted regarding the plagiarism issue, I choose not to include a discussion in the body of this book on King's philandering. My reason has little to do with personal discomfort. Rather, it has to do with my distrust of the powers responsible for FBI surveillance reports on Afrikan American leaders (especially preceding and during the civil rights and Black Consciousness movements of the 1960s and 1970s), as well as my skepticism of claims made by some of those close to King, in particular, by his best friend, Ralph Abernathy.<sup>34</sup> The racism of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his vicious vendetta against King are and were well known. Andrew Young, a close confidant and advisor to King, was absolutely convinced that Hoover was out to destroy King emotionally and psychologically through disinformation, lies, and intimidation. In addition, Hoover and the White House seemed to pull out all stops to destroy the planning of the Poor People's Campaign.<sup>35</sup> Then there is the matter of Abernathy's desire to capitalize financially on his longtime close relationship with King in his *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (1989). Abernathy has written that King was with a close female companion at her home in Memphis past 1:00 A.M. When they returned to the Lorraine Motel, Abernathy writes, King then spent the remainder of the night with a female member of the Kentucky legislature (Senator Georgia Davis Powers) who "had clearly come to see Martin."<sup>36</sup> This all allegedly occurred the night before King was assassinated, which makes the philandering charge all the more sensational. Surely one's best friend, one's "alter ego,"<sup>37</sup> would not lie about such a thing. But sensationalistic literature often brings the writer huge royalties. Indeed, had not Abernathy himself written: "Sexual sins are by no means the worst. Hatred and a cold disregard for others are the besetting sins of our time, but they don't sell books or tabloid newspapers. . . ."<sup>38</sup> In any case, there is so much smoke and circumstantial evidence regarding the charge of philandering that there is surely truth in it.

My chief discomfort about discussing King's extramarital relationships is based on the tendency of many who placed him on a moral pedestal, and then utterly condemned him when he failed to live up to *their* moral standards, whether regarding extramarital relations or plagiarism. I have argued in articles and lectures on King that

if we are to truly understand his life, ideas, and ministry it is absolutely essential to understand that he was first and last a human being who possessed all the possibilities and limitations that every person possesses. As we will see, King was quite aware that his personal life was not spotless and without blemish. Failure to acknowledge King's humanity makes it too easy to condemn him as person, as Garrow did upon discovering that he plagiarized. Others, because of King's personal moral failures, have sought to minimize his contributions to the struggle for civil and human rights. This has been the reaction of many conservative and fundamentalist white racists when allegations about King's moral character surfaced. Of course, for this group the allegations themselves only confirmed what they had already conjured up about King.

Much scholarly and journalistic attention has already been devoted to King's alleged sexual escapades. Those who wrote books on King shortly after his assassination—e.g., John A. Williams, Jim Bishop, and David L. Lewis<sup>39</sup>—could only write of *rumors* of extramarital affairs. Lewis's was the best of the early biographies. He was careful to make it clear that these were nothing more than rumors, since FBI tapes that allegedly substantiated them were at the time sealed. Innuendos in the books by Bishop and Williams imply that they knew more about the *rumors* than they probably did. Stephen B. Oates was among the first of the scholars on King to obtain the previously sealed FBI files. He wrote about the contents of some of these files and tapes in *Let the Trumpet Sound*.<sup>40</sup> Once the floodgates opened, Garrow, Taylor Branch, Dyson, and a few other writers on King earned huge book royalties, in part, for focusing heavily on the alleged sex tapes and files.<sup>41</sup> Not all King scholars (including James H. Cone, Lewis V. Baldwin, and Garth Baker-Fletcher) have chosen to devote much energy and attention to this issue. They wonder, as I do, about the racist element embedded in the tendency (especially among white male scholars) to devote so much attention to King's personal moral shortcomings. In my judgment former Kentucky state Senator Georgia Davis Powers, King's close friend, confidant, and acknowledged lover during the last year of his life, asks an important question: "Why is the dedication that brings people together, the goals we shared, the work we did, less important than the fact that Dr. King and I had an intimate relationship?"<sup>42</sup> That vast numbers of people are less concerned about the former is a sad commentary on the moral status of this nation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. literally gave his life because of his faithfulness and commitment to eradicating human oppression, despite his human limitations. In the end, notwithstanding his personal moral failures, King was faithful to God's call to set at liberty the oppressed. Precisely here I second the words of David Bundy quoted above: "My admiration for King remains untarnished. . . . I suppose I'm more keen to see a whole life rather than a single moment of either brilliance or defect. Faithfulness to God . . . is a long term project! I see King as a faithful person." This general sentiment has also been echoed by a number of King scholars, not least the recently emerging

voice of Michael G. Long who, in his reflections on King's legacy had this to say in light of charges of plagiarism and philandering.

Recent years have proven difficult for the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Heavily documented studies of King's practice of plagiarism, in addition to loosely documented, indeed sensational, reports of his alleged womanizing, have saturated much of the recent mass media coverage of his life. In offering this brief study, I seek not to ignore or dismiss these charges and allegations, but rather to suggest that King's legacy, just like his moral character, can never be reduced to such matters as plagiarism and intimate behavior. The whole King is greater, far greater, than the man who borrowed words without attribution or who expressed interest in women other than his wife. In my estimation, the whole King includes not only those actions, real or imagined, but also his willingness to suffer for the God-given dignity of his brothers and sisters, his courage to stand against a government that sought to degrade him, his abiding love for his family and friends, his deep faith in the Anchor—and, of course, his compelling vision of creative living. Like each of us, the whole King is both sinner and saint.<sup>43</sup>

Such behavior on King's part, regardless of rationales for his motives, was also a breakdown in his practice of personalism. Although King was a thoroughgoing personalist in theory, there are points at which his actual practice contradicted his fundamental personalistic ideas.

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The first chapter of this book focuses on King's intellectual journey, beginning with his matriculation at Morehouse College. It examines some of his experiences there, how his religious thinking was shaken up and transformed, the type of student he was, and what led to his decision to enter ministry in order to help his people. There is also a consideration of King's experience in seminary, including his social life and adjustments he had to make at the predominantly white Crozer Theological Seminary, his studiousness and zeal to make a good impression and to be an excellent student, and his determination to find both a reasonable theological rationale for his social conscience and a method to help his people. This chapter also discusses the influence of George Washington Davis, under whom King did approximately one-third of his course work. Davis formally introduced King to the basic ideas of liberal theology and the philosophy of personalism—ideas King had grown up with in more informal ways through his family and his experiences in the black church.

Chapter 2 examines additional intellectual influences from King's seminary experience, more specifically the influence of the social gospel movement, and distin-

guishes between the black social gospel and the white social gospel. King was not first introduced to the existence and importance of social Christianity during his studies at Crozer, but grew up being told about the social ministry of his maternal grandfather. He also witnessed it in the ministry of his father and other black preachers (e.g., William Holmes Borders). What is more, as a college student King was exposed on a regular basis to the liberal social gospel preaching of Benjamin E. Mays and George Kelsey at Morehouse College. The case will therefore be made that King was quite familiar with social gospel Christianity long before he matriculated at Crozer. In addition, attention is given the issue of racism and the response of white social gospel leaders such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, Lyman Abbott, and Josiah Strong. This discussion is influenced both by the more traditional works on the social gospel by early scholars such as Robert T. Handy, Thomas Gossett, and C. Howard Hopkins, as well as the more recent revisionist and provocative discussions of Ronald White and Ralph Luker. The chapter prompts one to ask: Was King aware of the racism of the white social gospelers, and most particularly Rauschenbusch's long silence on that issue, since he was most influenced by him? Did King respond to this? Special attention is given Rauschenbusch and racism, as well as his first major text, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which provided King with the formal theological rationale he sought in order to ground his social conscience. This chapter also considers the influence of Rauschenbusch's ideas on King and how he adapted them, as well as King's critique of various social gospel ideas, and how his own social gospelism transcended that of Rauschenbusch.

The task of the third chapter is to clarify the meaning and significance of King's fundamental philosophical point of departure: personalism. What is it, and what was King's experience with it at Boston University? How did it play out in his ministry? What did King's family and church upbringing contribute to his personalism, and how deeply rooted are these contributions in Afrikan American culture and history? The chapter also revisits attempts by some scholars to undermine the importance of personalism for King.

Chapter 4 examines King's doctrine of God. I argue that this is crucial for understanding his beloved community ethic, his doctrine of nonviolent resistance to evil, his emphasis on the sacredness of persons, and his conviction that the universe is friendly to value, that is, to the achievement of good. King's beloved community ethic, and his conviction that the universe hinges on a moral foundation, is grounded in his conception of God. Steering away from the stance of mainstream King scholars, this chapter introduces and examines the hypothesis that King was not a rigid, traditional theistic absolutist, and suggests that while he frequently used terms like "omnipotent" and "almighty" to characterize God, he did not mean that God possesses absolute power. It is quite possible that King meant something similar to what

Edgar S. Brightman (his teacher) and Charles Hartshorne expressed when they characterized God as *the most powerful being in the universe* and *a being of unsurpassable power*, respectively. Attention is also given to Brightman's doctrine of the finite-infinite God, as well as to black liberation theologians such as James Cone and J. DeOtis Roberts, who uncritically place King in the traditional camp of theistic absolutism. How did King respond to the doctrine of divine omnipotence in seminary and graduate school and during his ministry? What is the most reasonable way to characterize his conception of God? To get at these questions, the chapter examines various papers that King wrote in seminary and graduate school, as well as postgraduate school sermons and speeches. Because King was adamant that God is personal, the chapter devotes attention to the meaning of this concept and why it was important to him. I also try to make the case that in many of King's writings and speeches we frequently find openings for a version of theistic finitism.

Chapter 5 focuses on King's theory of dignity and the mutual influence of personalism. King had a strong sense that all being has dignity because God is the source. King focused primarily on the dignity of persons, most especially that of his own people. Considerable attention is given what may be the most glaring contradiction in King's doctrine of the dignity of being as such, namely sexism. Was King in fact sexist, and if so, how do we make sense of this in light of his personalism? What was Coretta Scott King's reaction to her husband's chauvinism? What was King's relationship with movement women such as Ella Baker? The chapter also considers the stance of several King scholars regarding his sexism.

The sixth chapter introduces the concept of personal-communitarianism, which represents King's and personalism's fundamental emphasis on the person *and* the community, as well as their interrelatedness. This idea is then connected to the achievement of the beloved community, a term whose origin is discussed along with how and when King became familiar with it at Boston University. King frequently used "Kingdom of God" and "beloved community" interchangeably, and we will examine interpretations of the beloved community and its influence on King as found in the work of Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp and of Lewis V. Baldwin. Because the beloved community was not simply an ideal for King, but something he clearly expected would take place, the chapter discusses the role of freedom and moral agency, as well as cooperative endeavor between persons and God in this process.

Chapter 7 aims to clarify the significance of the idea of the objective moral order, and what it meant for King's dream of actualizing the beloved community. King often spoke and wrote about there being something in the nature of the universe itself that makes for goodness and justice and ultimately the achievement of the beloved community. Because of King's conviction that in order to achieve and live well in the be-



loved community one would have to abide by certain objective moral laws, the chapter also lists and discusses the nature of such laws.

Chapter 8 shows how King used the personalistic moral law system to decide whether to break silence on the war in Vietnam. It will be seen that King's ultimate reason for speaking out against the war on April 4, 1967, was primarily moral and theological rather than political. He was enough of a hardheaded realist to know that the political dimension had to be taken into consideration, but his faith and commitment to the God of the Hebrew prophets was such that he *chose* to be morally correct rather than politically correct.

The final chapter focuses on the socioethical significance of King's doctrine that the universe is friendly to value. Much of the discussion is in the form of a prophetic challenge to religious persons, particularly Christians and the ecclesial community. King's was, after all, a social personalism whose basic principles he sought to apply to solving social problems in order to make the world a more gentle place, one in which moral agents could be encouraged about the possibility of achieving a community of love. It is precisely here that King made his most significant contribution to personalism.

Four cornerstones distinguish King's personalism: God as personal, freedomism, reverence for persons, and the communal nature of reality. Because he was a thoroughgoing or systematic, theistic-creationist personalist, these cornerstones must be seen in their interrelatedness if one hopes to grasp the full meaning and socioethical challenge of King's personalism for the twenty-first century and beyond. Only as we see the integral connection among these four tenets will we also understand the full significance of King's ethic of the beloved community.



## King's Intellectual Odyssey

### *From Morehouse to Crozer*

Born on January 15, 1929, King entered the public school system of Atlanta in 1935. By the time he enrolled at Booker T. Washington High School, he was known to be studious. Almost immediately he exhibited signs of intellectual promise, and as a result, he was allowed to skip both the ninth and twelfth grades. Upon completion of high school in 1944 at the age of fifteen, he entered Morehouse College in September. In part, King was able to attend at such an early age because enrollment at Morehouse, as in other colleges throughout the United States, was quite low as a result of World War II. The idea to lower some of the entrance requirements was proposed by Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse. Mays saw this as a temporary measure to raise and stabilize enrollment. King graduated high school at the right time to take advantage of this decision.

As a college student, King was impressed by the sense of freedom that he found on the Morehouse campus. For example, he engaged in candid, open discussions about a number of sensitive social issues. Looking back on the Morehouse experience he wrote, “[I]t was there that I had my first frank discussion on race. The professors were not caught up in the clutches of state funds and could teach what they wanted with academic freedom. They encouraged us in a positive quest for a salvation to racial ills and for the first time in my life, I realized that nobody there was afraid.”<sup>1</sup> This experience made a strong impression on the young King. He majored in sociology under Walter Chivers, and joined several clubs on campus. In addition, King worked relentlessly at sharpening his oratorical skills, a practice he would continue in seminary.

King was neither an A student nor a consistent B student at Morehouse. He was, rather, an average student, one whose ability to perform well was not always displayed in his academic work. What we need to remember, however, is that he was quite young—emotionally and psychologically—and had much growing and maturing to do when he entered college. He was at best an academic “underachiever.” According to Dean B. R. Brazeal, King had a “comparatively weak high school background.” Looking back, King recalled that by the time he matriculated at Morehouse he was only reading on an eighth-grade level.<sup>2</sup> One can easily see how this alone made for tough times for the fifteen-year-old college student. Even President Mays said that King was “capable of ‘substantial B work’ but ‘not brilliant.’” This is borne out by the fact that King earned one A, 20 B’s, 18 C’s, and one D during his years at Morehouse. He also earned a number of P’s for pass.<sup>3</sup> It may be that George Kelsey, his teacher in religion, gave the most accurate and prophetic assessment of King’s time at Morehouse. “Professor Kelsey termed King’s record ‘short of what may be called “good,” but designated him ‘one of those boys who came to realize the value of scholarship late in his college career. His ability exceeds his record at Morehouse.’”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, even late in King’s college career he earned mostly B’s and a few C’s.

Early in his college career, King had made the decision to become an attorney or a doctor. Like many Morehouse men, he took seriously the challenge extended by professors and administrators to prepare himself to contribute to the uplift of the race. His parents had impressed this point upon him and his siblings from the time they were young children. However, the courses he took in the biological sciences, for which he earned C’s, convinced him that whatever contribution he would make toward the liberation of his people would not be in the area of medicine. For a longer period of time, however, King trained for a career in law. Having grown up in the South, and having witnessed firsthand the way blacks were mistreated in its criminal justice and judicial system, King believed that becoming a lawyer was the best way he could address its injustices and help create better living conditions for his people.

This early choice of a career in law is quite interesting in light of the fact that King grew up a preacher’s son and was also the grandson and great-grandson of Baptist preachers. He was initially dissuaded from the possibility of becoming a minister because of his embarrassment that so many black preachers and churchgoers had a propensity to become (in his view) unduly emotional in church. The young King understood and appreciated the value and need for passion and liveliness in sermon delivery and the worship service. He understood that in light of what his people endured during the week, it was necessary for the church to deliver comfort, encouragement, and hope on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, the frequent practice of shouting, stomping, and walking the pews, which black Baptist preachers frequently did (including his father), was too much for him.

This early indecision about ministry was quite real. During his first two years at Morehouse, he and a number of other preachers' sons were in active rebellion against ministry and had no desire to follow in their fathers' footsteps.<sup>5</sup> What is most important is that even as a young college student, King was clear about his responsibility to help his people. Later, as it turned out, King was so impressed and inspired by the sermons preached by Mays and Kelsey at Morehouse, for example, that he decided in his junior year to answer the call to ministry. Although he reported that he experienced no abrupt religious conversion, religion had been central in his life from the time he was a young boy. He asserted that "religion for me is life."<sup>6</sup> As for his call to ministry, King said that it "was not a miraculous or supernatural something. On the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity."<sup>7</sup>

At the age of six, King had promised his father that he would help him eradicate segregation and related evils.<sup>8</sup> His sense of social responsibility grew increasingly stronger as he progressed through college. He knew even then that he had to do something to help end racial discrimination in the United States. In this regard, King's father was an excellent role model for him. Daddy King, who had been dirt poor growing up in Stockbridge, Georgia, insisted that blacks should be self-determined in their quest for equality, and that from those who have much, much is expected. By the time his own children were born, he and his wife were members of the black elite in Atlanta. They were not rich, but were better off financially than most blacks in the South. Daddy King had learned from his father-in-law, A. D. Williams, that the black preacher was morally obligated to champion the cause of blacks for justice.<sup>9</sup> In addition, he believed that black pastors were less vulnerable than most of their people because they did not have to depend on whites for their livelihood. They therefore had no excuse for being fearful of white retaliation or for holding back in the struggle.<sup>10</sup> Martin shared this view and uttered it frequently during his ministry. During the Birmingham, Alabama, campaign, for example, he lectured black ministers on the "need for a social gospel" that addresses the social, economic, and political needs of oppressed blacks. Furthermore he said, in language quite characteristic of his maternal grandfather and Daddy King: "I pleaded for the projections of strong, firm leadership by the Negro minister, pointing out that he is freer, more independent, than any other person in the community."<sup>11</sup> According to King, the minister must always attend to the needs of the soul as well as the body. Reflecting on the meaning of the preaching ministry during his student days at Crozer Seminary, King said: "On one hand I must attempt to change the soul of individuals so that their societies may be changed. On the other I must attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have a chance."<sup>12</sup> The minister must therefore be concerned about any and all conditions that maim and devalue the worth of persons.

King's goal was to position himself to help his people. When he considered becoming a lawyer, it was not for the purpose of lining his own pockets but rather as the best means to make it possible to eradicate the injustices in the legal system that harassed and hounded his people. The family and church values that were instilled in him and reinforced at Morehouse served as a reminder of the obligation to contribute toward the survival, liberation, and empowerment of his people. As a child, King was taught the value of sharing as well as serving others,<sup>13</sup> of being responsible for himself and for the society in which he lived, and of having a healthy sense of self as well as individual responsibility. King's parents modeled for him the importance of giving back to the community and championing the poor and oppressed.

During the summer months of his college days, King worked labor-intensive jobs, much to the chagrin of his father, who desired to spare him this experience. King clearly had a choice in this, for by virtue of his parents' financial status and social standing he did not have to work such jobs. Nevertheless, he *chose* to work with those who were less fortunate than he, in order to learn firsthand their plight and what they thought about it. Although Daddy King preferred that he do other work during the summers, King's decision was actually consistent with the values instilled in him by his parents.

The choice to do hard labor during the summers was probably also fueled by the influence of King's sociology adviser, Walter Chivers.<sup>14</sup> King's transcript from Morehouse reveals that he took no fewer than eight courses under Chivers, a sign that he was probably making a significant impression on the young student. It was also during the Morehouse years that King gained an appreciation for social science methodology, which would serve him well in the civil and human rights movements. This method stresses the importance of collecting facts in order to know the actual state of affairs regarding specific social ills. This approach remained of great importance to King in the struggle from Montgomery to Memphis. Each nonviolent campaign was preceded by gathering the pertinent facts to determine whether injustice existed and whether negotiation or direct action was needed.<sup>15</sup>

When King worked those labor-intensive summer jobs, he came face to face with the evils of the capitalist economic system in a way he had not previously experienced. He saw for himself how black workers were paid less, and treated worse, than white workers who performed the same jobs. He also saw poor whites misused on the job, and thus had his eyes opened to the problem of economic class. There were poor whites as well as poor blacks, and both were severely mistreated and dehumanized. The race factor exacerbated the mistreatment of blacks. In his sociology classes, King learned that money was the root of much of the social evil and racism that was so prevalent in the United States. The experience affected him deeply, and he never forgot it. It surely influenced his level of sensitivity to the plight of the nation and the world's

poor throughout the duration of his ministry. Working with the poor during those summers helped to pave the way for King's later ministry.

It is important to observe that by the time King decided to go to Crozer his mission in life was clear. He was now poised to find both a more sophisticated theological rationale for his still-growing social conscience, as well as a method for the elimination of racism and economic exploitation. Having grown up in the black church, King knew instinctively that Christianity required that one exhibit strong social concern for working to eradicate injustice and other social ills. Indeed, King reflected that by the time he entered Morehouse College his concern for racial and economic justice and political matters was already substantial,<sup>16</sup> and it had intensified by the time he enrolled at Crozer. King knew just as instinctively that as a Christian it was necessary to develop a sound theological rationale to support his social conscience. This, in part, was King's reason for wanting to go to seminary. As an average, "not brilliant" student, King earned college grades that were sufficient to allow him a place in the entering class of 1948 at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. Since Professor Kelsey said that King learned late in his college days the importance of scholarship and academic achievement, one might expect a better performance in his work at the next academic level, despite the fact that he would have to leave his beloved South and a loving family, and for the first time would be in an academic setting where the majority of the students and professors were white. He was ordained on February 25, 1948, and was named assistant pastor under his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

### CROZER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Looking back, King said that his experience at Morehouse College provided the key that unlocked the chain of fundamentalism that threatened to choke both reason and freedom.<sup>17</sup> In the fall of 1948, he matriculated in the Bachelor of Divinity degree program at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, not far from Philadelphia. Away from home for an extended period for the first time (and in the North!), King was happily surprised to find that in an entering class of thirty-two he was one of eleven black students (by the beginning of second semester).<sup>18</sup> The total student body numbered nearly one hundred. Only half of the entering class, including six of the black students, would graduate three years later.

Crozer was a remarkably different experience for King, primarily because he was a black southerner in a predominantly white academic setting. King had grown up under fundamentalist teachings such as belief in the absolute infallibility of the Bible, although at the age of thirteen he began to question this as well as the bodily resurrection of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Because his conversion from black church fundamentalism

had taken place under liberal black preacher intellectuals such as Mays and Kelsey at Morehouse, he did not, like many of his classmates from conservative southern Baptist churches, experience difficulty with Crozer's liberalism in theology and biblical interpretation. King was more challenged by the cultural differences, and was especially sensitive to the fact that there were certain practices in black schools and the black community that simply embarrassed him. Consequently, when King went to the predominantly white Crozer Seminary, he was conscious of these tendencies, and of the tendency of many whites to stereotype all blacks as behaving in these ways. "I was well aware of the typical white stereotype of the Negro, that he is always late, that he's loud and always laughing, that he's dirty and messy, and for a while I was terribly conscious of trying to avoid identification with it. If I were a minute late to class, I was almost morbidly conscious of it and sure that everyone else noticed it. Rather than be thought of as always laughing, I'm afraid I was grimly serious for a time. I had a tendency to overdress, to keep my room spotless, my shoes perfectly shined, and my clothes immaculately pressed."<sup>20</sup>

King was no doubt also burdened by the idea, pressed upon him by whites, of having always to represent his entire race. This was a burden that individual whites seldom if ever experienced. King knew that his people did not expect individual whites to represent their entire race. He reasoned that because persons are autonomous beings the individual (generally) cannot act for the entire race. What the individual does is generally a reflection on that person alone.

It mattered to King—perhaps too much—what his white peers and professors thought of him and his people. It was indeed a tremendous burden, to feel the sense that he essentially had to represent his entire race in all that he did. It meant having to live constantly on a kind of moral tightrope on which he must always be steady. To show up late for an appointment, for example, did not mean, "Martin Luther King is always late," but that "*those* people are always late."

Although King refined his "political and social graces" while at Crozer, he also acquired some behaviors that caused his fundamentalist preacher father grave concern. Taylor Branch has written about this:

By the second year, King was so imbued with the Social Gospel that he dared to drink beer, smoke cigarettes, and play pool openly in the presence of his father, whenever Reverend King visited Crozer. He went so far as to usher his father into the poolroom beneath the chapel, inviting him to play, trying to act as though it were perfectly normal, taking pride in his hard-earned skill as a player. He knew Reverend King would object violently, which he did, but he trusted excessively in the persuasive powers of the liberal Christian teachings that defilement comes only from within (as in Matthew 15:11).<sup>21</sup>



It is not difficult to see that some of this was merely acting out, and thus was a case of strong parent-child rivalry. Whatever else may have been involved in those displays of rebelliousness, King was also trying to find his own self and voice amid the many new ideas and experiences he was encountering at Crozer. There would be more times during his days at Crozer that he and his father would have ideological and other clashes. One such time was when he decided to spend Christmas break of 1949 dividing his time between preaching at Ebenezer and reading the communist doctrines of Karl Marx. However, there was another incident that would surely have caused fireworks between King and his father, had the latter known of it at the time.

During his second year at Crozer, King fell in love with a young German immigrant named Betty. She was "evidently the daughter of Crozer's superintendent of buildings and grounds."<sup>22</sup> Her mother was the cook in the seminary cafeteria.<sup>23</sup> In fact, King competed with Kenneth Lee Smith, a young white professor, for her affection. King got the better of the competition. Prior to this he and Smith, who was only a few years older than King, had become good friends. But after King's coup, "tempers flared," for it was not long before King and Betty were discussing marriage. Obviously confused and not a little distressed over the jokes of his friends and their tendency to dismiss as mere infatuation what was to him true love, King sought the advice of several close friends. One of these, Joseph Kirkland, was critical of the relationship on social class grounds. Betty was, after all, the daughter of a cook and a glorified janitor. What mattered, according to Kirkland, was not her race, but her social and economic class. Another friend, Marcus Wood, reminded King of the difficulty that an interracial couple would have in finding a church to pastor, especially in his native South. "Horace Whitaker, older and perhaps wiser than the others, let King talk himself out. He listened as King resolved several times over the next few months to marry Betty, railing out in anger at the cruel and silly forces in life that were keeping two people from doing what they most wanted to do."<sup>24</sup>

King was also given advice by Reverend J. Pius Barbour, a local black pastor and longtime close friend of Daddy King. King had become a regular at the Barbour home and often enjoyed Mrs. Barbour's "down-home" cooking. In any event, Barbour had a long fatherly talk with King "about the terrible problems intermarriage would create for him in this country."<sup>25</sup> King later confided in Whitaker that he could take anything his father might throw at him about his love for Betty, but that he could not bear the pain it might cause his mother. We do not know for certain that this was the real reason that King essentially conceded defeat, or whether it was simply the only way he could bear breaking off the relationship with Betty. In any case, he was deeply angered that church and society in this country were so narrow and out of step with God's expectation regarding human relations. However, he did what is now called the "politically correct thing," and he did so despite the fact that his love for Betty was a

matter of the heart. Slowly, he resigned himself to the view that the price of marriage to a white woman in the 1940s was too high. Therefore, King “forced himself to retreat, and struggled against bitterness.”

Perhaps this disappointing, heartrending experience, contributed to King immersing himself in his studies for the duration of his time at Crozer. It might be that this too was an example of overcompensation. However, the decision to lose himself in his studies might also have contributed to his having never lost track of his boyhood desire to find a reasonable theological rationale to support his social justice convictions, as well as a method to eradicate the social problems that hounded his people. By the time King got to Crozer, and later to Boston University, the passion to help his people was already etched into his being.<sup>26</sup> The initiative and effort to find a method to do so were mostly his own. Neither Crozer nor Boston University even had a curriculum and a faculty expressly geared to what King was seeking. In a sense, then, and especially in seminary, King had to do some creative reinventing of the curriculum in order to get the information and knowledge that he thought would be most helpful. More than this, we should not forget the King family emphasis on the value of service and giving back to the community. No one modeled this better than King’s parents, and it clearly left an indelible impression on him.

It was evident to King that his formal studies must be aimed at finding solutions to racism, discrimination, and economic exploitation, each of which caused his people tremendous suffering in an ostensibly free and democratic society. Knowledge and truth must be for the purpose of enhancing persons and communities. King came to think of personalism in the same way. It was not just a philosophy to discuss and debate. King was more concerned about what personalism could contribute to the uplift of his people and the achievement of the beloved community. He read voraciously, searching for the most reasonable philosophical and theological grounds for his deepening social conscience. The burning issue for King at Crozer was whether theologians acknowledged that Christianity had anything relevant and significant to say about the social crises that crushed the humanity and dignity of his people. He wanted to know whether Christianity had anything to say about otherwise Christian people who believed that their faith primarily required that they focus on spiritual matters, which ostensibly lead to the “saving” of the soul. King knew the Bible well enough, and had heard enough sermons preached by his father, and by William Holmes Borders and other black preachers, to know what the Bible and the best in the Jewish and Christian traditions required of Christians. What he so desperately sought at Crozer, then, was a formal theological basis on which to ground the strong social conscience and conviction he had grown up with from childhood.<sup>27</sup>

From the beginning of his seminary experience, King read many of the great Western theologians and philosophers in an effort to satisfy his quest. Of these he was most

impressed with the philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel and his dialectical method of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The truth, Hegel maintained, is found in the ongoing synthesis of opposites. In addition, King was fascinated with Hegel's doctrine that growth comes through struggle and suffering,<sup>28</sup> an idea that was also articulated by his maternal grandfather, and adopted by Daddy King.<sup>29</sup> During his doctoral studies at Boston University, King again studied Hegel, this time in a year-long seminar taught by his advisor, Edgar S. Brightman. We will return to a brief discussion of the Hegelian influence in chapter 3.

The other person who most influenced King during this period was church historian and Christian ethicist Walter Rauschenbusch, the chief theologian of the white social gospel movement<sup>30</sup> during the first two decades of the twentieth century. King's reading and study of Rauschenbusch and the social gospel movement fulfilled one of his two aspirations regarding theological study: he found in Rauschenbusch, especially, a sound theological foundation to support his social conscience. As significant as Rauschenbusch and his Kingdom of God ideal was for King, I want to postpone fuller discussion of him until the next chapter. For now, however, I briefly consider several other influences on King while he was at Crozer.

#### OTHER INFLUENCES AT CROZER

As a seminary student, King took thirty-four of the required one hundred ten hours for the B. D. degree under George Washington Davis, a Yale Ph.D. recipient who joined the Crozer faculty in 1938. Davis was influenced by the personalism of both Bowne and Brightman.<sup>31</sup> "The personalism of Brightman . . . was by far the single most important philosophical influence upon Davis."<sup>32</sup> Brightman was important not only to Davis but "was held in high esteem by the Crozer community. This affection and regard is reflected in a statement by Morton Scott Enslin, who introduced him to *Crozer Quarterly* readers as 'a frequent and ever-welcome contributor.'"<sup>33</sup> Through Davis, King was also exposed to the broader evangelical liberal tradition. "King inherited from Davis the best of the Anglo liberal tradition—Friedrich S. Schleiermacher, Albrecht R. Ritschl, Horace Bushnell, William Newton Clarke, Walter Rauschenbusch, Edgar S. Brightman, and a host of others."<sup>34</sup>

Under Davis, King was able to grapple with many of his most important philosophical and theological concerns: the nature of God, the problem of evil, and the role of religion in the world. King did not by any means "solve" all or even most of his pressing theological issues, but Davis provided for him an atmosphere (in which) to work at it. In addition, Davis was both understanding and encouraging to his eager student.<sup>35</sup> Much of the encouragement came in the form of strong grades and brief

comments on assigned papers (“Well done” or “Very well done,” and occasionally, “Excellent”).

Under Davis, King was able to continue honing the critical and analytical skills he learned under Kelsey, Williams, and others at Morehouse. As a seminary student, King was eclectic. His study habits and strong sense of wonder were second to none. It is also significant that it was under Davis that King got his first introduction to the theology of L. Harold DeWolf (a student of Brightman’s), who would become his doctoral academic advisor and mentor when Brightman became ill and died during King’s second year at Boston University.

In Davis’s courses, King closely scrutinized and wrote essays on Brightman’s text, *A Philosophy of Religion*. Also under Davis, in a paper entitled “A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification,” King cited at least two works—one of which he did not name—by Albert C. Knudson, a personalist theologian and dean of Boston University’s School of Theology before King matriculated there.<sup>36</sup> In Kenneth L. Smith’s course on Christianity and society, a paper attributed to King, “War and Pacifism,” acknowledged his familiarity with Nels F. S. Ferré,<sup>37</sup> a “neo-personalist theologian.”<sup>38</sup> Although King did not mention it in the paper, Ferré also studied under Brightman as an undergraduate student at Boston University. Ferré did not name himself a disciple of personalism, though one might consider him a friendly critic. He taught at Andover Newton Theological School, then spent “a few stormy years at Vanderbilt,” before returning to Andover.<sup>39</sup>

Many of Davis’s theological tenets—e.g., the existence of a moral order in the universe; the activity of God in history; the value of the personal; the social character of human existence; the ethical nature of Christianity—were evident in King’s own thinking in his seminary and doctoral studies, as well as during his leadership in the civil and human rights movements.<sup>40</sup> His formal study of personalism at Boston University, for which he received more than adequate preparation under Davis, solidified for King the theological and philosophical foundations for these fundamental doctrines that became his own. In chapter 8, I examine more explicitly two of Davis’s basic principles that deeply influenced King, especially as he engaged in moral deliberation to determine whether he should break silence on the war in Vietnam.

During the spring of his senior year at Crozer in 1950, King drove to nearby Philadelphia where he heard two fascinating lectures on Gandhi and the philosophy and practice of nonviolence. At the time, he was more impressed with what was said about Gandhi than about nonviolence as such. In addition, he was stirred by the passion of the lecturer, Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University in Washington, D.C. Johnson had made a recent trip to India, where he learned of Gandhi’s principles. Johnson was convinced that these principles were applicable to the elimi-

nation of racial discrimination in the United States. He was much influenced by “non-violence and the redemptive power of love and unmerited suffering.”<sup>41</sup> King’s immediate reaction to Johnson’s lectures was to rush out to purchase “a half dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works.”<sup>42</sup> An early King biographer reminds us that while King “found all this extremely enlightening and spiritually exalting,” he was not at the time convinced that Gandhi’s method of nonviolence would work if applied to race relations in the United States.<sup>43</sup> King liked Gandhi’s concept of nonviolence, but several years would pass before he finally adopted and adapted it for use in the struggle for civil rights.

It should also be noted that while a student at Morehouse College, King read Henry David Thoreau’s essay “On Civil Disobedience.”<sup>44</sup> Gandhi himself was familiar with, and influenced by, Thoreau’s famous essay.<sup>45</sup> When King found himself providing leadership for the civil rights movement, he also periodically quoted the thoroughgoing pacifist, Leo Tolstoi,<sup>46</sup> who based his pacifism on Jesus’ saying in the Sermon on the Mount: “Resist not evil.”

In addition to seeking a more formal theological foundation for his social conscience and a method to effectively address racism and economic exploitation, King was also interested in perfecting his oratorical and pulpit skills in seminary. In this, King knew what most seminary students do not know today, namely that good preaching is frequently seen by parishioners to be the bread and butter of parish ministry. Right or wrong, what most congregations desire is that their pastor be a very good preacher. At any rate, Taylor Branch writes that King’s oratory was “among his chief distinctions at Crozer,” noting that the chapel would generally be packed to capacity when it was known ahead of time that he was the student preacher.<sup>47</sup> In addition, when it was known that he would be at the practice podium in preaching classes, students who were not enrolled would show up to observe his technique. Preaching was for him an art, which also meant displaying some entertainment value as well. He “perfected minute details of showmanship, such as tucking away his notes at the podium in a manner just unobtrusive enough to be noticed, and his general style was extremely formal.”<sup>48</sup> He worked just as hard on the content of his sermons to ensure that what was being preached actually addressed the people at the point of greatest need. He believed “that preaching should grow out of the experiences of the people,” and that the minister should work hard to become familiar with the problems that adversely affect them.<sup>49</sup>

Even as a student, King understood the importance of maintaining a good balance between showmanship and substance in preaching. If one could appeal to the intellect as well as the emotions and passions of congregants, the message, he believed, would more likely be heard and understood. According to the Afrikan American

preaching tradition, finding just the right balance was an art in itself. It meant that one had to be able to size up an audience quickly. The preacher had to know how to get the congregation on board so that they could mutually feed and fuel each other during the sermon delivery.

When considering King's interest in the art of preaching while he was in seminary, it should be remembered that his oratorical skills were already superior to most students (and professors) by the time he arrived at Crozer. He had won oratorical contests in high school and at Morehouse. He had been exposed to good preaching styles and techniques from the time he was a boy. Although King did not care for some of the theology and pulpit antics of his father and other well-known, black, southern Baptist preachers, there was much about their humor, their application of the gospel to the plight of their people, and their overall manner and showmanship that profoundly impressed him. King learned much about homiletical theory and theology of preaching at Crozer. King took a total of nine courses in public speaking, homiletics, and pulpit oratory at Crozer.<sup>50</sup> His own preaching style, however, was patterned after those of good black preachers. Lewis Baldwin is careful to point to the dual influence of white and Afrikan American influences on King's preaching style. Baldwin is just as quick to remind us, however, that King's actual style was more influenced by the black preaching tradition from slavery onward. "When it came to the preaching art, the influence of King's father and that of [Vernon] Johns, [Benjamin] Mays, [Howard] Thurman, [Sandy] Ray, and others came together in his consciousness, and the ideals and examples of each reinforced those of the others in King's life."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, during his junior and senior year of college, King and two of his best friends frequented the Sunday worship services at the Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, pastored by William Holmes Borders. They were interested to learn all they could about the preaching styles of different black preachers and their ways of doing ministry that addressed the needs of the whole person.

As to King's own style, although King did not consider himself a whooper, he had the capacity to whoop, and did so on rare occasion. He did not resort to this style when preaching in the unemotional, more intellectual congregation in New England (e.g., Harvard's Memorial Church, where he preached not long after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize), but he did sometimes whoop when preaching in the more emotional southern black churches. Coretta Scott King recalled, "He responded to their expectations by rousing oratory; and as they were moved, he would react to their excitement, their rising emotions exalting his own. The first thunderous 'Amen' from the people would set him off in the old-fashioned preaching style. We called it 'whooping.' Sometimes, after we were married, I would tease him by saying, 'Martin, you were whooping today.' He would be a little embarrassed. But it was very exciting, Martin's whooping."<sup>52</sup>

The capacity to whoop linked King to an art form dating back to “slave preachers like Harry Hoosier and John Jasper.”<sup>53</sup> Is it any wonder that King, surrounded from the time he was a boy by trained preachers whose preaching “had a strong theological and hermeneutical base as well as a social and prophetic character,”<sup>54</sup> would ultimately develop into a powerful, effective preacher with a profound oratorical flair, coupled with the propensity for prophetic pronouncements? Furthermore, when King became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, he was an excellent, but generally restrained preacher. “King was controlled. He never shouted,” writes Taylor Branch. “*But he preached like someone who wanted to shout, and this gave him an electrifying hold over the congregation.*”<sup>55</sup>

### KING'S ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

King was an excellent student in seminary, although not quite a “straight A” student, as some biographers have maintained.<sup>56</sup> He did perform much better at Crozer than he had at Morehouse. He would become valedictorian and was awarded a scholarship to do two additional years of graduate work at a school of his choosing. As to the question of why King performed so much better at Crozer, Lawrence D. Reddick wrote: “Possibly it was the interracial situation, more than any other factor, that had stimulated him to do his best. He felt a compulsion to do well, for whatever he did, he felt sure, would be accredited not just to him as a person but to the Negro people as a whole.”<sup>57</sup>

James B. Pritchard, who taught Old Testament studies, was “surprised to find that a Southern Baptist like King adjusted so quickly to Crozer.”<sup>58</sup> For Crozer was a very liberal, social gospel seminary by comparison with many others. Most Southern Baptists, white as well as black, tended to be fundamentalist and rigid in theological outlook. Such a perspective generally made it difficult for them to do well at places like Crozer. This was not the case for the young, searching, perspicacious King, who actually began questioning some of his fundamentalist beliefs by the age of thirteen.<sup>59</sup> He had been taught the value of thinking and critical reflection at Morehouse College, and was introduced to many liberal theological ideas by Mays and Kelsey. This served him very well indeed in seminary, and later in graduate school. Therefore, unlike many of his southern Baptist classmates at Crozer, King was not troubled by “the skeptical rigor of Pritchard and [Morton Scott] Enslin.”<sup>60</sup> The latter taught New Testament studies and was considered “a radical biblical critic” who did not hesitate to question the factuality of more traditional biblical claims. For example, Enslin rejected the claim that Jesus and John the Baptist ever met.

It was also Enslin who wrote in his confidential evaluation of King that he was “a very able man,” and made a prediction that later came to fruition: “He will probably become a big strong man among his people.”<sup>61</sup> Dean Charles E. Batten wrote even more laudably about him: “King is one of the most brilliant students we have had at Crozer. He has a keen mind which is both analytical and constructively creative. While interested in social action, he has a fine theological and philosophical basis on which to promulgate his ideas and activities.”<sup>62</sup> Batten went on to praise the quality of King’s academic work at the University of Pennsylvania, where he took one course on aesthetics and another on Kant. He added that King’s peers thought highly of him, as evidenced by his election as president of the student body in his senior year. Moreover, Batten wrote that King was the only student to be granted honors in the comprehensive examinations. In addition, he wrote: “He is held universally in high regard by faculty, staff, and students and is undoubtedly one of the best men in our entire student body. He reflects fine preparation, an excellent mind, and a thorough grasp of material.”<sup>63</sup> It is significant that Batten did not say King was one of the best “Negro” men in the student body, but one of the best men. Professor of church history Raymond J. Bean wrote similarly about King’s intellectual prowess, contending that he was not only “the outstanding student in his class,” but that he “would be outstanding in any institution.”<sup>64</sup> Chosen valedictorian of his class, King graduated in June 1951.

Having discussed with Davis some of the first-rate graduate schools from which he might obtain a Ph.D. degree in the philosophy of religion or systematic theology, King applied to Yale University, Boston University, and the Divinity School at Edinburgh University in Scotland. In his letters recommending King to graduate schools, Enslin (revealing his racial and cultural bias) expressed his “surprise that a colored man from the South had done so well at Crozer.”<sup>65</sup> In a parenthetical comment in a letter to Sankey Lee Blanton for a postgraduate fellowship from Crozer, King said that Yale was his preference.<sup>66</sup> However, despite his impeccable academic credentials, selection as valedictorian, and strong references, Yale turned him down.<sup>67</sup> This rejection stemmed from King’s failure to take and submit the results of the graduate records examination, which he acknowledged as “a prerequisite for acceptance.”<sup>68</sup> The other two schools accepted him.

King was very close to his mother, and therefore discussed the matter of doctoral studies with her before speaking with Daddy King, who, by the summer of 1951, was not as enthusiastic about his decision to pursue doctoral studies as he had been regarding his desire to obtain formal theological training three years earlier.<sup>69</sup> Remember, in Daddy King’s judgment his son had acquired some questionable habits (smoking, drinking, and playing pool), which he linked to Crozer’s liberalism. In any event, King decided to go to Boston University. In his application he expressed a desire to study there because Brightman, the noted personalist, was on the faculty.<sup>70</sup> The



case for going to Boston was made even stronger because of the influence and encouragement of George Washington Davis, and the fact that King was seeking a deeper metaphysical and ethical grounding in personalism.<sup>71</sup>

Before proceeding to a discussion of the Boston University years, more attention should be devoted to the influence of the social gospel movement, specifically the work of Walter Rauschenbusch. The next chapter discusses the contributions of the black social gospel as well as the significance of Rauschenbusch in King's efforts to find a theological basis on which to ground his social conscience.