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Lonnie Valentine

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KING AND QUAKERS: CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

LONNIE VALENTINE

KING AND FRIEND RUSTIN

Near the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. urged young men to claim conscientious objector status in response to the war in Vietnam:

As we counsel young men concerning military service we must clarify for them our nation’s role in Vietnam and challenge them with the alternative of conscientious objection. I am pleased to say that this is the path now being chosen by more than 70 students at my own Alma mater, Morehouse College, and I recommend it to all who find the American course in Vietnam a dishonorable and unjust one. Moreover, I would encourage all ministers of draft age to give up their ministerial exemptions and seek status as conscientious objectors.¹

There is a Quaker connection to this statement. At the beginning of his career as the key civil rights leader, King was challenged by a Quaker conscientious objector from World War II to rid his home of guns and disarm his bodyguards. From this first act of personal disarmament in the midst of the civil rights struggle to this last act of the call for universal conscientious objection to the war in Vietnam, King was journeying along with—challenging and being challenged by—Quakers and Quaker ideas.

Bayard Rustin came to Montgomery in 1955 during the bus boycott and found the new proponent of nonviolent resistance for civil rights protecting his family with a gun and armed guards. Although this might seem incongruous to many Friends, King was just beginning his path of nonviolence and was justifiably concerned for his life and the lives of his family and colleagues. King’s home had already been bombed and death threats were multiplying. For his part, Rustin had spent twenty-eight months in prison as a conscientious objector in WWII and had been working since on developing the concept of

¹ Valentine: King and Quakers: Conscientious Objection for Social Change
nonviolence for the civil rights struggle. He had been involved in the Freedom Rides of the late 1940s and, unlike most Friends, experienced the kinds of threats King was living with and had experience with confronting them nonviolently. With this background, Rustin was sent to Montgomery by the Fellowship of Reconciliation to train new civil rights workers in nonviolence. In Rustin, therefore, King met one who brought conscientious objection as a religious stance together with experience in militant nonviolence for social change. Rustin persuaded King to disarm. Their meeting in Montgomery can be seen as a catalyst for King’s work from that point forward. The two would be in contact throughout King’s life. However, it would take another decade before King began connecting the civil rights movement with the anti-war movement, but the first steps on that path were taken with Rustin in King’s besieged Montgomery home in 1955.

Rustin did not present King with ideas and actions completely foreign to him. These influences were not directly connected to Quakers, but we can say that King had developed theological underpinnings in sympathy with Quaker perspectives, and he did read some Quakers while in seminary. From his experience of racism in the South and his studies in the midst of this virulent and violent racism, King would bring challenges to Friends’ perspectives. So, King was already working in his seminary studies at putting together a sturdy theological basis for combining conscientious objection to war with the active nonviolence he would champion in the civil rights struggle. There were few Quakers like Rustin who combined all these perspectives intellectually as well as in action.

**King’s Intellectual and Experiential Preparation**

King graduated from Morehouse College in 1948 at nineteen and decided to seek his B.D. at Crozer Seminary. Crozer had a reputation as an excellent seminary; it was located in what was understood to be an integrated North, and it was away from his father. Also, by all accounts, King was hungry for this work. Crozer had but six black students and King worried about the stereotyping of blacks as lazy and not intellectually capable; however, he soon impressed both faculty and fellow students with his eagerness, hard work, and intellect. He earned “A’s” in every course. Moreover, King had a deep desire for the knowledge. He desired the knowledge for the questions he
was pursuing personally, for the black church in the South, and for the deep social problem of race. King, says his biographer Stephen Oates, wanted to “serve humanity from the pulpit.” King sought a theological approach to these issues that would speak to him and that would speak for change.

King took up the study of social philosophy often pursuing the issues beyond what was required for class. Here he came across Walter Rauschenbusch, the key figure in the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century. Rauschenbusch’s ability to combine Christianity with social critique excited King. Further, King saw in Raushenbush someone who not only analyzed social problems through a Christian perspective, but also brought his social analysis into the streets. Rauschenbusch, as did others in the Social Gospel movement, attempted to actualize their vision of the Social Gospel. They understood that the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God might be touched here and now and that this vision was an impetus for seeking social justice. The Quaker painter Edward Hicks portrayed the same vision in his numerous renderings of the Peaceable Kingdom, which combined Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom with real historical events. So, it was Rauschenbusch’s—and some Quakers—view of the Kingdom of God as present and powerful that captured King’s attention.

Interestingly, King initially rejected a feature of Rauschenbusch’s analysis of the human condition that he later embraced as he pursued social change for the sake of the “beloved community.” Rauschenbusch had reacted to a view of human sin that saw such sin as undercutting efforts toward social betterment. In the view Rauschenbusch rejected, society was the way it was because of the sin in every individual. Hence, the task was to save people from sin and not worry about social systems that could not be improved. All social change would be infected by sin, so efforts to restructure society for the better would be futile. King’s introduction to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, who saw that the best society could do was to mitigate the evil of human sin, was the figure who would stop King’s exploration of the social gospel approach.

An important feature in Rauschenbusch’s thought that also stayed in the background until King’s “Declaration of Independence from the Vietnam War” was a critical analysis of capitalism. King remembered the depression and recalled seeing African Americans in bread lines. Early on, he confessed to “anti-capitalist” feelings. On
Christmas break of 1949, King read the *Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital* without them being assigned. Although he rejected the materialistic and hence totalitarian approach, he would not be blind to the economic aspects of the civil rights struggle. King later tied the effort for civil rights to economic rights. In King’s eyes, capitalism was no more *godly* than was communism *godless*. Hence, King acknowledged that communism may appeal as an alternative to capitalism because of Christianity’s failure to be fully Christian and address economic concerns of oppressed people. So, early on King suggested the Church stop preaching “pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities”¹⁴ which would make it truly nothing but an opiate of the people. It was the church’s call, said King, to contribute to the creation of “a world unity in which all barriers of caste and color are abolished.”¹⁵

Two events during his time at Crozer can be said to have shaped King’s coming involvement in the civil rights struggle.

On one weekend, King and a friend, along with their dates, drove into New Jersey. Stopping at a diner, they met a reception that King well understood from his life in the South. The waitress and all the white clientele ignored them. Upon summoning the owner, King attempted to reason with him, pointing out the legal problems of such discriminatory actions. The owner drew a gun and ordered them out, firing into the air for good measure! King pressed charges, but the case was thrown out when the three white witnesses refused to testify.

King had another run in with a white racist with a weapon, a fellow student at Crozer. This time King pursued a different strategy rather than leaving a dangerous situation and appealing to the law. When the student came to King’s room armed and accusing him of messing up his room, King talked quietly with the student, denying the charge and facing him down. However, when the student was brought up on charges and both students and administrators were ready to act against the white student, King refused to press charges. The student apologized. Hence, King saw that an appeal to the law might—or might not—provide some measure of justice, but something more was needed than changes in the law and how they were enforced. Although King would appeal to the rule of law and to equal protection under the law as one aspect of civil rights, nonetheless, the just use of the law was not in itself the beloved community. Although just laws and enforcement could provide a vital framework for such a
community, he saw that changing hearts and minds was equally necessary.

**SOCIAL AND PERSONAL SIN: RECONCILING POLARITIES**

King heard a lecture on Gandhi by Mordecai Johnson and was deeply impressed. He was impressed that a movement could overthrow an unjust, racist, and powerful system by massive civil disobedience. Yet, King was equally impressed with the religious commitment of Gandhi and the religious dimension of the independence struggle in India. King saw in Gandhi one who understood nonviolence as a way to address social sin as well as the sin in each human heart. King had come to understand that both of these were necessary to address in order to move toward the beloved community; in Gandhi he saw that both could be combined.

Earlier, King had been influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr and saw little hope for positive social change because of sin’s pervasiveness. But now, late in his studies, King saw a way to answer Niebuhr through Gandhi. Niebuhr believed that love was the goal in individual relationships, and that this was indeed taught by Jesus. However, for Niebuhr, Jesus had nothing to say about the problems of social injustice, since love had no power in larger social groups. At the societal level, the best one could hope for was relative justice, and this would always be maintained with coercive force or the fear of it. For Niebuhr, love was not enough. A.J. Muste, head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation after Reinhold Niebuhr had left it, spoke in opposition to all war whatsoever; King, on the other hand, had doubts about the realism of a completely nonviolent approach. Niebuhr’s exposition of the depth of human sin was the most profound challenge to King’s enthusiasm for the Social Gospel. However, in Gandhi, King saw a way to address the depth of human sin and social evil with a loving force that could be a match for coercion.

King began to explore how he could move beyond some of the excessively optimistic views of the Social Gospel movement and beyond the overly pessimistic view of Niebuhr’s “Christian realism.” After seminary, King went to Boston University with these possibilities in mind. In his first semester, King studied Hegel under Edgar Brightman. In dialectical process, King found a way beyond either/or thinking. The Spirit which is transcendent to our knowledge and
action is also radically immanent in our knowledge and action. It is through such a theological approach that King saw that the dualism of good and evil could be transcended within individuals and society as well. Although no human society could be fully the Kingdom of God, the beloved community could manifest that Kingdom in the ongoing process of social critique and change. King studied only briefly with Brightman before his death, but Brightman’s giving personality (he even held class from his death bed) and his vision of the processional nature of a personal God was powerful for King.

For example, in an exam for Brightman, King expressed enthusiasm for the concept of a “finite God”—a God that is not omnipotent—as a way to fully acknowledge the reality and power of sin. How so? Because the theological grounding for a view of God who suffers in love for creation becomes foundational and takes on a different sort of power. Such divine love could be seen as more powerful, even as it suffers, than evil and the violence that erupts from evil. Divine love transcends the apparent divisions between human and social goodness and brokenness.

Here we see family resemblances to early Friends who were well acquainted with sin—their own as well as society’s. These early Friends felt a power not defeated by sin, a power that could transform sinful people and societies. King, as early Quakers, acknowledged sin without “preaching up sin”—without making sin an excuse for retreating from the hard work of living the Kingdom in the world. In this early exam, King did in fact point to the Quakers as an example of mystics who did not forsake the world. King understood Quakers as moving more deeply into the heart of the world. Although this is about the extent of King’s formal exploration of Quaker thought, we can see the deep similarities to Friends’ perspectives: God as both transcendent and immanent, love as a force more powerful than sin and evil; community as a place to strive for the further realization of the Kingdom of God.

King moved further away from the neo-orthodoxy of Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, although he had to do so by first moving through their critiques of liberalism. Just as he saw a dynamic divine process at work in creation, King now was intellectually prepared to step into that moving stream toward his beloved community.
CONCLUSION

In his living room in Montgomery, with Rustin, King met a Quaker who had been swimming in that moving stream for years. Coming to social change work as a WWII conscientious objector, Rustin had moved from a passive view of pacifism to a vision of conscientious objection as the basis for militant nonviolence. In some ways, Rustin could be seen as John the Baptist to King as the anointed one. Rustin early on said to King that King was God’s prophet and that God had laid his hand upon King. However, to be God’s prophet would probably mean death. Rustin asked King to be ready. When King laid down his weapon in his Montgomery living room his path was chosen. He was obviously influenced by Rustin and learned from Rustin’s experience. However, the ground was prepared through King’s formal education and his own eager mind.

In his “Declaration of Independence from the Vietnam War,” all the elements of his early study and his struggle with competing theological views come together. Here we see the critique of the economic divisions in the United States in addition to his critique of racism. Here we see civil rights placed in a larger context for community. Here we see theology coupled with social analysis. Just as King called for the civil rights struggle to be nonviolent for religious and pragmatic reasons, he now called upon those involved in the Civil Rights struggle to take nonviolent resistance into opposing the Vietnam War. Conscientious objection, as King saw it now, was by no means simply standing aside and refusing to fight in war. At its core conscientious objection was the beginning of a nonviolent struggle against war as it was already a struggle against racism.

Here we see how King returns to us a challenge like the one Friend Rustin gave to him. King asks us how we can make our nonviolence revolutionary. Simply saying “No” to war is not enough, just as saying a personal “No” to race and class divisions is not enough. True conscientious objection leads us into the difficult conflicts of our society; it does not shield us from those conflicts. Rustin introduced King to conscientious objection as a vital part of active nonviolence. King returns the favor by introducing us, as conscientious objectors, to active nonviolence as a necessary expression of conscientious objection.
NOTES


