


2019

Background of King's Preaching Theology (Chapter One of King's Speech: Preaching Reconciliation in a World of Violence and Chasm)

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Backgrounds of King's Preaching Theology

The Influence of the Black Church Tradition

FROM BIRTH, KING WAS surrounded and influenced by the black faith community. Both his maternal grandfather and his father were successful African-American Baptist preachers in Atlanta, Georgia. Put simply, "King was a product of the black church in America."¹ How exactly, then, did the black Baptist church—or the black church in general—influence King's reconciliatory preaching theology? There are at least three significant elements of the black church tradition that influenced King: the freedom tradition, open-ended Christian practices, and the particular interpretative tools of allegory and typology.

First is the black church's "freedom tradition." Long before the birth of King, black people had been singing hymns such as the one below:

Children, we all shall be free
When the Lord shall appear!²

1. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 5.

2. Southern and Wright, *African-American Traditions*, 37.

KING'S SPEECH

And,

Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom over me!
Before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord
And be free.³

And,

In Christ now meet both east and west,
In Him meet south and north:
All Christly souls are one in Him
Throughout the whole wide earth.⁴

As seen in the songs above, a fundamental motif of freedom and liberation permeated black Christians' lives from their first exposure to Christianity in America. They found both spiritual enhancement for their oppressed lives and eschatological hope by singing and dreaming of their own liberation from oppression. In fact, it was none other than this spiritual enhancement and eschatological hope that propelled early African-American Christians to walk out of the churches of white slave owners and start black churches. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) in 1787 was the first example of such a walkout. Richard Allen, founder and first consecrated bishop of the A.M.E. church, departed from St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and started the first African-American denomination.⁵

By the time of King's birth, black Christians in America had already been actively engaging in social movements to improve black lives and, therefore, most black churches in America functioned as both spiritual homes and social-movement base camps.⁶

3. *African American Heritage Hymnal*, 545.

4. *African American Heritage Hymnal*, 399.

5. Abington, *Readings*, 30.

6. However, not all black churches were part of the civil rights movement. Indeed, there were a considerable number of black churches that did not participate in the movement, and rather took an accommodationist position.

So, it comes as no surprise that King was surrounded and influenced by this spiritual and social ethos while being raised as a pastor's son. Consequently, it was deeply rooted in King's mind, theological thoughts, and preaching from his childhood. When King was led to public service, that ethos was evidently present in his preaching and various speeches, as we can see in the following excerpt:

It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever." . . . Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.⁷

These words sound almost like the lyrics of an old-time black spiritual, which evidently proves King's inheritance of the black church's freedom and liberation tradition.

The second influential element on King's preaching is that of the black church's open-ended Christian practices. These practices include extending biblical narratives into the church's own worldly experience, performing Scripture in its music, its rhythmic pattern

Hans Baer and Merrill Singer explain this in their book, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*. Through thorough research on African-American mainstream churches, Messianic-nationalist sects, conversionist sects, thaumaturgical sects, etc. in the twentieth century, they find not only that there have been varieties of social protest in the black church, but also that there were varieties of accommodationist positions in the black church, influenced in particular by advanced industrial capitalism. Thus, at this point it would not be correct to say that all black churches in the early or middle twentieth century were active participants in social or civil rights transformation.

7. King, *Strength to Love*, 114.

of call and response, and rhetorical adornments.⁸ Richard Lischer observes that all of these are techniques that King “exported from the church’s Sunday worship to political mass meetings around the country.”⁹ Quite understandably, these practices enabled King to find God revealed and speaking through the whole universe, that is, both sacred and secular realms. Above all, extending the Bible into the church’s own worldly experience affirms God’s universal reign in the world. Performing the Scripture in music creates the Scripture’s common virtue in the secular world thanks to the universality of music itself. And black worship’s pattern of call and response enables people’s active engagement with divinity, whether the listeners are Christian or not (therefore, universal engagement!), by appealing to human beings’ most common desire for communication with each other and with the divine. Lastly, various rhetorical adornments help King inflate “local conflicts into the titanic battle of universals.”¹⁰ With the underlying influence of the black church’s open-ended practices, King was able to transform “the Judeo-Christian themes of love, suffering, deliverance, and justice from the sacred shelter of the pulpit into the arena of public policy.”¹¹

Thirdly, King’s theology was informed by the black church’s interpretative tools of allegory and typology. Regarding this matter, Lischer says:

[T]hey [allegory and typology] allowed his congregations a greater opportunity to identify their struggles with those portrayed in the Bible. The black church not only sought to locate truth *in* the Bible, in order to derive lessons from it, but also extended the Bible its own experience. King found the ancient methods of interpretation useful in his effort to enroll the Civil Rights Movement in the saga of divine revelation.¹²

8. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 7.

9. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 7.

10. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 9.

11. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 4.

12. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 7.

What is evident in Lischer's observation is that by utilizing the interpretative tools of the black church's tradition, King succeeded in intertwining the realm of divine revelation with the secular realm, wherein the civil rights movement is perceived as a divine claim. In doing so, King eventually came to confront the God revealed through the whole universe again and again.

King was a product of the black church, and his own theological identity was deeply influenced by the black church tradition. Specifically, King found his God revealed through the whole universe as a result of the three major influences of the tradition that we discussed above. However, the influence from the black church was not enough for King to develop his own homiletic theology, which he needed in order to confront the cruel reality of the America in which he lived. He needed more than influence itself. He needed a deeper articulation of the human condition, a broad and comprehensive understanding of God, and his own homiletic voice to confront this violent reality. As one can guess, all of these higher disciplines came from his advanced theological studies. Therefore, it is now time to turn to King's theological background and how it deepened his understanding of theology and preaching of reconciliation.

The Influence from Contemporary Theologies

King went through three influential academic institutions: Morehouse, Crozer Seminary, and Boston University (where he wrote his dissertation in theology). These institutions gradually helped King to develop his own prophetic voice, which would echo God revealed or manifested through the universe during his public life. In particular, significant influence on King's preaching theology came from King's contemporary theologians, such as Benjamin E. Mays, George W. Davis, and Boston Personalist theologians like Harold DeWolf, along with Paul Tillich and Karl Barth in whose works King had a vast interest. Besides, King had been largely influenced by black theological legacies he inherited from his Ebenezer church experience and his active participation in black

theology. Hence, this section investigates the theological influences mentioned above, including the homiletic influence of black theological legacies.¹³ It is perhaps best for us to start with King's black theological legacies, since those legacies are the fundamental theological ground of King's experience and development as an African American preacher and practical theologian. From here, we will move on to explore his major intellectual sources.

Black Theological Ground

It is quite difficult to trace the exact black theological legacies King inherited. This is partly because King did not have a chance to be educated under black academic theologians (instead his experience of black theology was observed from influential black preachers¹⁴), and also because his main theological interest was not in the black theological tradition. Even his doctoral dissertation was about two white theologians' conceptions of God. Nonetheless, it is not impossible to explore the influence black theology had on King's homiletic theology, thanks to the works of some prominent black theologians such as James H. Cone, Noel L. Erskine, and specifically Richard Lischer's outstanding research on King's preaching and theology.¹⁵ The two former theologians do not specifically deal with King's preaching theology. Nevertheless, their articulation of King's black theology, and its theological implications for

13. This investigation will help us understand how these various theological influences contribute particularly to the formation of King's homiletic theology of reconciliation and ecumenism. Admittedly, this is not the only way to read these influences. William D. Watley reads them as the formative sources of King's evangelical socialism, while Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp Jr. read them as the intellectual sources of King's evangelical ethical ideals. Recently, Richard Wayne Will Sr. identified them as the critical sources of Kingian doctrines of God. See Watley, *Roots of Resistance*; Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*; and Wills, *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God*. For the purpose of the project, however, this investigation intentionally focuses on the theological sources' influences on King's homiletic imagination and theology.

14. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 15–37.

15. Their publications will be at times quoted later in this study.

King's life and work, provides essential theological accounts. Thus, I will call upon these important research efforts to explore King's black theological foundations.

First, we need to investigate what practical and fundamental theological legacy King inherited from his home church, Ebenezer Baptist. "The church," King recalls in his autobiography of religious development, "has always been a second home for me."¹⁶ It is obvious that Ebenezer was the place that provided his early religious experience and formed his basic theological concerns. According to Lischer, Ebenezer Baptist Church had considerable influence on King at least in three ways that this project will later articulate and develop in relation to King's own homiletic and theological ideas of God, humanity, and the universe.

First, at his home church King experienced a God who is all powerful, ever present, and ceaselessly loving.¹⁷ Being taught along fundamentalist lines in the black Baptist church,¹⁸ King formed his own religious universe with an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving God—even though he later confessed in an autobiographical statement to "removing the shackles of fundamentalism."¹⁹

The church's second theological influence on King was its active social concern.²⁰ King's congregation recognized a God who

16. Garrow, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 361.

17. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 15–17.

18. Garrow, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 359–62. King uses the often historically loaded term "fundamentalism" to mean 1) the infallibility of Scriptures and thus the invalidation of historical biblical criticism, 2) evangelistic conversion of an individual, 3) belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and 4) a patriarchal understanding of God and the pastorate. King later came to seriously revise this fundamentalist view as he acquired a more liberal theological education at Crozer seminary and Boston University.

19. Carson, Luker, and Russell, *Papers*, 363.

20. Indeed, it wasn't just Ebenezer Baptist Church but its pastor, King's father, that influenced King's lifetime social concern. Already, "decades earlier to the Montgomery bus boycott, King's activist father [along with the church] refused to commute on a segregated bus system, fought for parity in teacher salaries, and desegregated courthouse elevators" (Wills, *Image of God*, 33). Thus, it is no surprise that King confesses, "My admiration of him [the father] was a great moving factor; he set forth a noble example that I didn't mind following" (King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development" [1950], in *The Papers*, 1:360).

was actively working to transform black people's oppressed status, and the church was believed to be a vehicle for that divine act. To put it more theologically, "King's congregation knew that the future of the Kingdom of God [eschatological hope] was meant to be seen and tasted in *this* life."²¹ Hence, it was very natural that when he arrived in Atlanta years later to serve his home church, "King linked the salvation of the church to the economic and social health of the Negro in Atlanta."²²

Lastly, the faith experience at Ebenezer church provided King with an image of what a preacher ought to be, which King later reflected throughout his public life. Regarding this matter, Lischer writes, "At Ebenezer, young King learned that when the preacher assumes his proper place in hierarchy above the people and beneath the cross—and says what God wants him to say—the entire organism hums with celestial power. The people had better pay attention."²³ In Lischer's observation, two things are very clear: (1) God is continuously in dialogue with humans and specifically gives the Word to the preacher, and (2) when the preacher preaches, the whole universe helps the preacher to deliver God's word. These fundamental beliefs were paramount when King was in the public eye, since they legitimized King as a preacher of the universally speaking God for the sake of the oppressed.

In sum, Ebenezer Baptist planted the seeds of King's future evangelical social service. There he found the God and the Word upon whom he would call in his public service, formed his basic worldview, and became aware of his own identity as a public preacher.

Regarding King's preaching and theology, James Cone writes, "It is to his credit that he never allowed a pietistic faith in the other world to become a substitute for good judgment in this world. He not only preached sermons about the Promised Land

21. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 17.

22. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 24.

23. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 17.

but concretized his vision with a political attempt to actualize his hope."²⁴ And in 1969, the National Committee of Black Churchmen stated:

Black theology is a theology of liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black community. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black community that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says no to the encroachment of white oppression.²⁵

In the statements above, we find two important black theological ideas that colored King's homiletic theology.

First, as black theology does, most of King's preaching seeks liberation of the oppressed in *this* world, rather than only in the world to come. From its inception, black theology has been a theology of liberation.²⁶ It eagerly sought to liberate theology from dominant white American and European theology and to free the oppressed, in particular black people, from social, religious, economic, and political oppression.²⁷ Although King did not

24. Erskine, *King among the Theologians*, 122.

25. Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology*, 101. There is, indeed, a caveat to this statement: in historical terms, we must recognize the statement as an appeal for black theology to *become* what it describes. In other words, black theologians in this period were bringing this form of liberation theology into existence, not simply describing a black theology that had always existed. This is not to say that black theologians before this time did not have similar analyses—theologians and church leaders such as Reverdy Ransom, Howard Thurman, and others certainly did. However, the specific formulation of a "theology of liberation" was new in this period, in that it came after (and in many ways was a result of) the civil rights movement, and cannot be taken as an ahistorical description of what black theology had always been—or, for that matter, of what all black theology has been since that time.

26. Cone, *For My People*, 53.

27. As discussed briefly above, in King's time, the formulation of black theology as a theology of liberation was in the beginning stage. Further, King did

ultimately succeed in this theology of total liberation, he nonetheless took the idea seriously and incorporated it into his own homiletic theology. In fact, this was a natural development of his theology, since most of his preaching and speeches were delivered in the public arena for the real (or practical) sake of the oppressed. King preaches:

I say to you that our goal is freedom, and I believe we are going to get there because however much she strays away from it, the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be as a people, our destiny is tied up in the destiny of America . . . If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition that we now face will surely fail. We're going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty are embodied in our echoing demands.²⁸

Clearly, King's target is *America, here and now*. This tangible worldly reality must go through liberation and transformation.

Second, as black theology seeks the reconciliation of the oppressed and the oppressors, King's preaching also echoes the idea of reconciliation between blacks and whites.²⁹ In fact, the ultimate

not understand himself as a liberation theologian, a term that did not exist in the 1950s and early 1960s. Thus, it would suffice here to state that King helped inspire the work of the black liberation theological movement rather than that he adopted a fully-fledged liberation theology.

28. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock at Midnight*, 222–23.

29. King's ideal of reconciliation toward or beyond liberation did not go without criticism from contemporary black theologians and liberation socialists. In particular, the prominent Muslim liberation socialist Malcolm X blamed King's pacifist approach to a cruel and unjust reality and the "white" liberal concept of reconciliation itself (Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 96–99). As will be discussed later, Cone's criticism of King, though not identical to Malcolm X's, takes a similar stance, that King's seemingly passive "turn-the-other-cheek" method of reconciliation against a vicious racist system did not adequately serve the function of true liberation. Despite those criticisms, however, King's ideal of reconciliation stood firm, because King never forgot that without liberation of the oppressed, there can never be authentic reconciliation between the oppressors and the oppressed. In other words, reconciliation necessitates liberation.

end of King's civil rights movement, beyond the triumph of the oppressed over the oppressors, was to effect this reconciliation. This is why King preaches, "God grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy. God bless you."³⁰ As we will discuss later, this idea of reconciliation is one of the prominent themes in King's theological and political rhetoric. Noel Erskine observes that this reconciliatory idea is the major difference between King and Cone. While Erskine contends that King sees reconciliation as the ultimate goal of the black struggle, Cone's ultimate goal is liberation.³¹

Throughout his public preaching life, King was in close connection with the black theology that emerged in the 1950s.³² In

30. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 224.

31. Erskine, *King among the Theologians*, 127. Indeed, Cone is not satisfied with King's "white Jesus" nonviolence agenda. According to Cone, King's Jesus seems to tell blacks that "the only way to win political freedom is through nonviolence," and that Jesus "chose him because King was the least of the evils available." Thus, Cone believes, even though King's life and legacy has been a tremendous foundation for the development of black liberation theology, King's ideal method of reconciliation would not achieve true liberation. Cone eventually wants to establish an uncontaminated pure black theology of a black God revealed through the unique black experience as the real ground of black liberation (Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*). Cone's criticism is, however, difficult to swallow, because in his black liberation theological agenda there is an inescapable (and also inappropriate) binary structure of "pure white theology" and "pure black theology." There is no real evidence, neither historically nor theologically, that either thing truly exists.

32. Cone argues that black theology's origin dates back to early 19th century, wherein activists like Richard Allen, Henry Highland Garnet, Nat Turner, Henry McNeal Turner fought to liberate the black people (Cone, *For My People*, 7). However, Howard Thurman, whose *Jesus and the Disinherited* King is said to have carried with him to the day he died, must have been the strongest influence on the formulation of King's own black theology. Thurman argues that 1) Jesus himself was one of the downtrodden who actively resisted an unjust, dominant society with nonviolence; 2) God is on the side of the oppressed; and 3) forgiveness, love, and reconciliation are the final destiny both for the downcast and the privileged. We will see later how King creatively

light of that connection, we observe two of black theology's important contributions to King's theology: first, the idea of black liberation, and second, the ultimate reconciliation between the oppressed and their oppressors. Though other influences such as theological liberalism and personalism (which we will discuss later) may have further developed these ideas, it seems more likely that black theology was the core foundation of King's personal homiletic philosophy.

At Morehouse

Morehouse College was the first academic institution that King attended. There, Benjamin E. Mays, the president of the college at that time, played a significant role in King's education. Mays served as King's mentor during his years at Morehouse, sharing his own teachings and philosophies that King later adopted and adapted to coin his own theology. He influenced King's theology and preaching on at least three subjects: humanity, American society, and God.

To the first point, Mays believed in and advocated for the dignity of all human beings. He once wrote, "[T]he dignity of each individual wherever he resides on the earth is tied up with the destiny of all men that inhabit the globe. Whether we like it or not, we cannot do anything about it."³³ Mays taught his students that no individual was the spiritual or intellectual inferior of another, regardless of race. In this respect, Lischer's assessment of Mays is quite right when he says, "Mays was a liberal who believed that human largesse would eventually overcome ignorance and prejudice and usher in a new era of understanding."³⁴ Indeed, we can easily discern Mays's conception of human dignity in King's later sermons, such as when he preaches, "The whole concept of the *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all

adopts and adapts these key ideas of Thurman's for his own homiletic and theological usage.

33. Mays, *Disturbed About Man*, 22.

34. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 44.

men have something within them that God injected. . . . And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity."³⁵

Second, Mays thought that American democratic ideals did not match American society. According to Mays, if America had truthfully and faithfully followed the democratic ideals upon which it was founded, its society would have not become oppressive and bifurcated. This corruption of America was particularly clear from a Christian perspective. Mays writes:

It is clear that Christian light condemns the inhumanity of man in our economic life. It is equally clear that Christian light condemns the corruption in our political life. We know what Christianity has to say about war and racial discrimination . . . What then can we do to be saved? It is the responsibility of the church of Christ to launch an evangelic campaign to convert men to God.³⁶

Agreeing with Mays's Christian criticism of American society, King voiced a similar critique years later:

On the one hand we have proudly professed the great principles of democracy, but on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very opposite of those principles. But now more than ever before, America is challenged to realize its dream, for the shape of the world today does not permit our nation the luxury of an anemic democracy. And the price that America must pay for the continued oppression of the Negro and other minority groups is the price of its own destruction. For the hour is late. And the clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now before it is too late.³⁷

In these statements, both Mays and King agree that American society has been corrupted by deviating from its original democratic dreams and must now be reformed and converted in the way God wants.

35. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 88.

36. Mays, *Disturbed*, 22, 24.

37. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 87.

Therefore, concerning theological notions of God, we find that Mays and King share another thought—in particular, what God wants us to do when we confront a dehumanized society. Mays says, “We need the power of God unto salvation . . . Ask God, and mean it, to create a clean heart and renew a right spirit within us. Ask him to purge our souls of sin and corruption.”³⁸ Here Mays claims that God is fighting against the widespread injustice throughout America and that Christians are the people who had to carry out God’s divine purpose. Simply put, God is with us in our fight against injustice. In King’s later preaching, we see the same motif of God’s presence with us in the fight against injustice. More specifically, King’s preaching portrays a powerful and loving God that has begun the fight in his own name and calls upon us to join him. Indeed, for King this is the only true source of strength we have in the fight against injustice. He preaches, “It will give us courage to face the uncertainty of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom.”³⁹

We realize that Mays’s theological ideas concerning humanity, society, and God became the key themes that King would carry with him throughout his involvement in the civil rights movement. Of course, King did not take Mays’s ideas whole cloth without developing them in his own ways. He rather adapted what he learned from his beloved teacher. For instance, King stressed how abundant God’s love is for the oppressor, even when God is fighting on the side of the oppressed. Even the oppressors “are not totally bad and . . . are not beyond God’s redemptive love.”⁴⁰

The three concerns that King learned from Mays at Morehouse were the same concerns he brought to Crozer Seminary and then to Boston University. At these two institutions, King would hone and develop what he had learned from Ebenezer and Morehouse to find his own theological voice.

38. Mays, *Disturbed*, 24.

39. King, *Strength to Love*, 114.

40. King, *Strength to Love*, 51.

At Crozer Seminary

It was while attending Cozer Seminary that King was introduced to Christian liberalism, primarily through his favorite teacher, George Washington Davis. Under Davis's influence, King discovered the unity of all truth, universal principles acceptable to all people of goodwill, and the wholeness of both his secular world and religion.⁴¹ King writes, "In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life."⁴² Of course, the fact that King was attracted to liberal theology and wrote some papers in favor of it does not mean that he abandoned his traditional theological notions. Rather, King gave up the whole liberal project years later.⁴³ Thus, we can only say that King was absorbing some fundamentals of liberalism, which he then subjected to his own alterations. For instance, he adopted "such Christian values as love and personality for their alleged conformity to the laws of the universe"⁴⁴ and appropriated them for his own preaching. King preached in his sermon *Loving your Enemies* the following:

Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key

41. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 55. Davis argues that universal principles, such as love, justice, freedom, equality, peace, etc., undergird the fundamental structure of the world and must be sought by humanity out of goodwill for a better world. Obviously, these principles or principal ideas made their way into King's later theological and humanitarian ideas of love even for enemies, freedom of all races, social equality, and the absence of unjust war (Davis, "The Ethical Basis of Christian Theology," 177-89).

42. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 55.

43. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 59. In particular, King's theological mind cannot accept the liberal idea of Jesus not as God Incarnate but as "the best thinking about God the world has known to date" or the idea that there is no historical intervention by the Divine. However, as discussed above, even though he gave up the liberal project entirely, the remains of it still lingered in his mind and were expressed through his own alterations of its ideas.

44. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 55.

to the solution of the problems of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist.⁴⁵

It is evident in this sermon that King's notion of Christian love is very similar to liberalism's idea of love and its practical implications. What is then important for the sake of this research is the fact that King was absorbing liberalism's views of universality. Indeed, through these views, Christian liberalism was eagerly relating God to the secular world, not merely confining God to the religious realm. Where there is genuine love among people, there is also God—who is love itself. In King's preaching, this universality of God's nature is very important in his effort to have God speak to the secular realm directly through earthly witnesses, which was the very aim of the civil rights movement. Thus, King preaches, "in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and in history."⁴⁶

In short, we find the liberal influence on King in his later sermons, especially the idea of God's universal nature. This liberal influence started at Crozer Seminary through its academic environment. However, it was not until King arrived at Boston University that he was fully able to study Christian liberalism and, in particular, Boston personalism.

At Boston University

Boston personalism had a huge impact on King, even though it would not be the ultimate theological ground of his civil rights movement. In a 1959 sermon, King says, "You look at me, Martin Luther King; you see my body, but, you must understand, my body can't think, my body can't reason. You don't see the 'me' that makes me me. You can never see my personality."⁴⁷ The personalism taught by Harold DeWolf and others at Boston University had a considerable influence on King's theology in two ways—its

45. King, *Strength to Love*, 49–50.

46. King, *Strength to Love*, 107.

47. King, *The Measure of a Man*, 51.

theism and Christology. Personalism espouses a God of ideal personality.⁴⁸ This God comes to a person in the form of a personal spirit and confronts that person in a religious experience.⁴⁹ And since it is in God's very nature to be personal, God is immanent in this world wherein the religious experience happens. However, it is not right to say that King accepted the immanence of God in the world by denying the transcendence of God. During his academic life at Crozer, King had already written, "Frankly I feel that unless God were transcendent he would not be God at all."⁵⁰ Throughout King's ministerial and public life, the ideas of the transcendence and immanence of God coexisted in King's theology.

What raises particular interest concerning King's exposure to Boston personalism is that King became acquainted with a God who reveals Godself to common persons in the world through God's personal spirit. As discussed already, for King, this idea of God does not mean that God does not have spiritual supremacy in relation to the world. Rather, this only means that King highly cherishes the concept of a personal God who has been revealing and confronting common persons or the public in the form of God's personal spirit all along. Thus, King wrote, "The revelation of God in Christ is not dissimilar to the revelation of God in other men [sic] but in Christ the revelation of God reaches its peak."⁵¹ In other words, God still appears supreme in the special or ultimate revelation through Christ, but is also *personal enough* to have intimate relations with and be revealed through individual human beings.

At Boston, King was taught that "Jesus does not incarnate God in the orthodox Christian sense but represents the best thinking

48. For a more detailed personalist discussion of theology, see Knudson, *The Philosophy of Personalism*; Bowne, *Personalism*; Brightman, *Moral Laws*; DeWolf, *Theology of the Living Church*; and Muelder, *Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics*.

49. Concerning this notion of God, in an examination at Crozer King wrote, "God for me along with other theists is a personal spirit immanent in nature and in the value structure of the universe" (King, *Papers*, 290).

50. King, *Papers*, 291.

51. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 58.

about God the world has known to date.”⁵² Jesus was conceived as an amazing spiritual socialist as well as a religious revolutionary. Of course, we cannot think that King fully accepted this personalistic idea of Jesus, even though his notes from that time say, “It was the warmth of his devotion to God and the intimacy of his trust in God that accounted for his divinity.”⁵³ For King, Jesus was still the spiritual and physical manifestation of God’s presence in this world. Nonetheless, it was at least personalism’s contribution to King that allowed him to find in every oppressed person the divinity and intellectual foundation that pertains to the human Jesus Christ. He once wrote:

I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. Both men greatly stimulated my thinking. It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. The personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism’s insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real 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.⁵⁴

Evidently, this discovery of human divinity in every person was both challenging and inspirational for King. Later on it was logical that the personalist concept became an imperative of King’s ministerial approach to the cruel reality of his day—namely, seeing goodness still inherent deep inside both the oppressed and the oppressors.

No doubt, personalism left a strong imprint in King’s thought. However, as suggested before, King did not fully accept the personalist approach to theology, and therefore his years at Boston did not totally change King’s traditional belief in church and God;

52. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 59.

53. Lischer, *Preacher King*.

54. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 73.

rather, they equipped King with some critical liberal and socialist tools. Thus armed, King graduated from Boston University and arrived at Montgomery, Alabama, to start his ministerial and public life.

Influences of Paul Tillich and Karl Barth

It is no surprise that King's theology was influenced by Paul Tillich, as King finished his dissertation on Tillich's theology in 1955. The year itself carried particular significance for King's own theology, since he was just starting his public life as a civil rights activist in Montgomery. Under the dissertation title, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," King explored Tillich's conception of God, some of which King took later for his own use. However, he maintained some distance from Tillich, as Tillich's God was too impersonal⁵⁵ to satisfy King's own homiletic theology, which, as demonstrated in the previous section, had been influenced by Boston personalism.

Nonetheless, Tillich's major influence on King comes from his conception of God. In Tillich's theology, God is perceived as the fundamental Ground of Being, Being itself, or the Power of Being.⁵⁶ Specifically this means that "God is the ground of the personal existence and participates in every life as its ground and aim."⁵⁷ This conception of God is essentially universal; God sustains, empowers, and directs everything that has being in the whole universe. In other words, God is the universal ground of any being. In this theological sense, for Tillich, "*The Word of God* means the self-manifestation of that which concerns everyone ultimately."⁵⁸

55. Erskine, *King among the Theologians*, 47.

56. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*; Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 7

57. Erskine, *King among the Theologians*, 25.

58. Erskine, *King among the Theologians*, 39.

In fact, we find Tillich's conception of God as the universal Ground of Being or the Power of Being in King's various sermons. In the sermon *Our God is Able*, King preaches:

At the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and in history . . . Let us notice, first, that God is able to sustain the vast scope of the physical universe.⁵⁹

And in the sermon *Paul's Letter to American Christians*:

It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power-drunk generation that love is [the] most durable power in the world, and that it is at bottom the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. Only through achieving this love can you expect to matriculate into the university of eternal life.⁶⁰

Finally, in his sermon *Guidelines for a Constructive Church*:

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when men learn to live together as brothers. The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when men will keep their theology abreast with their technology . . . The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when men will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; and nations will not rise up against nations, neither will they study war anymore. The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain will be made low; the rough places would be made plain, and the crooked places straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.⁶¹

Thus, King preaches that God is a universal God who sustains, empowers, illuminates, and embraces the whole universe. Of course,

59. King, *Strength to Love*, 107.

60. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 36.

61. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 112-13.

we might argue that this perception of God could just as easily have come from such sources as King's own black church tradition and, to some extent, that argument is true. However, King owes, at the very least, the language of this universal God to Tillich.

Tillich's idea of God played a significant role in King's public life from 1955 on. King's God had to be universal enough to embrace the whole American socio-political and cultural reality. Nonetheless, as Erskine points out above, King could not fully accept Tillich's perception of God, since Tillich's God was too impersonal⁶² for King to develop his own pastoral and prophetic voice. King's proclaimed God, who is the eternal Ground of the whole Universe, had to be personal in order to have a compassionate relation with other beings, just as he preaches:

Man, for Jesus, is not mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, but a child of God. Is it not unreasonable to assume that God, whose creative activity is expressed in an awareness of a sparrow's fall and the number of hairs on a man's head, excludes from his encompassing love the life of man itself?⁶³

As discussed before, this personal characteristic of the universal God was provided to King through the personalist discipline at Boston. At this point, therefore, we can conclude that King was forming his own homiletic theology by synthesizing personalism and Tillich's theology, among other elements.

While Tillich's influence on King is explicit, Barth's influence seems less so. In some cases, such as his sermon "Pilgrimage to Non-violence," King criticizes Barth's neo-orthodoxy. King says, "In its revolt against overemphasis on the power of reason in liberalism, neo-orthodoxy fell into a mood of antirationalism and semifundamentalism, stressing a narrow uncritical Biblicism. This approach, I felt, was inadequate both for the church and for personal life."⁶⁴ Still, it is incorrect to say that Barth's theology does not have any connection to King's. King himself wrote in his Boston

62. Erskine, *King among the Theologians*, 47.

63. King, *Strength to Love*, 124.

64. King, *Strength to Love*, 147.

graduation paper, "In spite of our somewhat severe criticism of Barth, however, we do not in the least want to minimize the importance of his message."⁶⁵ In fact, Barth and King share at least two similar ideas.

First, both of them agree that the human situation itself is so desperate and corrupt that Christians should evaluate it and take action. Barth once said:

I have now become a member of the Social Democratic Party. Just because I set such emphasis Sunday by Sunday upon the last things, it was no longer possible for me personally to remain suspended in the clouds above the present evil world but rather it had to be demonstrated here and now that faith in the Greatest does not exclude but rather includes within it work and suffering in the realm of the imperfect.⁶⁶

Although Barth's theology seems to begin with the other-worldly God, his theology is rooted in facing human desperation here and now. This is why King states, "[Barth's] cry does call attention to the desperateness of the human situation."⁶⁷ King also recognized this "desperateness" and went radically beyond Barth's position with his own actions and preaching. King was bold enough to take a public stance on a national level and encouraged the oppressed to take their own action toward social transformation, as he preached, "With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."⁶⁸ For King, the real action from the oppressed was urgent for true transformation to come.

Second, both Barth and King had no qualms in proclaiming God's universal dominion over the present as the only right answer to the human condition. King continues his comments on Barth's theology as follows:

65. King, *Papers*, vol. 2, 106.

66. Barth, *Revolutionary Theology*, 28.

67. King, *Papers*, vol. 2, 106.

68. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 224.

[Barth] does insist that religion begins with God and that man cannot have faith apart from him. He does proclaim that apart from God our human efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest night. He does suggest that man is not sufficient unto himself for life, but is dependent upon the proclamation of God's living Word, through which by means of Bible, preacher, and revealed Word, God himself comes to the consciences of men.⁶⁹

Barth recognizes God's dominion in the present moment as a transforming power in the world. For Barth, this God is the only effective answer to human decadence. As Jesus comes to this world in flesh (John, 1:14), God's real dominion over evil descends with him. It is no wonder that King's actions and message stood on common ground with Barth. For King, it is the same God that both overcomes the evil of the world and is the only true resource upon which we may rely "to win our freedom."⁷⁰ Thus, King had no doubt that "[t]he judgment of God is upon us today."⁷¹

It is interesting that King had considerable exposure to the theologies of both Tillich and Barth when he was crafting his homiletic voice. He certainly knew that each theologian had his own strengths to emulate and weaknesses to avoid. As a result, by the time King began his work as a Christian pastor, he was utilizing these strengths to speak out in his own unique voice.

King amidst a Violent Reality

Just as the black church strongly influenced King, the socio-political, economic, and spiritual environment of his time also shaped his theology and public life. In particular, the violence with which he found himself surrounded led to King's homiletic idea of God manifested through(out) the whole universe.⁷² This

69. King, *Papers*, vol. 2, 106.

70. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 223.

71. Carson and Holloran, *A Knock*, 220.

72. Of course, it might not be entirely correct to say here that the context of violence was the sole or even primary cause of King's idea of God spoken

theological development was natural for King for two reasons. Firstly, twofold violence (social and spiritual) appeared to be universal—that is, violence existed everywhere there was an imbalance of privilege—and the universal God is the counterclaimant against universe-permeating violence. Secondly, this God of the whole universe is biased toward neither the oppressed nor the oppressor. God does not desire an ultimate triumphant victory of the oppressed over the oppressors, but rather seeks reconciliation between the two opposing parties. The victory of one side is simply a pathway to that ultimate purpose.⁷³ Below is a discussion on this critical issue of violence and the God of the universe in societal, physical, spiritual, and moral senses.

Societal and Physical Violence

We can quickly discuss the societal and physical violence of King's time in two ways: at the international level and the domestic—or societal—level. From the 1940s through the 1960s, America was involved in several global wars, namely World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. These wars created national instability due to monetary shortage, numerous casualties, collective anxiety for the future, economic uncertainty, and so forth. The Vietnam War in particular was a huge failure for America and that failure sparked severe criticism from both inside and outside the U.S.

through the whole universe. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, King's theological struggles and interactions with his own historical context over almost a decade led him to that particular notion of God. Indeed, the seed of King's homiletic idea of God spoken through the whole universe was planted even earlier, in his childhood at Ebenezer.

73. Smith and Zepp, in their *Search for the Beloved Community* (141–45), recognize both the Jewish conception of the messianic era and the early Christian proclamation and doctrine of the Kingdom of God as the foundational ground for King's dream of the Beloved Community, the community where all conflicting parties eventually come to live in peace and harmony. They also notice that in order to achieve this wondrous dream, King's God should be the God of the universe, who continuously comes to humanity as ever-loving and ever-proclaimed. We will explore this issue of the Beloved Community and the God of the universe in more detail later, when we deal with King's eschatology.

King was among these outspoken critics. Preaching at Ebenezer Baptist on the topic, he stated:

They see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers. We [Americans] have destroyed their two most cherished institutions—the family and the village. We have destroyed their land and their crops . . . We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men. What strange liberators we are!⁷⁴

King did not at first vocally oppose the war, but by 1963, having already long embraced the ideals of pacifism (influenced in particular by Gandhi), King expressed deep concerns regarding the conflict in Vietnam. He did so because, among other reasons, he believed that it is inconsistent to preach against violence at home but to keep silent against the country's international crime.⁷⁵

More importantly King believed that America, on the domestic level, was an explicit example of a violent society that oppressed the marginalized within its own borders, especially black people. From childhood, though he grew up in "a home of economic security and relative comfort,"⁷⁶ King recognized the social and economic problems afflicting black people. He recalls:

I had grown up abhorring not only segregation but also the oppressive and barbarous acts that grew out of it. I had passed spots where Negroes had been savagely lynched, and had watched the Ku Klux Klan on its rides

74. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 161.

75. Other reasons include that the message against the war would help his allegiance with black youths in the ghetto whose antiwar ethos was already strong as well as his connection with white liberals whose focus was moving from the civil rights movement to the peace movement and that the unjust causes and immorality championed by the war were almost identical to the injustice and immorality the civil rights movement fought against. Thus, taking a stance against the Vietnam war was itself taking a stand against the injustice that oppressed black people at home. Above all, however, as he confirmed through his preaching against the war, his primary reason was his Christian moral conscience, which could not ignore the causes and effects of such a war—inhuman cruelty, human arrogance, and the exploitation of the underprivileged (Ansboro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 256–65).

76. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 90.

at night. I had seen police brutality with my own eyes, and watched Negroes receive the most tragic injustice in the courts . . . So when I went to Atlanta's Morehouse College as a freshman in 1944 my concern for racial and economic justice was already substantial.⁷⁷

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that during his days at Morehouse King read *Thoreau's Essay on Civil Disobedience* several times, a book that introduced the idea of nonviolent resistance into King's consciousness.⁷⁸

When King arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, for his first pastorate position, he witnessed the continuing severity of black people's oppression. He recounted the poverty and oppression of the black people in Montgomery thus:

63 percent of the Negro women workers in Montgomery are domestics, and 48 percent of the Negro men are laborers or domestic workers . . . in 1950 the median income for the approximately 70,000 white people of Montgomery was \$1730, compared with \$970 for the 50,000 Negroes. Ninety-four percent of the white families in Montgomery have flush toilets inside their homes, while only 31 percent of the Negro families enjoy such facilities.⁷⁹

Beyond these socio-economical infrastructure problems, what most troubled King's mind was the apparent denial of basic (God-given) human rights to his black friends, colleagues, congregants, and neighbors. This situation was exponentially escalating the tension between blacks and whites.

On December 1st, 1955, an incident took place that would serve as the launching point for King's public life. On that day, a woman named Rosa Parks, after a long day at work, refused to yield her bus seat to a white person. She was arrested, despite the fact that she was not actually in violation of any segregation law, since she was sitting in the first row of the black section at the

77. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 90-91.

78. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 91.

79. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 27-28.

back of the bus. However, because the bus was full, the bus driver demanded that Parks give up her seat to allow a white man to sit. This incident triggered an outraged response from the black community in Montgomery and led to King's election as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association and spokesperson for Rosa Parks. King was officially in the public eye and would remain there until his death, fighting vocally for the liberation of his people.⁸⁰

According to King himself, his method of nonviolent resistance was rooted in the philosophies of two great thinkers: Mohandas K. Gandhi and the social philosopher Walter Rauschenbusch. King was first attracted to Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*, which means truth-force or love-force. Intrigued by the power that lies in the marriage of the concepts of love and force, he writes, "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale."⁸¹ Therefore, it was natural that King, from the very beginning of his Montgomery movement, engaged exclusively in nonviolent resistance against his aggressive opponents. He continuously urged the members of his movement to work within the confines of the law, not to use any physical force—rather to suffer before using violence. This is why Rosa Parks was an ideal symbol of the civil rights movement. As King says:

Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person. And since it had to happen, I am happy it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. Nobody can doubt the height of her character, nobody can doubt of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teaching of Jesus.⁸²

80. For more biographical information on King, refer to Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography*; Lischer, *Preacher King*; and Martin Luther King, *Stride toward Freedom*. King's own book, of course, is the best testament to King's personal philosophies regarding the Montgomery movement.

81. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 97.

82. Lischer, *Preacher King*, 86.

As seen above, King considered moral integrity, quality of character, and adherence to Jesus's teachings of nonviolence as the key components of social action, making it easy to reconcile these notions of nonviolent resistance to Gandhi's *satyagraha*.

Walter Rauschenbusch's book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* also had a considerable influence on King. Even though King believed Rauschenbusch's thought to be flawed in some respects—such as (1) a superficial optimism concerning man's nature, and (2) identification of the Kingdom of God with a particular social and economic system⁸³—he admitted that Rauschenbusch's work was the theological basis for his social concerns.⁸⁴ What King inherited from Rauschenbusch was the idea that the gospel should deal with *the whole person*. Christianity—or any religion, for that matter—should be concerned not only with the soul, but with the body as well. This means that the gospel must also be concerned with social and economic conditions that damage the soul. If the gospel concerns only the spirit, it is not a whole gospel and does not contain the whole truth.

King was attracted to Rauschenbusch's ideas because he needed a religion that addressed both the concrete human situation and worldly affairs. Accordingly, King eagerly sought and proclaimed a God who actively participated in human life in order to transform a violent reality and liberate the oppressed. King's God could not be blind to the voices of the oppressed and exist in the religious realm alone. God must be a God of world-transformation.

Spiritual and Moral Violence

The brutal societal and physical violence against black people was, of course, the driving force behind King's public works and the formation of his homiletic theology. However, there was also a secondary kind of violence against which King fought—a violence of the spiritual and moral kind. Throughout his public life, King openly criticized this spiritual and moral violence that pertained to

83. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 91.

84. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 91.

the church and its leaders as well as political leadership. In King's "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," we see how this spiritual and moral violence had been hovering over King's public life and how that influenced King to create his own homiletic theology.

In the letter, King recounts that as soon as he started his public protest in Montgomery, he incurred backlash from church and societal leadership. King initially expected the support of the white churches in Montgomery. Instead, the city's white spiritual leaders, rather than being King's strongest allies, were often outright opponents, refusing to endorse the freedom movement and even misrepresenting the protest's leaders.⁸⁵ The moral decay of the legal system provoked further anger on the part of black protesters; most judges and juries were likely to ignore the law in favor of prejudice.

As King says in the letter, the situation in Birmingham was no better than that in Montgomery. There, King suffered three-fold spiritual and moral deprivation. First, white clergy in the city criticized King, saying that his nonviolent activity was extreme.⁸⁶ Further, according to King, the clergy "warmly commended the Birmingham police force for 'keeping order' and 'preventing violence.'"⁸⁷ This opposition was experienced by King as spiritual and moral violence against the whole black community as well as himself. King firmly believed that the church was the first and last shelter and protector of the oppressed and marginalized and should therefore be the eager advocate of justice. However, King found the mindset of the white church depraved to the extent that he had to say:

Over and over again I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here: Who is their God? . . . The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average

85. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 299.

86. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 296.

87. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 301.

community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.⁸⁸

It would be seriously mistaken to say that all white churches and their pastors turned against King. There were some small exceptions. Some white pastors lost their pulpits and some white friends were murdered thanks to their sincerest sympathy to King and the civil rights movement. Yet still, it was depressing for King that the majority of the white church was not, he believed, on God's side.

Second, King was the victim of spiritual and moral violence from his own people, both middle-class blacks and those who belonged to various black nationalist groups—such as Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Black people in the middle class were not only accustomed to and even comfortable in segregated society but were also indifferent to the civil rights movement, even criticizing it as social disorder. As King saw it, they “have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of ‘somebodiness’ that they have adjusted to segregation.”⁸⁹ Black people involved in the black nationalist groups were responsible for another form of moral violence. Not only had they repudiated Christianity, but they also advocated violence as an effective tool for social change and labeled all white people the “devil.”⁹⁰

The third form of spiritual and moral violence came from the “white moderate”⁹¹ and political leadership. King said, in the Birmingham City Jail letter and elsewhere, that the white moderate always told black people to “wait” for the right time; but the call for “wait” always meant “never.” In the middle of the letter, King included a portion of another letter from a white brother in Texas that read, “All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time

88. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 299–300.

89. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 296.

90. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 296–97.

91. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 296.

to come to earth."⁹² For King, what was clear in this letter was that the white moderates wanted to maintain the status quo from a distorted perspective of Christianity. That sort of "Christianized" attitude to the civil rights movement could not have been more violent, in King's opinion. It was a spiritually and morally violent act committed in the name of Christianity. King received a similar response from socio-political leaders in Birmingham. Even though they were probably religious people of Christian faith, "the city fathers" of Birmingham "consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation" to improve the life situations of black people.⁹³

What King experienced as spiritual and moral violence, and revealed in his letter, was not a phenomenon unique to Birmingham. As he said, the situation had been the same since his first public protest in Montgomery and, as we know now, it would continue up to and even beyond his assassination. Amazingly enough, King did not retreat from his stance. Rather, he pronounced the abundance of God's universal justice, peace, and love among all people, despite their spiritual and moral violence. King believed that God was unchangeably on the side of justice and love, which would ultimately suffuse the nation. He proclaims in the closing of his letter:

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great walls of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.⁹⁴

Here we begin to glimpse that King's profound theology of reconciliation defies the death-sting of violence and bridges the extreme chasm permeating the whole of American society. For King this national or universal reconciliation is no longer a "dream," but

92. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 296.

93. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 290.

94. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 302.

a reality promised in the Judeo-Christian heritage and engraved in the nation's Constitution. God has started the work of reconciliation already, and we are invited to participate in it as God's partners.

Summary

What is clear from what we have discussed thus far is that King's preaching theology developed over time, drawing on a variety of experiential and intellectual sources—from his childhood at Ebenezer to academic influences to actual public ministry. Indeed, most of the quotations used in this chapter come from the writing, preaching, and public speaking that followed King's graduation from Boston in 1955, when the basic formulation of his homiletic theology was complete. Therefore, we can summarize his homiletic theological development as follows. King initially formulated his theology along black, Baptist, evangelical, and fundamentalist lines, eventually departing from these toward the confrontation of and struggle with theological liberalism (specifically, personalism in Boston). Later on, by adoption and synchronization of all those various sources of experience and theology, he came to create his own concrete theological ideas.

Of course, this is not to say that King's homiletic theology and sermonic philosophy stopped their development after his graduation from academia (as we will see later, for instance, King's moral attitude vis-à-vis the Vietnam War changes over time), but only that he completed his basic synthetic theological formulation before embarking upon his public ministry. These basic ideas include a personal God of the universe,⁹⁵ upon which he forges his fully fledged reconciliatory and ecumenical writings, sermons, and speeches. In fact, the cruel spiritual and social violence King faced, endured, and finally overcame in the public arena was the very occasion for the development of a complete homiletic theology of

95. This is King's creative synthesis of the fundamentalist notion of an omnipotent and omnipresent God and the Boston personalist understanding of God.

BACKGROUNDS OF KING'S PREACHING THEOLOGY

the personal God of the universe. The next chapter begins with a detailed discussion of this particular idea of the universal God and other associated theological concepts as best demonstrated in his preaching.