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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND
THE QUAKERS

HOWARD R. MACY

INTRODUCTION

This essay arises out of the coalescence of several factors. It was first presented at a Quaker Theological Discussion Group meeting in Atlanta, the city where Martin Luther King Jr. grew up and later ministered. This is also the fortieth-year remembrance of two of King’s most memorable public messages, the “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” on April 16, 1963, and the “I Have a Dream” speech delivered as part of the March on Washington on August 28 of the same year. Although Quaker Religious Thought devoted an entire issue to King in 1988, it is fitting to explore further intersections between Martin Luther King Jr. and the Quakers.¹

I use the words “explore” and “intersections” modestly. To explore means far less than providing an exhaustive account. Further, I use the word “intersections” rather than “connections” or “influences” because the latter are hard to measure. Along the way, for example, I have encountered scraps of information that together suggest that Quakers influenced Tolstoy, who heavily influenced Gandhi, who influenced King. However, I have tried to limit this exploration to identifying ways Quaker persons or ideas may have contributed to King’s thinking and action and ways in which King’s ideas and actions helped to shape Friends.

In this essay I will consider the intersections that affected King’s work, principally the contributions of Howard Thurman and Bayard Rustin, as well as King’s important intersection with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). I will conclude by noting briefly intersections with King that have influenced the Religious Society of Friends and that continue to shape Quaker witness.

¹See Quaker Religious Thought 16 (1988).
Howard Thurman was one of the most notable leaders of his generation, serving as a pastor, a member of the academic community, and an author with enduring insights about how the life with God meets our life in the world. Some think the significance of his work has been underestimated until recently, though many of his books are still available, several of them published by Friends United Press.

These words almost obscure the triumph of Howard Thurman’s life, although we cannot do justice to his biography in this essay. He was born an African American in the South, in Florida, in 1900. One of his most important early teachers was his grandmother, who had been a slave. The story of his journey from humble and difficult beginnings to his later enormous contributions is inspiring.

Thurman had a variety of opportunities to shape Martin Luther King Jr. For one, Martin’s father, “Daddy King,” and Thurman were contemporaries as students at Morehouse College. Martin would have known Thurman through family friendships over the years. Later, when Martin himself attended Morehouse, Thurman was on the faculty, teaching religion and philosophy and serving as the college’s religious adviser. By the time King went to Boston University for doctoral studies, Thurman was there serving as professor of spiritual disciplines and resources and as dean of Marsh Chapel.² Thurman is modest about his contributions to King in those years, noting their more informal contacts such as watching the World Series together in Thurman’s home.³

Despite playing down possible influence, connections suggest themselves here. For example, S. P. Fullwinder suggests that Thurman may have first introduced to African Americans the idea of nonviolent action through suffering and further may have indirectly been responsible for King’s first serious exposure to a nonviolent ethic.⁴ Further, Thurman’s book Jesus and the Disinherited, published in 1949, profoundly influenced leaders in the civil rights movement. Companions of King report that he not only had it in his briefcase during the bus boycott in Montgomery, but he regularly carried it with him as he traveled in the struggle for civil rights.⁵ The fact that the book is more deeply rooted in Christian spirituality than it is in political theory undoubtedly shaped King’s leadership.⁶

Of course, Howard Thurman was not a Friend, though a leading Quaker deeply influenced him. As a young pastor in Oberlin, Ohio,
Thurman impatiently left a church meeting in a neighboring town and happened upon Rufus Jones’ then recently published book, *Finding the Trail of Life*. He sat on the church steps and began to read. “I did not move until I read the entire book. When I finished I knew that if this man were alive, I wanted to study with him.” Jones was very much alive, and at his invitation, Thurman undertook directed study with Jones at Haverford College in January 1929. Thurman continued his studies with Jones until he took an appointment at Morehouse and Spelman colleges that fall. “My study at Haverford was a crucial experience, a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life.”

Thurman certainly encountered mystical religion (one of Jones’ specialties) and Friends’ approaches to spirituality and worship as he shared in the Wednesday meetings for worship in the Haverford Meetinghouse. No doubt he also deepened his understanding of pacifism and active social witness, although he had been a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation since 1922. Further, I suspect he may have been encouraged to consider the work of Gandhi, work that Jones had praised as early as 1926. Thurman came to know it directly a few years later when he met Gandhi in India in 1935.

One of the enduring insights Thurman took from his study with Jones was the integration of spiritual inwardness with the ordinary struggles of life. This old Quaker witness insists that authentic spiritual experience must penetrate one’s entire life and that one’s inner resources have genuine power to effect change in outer experience. Luther Smith comments that Jones “offered a linkage which gave Thurman the vision of how spiritual power could address the conditions that oppressed him as a black man in America.” It offered a way to sustain the integrity of personal life in the face, crushing social inequity and it offered a resource to interpret and act with power against systemic injustice. One of Thurman’s persistent contributions to the struggle for civil rights was to remind its leaders of the importance of deep spiritual resources. King more than many others, heeded this counsel. Friends, through Rufus Jones in particular, helped make this contribution.

**Bayard Rustin**

A second Quaker intersection with the life of Martin Luther King Jr. was more direct. It came through his contact and collaboration with
Bayard Rustin, a gifted African American who thought deeply about nonviolent action and had remarkable skill in organizing groups and movements. He is perhaps best known as one of the principal organizers of the March on Washington in 1963, but his story and work go back more than twenty years before that.

Rustin was born in 1912. He grew up in West Chester, Pennsylvania, a town marked by segregation, though not with the ferocity of the South. His grandparents Janifer and Julia Davis Rustin raised him. His grandmother Julia in particular had a profound influence on him. She and her husband were active members in the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in town, but she was a Quaker, so raised by her mother who had been reared in a Quaker home. Julia carefully taught Bayard Quaker principles including the need to treat everyone with love and respect, that all were equal in God’s eyes, and that nonviolence was important. She was a remarkable woman in many ways: a charter member of the NAACP, a frequent hostess to African Americans in need of lodging as they traveled through town (including W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and James Weldon Johnson). As a nurse she helped found a day nursery for children at nearby Cheyney Teachers College, a school Quakers ran for black students.

Rustin learned early on that he could be an effective organizer and was uncommonly gifted in it. In his second year at Wilberforce University, where he had a scholarship and sang in a prestigious quartet, he organized a student strike to protest the bad food service; he was kicked out instead of bringing change. My impression, however, is that his dismissal even then indicated more success than failure.

He soon moved to New York where he continued his education, continued to sing in performance, often with notable groups, and continued to grow in social activism. He also became a member of Fifteenth Street Friends Meeting for he had come to appreciate the patterns of unprogrammed worship.

In 1941, Rustin helped A. Philip Randolph, the president of The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organize a March on Washington, the threat of which persuaded President Roosevelt to end discrimination in war materials factories. Disappointed Randolph called off the march because of Roosevelt’s concessions, Rustin then worked for A. J. Muste at the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He later helped to co-found the Congress on Racial Equality and at various points also worked with the American Friends Service Committee. After being imprisoned for over two years for refusing to cooperate
with the draft board as a conscientious objector, he organized the Journey for Reconciliation in 1947 that took a mixed racial team to the South to initiate nonviolent action against Jim Crow laws there.

Although we could add other examples of Rustin’s central engagement with the civil rights movement and its leaders, perhaps it is more important to note here his trip to India in 1949. In a conference initiated by Mahatma Gandhi before his death and carried through by his son, Rustin learned firsthand of methods of nonviolent action that he had been studying now for almost ten years. This deepened his understanding and helped him reflect on what he had already learned.

King first met Rustin in 1956 when he came to Montgomery to advise King on the bus boycott action. This was King’s first such action. King had been chosen to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) even though he was only twenty-seven years old. Rustin brought more than fifteen years of experience to Montgomery, having been involved in most civil rights activism since 1940. King clearly wanted to base nonviolent struggle on Christian love, and he had read Gandhi with appreciation. However, it was Rustin who showed King how to apply these principles in order to effect change. It was also Rustin who convinced him that in order to be consistent in nonviolent leadership he needed to remove the gun from his home that he kept to protect his family. Rustin used his organizing abilities to help local workers be more effective. During this time, he had to keep a low profile because the police kept close tabs on him and regarded him as a Yankee agitator. Eventually the MIA slipped him out of town, though this created a rift with King. Still, Rustin’s practical influence in advancing King’s work is undeniable.

Beginning in 1956, Rustin also helped organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in order to extend nonviolent action throughout the South. King was its first president and he wanted Rustin to be its executive director. He declined.

Bayard Rustin as a Quaker and nonviolent activist, had an important impact on King’s public ministry, and his own influential career continued until his death in 1987.
OTHER FRIENDS AND QUAKER ORGANIZATIONS

A third intersection between Quakers and King is the communication and work with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and the AFSC. After significant discussion, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting sent a three-person delegation to Montgomery in 1956 to learn about the struggle there and to talk to leaders. The delegation was favorably impressed, including member Clarence E. Pickett, who was then executive secretary emeritus of the AFSC.

This resulted in at least two visible and concrete instances of support for King. First, the AFSC arranged for him and his wife, Coretta, to visit India in 1959 in order to become better acquainted with the work of Gandhi and his continuing legacy. The trip deepened and confirmed King’s work in bringing Jesus’ love to bear as a powerful social force as well as a pattern for individual relationships.

The second significant support from AFSC was their publishing the letter King had written while held in the Birmingham, Alabama, jail in April 1963. Within a month it sold more than 200,000 copies and AFSC printed and distributed hundreds of thousands more in anticipation of the March on Washington later that year.

A letter from King to Earl Mazo on September 2, 1958, illustrates another intersection between Quakers and King and it is revealing in two ways. It speaks of King coming to know Richard Nixon. First, it suggests that King knew enough about Quakers to feel positively about them. “Nixon happens to be Quaker and there are very few Quakers who are prejudiced from a racial point of view.” But, in retrospect, this letter also offers a sobering reflection: “I would say that Nixon has a genius for convincing one that he is sincere. When you are close to Nixon he almost disarms you with his apparent sincerity….And so I would conclude by saying that if Richard Nixon is not sincere, he is the most dangerous man in America.”

CONCLUSION: KING’S CONTRIBUTION TO FRIENDS

The effect of these intersections not only marked King, and by extension the Civil Rights movement, they have also influenced Friends and continue to shape the Quaker witness.

First, many individual Friends who volunteered to join King’s nonviolent actions to bring change have been deeply shaped by those
experiences and they continue to witness to that. I have friends who were engaged in that way, among them Andy Grannell and David Finke. I’ve been moved when hearing them speak winsomely but urgently about what King’s life and work mean to us all.

Second, King’s work seems to have broadened Friends’ vision of what it means to do peace work. It has deepened the concern for racial justice and “expanded it to include the roots of violence – injustice, poverty, and oppression.”23 It renews by its example what it means to pursue justice.

Third, in my judgment, because King’s life and work were so rooted in a deep spirituality, in preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as David Finke writes, I believe it has challenged Friends who cherish that Gospel to see it broadly in terms of Jesus’ announcement of bringing “good news to the poor.”24 I hope it will continue to encourage the holistic integration of deep faith and creative social action.

Fourth, for all Friends, King’s work broadens our understanding of nonviolence. Instead of being passive or simply avoiding violence, King’s engagement requires more. As David Finke puts it, “It means rocking the boat, confronting structures of evil, and living a life of creative risk-taking; solving deep-rooted problems, not focusing on the evil-doer, who may be trapped in those same oppressive structures.”25 No doubt King’s action and witness have encouraged some Friends to act more boldly and creatively in serving justice than they might otherwise have done.

This exploration of intersections between Quakers and Martin Luther King Jr. has been a fascinating journey for me. It leads me to conclude that the important connections ran both directions. It also convinces me that there may be still more stories and intersections waiting to be recalled in order to make this picture even fuller.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 254.
5. Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, foreword.

7. Thurman, With Head and Heart, 74.

8. Ibid., 77.


11. Thurman, With Head and Heart, 103ff.


15. Ibid., 15.


17. Devon Carbado and Donald Weise, eds., Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), xvii-xix.

18. Ibid., xxiii.


20. Carbado and Weise, eds., Time on Two Crosses, xl.


23. American Friends Service Committee, “AFSC Embraces Shared Legacy with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”


25. Ibid., 5.