A Maladjusted King:
Theological Resistance and Nonconformity in an American Prophet

by

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Date: 28 April 2018

Approved:

[Signatures]

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J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In response to Nassir Ghaemi, an academic psychiatrist who presumes a mental illness and genetic abnormality in Martin Luther King, Jr., this project contends that King was a decidedly maladjusted prophet who dramatized his resistance to the evil triumvirate of racism, materialism, and militarism pervasive in American public life. Using the sermonic trope, “Creative Maladjustment,” a theological reconstruction of King’s prophetic meliorism is sustained in order to reclaim his legacy from the facile memory of the nation. The essential writings, speeches, and sermons of the revered Baptist clergyman source the work, giving insight into his personal thoughts about the method he chose specifically for the purpose of pricking the conscience of the America during the Civil Rights Movement. Relevant commentary and critical analyses of scholars and historians also support the claim of this thesis, pointing to King’s well-reasoned moral stance against social iniquity. The project traces the roots of King’s resistance in the biblical witness of the Old Testament prophets, the religion of the black church in America, and his early humiliations borne of racial segregation. Attention is also given to his intellectual assent to the theory of civil disobedience and philosophy of nonviolence, with critical examination of his conversion to the same. Finally, the project delves into the maturing path of King’s resistance vis-à-vis the widening economic inequities observed across the national landscape and spreading global strife, which formed the basis of his “world house” doctrine. The implications of King’s legacy upon contemporary moral leaders are offered as concluding thoughts.
Dedicated to my daughter

Dahlia Marie

who inspires me

like children inspired Martin King
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Introduction
“Mistaking Moral Resistance for Mental Abnormality”

“Are All of Our Leaders Mad?” The title of Thomas Mallon’s Sunday Book Review in the New York Times on August 19, 2011 takes a jab at Nassir Ghaemi’s “A First-Rate Madness,” which posits a link between mental illness and achievement in public leaders.¹ “Depression makes leaders more realistic and empathic, and mania makes them more creative and resilient,”² writes Ghaemi, the director of the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts University Medical Center. The academic psychiatrist concludes that certain leaders are better suited for times of crisis—i.e., the mentally ill or abnormal, while other leaders should be reserved for times of peace—those who are mentally healthy. He arrives at this finding after examining the psychological histories of William T. Sherman, Ted Turner, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, alongside several counterexamples. With a passing reference to Aristotle’s speculation about a link between melancholy and genius,³ Ghaemi retrieves a long-disputed hypothesis of nineteenth-century Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso, who, as Ghaemi believes, defined that very link, and left us with the simple equation which summarizes the theory: insanity = genius.

³ The ancient Greeks’ theory of health espoused the equal balance of humors (the four fluids of body) whose relative proportions were thought to determine a person’s disposition. People of renown were believed to have mastered this rhythm. Aristotle, however, observed something quite different: All those who were above average in philosophy, politics, poetry or the arts were melancholy, and some to such an extent that they were seized by black bile.
Mallon, however, is unconvinced by Ghaemi’s claims. Sourced primarily with the anecdotal evidence, including second-person memoirs and other auxiliary materials, and a psychiatric theory from the plot of a movie, Ghaemi presumes a therapist’s intimacy with the aforementioned subjects but falls prey to a weakness for generalizations. While acknowledging an absence of evidence in many instances, he insists that it does not prove the evidence of absence. Mallon is among good company in dismissing Ghaemi’s claims as insubstantial and relegating them to the discredited discipline of psychohistory.

A critical intrigue persists, though, into Ghaemi’s ‘diagnosis’ of Martin King, particularly as he attempts to link King’s chosen method of nonviolent direct action with an assumed malady of clinical depression. Specifically, Ghaemi contends that depression—which produced radical empathy—drove King to deploy a strategy of nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement. By contrast, W.E.B. DuBois, a founder of the NAACP—one presumed to be mentally healthy—found nonviolent resistance as practiced by Gandhi in India very intriguing, but, after debating it with his colleagues in 1924, concluded that an American leader of that similar character and practice “would be met with a ‘blood bath.’” Ghaemi asserts “the second Gandhi [i.e., King, who chose the method out his illness] proved to be about as depressed as the first.”

In a January 2012 article in Psychology Today, Ghaemi makes another attempt to diagnose King with clinical depression with a misinterpretation of the rhetorical trope, ‘creatively maladjusted,’ a phrase that reoccurred in some of King’s sermons and speeches. Instead of probing for the deeper symbolic meaning of the metaphor vis-à-vis America’s

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4 Ghaemi, A First-Rate Madness, 99.
5 Ibid, 101.
evil triumvirate of racism, materialism, and militarism in King’s day, Ghaemi offers it as evidence that meet the burden of proof, writing:

> King knew what it meant to be maladjusted psychologically, because he was not normal, psychiatrically. He had multiple periods of severe depression, and twice made suicide attempts as a child. Near the end of his life, some of his staff tried to get him into psychiatric treatment, but he refused.\(^6\)

The two suicide attempts referenced were impulsive, grief-stricken responses to the perceived death of his grandmother and then her actual death, respectively. Nevertheless, Ghaemi persists in the presumption that King was haunted by a mental illness borne a genetic abnormality, even while admitting he has seen no family medical records to substantiate his hypothesis.

His final argument is that King “endured his most unambiguous severe depression in his life’s final years.”\(^7\) Fear, anxiety, and a morbid preoccupation with death consumed the man whose dream had become a nightmare. However, the testimonies of King’s colleagues and the writings of historians about a harried life in his final years all refute the underlying claim of mental illness, even as they acknowledge the changed behavior that Ghaemi reports. The account of Alvin Poussaint, a psychiatrist who had marched with King, further undercuts the argument. Poussaint vividly remembers King bearing disappointments in his last years and appearing depressed because of the fatigue of leading multiple campaigns of a national movement while not getting support during those years. Criticism abounded from all sides and the threats of death were an ever-present reality


\(^7\) Ghaemi, *A First-Rate Madness*, 102.
during those last years. Pouissant attributes these pressures as precipitating factors in changing King’s behavior, not a genetic predisposition to mental illness. Having dismissed the adolescent suicide attempts as impulsive grief reactions, Poussaint doubts “from his own experiences and from speaking to others in King’s circle, that Dr. King suffered from much depression otherwise.”

What Ghaemi fails to appreciate about King’s ‘maladjustment’ is the journey through personal humiliation and rigorous intellectual wrestling to arrive at this well-reasoned moral stance. Dramatizing his moral abhorrence for the social iniquity of America, King spoke of this posture as the theme connecting his ministry to the urgent need of a sin-sick nation. In May 1954, just one month after assuming the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, King delivered a sermon entitled “Mental and Spiritual Slavery,” with the Roman procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, as central figure under the spotlight. Pilate is the subject of rebuke for betraying the truth he knew about Jesus by not freeing him, choosing instead to capitulate to the rabble which clamored for Barabbas as its preference. Though convince of Jesus’ innocence, he resisted the impelling force to order his release. And, thus, a man with the power to do what was right conforms to the will of the crowd and sentences Jesus to death. Homiletically, Pilate was the metaphor for the white citizens in the American south, who self-professed to be Christians but lacked “the moral stamina to stand alone on [their] convictions” on the issue of racial segregation. Many of them were personally opposed to racial segregation by

8 Ibid, 106.
10 King, “Mental and Spiritual Slavery,” 168.
law, or any other form of discrimination, but were unwilling to take stand against it publicly. Having observed this shameful moral deficiency two years earlier in his last summer sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, King began formulating modes of resistance and started to articulate his thoughts which would become his theology of nonconformity and be dramatized as maladjustment.

King gave a robust moral defense of nonconformity in the sermon, “Transformed Nonconformist,” after his installation as pastor in October 1954. Deduced from Romans 12:2 – “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (KJV) – and Philippians 3:20 – “We are a colony of heaven,” (KJV) King spoke plainly about the paradox of the Christian life, sermonizing the duality of time and eternity. Allegiances to heaven (the world of eternity) often clash with one’s allegiances to earth (the world of time). Such a tension creates an ethical dilemma, as in the case of segregation. To which world was the Christian bound to render his/her allegiance? King relieved the tension by proclaiming that ultimate allegiance is owed to God and the world of eternity. On the issue of segregation, King believed the Christian duty was to stand and speak against such an evil. He spoke of nonconformity in terms of sacred obligation, a theological response and ethical option for those who profess to subordinate their love of country to their loyalty to God. This was the gospel conduct prescribed by the apostle of antiquity and preached by the apostle. It was the appropriate counteraction to the subtle and not-so-subtle invitations to conform to the normative clamor for racism in America. What remained outstanding in King’s sermon was an acknowledgement that proponents of the

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11 King’s 7 September 1952 sermon was advertised in the Atlanta Daily World, on 6 September 1952.
very system he sought to dismantle made their own selective references to Pauline passages in attempts to find biblical cover for their bigotry.

Moreover, when King was back at Ebenezer as co-pastor in 1962—a decade after he advanced the idea of nonconformity—his message had been perfected with absolute clarity. Stirred by James E. Will’s sermon on the same passage, King proclaims the message in stark terms. “The most pressing need of this hour is a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists.” He clearly understood the urgent need for a maladjusted response. Arguing against learned conformity as a means of becoming well-adjusted, he countered: “If our world is to be saved from its pending doom it will come not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority.” He went on to say,

If the world is to be lifted from the morass of confusion and chaos it will be done by men who have succeeded in standing above the world so that God can lift it through them [...] Everybody is passionately seeking to be well adjusted; nobody wants to be maladjusted [...] But there are some things in our world to which all men of good will must be maladjusted until the good society is realized. As for me I must confess that there are some things to which I’m proud to be maladjusted [...] The world is in dire need of a society of the creative maladjusted. It may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of such a creative minority.”

The words of ‘the Preacher King,’ who was always mindful that he was fundamentally a clergyman—a Baptist preacher, echo beyond his time into the current age.

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12 James E. Will delivered the sermon, “Men Who Live Differently,” at the Chicago Sunday Evening Club on 27 May 1951, as the Seminarian of the Year.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 475.
He was convinced that the resolution of the pressing problems of human life required creative maladjustment. It was humanity’s best hope for a usable future and he embraced this responsibility, even unto death. A moral stance and courageous acts of resistance grounded in prophetic meliorism. This is the enduring legacy of his maladjustment.

In this project, one will take the pilgrimage of resistance journeyed by America’s chief prophet and examine its origins in the biblical witness of the Hebrew prophets and the black church tradition. King’s early encounters with the theory of civil disobedience will also be featured, with special emphasis on its intellectual and moral influence upon his theological consciousness. Then a turn will be made to his practice of the nonviolent method as a discipline, as his innovation of the philosophy is revealed. The journey will also broaden to account for the intersectional maturation of maladjustment beyond the Montgomery movement. Finally, the path will culminate in theological reflection upon his enduring legacy on moral leadership in American public life.

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Meliorism is the belief that the state of the world, whatever it may be, can be improved through positive human action.
Chapter One
“The Making of a Prophet”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was God’s prophet to America upon whom a national burden was placed. His was the task of carrying an urgent message that made the case for a new future based on moral terms. In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, whom he had come to embrace for their unrelenting courage, spiritual wisdom, keen insight, and, yes, maladjustment—and whose timeless exhortation or stinging critique he quoted often, King sought to lead the moral reconstruction of America through the preaching of a new baptism of freedom, equality, and genuine kinship. Critical commentary on his life and leadership, then, warrants an examination of its prophetic character because that is the sacred office his ministry honored, as he led the movement to redeem the soul of America from December 5, 1955 until April 4, 1968. That is the work of this chapter: to uncover and identify the prophetic nature of Reverend King’s ministry as an act of reclaiming his legacy from the facile mystique of American memory, and to contextualize his place in the democratic rhetorical tradition in juxtaposition to the role of biblical prophets in ancient Israel. Special attention will be given to King’s earliest experiences around race and racial segregation, which set him on the path toward resistance and nonconformity.

The prophets of biblical memory occupied significant leadership roles in ancient Israel’s religion and culture. They were ‘fore’ and ‘forth’ tellers of divine revelation, as well as mediators of the standards of righteousness. Prophets interpreted the events of Israel’s past and present in light of the covenant Yahweh established with them on Mount Sinai. This covenant became a moral code by which prophets judged the integrity of Israel’s actions and/or called her to return to loftier goals. Granted, inordinate attention and emphasis is given to prophetic foretelling—speech about future events—but such
fascination reflects the distant relationship of the reader from the text. It bespeaks a desire to checkmark an actual unfolding event(s) occurring later in scripture, but Old Testament prophets were more representative witnesses of God’s truth to a people who had long given up on future signs than they were predictors of things to come.

Israel’s prophets also dealt in social ethics. The covenant at Sinai set forth an understanding of God’s relationship with Israel and her common life before God. Her way of relating to God was through righteousness, and often, the prophets would remind Israel about this standard or indict her for failing to meet it. To the prophet fell the responsibility of holding the nation accountable for its special status with God. This way of life before God was to be characterized by justice. That is to say, everyday living was to be ordered in mercy and attendance to those who had no power to secure resources for their own survival. This practice of justice was not set forth by legal means, i.e., ruling of a magistrate or judge. Rather, it was to be a way of being, a natural consequence of keeping rhythm with the standards of God. Just as the prophet articulated what it meant for Yahweh to be God for Israel, s/he was also required to instruct the people on what it meant to be the people of God before Yahweh. In that sense the words of Micah 6:8 (NRSV) ring clear: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” The prophet sets forth God’s requirements and prescribes a manner of conduct consistent with such demands. Not only is s/he concerned with the moral code as a guiding law, the prophet is faithful to ensure to keep the moral code at the center of Israel’s national consciousness.

King perceived his ministry of freedom in the same vein of Israel’s prophets and framed it as such. During the 1963 Birmingham desegregation campaign, he was arrested
and jailed for violating an injunction barring protests. Eight white clergymen published a joint statement in response in the newspaper not only condemning the protests but also criticizing King harshly for stirring the Negros and disrupting the tranquility of their city at Easter. The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, the founder of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, had cast the campaign as a moral witness for the survival of the Negro community, but the detractors sought to malign King as a rabble-rouser. Responding to their criticism from his jail cell on the scraps of paper available to him, King defends his presence and work in Birmingham in prophetic terms: “Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘Thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns [...] so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.”¹ Writing about Martin King’s role in the American public discourse, Richard Lischer, author and teacher of preaching, notes King’s embrace of the prophetic mantle from the beginning of his ministry from a 1958 reflection: “Any discussion of the role of the Christian ministry today must ultimately emphasize the need for prophecy. Not every minister can be a prophet, but some must be prepared for the ordeals of this high calling and be willing to suffer courageously for righteousness.”² Lischer contends that King had attached a sense of prophetic function to his activism for racial equality, economic justice, and a lasting peace.

Correspondingly, prophets do not appear on their own terms, nor do they choose their assignments. Rather, they are called forth and divinely summoned as God’s mouthpiece in the face of moral corruption, social morass and distortions of truth so that a

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vision of life can be renewed and human pursuits reordered. Coretta Scott King remembers her beloved husband, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in this fashion, as she responds to a presumptuous question posed to her by a white businessman sitting at her table at a banquet given in memory of the one she affectionately called the apostle of love. With his signature smile, the Reverend C. T. Vivian, a confidant and lieutenant of Reverend King during in the Civil Rights Movement, recalls the exchange between Mrs. King and her interlocutor before an audience of students at American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee.³ The gentleman inquires, “When will your people produce another Martin Luther King?” Vivian quips about the gentleman’s nerve to dismiss the cadre of clergymen and women, who in the ilk of King had continued the black prophetic tradition that King embodied, and the presumption that such a role was to be occupied by one heroic figure alone. Mrs. King, as gracious and poised as ever leaned in to respond, “The real question is when will your people produce another Martin Luther King?” With that, she reframed the dialogue entirely. By no means was Mrs. King crediting the southern white business or political establishment for producing the spiritual genius of the man whom Gardner C. Taylor remembered as America’s chief prophet. For such homage belongs to the nurturing womb of black Christianity which King first encountered in the fellowship of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia, and the widening concentric circles of Sweet Auburn Avenue and other sacred sites along his journey of spiritual formation, intellectual inquiry, and moral quest. What her reframed question hints at, though, is the political context of her beloved Martin’s ministry: the hegemonic powers which created a social climate of racial prejudice and legalized discrimination. For it was into this moral chaos Martin Luther King,

Jr. was birthed, came to consciousness, and ultimately resisted. To be sure, the question of this white businessman is not an atypical inquiry by the dominant culture relative to King’s life or legacy. It is indicative of the national distortion which persists in blurring King’s moral vision or devaluing his social ethos. Mrs. King, however, in her role as the chief curator of her husband’s legacy, pushes back on any representation untrue to his form. She was convinced that her beloved Martin was chosen so she would not permit anyone—certainly not one who did not appreciate fully the depth and breadth of his message—to misrepresent the purpose for which he was selected, for which he called, set apart, and was ultimately martyred.

Incidentally, America does not know quite what to do with her prophets, except to turn them into myths. Historian Massimo Rubboli traces the construction of Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘the myth’ in his article, “Now That He Is Safely Dead.” Likening the process of mythification to that of canonization in the Roman Church, he outlines the necessary steps sequentially. First, the leader is eliminated; then s/he is turned into a martyr; and finally, the memory of the martyr is ever so subtly transformed into a myth. The process is not unique to King, of course, for it occurs whenever “complex problems of interpretation” about the person or his/her truth must be resolved in order to present him/her as a figure worthy of public commendation. Rubboli argues that King’s legacy is swept away by the strongest undercurrent of myth-making: the purging of a leader’s most radical features. In effect, King’s life-story is sufficiently truncated—as if thirty-nine years of living was not

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5 Ibid., 73.
6 Rubboli, 73.
short enough—and redacted to fit neatly into the canon of notable persons. The biographical revision is intended to serve some common good; but it blunts the sharpest aspects of his message, presenting it in an appealing tone instead. This explains why the most stinging critiques of King’s words have been moderated into something more soothing to America’s itching ear. Specifically, King’s life is frame-frozen on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the humid afternoon of August 28, 1963, because the soaring rhetoric about dreaming seems to advance the national narrative of America’s possibilities. Rubboli notes that King had been inspired by Archibald Carey’s 1952 speech delivered at the Republican National Convention, which appealed to the unrealized but still possible American dream. It was intoxicating oratory to a nation which had long dismissed the horrors of that dream upon its citizens of color. But that is precisely the goal of myth-making: selectively extolling virtues in which it delights while simultaneously ignoring any criticism contained therein, especially criticism that undercuts its claim to truth. It is thus understandable why the national memory of King is that of a nonviolent dreamer because the image of a maladjusted prophet is simply too offensive to America’s sensibilities.

Religious scholar Vincent Harding; the Reverend Joseph Lowery, a founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); and a host of other confidants of King have decried America’s iconizing of their compatriot. They deplore attempts to recast King as anything other than what he was, a prophet, and are suspicious the motives of the nation to honor him in death when it branded him as other in his life, particularly in those last years. Harding is especially loathed by this distortion because the America does not take the prophet’s message seriously. He quotes the lyrics of poet Carl Wendell Hines in lamentation:
Now that he is safely dead,
Let us praise him.
Build monuments to his glory.
Sing Hosannas to his name.

Dead men make such convenient heroes.
For they cannot rise to challenge the images
That we might fashion from their lives.
It is easier to build monuments
Than to build a better world.

So now that he is safely dead,
We, with eased consciences will
Teach our children that he was a great man,
Knowing that the cause for which he
Lived is still a cause
And the dream for which he died is still a dream.
A dead man’s dream.7

Although written in the wake of Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, the sentiments fit appropriately and perhaps more so, to the posthumous honor America feigns toward King. The naming of boulevards, bridges and buildings; the erection of monuments and memorials; and the annual celebrations in his name—which are all deserving—have become the rituals of myth-making because the prophet’s message is muted. These honors turn him into an iconic symbol of a past era of civil rights struggle. King’s colleague and friend, the late Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., who pastored First Baptist Church Capitol Hill and led the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) during and after the King era, grew weary of it all. Smith dismissed any remembrance of King as a ‘slain civil rights leader.’ That designation, he said, suggested that

King may have functioned as a preacher at times, but when he was immersed in the activities that pertained to human

rights, that for which he is best known, he was outside the ministerial vocation. The appellation contradicts the major thrust of King’s ministry. His work was an acting out of his understanding of the social content of the Christian gospel.  

Smith insisted that King “was a martyred prophet of God who was killed for doing what prophets do.” In like manner, Benjamin Elijah Mays, King’s Morehouse mentor, remembered him in a compelling comparison with the biblical prophets:

If Amos and Micah were prophets in the eighth century B.C., Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet in the twentieth century. If Isaiah was called of God to prophesy in his day, Martin Luther was called of God to prophesy in his time. If Hosea was sent to preach love and forgiveness centuries ago, Martin Luther was sent to expound the doctrine of non-violence and forgiveness in the third quarter of the twentieth century. If Jesus was called to preach the gospel to the poor, Martin Luther was called to give dignity to the common man. If a prophet is one who interprets in clear intelligible language the will of God, Martin Luther King, Jr. fits that designation. If a prophet is one who does not seek popular causes to espouse, but rather the causes he thinks are right, Martin Luther qualifies on that score.

Those who knew King best understood his function in American public life. To say that he was a prophet is to understand the intensely moral tenor of his ministry. He held before the nation its founding documents in order to uncover its identity and govern its behavior. In those documents, he read biblical and universal principles which ordered a just society. Just as the Hebrew prophets concerned themselves with Israel’s failure to honor and keep the covenant with God at Sinai, King served notice on America that her civil religion, i.e., the practice of democracy, fell short of the terms spelled out in its

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8 Kelly Miller Smith, Social Crisis Preaching (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 11.
9 Ibid.
10 Lischer, 173.
founding documents and required immediate redress. What the Exodus and Sinai were to the Hebrew prophets, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution were to Martin Luther King, Jr. of sorts, although he placed the biblical witness above America’s documents. He was skillful in reading and interpreting these documents plainly before the very nation which had written the words but never truly lived and practiced them with integrity. Thus, in the opening words of his address at ‘The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,’ King framed the moral quest of the demonstration in terms of reclamation of an abandoned national pursuit:

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.11

Held in the centennial year of the signing of those freedom papers, the March on Washington made it emphatically clear that the reality of freedom had been stillborn for American blacks. The gathering was an act of prophetic dramatization almost lifted from the narratives of the prophet Isaiah who walked around naked and barefoot (Isaiah chapter

20) or the prophet Ezekiel who placed his belongings outside his house (Ezekiel chapter 12) to symbolize their respective messages. Drawing attention to the demonstration, King said:

So we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the ‘unalienable Rights’ of ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’

Homiletician Kenyatta R Gilbert writes, “King’s preaching used the power of language to interpret the gospel in the context of black misery and Christian hope.” References to the long night of captivity, the crippling manacles of segregation, as well as the analogy of exile in poverty and languishing in the corners were all intended to grip the conscience of a national and international audience, and make them aware of the common struggle of America’s Negro citizens. King laid bare the reality of suffering and pain of his people in light of America’s claim of opportunity and prosperity, just as the prophets lifted the moral code as the standard and then revealed how Israel had fallen short of meeting its responsibility.

King went to Washington to advocate for the freedom promised to all who fell under the banner of American democracy. His was a carefully scripted message that took the commitments of the founding documents seriously, laying the burden upon America to

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12 King, “I Have a Dream,” 102.
practice its civil religion authentically by being true to the ideals that had brought it into being. He would sharpen his message more over the following four and half years, and say it forcefully on the eve of his martyrdom in his speech at Mason Temple, the headquarters of the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee: “All we say to America is, be true to what you said on paper.”14 Of course, he realized that the requirement was more than merely ‘living up to’ the ideals of the founding documents because there were inherent prejudices enshrined into them, but it would serve as a scratch-line for moderating America’s behavior.

Although King was no predictor of things to come, at least not by any claim of supernatural foreshadowing, his message was weighted with both present import and future implications. In the best of the prophetic tradition he was both a preacher of his own time and for all generations. The dream of which he spoke in a cadenced refrain at the conclusion of the speech was a prophetic act of calling forth a future that could be secured through corrective action taken in the present. That he contextualized his dream within the framework of a well regard concept of the dominant culture put his message within mainstream consciousness, even while challenging their understanding of it. He frequently played with the rhetoric of texts which the nation regarded as sacred by invoking their imagery for his intended ends. So, for King to have said, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’,”15 was an act of envisioning of a new future

15 King, “I Have a Dream,” 104.
by using symbols and text of the past to support it. In that, the nation is not so much doing a new thing, it’s just living out what should have been its practice from the inception.

Like the prophets before him, the morality of King’s message posed ethical challenges to America’s public practice. If the nation’s founding documents outlined a course of action that was never fully followed, how could it continue without correcting what had been wrong for so long a period of time? He understood the need for corrective action as an urgent matter. Thus, the march and the demands. He said:

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.\footnote{King, “I Have a Dream,” 103.}

Those who attempt to freeze-frame King to this day or to cast him as one simply leading a non-threatening movement truly have not taken him seriously. His was not a go-along-to-
get-along message. King’s words were not intended to moderate the rage of a people who were relegated to the status of a permanent underclass. The heavy weight of his words was intended to communicate a posture of agitation until change became a reality. King had regarded America’s original sin of racism in theological terms. The fallen nature of humankind was a serious matter to him and he could not dismiss the need for redemptive agency. This need, however, did not negate the demand for human action in helping reorder the world on God’s terms. They go hand-in-hand. Thus, the social sin of America could not be expiated without intentional corrective action toward the future by those who could grant access.

Moreover, if prophets do not choose their moral assignments, the circumstance under which they are called must also be beyond their choosing. This was the case for Martin Luther King, Jr. But whether he responded affirmatively to the call of prophetic ministry or had shunned the moral impulse to become America’s agent of change, King’s life could not have escaped the racial hostility and legal discrimination that was commonplace in the American south. Born sixty-six years after the Emancipation Proclamation, King entered “a bittersweet existence in the world,” as Lischer puts it. It is at 501 Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia, where young King received his framing story from his parents, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. and Mrs. Alberta Williams King, to inoculate him against social alienation. He remembered having combined in his character “antitheses strongly marked,” learning from them respectively to be both militant and moderate, both idealistic and realistic, in addition to embracing a strong

17 Lischer, 17.
determination for justice along with a gentle spirit. These antitheses shaped his consciousness about matters of race and the subsequent course of events in which he would become involved. One can surmise how they influenced his thought, even to the point of becoming the foundation and central idea in the sermon, “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” much like the other experiences in his formative years to which he would respond later in his life. Lischer notes: “What came earliest to him remained longest and enabled him to put a distinctively Christian seal on the struggle for civil rights in the United States.”

King’s autobiographical notes contain stories of several humiliations he suffered as a youth in Georgia which affected him deeply. Those experiences formed the basis of what would become his resistance. Specifically, King recalled a great shock when an early childhood friendship with a white playmate ended. From the age of three to six-years old he had played with his friend, who was the son of the white storeowner across the street from the Kings’ residence. When both children entered school—separate schools, of course—the white playmate’s father demanded that his son play with King no more. King immediately inquired of his parents the motive behind such a prohibition:

We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person...

19 Lischer, 6.
20 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 7.
What transpired within King that afternoon and later at the dinner table was a coming to consciousness of what W. E. B. Dubois coins “the veil.” The veil is a description of the experience of alienation and oppression suffered by American Negroes because they were considered unworthy of sharing a common life with whites, who, as Dubois notes, live outside of such reality. He argues that there are at least two life-altering moments to black people in America that makes them aware of this sociological phenomenon. The first is the moment a person realizes his/her blackness; and the second is the discovery that his/her blackness is a problem in the larger society. What typically follows this in-breaking awareness is a reactionary feeling of contempt for the majority culture, then the setting in of feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. The veil lets one see him/herself only through the eyes of the dominant culture, leaving him/her to measure his/her soul by the tape of a world that looks on only in amused contempt or pity. When King came to the realization of his blackness something changed in him; it challenged his self-identity and gripped him for a lifetime. In the last year of his life, he was still working through its affect upon his consciousness, writing:

Every Negro comes face to face with this color shock, and it constitutes a major emotional crisis [...] If, however, one is rejected because of his color, he must face the anguishing fact that he is being rejected because of something in himself that cannot be changed. All prejudice is evil, but the prejudice that rejects a man because of the color of his skin is the most despicable expression of man’s inhumanity to man.

21 See W. E. B. Dubois in The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 1-12.
22 An experience similar to the veil is recounted in King’s autobiography: Returning from Connecticut as a youth one summer, he found it a bitter feeling to go back to segregation. He had ridden where he pleased on the train from New York to Washington but had to change to a Jim Crow car in D.C. in order to continue to Atlanta. For the time he sits behind a curtain in the dining car, feeling as though “the curtain had been dropped on [his] selfhood.” See The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 11-12.
King’s introduction to the strict system of segregation continued with a mean-spirited attack on him by a white woman in a downtown Atlanta store. While shopping with his mother, King is slapped and hears, “You are that nigger that stepped on my foot.” These incidents should contextualize King’s reference to his own children in the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* within his early childhood, racialized trauma. He writes to his critics:

> When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Fun Town is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct and answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’

What he described was the problem of Negro parents in America, on whom fell the responsibility of explaining to their young children the system of legal discrimination and segregation. Just as he was so shockingly introduced to the same reality at six-years-old, so were his children internalizing the dehumanization twenty-six years after his first encounter.

It is the humiliation of April 13, 1944 that propelled him toward resistance. He had just delivered an oration entitled, “The Negro and the Constitution,” in Dublin, Georgia, at an oratorical contest sponsored by the Elks at First Baptist Church. Having won his high

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school contest, he and Hiram Kendall, the runner-up, represented well at the statewide level. While he and his teacher, Sarah Grace Bradley, were traveling back to Atlanta, they were commanded by the bus driver to give up their seats to onboarding white passengers. He remembered:

> We didn’t move quickly enough to suit him, so he began cursing us. I intended to stay right in that seat, but Mrs. Bradley urged me up, saying we had to obey the law. We stood up in the aisle for ninety miles to Atlanta. That night will never leave my memory. It was the angriest I have ever been in my life. ²⁶

That experience is important for underscoring King’s abhorrence for the evil system of segregation. He had been kept in check by this way of life riding the bus to and from high school in Atlanta, witnessing Negroes standing over empty seats in the front of the bus because they were reserved for white passengers. Yet, he recalled “every time I got on that bus I left my mind up on the front seat. And I said to myself, ‘One of these days, I’m going to put my body up there where my mind is.’” ²⁷ At fifteen years of age, King was resolved to change the system of public transportation in the south. So, eleven years later when he receives an early morning phone call from E.D. Nixon—whom King described as a foe of injustice—as the twenty-six-year-old, new pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, he gladly gives his support to a bus boycott, in response to the humiliating incident experience by Mrs. Rosa Parks. The irony of King’s humiliation that evening was its timing. Clayborne Carson, general editor of “The King Papers” notes that King’s speech at the contest had outlined “the contradictions between the nation’s biblical

²⁷ Ibid, 9.
faith and constitutional values and the continuing problem of racial discrimination” in his oration. King called slavery “a strange paradox in a nation founded on the principles that all men are created free and equal,” noting that it took a civil war for America to take a stand, and even the proclamation granting emancipation, along with the 13\textsuperscript{th}, 14\textsuperscript{th}, and 15\textsuperscript{th} Amendments to the Constitution were not yet translated into actuality. Perhaps the three-fifths compromise was more binding than people thought. Undoubtedly, these thoughts were the precursor to his speech at the March on Washington, a work one could trace nineteen years in the making. Just as he challenged the practice of democracy in the nation as a thirty-four-year-old minister, he did so as an adolescent, saying:

> We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in ignorance. We cannot have a healthy nation with one-tenth of the people ill nourished, sick, harboring germs of disease which recognizes no color lines—obey no Jim Crow laws. We cannot have a nation orderly and sound with one group so ground down and thwarted that it is almost forced into unsocial attitudes and crime. We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flout the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule. We cannot come to full prosperity with one great group so ill-delayed that it cannot buy goods. So as we gird ourselves to defend democracy from foreign attack, let us see to it that increasingly at home we give fair play and free opportunity for all people.\textsuperscript{29}

Although Carson credits the polished piece to adult editing, King’s own reflection came through, giving the evidence that the weighty matters of race and democracy were front and center in his developing consciousness.


\textsuperscript{29} King, “The Negro and The Constitution,” 112.
Against the backdrop of World War II raging on while blacks fought for the nation, beating back threats to American democracy, the young King was thinking about a true democracy that included all people in the homeland. His was an uncanny way of bringing issues in America’s blind spot into plain view by speaking forthrightly about the sheer burden of being black. Young King witnessed horrendous acts toward his people in Georgia, things that did something to his growing personality. He recalled the police brutality he saw with his own eyes, and the miscarriage of justice in the courts. He remembered the Ku Klux Klan marching in the streets and the severe beating they gave a Negro citizen. He even recalled passing spots where Negroes had been lynched. All these horrors crowded in on him during his formative years.

An abhorrence for the evils of this system grew within him but did not consume him because of the lessons he learned from his parents. King recollected his mother explaining to him “the divided system of the South—the segregated schools, restaurants, theaters, housing; the white and colored signs on drinking fountains, waiting rooms, lavatories”\(^30\)—and marking for him a critical and important distinction between the social condition and natural order. Segregation was a distortion of human relations based solely upon bigotry and prejudice. In no way did it reflect God’s intentions for interpersonal relationships. True to their protest heritage, neither King’s mother nor father had accepted segregation as an expression of the natural order, and thus instilled in King a spirit of resistance. This stirring of resistance was kept alive within him by his father’s fierce opposition to segregation’s sinister manifestations. On one occasion when he accompanied his father to a downtown shoe store, they were told to wait in the back by the store clerk.

His father protested, “We’ll either buy shoes sitting here or we won’t buy shoes at all.” Similarily, King reflected upon the time, when riding with his father, they were pulled over by a policeman who says to Daddy King, “All right, boy, pull over and let me see your license.” His father retorts: “Let me make it clear to you that you aren’t talking to a boy. If you persist in referring to me as boy, I will be forced to act as if I don’t hear a word you are saying.” These incidents were just as conscience-shaping for him as were the other experiences that had produced his abhorrence. And just as his father had never adjusted to the system of segregation, King, too, was set on a course of maladjustment. But this would be demonstrated and dramatized before a national audience.

When the white businessman asked Mrs. King, when will her community produce another King, he demonstrated not only a lack of appreciation for the witness and moral genius of Martin King—the prophet, the leader, the change agent—but also an ignorance about the legal and dehumanizing context of the American south which sought to strip King and his people of their inherent dignity. It was an absurd question, no doubt, because it dismissed the harsh realities of segregation and the fierce fight waged to dismantle its system. Only one who enjoys the spoils of white privilege could be so deliberately obtuse about such a practice of moral evil. Yet Mrs. King spoke her truth plainly. Her reply gives way to closer examination of Reverend King’s life, especially the early experiences which shaped his consciousness in remarkable ways, setting him on a course to change the moral landscape of America. King came of age in a world of “two dialectically opposed realities,” writes Lischer. He inherited a legacy of suffering of which poverty and segregation were

31 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr., 8.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Lischer, 17.
a part, but he was also given a profound gift of affirmation of his ‘somebodyness’ in light of God’s purpose. These claims warred against each other within the prophet, making his mind a battleground of conflicting thoughts. But it would be the greater claim, his sense of God’s redemptive end and purpose, that would mark his life and chart his course. And what America cannot celebrate in earnest of who he was—all of who he was—and what he said and how he pointed to a new day, those who stand in his tradition remember with gratitude. For prophets seldom receive honor at home.
Nothing was more shocking to the conscience of Martin Luther King, Jr. regarding the deep and divisive nature of racial segregation in America than the first-hand trauma of his childhood and adolescence in Georgia. The laws and practices of Jim Crow had lasting effects upon his personality, exposing him to some of the most malevolent manifestations of human prejudice and bigotry backed by the institutions of government and corporate business. Determined not to diminish his dignity and that of his people by acquiescing to the sin distorting the beauty of America’s diversity, King nurtured a spirit of resistance, vowing, instead, to do something different than simply to endure and survive such a horror.

When he commenced tertiary studies at Morehouse College in 1944, King was eager to enter a discourse on America’s race problem. The intellectual curiosity and freedom at the historically black college encouraged him to explore these deeper, more complex issues without caution or censorship. He had come to Morehouse burdened with substantial concerns for racial and economic justice. Although his upbringing afforded him relative comfort, the economic insecurities of many of his friends could not be shaken. Two summers during his late teens, he worked at a plant that hired both blacks and whites. There he witnessed the exploitation of poor whites just as Negroes had been accustomed. He developed a disdain for injustice and was more than ready for a teacher. He would find instruction at just the right time in Henry David Thoreau’s “On Civil Disobedience.” King’s personal abhorrence for Jim Crow was tipping toward resentment of the whole white race and he needed redirection toward a more effective channel for his discontent. Thoreau, an acclaimed essayist, practical philosopher, and abolitionist, had proffered the
theory of resistance against state-sanctioned terror, almost one century prior, and it was still so relevant and compelling in King’s time that it mitigated his loathing for white people and sent him searching for a method to eliminate social evil. The approach most appealing to King—nonviolent direct action—wouldn’t come until some years later, though, as his intellectual quest intensified, while studying at Crozer Theological Seminary. One Sunday afternoon, King traveled to Philadelphia to hear Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, deliver a sermon at Fellowship House. Dr. Johnson had recently returned from a trip to India and spoke with profundity about the Gandhian campaigns of nonviolent resistance. King was drawn to the grounding principle of this form of protest: “The whole concept of Satyagraha...was profoundly significant to me.”1 Though he would not be fully immersed in it until the Montgomery protests began.

It was the double fascination—with Thoreau’s civil resistance and Gandhi’s love force—along with his animus for segregation borne of initial humiliations that formed the foundation for King’s maladjustment and creative protest. Full appreciation of King’s moral authority as a maladjusted prophet necessitates tracing its roots in the intellectual, theological and philosophical soil from which it grows. This is the burden of the chapter: To examine the influence of Thoreau’s theory on King’s intrigue with resistance; and, then, to assess the impact of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence on King’s strategy, underscoring the transmission of the potency of the love-ethic from the Mahatma to Martin. Both remain crucially important in reconstructing King’s prophetic meliorism.

Two major debates dominated public discourse in American society in the middle of the nineteenth century. One was the issue of chattel slavery and the other was the

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1 “Satya is truth which equals love, and agraha is force; Satyagraha therefore, means truth force or love force.” in The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 23.
Mexican-American War. Both were matters of significance in determining the moral fiber of the nation and for casting a vision for what true democracy was. The country was deeply polarized as the opponents of slavery and the dissenters to the raging war on the southern border became more vocal. Abolitionists and anti-war activists alike, along with academics and ministers joined a chorus of citizens who protested these national evils. They attempted to redirect America toward a practice of democracy that would honor the humanity of all people, and not vitiate it instead. They regarded slavery as an abject cruelty upon people of African descent, and the war with Mexico was viewed with contempt because it was nothing more than an act of violent aggression against a weaker country driven by a shameless attempt to expand the American territory. Of course, the proponents of those pernicious campaigns argued in response that slavery was nothing more than a matter of commerce and that the war was an expedient to fulfilling America’s “Manifest Destiny.”

The moral objectors would not be deterred, however, especially as they grew in number. Lending his intellectual gifts to the moral minority through writing, Thoreau penned the quintessential document that would become the theoretical framework for resisting the state. King hailed him as a courageous New Englander for embodying and practicing the only appropriate, ethical response one could give to the issues of the time in which he lived. So fascinated was King by Thoreau that he reread the work several times. Not a conventional believer, Thoreau represented an intellectual tradition that was consistent

2 “Manifest Destiny, in U.S. history, is the supposed inevitability of the continued territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States westward to the Pacific and beyond. Before the American Civil War (1861–65), the idea of Manifest Destiny was used to validate continental acquisitions in the Oregon Country, Texas, New Mexico, and California. The purchase of Alaska after the Civil War briefly revived the concept of Manifest Destiny, but it most evidently became a renewed force in U.S. foreign policy in the 1890s, when the country went to war with Spain, annexed Hawai, and laid plans for an isthmian canal across Central America.” Jeanne T. Heidler and David S. Heidler, Encyclopedia Britannica
https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny.
with the kind of training and instruction King was receiving from Bennie Mays and others at Morehouse. “The idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system,” King wrote, was deeply moving to him and required further analysis and contemplation.

At the core of “On Civil Disobedience” is Thoreau’s conviction that personal conscience takes precedence to the dictates of law. Finding little to praise in the work of the government of his day, except to honor its potential to serve and protect the common good—although often thwarted because of mere acquiescence to the will of the majority—Thoreau lifts individual citizens as the primary defenders of American democracy in counter distinction to the institution of government itself. He wrote:

> This government never of itself furthered any enterprise […] It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more if the government had not sometimes got in its way.

Thoreau credited the citizenry for its resourcefulness in securing the gains of the American society. In contrast, the bureaucracy of government seemed to stifle ingenuity and impede progress. Worse than that, he stressed, “The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.” Such abuse, sadly, was “the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool,” he argued

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
further, noting how the institution intended for the public good was turned into an instrument of injustice, as was the case in the Mexican-American War.

Thoreau was careful to differentiate the few individuals perverting government from the masses who “would not have consented to this measure,” but he was unwilling to completely release the general populace from culpability for their government’s atrocities by virtue of what he considered was their tacit complicity. Betraying the personal conviction of their conscience, Thoreau argued

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. [...] Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God.8

Blind loyalty to a nation-state that ignores its error is utterly lacking in sound moral judgement, Thoreau contended, rendering such loyalists as useful as wood, earth, or stone. And yet, these loyalists are commonly esteemed as good citizens, while “heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men [who] serve the state with their consciences [...] are commonly treated as enemies by it.”9 Allegiance to the virtue of truth and to a genuine practice of democracy would have put one at enmity with his/her fellow citizen, even to the point of being deemed ‘un-American’—as King would be regarded one century later—but to follow the national agenda of aggression and imperialist expansion without question would have put one in the good graces of the majority. There was no honor in being in the majority, Thoreau believed, if its rule was not steeped in justice.

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7 Thoreau, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
So, what then was a citizen of good conscience to do when his/her government’s action in legislation violated principles of truth and human decency? How was such an assault of the common good to be addressed? And, what obligation had he/she to follow a law which trespassed his/her moral constitution? These were not questions of theory to Thoreau. No such luxury was afforded him in a time of war and great moral atrocity. A decision needed to be made: Either obey the law and represent himself as a ‘respectable’ citizen or choose the government of conscience by disobeying the law and face the consequences, whatever they might be. As his personal manifesto reads regarding one’s behavior toward such a government, he chose the latter, writing: [I] cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.”

In so doing, Thoreau inspired many of his compatriots, and won innumerable admirers in addition to the generations of disciples to his philosophy of civil resistance, King included.

Already, insightful consonance can be deduced between the activism of Martin King and the philosophy of Henry Thoreau. King remembered this essay as his “first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance,” as he recounted his own pilgrimage toward his method of effecting change. It was a most impressionable work upon his consciousness regarding direct civil action, forming the foundation upon which he would later add the works of G. W. F. Hegel, Walter Rauschenbusch, Friedrich Nietzsche, Reinhold Niebuhr and others. In “On Civil Disobedience,” King outlined the progression of social discontent from a personal, moral objection into the direct action of withdrawal.

10 Thoreau, On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.
of support, both in person and in property. Specifically, Thoreau’s refusal to pay taxes, coupled with his willingness to remain in jail, rather than support what was unconscionable to him became the blueprint for dismantling structural and institutional racism. The explicit refusal to participate, even passively, with evil was regarded as a moral obligation put on equal footing with the cooperation with good. It was in keeping with the ethics of Jesus, had firm support in the teachings of the New Testament, and was thus opened as the inevitable course that King would take. “Evil must be resisted,” he wrote, “[for] no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice.”

Similar to Thoreau, King was beholden to a higher and nobler ideal. As a Christian minister in training, he saw no way of escaping the moral mandate of his faith to respond to social sin. He acknowledged that “[r]eligion is never disinterested, however objective it may be. It is ‘interested,’ that is, it takes sides for value as against disvalue. Religion is definitely for the good and against the evil.” With this truth made plain to him, King’s wrestling shifted to the question of how much or deeply to involve himself in a public movement of resistance. The personal conflict is reflected in his examination of an Old Testament prophet’s struggle between his personal contentment and public ministry. In a seminary paper on the “Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought,” King wrote: “We are aware of the inner conflict between his desire for inconspicuous retirement and his devotion to truth and civil duty.” Although it is a page out of his own story, the

acknowledgement reflected the deeper struggle of all those whose conscience impelled them to act in response to the encroachment of evil upon the common good of humanity. The devotion to the ideal—even against personal security—serves as a standard by which people of good will should measure themselves and their society. Their ministry of resistance was necessary for advancing truth, King believed, writing further, “[A]s each rebel stepped upon the religious stage, it was but the trumpet for a new idea of God, the signal for another forward march of the soul, for without the spiritual rebel the soul of man would sicken and die.”

Of course, King was not unaware about the way society deals with such rebel prophets. There was something prescient in that point of reflection for him, for it not only revealed his ongoing struggle in life and leadership, but also made it plain the fate he might suffer—the way he met his end—martyrdom.

In addition to their devotion to a higher duty, King and Thoreau shared a common contempt for the apathy of fellow citizens who held disdain for the same evil that drove others to public protest but did not prompt them to the same action. Thoreau regarded their passivity as a resignation of conscience to legislation. He observed:

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hand in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect.

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16 Thoreau, On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.
King would face the same disposition after an incident at a tavern in Pennsylvania during his days as a seminarian. The white owner of the establishment harassed King and his friends while other patrons looked on without intervening. The proprietor’s harassment became more abusive and violent as he fired his shotgun several times. The matter was reported to the police, and the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was fully prepared to pursue the legal case and wage a public campaign on behalf of the seminarians. However, attempts at redressing the matter before the courts were soon discontinued because eyewitnesses refused to give testimony. Remarkably, neither Thoreau nor King castigated their fellow citizens for such moral cowardice. Theirs was a sympathetic response, exhibiting profound insight as to how the passivity of inaction could be sustained.

Later in his preaching ministry, King would articulate his thoughts on the matter in decisive tones. For example, in the sermon, “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” he referred to passive people as being softminded. Softmindedness, he preached, was mere acquiescence to life’s circumstances. It bespeaks an absence of incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment. The softminded feel that the only way to deal with oppression is to adjust to it. They find an anesthetizing security in the company of the majority. King contended that it was one of the basic causes of racial prejudice. Blind conformity to the norms set by the majority, just like blind loyalty to the nation-state, dulls the conscience and makes one a cog in a system of immorality.

Moreover, King was astounded by the refusal of white Christians to involve themselves in the protest movement against racial segregation. They privately admitted
that Jim Crow was an unspeakable evil upon humanity but could not muster courage to express those convictions publicly. He told the listening congregation:

Millions of citizens are deeply disturbed that the military-industrial complex too often shapes national policy, but they do not want to be considered unpatriotic. Countless loyal Americans honestly feel that a world body such as the United Nations should include even Red China, but they fear being called Communist sympathizers. A legion of thoughtful persons recognizes that traditional capitalism must continually undergo change if our great national wealth is to be more equally distributed, but they are afraid their criticisms will make them seem un-American. Numerous decent, wholesome young persons permit themselves to become involved in unwholesome pursuits which they do not personally condone or even enjoy, because they are ashamed to say no when the gang says yes. How few people have the audacity to express publicly their convictions, and how many have allowed themselves to be “astronomically intimidated”!

In response to this syndrome, King advances the posture of nonconformity in another the sermon, as he further developed the idea of a “Transformed Nonconformist.” He proclaimed that the only way to challenge the conscience is to maintain a posture that does not bend to the immoral will of the majority. To counter fear and timidity, people of conviction and moral nobility—not social respectability—must live according to a higher loyalty. He went on to say, “As Christians we must never surrender our supreme loyalty to any time-bound custom or earth-bound idea, for at the heart of our universe is a higher reality—God and His kingdom of love—to which we must be conformed.”

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18 King, Strength to Love, 22.
Like Thoreau, who a century before him had challenged the belief that the majority is right by virtue of sheer number, King readily embraced and identified with the idea of a moral minority. Reading Thoreau’s question: “What is the price-current of an honest man?” King discerned a moral obligation to choose the path of resistance, to join a wise, maladjusted minority who could face their opposition with the confidence that their cause was just and morally defensible. This choice was made to maintain his integrity and to keep faith with the gospel he believed and the tradition in which he had been raised and nurtured. During one of the dark days of the bus boycott in Montgomery, King needed reassurance about his decision after receiving a menacing threat from a caller who sought evil against the minister and his family. Sitting at his kitchen table over a cup of coffee, King contemplated a way to extricate himself from leadership in the burgeoning movement. The masses were not on his side and he was being targeted for upholding the right. At a point of existential crisis, God reaffirmed his ministry in powerful way, telling him to stand for righteousness with the confidence that God would stand with him.

Notwithstanding King’s fascination with Thoreau’s theory of civil disobedience and his embrace of the idea as a driving principle of the movement and his personal way of life, one can detect that King did not accept the wholesale proposal, particularly regarding: 1) the efficacy of petitioning the government in the process of effecting change; 2) exercising the franchise of voting to ensure just laws; and 3) the individual imperative to eliminate evil. On the first matter, Thoreau did not think it his business to petition the governor or the legislature on any matter of injustice. The ways which the state provided for redressing its own ills were wholly inadequate, if not nonexistent altogether. If citizens were to engage the levers of power, it would take too much time and their lives would pass
before any resolution could be attained. He wrote, “I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he should do something wrong.”  

King, on the other hand, could not resign himself simply to avoid doing something wrong. The legacy of racism in legal form was a burden upon his people, even though it was America’s shame. Petitioning the government which propped up bigotry and prejudice either through legislation or failure to enforce the law had to be a part of the strategy for widespread social change. King would agree with Thoreau that the levers of power do move slowly, but he did not think it a worthless endeavor. In the sermon *On Being a Good Neighbor* King acknowledged that there are some unenforceable obligations that are beyond the scope of society’s laws, but admonished his listeners not to yield to the temptation of believing that laws and courts played only minor roles in solving the race problem in America. He preached:

> Morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless. The law cannot make an employer love an employee, but it can prevent him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin. The habits, if not the hearts, of people have been and are being altered every day by legislative acts, judicial decisions, and executive orders. Let us not be misled by those who argue that segregation cannot be ended by the force of law.  

Besides, to simply avoid ‘doing something wrong’ would have been something entirely different for King than it meant in Thoreau’s time. In Jim Crow America, any citizen of color could have been harassed by a white person be they civilian or a sworn officer for

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20 King, *Strength to Love*, 37.
any number of reasons or for no reason at all. As a matter of fact, many Negro citizens sought to be upstanding and law-abiding with the hope that it would protect them from the violence and aggression of white racists. Such a posture was untenable for those who bore the brunt of America’s unchecked bigotry.

As for the casting of the ballot, Thoreau saw voting as “a sort of gaming [...] with a slight moral tinge to it.”21 Issues of right and wrong were on the line, no doubt, but the character of the voter was untested, so there was no certainty that the good for which a single citizen had cast the ballot will be actualized. He concluded that voting was insufficient to achieve the good because it only expressed a desire for it. And that did nothing for it. The achievement of good, he continued, would still be held at the mercy of the majority—a majority whose virtue may be lacking. King, however, did not see the ballot as being impotent in securing something better than racial segregation.22 To the contrary, it was a key to the self-determination of his people. A sacred right long denied people of color had left them disinhernited in America, but the bestowal of that right—even though it should have been granted by virtue of amendments to the constitution—would make good on the highest mandates of the democratic tradition. Addressing the gathered audience at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, D.C. in 1957, King called for the ballot as a concession to their plea for federal anti-lynching legislation. He told the crowd that voting had the power to aid efforts to rewrite laws that would “bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence.”23 Unlike Thoreau, who had little

21 Thoreau, On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.
about which to concern himself regarding the franchise, King first had to overcome the obstacles county clerks threw in his way to even get to exercise what Thoreau thought to be insufficient. To be fair, King did express misgivings about the rate of change directly related to voting and called for a more robust political strategy in advancing the agenda of racial equality. But, he always maintained the sacred worth of voting.

Regarding the responsibility for eliminating evil, Thoreau did not consider it the duty of the individual to eradicate wrong in the world. The limits of one’s personal devotion, he mused, was to wash his/her hands of it and not to give it any support. Each citizen must ensure that his/her pursuits did not exploit others or bring them hardship. A premium is placed upon one’s withdrawal from institutions that sustain the system of evil. To be sure, there is a certain luxury, indeed a privilege, to this position. For the person whose back is against the wall and for whom evil violated the dignity of his/her humanity, social retreat is certainly not to bring about an end to their suffering. King would argue that Thoreau lacked a sense of urgency when considering the individual responsibility to eradicate evil. Yes, he had faced the consequences of refusing to pay taxes—a night in jail—but could not identify personally with living under the thumb of a state that could inflict violence upon you at any time with impunity. Thoreau was not aloof or unsympathetic about this immediate concern, though, acknowledging: “How much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person.”

King would very much agree with that observation. Thoroughly convinced that the evil of racial segregation could be eliminated King wrote to Coretta in a letter that they...
should “continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color.”25

Persuaded by Thoreau that refusal to cooperate with evil was as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good, King found just the model to practice the theory in Gandhi. Having been primed for engagement by Walter Rauschenbusch’s Christianity and the Social Crisis, King’s theological foundation for social concern had been reinforced, even as he fought skepticism concerning the power of love to effect social change. Prior to Gandhi, King thought the ethics of love, as he found in the New Testament witness of Jesus Christ—i.e., the ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy or the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy—could only work on the individual level. Surely a more realistic approach was needed to resolve conflict between racial groups or nation-states. But his agnosticism was overcome by Gandhi, who “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.”26 Gandhi actualized all that Thoreau had put into theory, as he ‘weaponized’ love for social and collective transformation. The intellectual and moral satisfaction King found lacking in the methods of other revolutionaries and philosophical luminaries, such as Marx, Lenin, Hobbes, and Rousseau were uncovered in the Indian moral leader.

Born and reared in the western part of India under British rule, Gandhi became interested in nonviolent philosophy as he read Hindu and Christian scriptures. He began contemplating on the claims of truth and its power upon the conscience. He would have the occasion to develop and practice the tenets of Satyagraha in South Africa with great

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26 King, Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, 84.
effect under an apartheid regime. This nonviolent resistance form sought to resolve conflict with an adversary without inflicting emotional or physical injury upon him. More than that, those employing the truth-force must be willing to suffer what they are unwilling to inflict upon their opponents. The goal was to bring both sides toward mutual respect and regard so as to avoid bitterness and resentment. While a spirit of compromise was important to this nonviolent resistance, the resistor makes an irreducible minimum demand that, if it requires it, would be a matter for which he/she would give his/her life. King echoed this demand in his speech at the Great March on Detroit in June 1963: “There are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they are worth dying for. And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

It was the record of Gandhi’s Salt March of 1930 that had garnered him worldwide attention and drew King into the power of truth-force. Britain had a longstanding monopoly on the production and sale of salt in India, and they were successful in passing laws to prevent Indians from entering the industry of production and distribution. Salt was heavily taxed and became unaffordable for the masses of Indians. This exploitation had been in effect for so long that people had come to adjust to it. But not Gandhi; he decided to demonstrate in a most public way. On March 12, he set out from his retreat in western India toward the Arabian Sea coast in Dandi. At first, only a few dozen followers joined him. But as he stopped at each town during the night and railed against the unfairness of the tax upon poor people others joined on the march. Two hundred and forty miles later on April 5, Gandhi and his throng of protestors had reached the seashore.

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picking up handfuls of salt and thereby breaking the law, on a technicality. While no arrests were made on that day, public protest continued as more Indians broke the Salt Laws. In early May 1930, Gandhi was arrested and over two thousand peaceful protestors were attacked by police and beaten. By year’s end, over sixty thousand Indians were jailed as a result of the direct action. By the time of Gandhi’s release in 1931, the ruling powers were willing to negotiate a truce, and a pact was formalized one year after the protest movement began.

Through his own admission, King had to live into the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. Before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he had engaged the method as an intellectual exercise, but it was not until his pastorate in Montgomery that he would commit to the method as a way of life. Reflecting upon that period in his life, King was particular in pointing out that he had not chosen the leadership role in the boycott. He recalled, “I never started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman.”28 It was as much an unexpected calling for him inasmuch as it was a moment for which he had been thoroughly prepared—a moment just right to put his convictions to the test.

The Montgomery movement afforded King a chance to practice Gandhi’s method of nonviolent resistance and provided sufficient opportunity to evaluate its impact upon the larger America society. He would also use the experience to add his theological innovation to the enterprise of Satyagraha—a theology of love. King understood the crowds he addressed knew what would motivate them to action. In speeches and sermons, he invoked the theme of Christian love as the foundation for resistance and protest, but it would be the

28 King, Stride Toward Freedom, 89.
Gandhian method that would transit the ethic into action. Of the many principles of Satyagraha developed by the Mahatma in his lifelong experiment with truth and nonviolence, King gravitated with great passion and commitment to love of humanity. Yes, he took steps to rid himself of fear, greed, hubris and hypocrisy, jealously, and passivity, but embraced wholeheartedly the love ethic of Jesus, lifting it as the radiant light that revealed the ugliness of conformity.

In speaking of love, King never appealed to nor called for emotional sentiments or some expression of affection. He always differentiated between the three words for love in the Greek New Testament. First, Eros bespoke affinity for aesthetics and romance, deriving meaning from the Platonic understanding of the yearning of one’s soul. Second, Philia was the affection shared between family and personal friends, grounded in reciprocity. Neither Eros nor philia could respond to the racial hostility experienced in America in King’s day. There was nothing pleasing about the social arrangement of racial segregation, and certainly there was to be found no reciprocity among those who inflicted injury upon Negro citizens. What was needed was ‘redemptive goodwill.’ That’s how King understood this third kind of love: “Agape meant understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality of function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart.”

The defining feature of agape is its indiscriminate character. It makes no distinction between the one who is considered worthy from another who might be considered unworthy. Instead, it begins by loving others solely for their own benefit. There is profound

29 King, Stride Toward Freedom, 93.
mutuality in the practice of *agape*. For it always regards the other as a neighbor, even to the point of including one’s enemy. King would not yield to the temptation of dividing people into categories of friends versus enemies because to do so would have made it justifiable to hate some and love others. In the command of Jesus to love your enemies he found a mandate to extend himself to another without a guarantee of such return. This is a truth he marshaled in the sermon, “On Being a Good Neighbor,” when he spoke of excessive altruism. In responding to the needs of the injured man on Jericho Road, the Samaritan demonstrated his capacity to sympathize. Sympathy is the expression of concern for the needy on the basis of their humanity. It is a willingness to go beyond the call of duty. The Samaritan did this by taking the injured victim to an inn, by paying for his care, and by committing to cover the expenses of further care. King went further in his understanding of duty by calling for the same genuine expression in the midst of racial hostility. Speaking explicitly about the Negro’s response to the racism of white men, he advocated for love because it met their need. Racism distorted the personality of white man and scarred his soul, rendering him in desperate need of redemption. The redemptive agent most readily available to him was the love from Negroes which could “remove his tensions, insecurities, and fears.”

30 Of course, this position left King vulnerable to the stinging barbs of his critics from all sides. But he was willing to absorb such criticism because of his conviction and commitment to this overwhelming force of love—the highest virtue in his canon. Like Gandhi, King held to a higher truth that all life was interrelated. The ways of maintaining that harmony and rhythm was to be found in extolling virtues and not in

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30 King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 94.
debasing oneself with the bitterness of hatred and hostility. For the latter only ends in
darkness and destruction, both figuratively and literally.

The discernible complementarity of Thoreau, Gandhi and King can be distilled into
at least two fundamental principles which undergird the philosophy and practice of
nonviolence. Chief among them is respect for the rule of law. Each supported a system of
laws that protected the interests of all citizens. They believed that the government was to
be an instrument of common good. However, when the government enacts and/or enforces
a law that counters the good for which it was bound to uphold, the moral duty to resist and
reject such a law falls to its citizens. Thoreau, Gandhi and King all agreed that unjust laws
should not be obeyed. If faced with the choice of obeying a law that is wrong or breaking
it, one should choose the latter. There can be no honor and respect in obeying what it is
immoral and unjust. It sullies the character of the one who purports to be law-abiding. For
one cannot participate in evil without being identified with it altogether. Thus, the duty to
truth would demand an act of civil disobedience.

The second principle flows as a natural consequence of breaking unjust laws. That
is, facing the punishment for resisting. Thoreau, Gandhi, and King all held that in common.
Each maintained the dignity of being held in jail for choosing a greater moral truth over
blind adherence to state-sanctioned immorality. Thoreau said the rightful place for the
citizen of conscience was the jailhouse. King often reminded his crowds that before it was
all over and the victory won some of them would be required to go to jail. And Gandhi
considered his imprisonment as submission to the highest penalty for carrying out his
highest duty as a citizen. Theirs was not the way of anarchy but responsibility. They
accepted what would come their way as a result of choosing the path of resistance.
The ultimate aim of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King was not resistance for the sake of resisting, but resistance for the sake of social change. Acts of disobedience were never intended to become ends unto themselves. Instead, they were to lead to engagement with the brokers of power who could repeal unjust laws and enact ones that were morally defensible. Each held to a high standard of intellectual appeal when dealing with their opponents. The possibility of being reconciled to the other was very much in their mind. None would have rejoiced in the achievement of repeal if it came at the expense of the humiliation of their enemy. In this regard, they maintained their integrity.

Among the many disciples who study the life and leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. there are many appeals. Often each group claims some special connection, some exclusive right to his legacy. American historian David J. Garrow characterizes this bidding as “a multi-party tug of war, with different scholars seeking to claim King for Walter Rauschenbusch’s social gospel, for Boston University’s personalism, for Mohandas K. Gandhi’s satyagrahic nonviolence, or for Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism.”

While he acknowledges legitimacy in each claim, he awards exclusivity to none. That is what made King so complex a thinker, so multi-dimensional a leader. He drew knowledge and truth from many intellectual and religious traditions and filtered them all through the schema of his moral framework. One does not become maladjusted by accident or by strict adherence to a parochial dogma. One comes to this posture through intense discernment and wrestling with truth, wherever it may be found. This is the intellectual legacy of King. This is rational basis for his maladjustment.

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Chapter Three
“Maladjustment in Action: The Struggle for Nonviolence”

Montgomery was the ground for testing the philosophy of nonviolence. The thirteen-month boycott campaign against segregated buses in the capital city of Alabama was a successful foray in challenging legalized segregation and racial discrimination in Jim-Crow America, portending even more victories by the same means. Remarkably, what was conceived and intended to be simply a one-day protest of city buses in December 1955 expanded methodically into a three hundred and eighty-one-day mass movement that mobilized Negroes in taking direct action to determine their future. Montgomery’s bus boycott came to stand as a signal demonstration of the tremendous potential inherent in nonviolent mass protest to successfully dismantle the evil system of segregation. The federal district court ruling in Browder v. Gayle\(^1\) in June 1956, which declared segregation on public buses unconstitutional, and the affirmation of that decision by the United States Supreme Court in November 1956, bolstered the credibility that a movement of mass protest without violence could overcome segregation. What happened in Montgomery—the strategy and its success—became a model for other anti-segregation campaigns across the American south.

\(^1\) The case of *Aurelia S. Browder v. William A. Gayle* was a successful challenge to the Alabama state statutes and Montgomery’s city ordinances requiring segregation on public buses. Filed by attorneys Fred Gray and Charles Langford on behalf of Aurelia S. Browder, Claudette Colvin, Susie McDonald, and Mary Louise Smith—women who experienced mistreatment on Montgomery buses—the suit originally included Jeanatta Reese, but she withdrew as a plaintiff because of external pressure. It was decided intentionally not to include Rosa Parks as a plaintiff, so that the case would have to be decided only on one issue, i.e. the constitutionality of legal segregation on public buses. Gray thought the inclusion of Mrs. Parks would have been perceived as an attempt to circumvent her prosecution on other related charges. The district court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, and the case was appealed and made its way to United States Supreme Court, which upheld the district court’s ruling. The defendants in the case included Montgomery’s mayor (Gayle), its police chief, the Board of Commissioners, the Montgomery City Lines, Inc., and the Alabama Public Service Commission.
Inasmuch as the Montgomery movement resulted in a significant legal victory for Negroes in the State of Alabama on desegregated public transportation, the bus boycott became the defining experience of leadership for the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the young doctoral candidate who came to the southern city to complete his dissertation. Two years after his arrival, King emerged nationally as a respected moral leader and internationally as a recognizable agent of social transformation. His presidency of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was the perfect public staging for an initial display of maladjustment in action. From that position, he demonstrated ability to coalesce clergy and laity, professionals and the working class, the lettered and unlettered black populace of Montgomery to sustain a united witness for more than one year. The sheer difficulty of leading a protracted, large-scale demonstration cannot be overstated, and the news about thousands of Negroes refusing to ride segregated buses in a small American city sent James Lawson, “whose superior manner and precise articulation smothered any hint of emotionalism,” into a fit of shouting, clapping, and foot-stomping at a Methodist missionary school near Nagpur, India, according to Taylor Branch’s recounted history of the Montgomery movement. Having discovered that Gandhism without Gandhi in India had dissolved into power politics and petty quarrels, Lawson was overjoyed that a movement in the spirit of the Mahatma had broken out in his homeland. Branch writes, “He sensed immediately that he would come to know M. L. King, who was described in the Nagpur Times as a man of exactly Lawson’s age, race, and profession.”

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3 Ibid.
Indeed, King had a pastorate larger than his mere congregation, located just beyond the shadows of the state capitol in the cradle of the confederacy. Although he preached from the pulpit of the small church, his flock became a national audience. How ironic that the less controversial minister selected by the congregation to replace the bombastic Reverend Vernon Johns would water the very seeds of activism planted by Johns himself. The impact of Montgomery on the larger civil rights movement cannot be appreciated fully without thoughtful reflection upon the deepening resolve of Martin’s maladjustment during this period. For it was through this experience the new pastor matured as both a moral strategist and pragmatic leader. He grew from an optimistic theoretician of nonviolent philosophy into a deeply committed practitioner of its tenets, and, ultimately, emerged as a more confident prophet who proclaimed its truths. And to that this chapter turns its attention: to the maturation of King’s creative maladjustment by examining his theological innovation concerning the philosophy of nonviolence during the campaign, his personal sanctification in its way of life, and its enduring mark upon his leadership beyond the days of the bus boycott.

As a seminarian at Crozer, King had gained an interest in pacifism after his first exposure to the principled position from a lecture given by Abraham J. Muste, a renowned Christian pacifist and one of the foremost proponents of nonviolence in the United States. King was moved by Muste’s talk, “but far from convinced of the practicality of his position.”4 Heretofore, he had believed that war could possibly serve a negative good in preventing the spread of evil, and that it might be preferable to surrender to the regimes of communism, fascism, or Nazism. But the tallest hurdle that pacifism had to overcome on

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King’s intellectual odyssey to nonviolence was the great Niebuhrian critique. Once an advocate of pacifism, Reinhold Niebuhr—theologian, ethicist, and public intellectual—broke ranks from the movement in 1933, after having served as chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The publication of his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* marked his new theo-ethical approach to the issues of the human condition. Christian realism, Niebuhr argued, acknowledged no intrinsic moral difference between violence and nonviolence as methods for resisting evil. While their consequences were different, it was only a difference in degree, not in kind. Niebuhr had come to reject the liberal position, which had relied on reason and moral suasion to mitigate human sinfulness, and he raised a challenge to the usefulness of such moral idealism in pursuing justice in the social sense.

King discerned in Niebuhr’s argument the failure of pacifism to deal justly with the reformation doctrine of justification. Pacifists, instead, found comfort in a form of sectarian perfectionism, which believed that “divine grace actually lifts man out of the sinful contradictions of history and establishes him above the sins of the world.” What King appreciated most in the thoughts of the 20th Century leading intellectual was the honesty about the potential for evil in human beings and the reality of their participation in it. He wrote plainly that he was able to “recognize the illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of a false idealism” as result of the persistent reminder in Niebuhr’s theology.

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7 Ibid.
The juxtaposition of Muste’s pacifism and Niebuhr’s Christian realism spins King into a state of confusion. Although not fully convinced that pacifism could work in broad terms, he was not fully vested in all that Niebuhr offered. King saw in Niebuhr’s position a misunderstanding of true pacifism as nonresistance to evil, when it was, in fact, a nonviolent resistance to evil. He reflected upon the world of difference between the two positions, writing:

True pacifism is not unrealistic submission to evil power, as Niebuhr contends. It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it, since the latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and hereby bring about a transformation and change of heart.8

With this belief firmly held, King could not agree with Niebuhr’s assessment that “however large the number of individual white men who do and will identify themselves completely with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if he is not forced to do so.”9 A few years later, he opposed Niebuhr’s thinking on the same issue, in a doctoral seminar at Boston University. Attempting to uncover why white men of goodwill refused to support the cause of inclusion for Negroes in America, King responds to the public intellectual. In an essay entitled “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Dualism,” he accepted Niebuhr’s argument that man as an individual possessed an inclination toward morality because it was natural to him. Man as a collective could not demonstrate the same, however, because of the inability of the collective to set aside self-

8 King, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” 479.
interests, according to Niebuhr. Thus, love could only be expressed through coercion or force, making government a necessity. King agreed that government was an inevitable necessity but refused resign to Niebuhr’s pessimism about the character of love to effect a change in the collective, just as it transformed the individual. He was not convinced that “the goodness of the individual man in his immediate relationship disappears when he acts as a member of a group.”

The consummate Hegelian, King would find a third way, what was being espoused as ‘prophetic meliorism,’ which had not become bogged down in (im)perfectionism. It was against this backdrop that King articulated what became the substance of a theology of nonconformity—a theology that buttressed his maladjustment.

A basic philosophy of nonviolence guided the Montgomery movement at the beginning—although some protestors were armed—before the words nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance were ever used. And the inspiration of Gandhi exerted significant influence on technique and protest strategy. But, it was not the tenets of Gandhism alone that built and sustained momentum in black Montgomerians during the bus boycott. What occurred in the southern American city can best be understood as people being grasped by a new realization of their dignity. The magnificence of King’s oratory roused hearers to the highest estimations of themselves and sent them forth to live up to those ideals. He rallied people who were weary of carrying the burden of segregation and racial discrimination and convinced them of their own power to change the arrangement of public life. The widespread discontent that had sparked the protest against segregated buses was insufficient to sustain protestors for the long haul. Passing

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anger and outrage would simply have waned if minor accommodations were to be made, in an effort to undercut the movement—assuredly, overtures were made by city fathers to divide the MIA and weaken momentum. But King’s constant appeal to their sense of dignity and self-worth inspired them “to stand up amid a system that... [oppressed them] and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of [their] own value.”

The sense of ‘somebody-ness’ that Martin’s mother had instilled in him as a child was being transmitted to Negroes in Montgomery. Speaking at an occasion celebrating the boycott’s success, he says:

> If we are to be prepared for this new order and this new world which is emerging, we must believe that we belong. Every negro must feel that he is somebody. He must come to see that he is a child of God and that all men are made in God’s image. He must come to see that the basic thing about a man is not his specificity, but his fundamentum, not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin, but the texture and quality of his soul.

Finding complementarity between religious traditions, King insists upon an affirmation of fundamental human dignity by wedding his theology of imago dei with Gandhi’s satyagraha. The force of truth needed a ground of being—the God ‘createdness’ that marked Negroes as equal with others, and thereby deserving of the same dignity. He sums up this insistence by concluding: “We came to see that, in the long run, it is more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. So [...] we decided to substitute tired feet for

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tired souls and walk the streets of Montgomery.”

Indeed, it was growing power of self-respect that animated the struggle.

King could speak credibly about summoning inner dignity at the conclusion of the boycott because he did exactly that during the 13-month protest struggle. In his memoirs, he reflects upon the personal sacrifices made for the advancement of the cause and the anguish it wrought within him. Illustratively, King recalls an evening meeting of the MIA that had become unsettled with movement and growing whispers among attendees in the room. When the news of a bombing at his home was reported to him nonviolence faced its first major test, and its subject was the leader of the movement. Upon arriving at home, he was met by a large crowd gathered outside. Needless to say, they were enraged at this act of violence, even as he was relieved to learn that his wife and daughter were unhurt by the explosion. With the dastardly deed fresh before him, King summoned strength to preach a gospel of nonviolence in the face of manifested evil. Reminding the crowd of their belief in law and order—as certain members present were growing restless in their restraint against police officers—he cautioned them against getting panicky, and advised all not to respond in kind. He said, “Don’t get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them.”

This was no small feat, especially as he remembers the flood of thoughts that overcame him later that evening, when he laid in bed at the home of members of his congregation. Not even the reassuring glow coming through the window

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14 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr., 80.
of that bedroom by the distant street lamp could still the anger rising within King, as he thought about the viciousness of those who bombed his house. Realizing the potential of his family being killed in that attack, he was revisited by the same corroding hate that was vying for his creativity during his adolescent years. “And once more [he] caught [himself] and said: ‘[I] must not allow [myself] to become bitter.’”15 When a stick of dynamite was thrown on the lawn of E. D. Nixon two nights later, protestors gathered again and had to be talked down from attempting a violent backlash.

These acts of violence perpetrated against leaders of the boycott constituted tests to the strategy of nonviolence. Members of the executive board were already saying to King in private that a more militant approach to segregation was necessary. In their estimation, nonviolence was too soft and compromising, signaling fear to white folks. Others within the ranks were advocating a moral distinction between aggressive acts of violence and retaliatory violence, hinting that they could only remain nonviolent as long as they were not the victims of violence. Nonviolent noncooperation was new to Montgomery Negroes but they opened themselves to the approach. King was aware that most of them did not believe in nonviolence as a philosophy of life, but “because of their confidence in their leaders and because nonviolence was presented to them as a simple expression of Christianity in action, they were willing to use it as a strategy that one uses simply because it is expedient at the moment...”16

As nonviolence was solidified as the technique of the movement, it fell to King—who, at first, had only given nonviolent resistance his intellectual assent—to interpret its meaning for the people and to become its guarantor of change. As he was sanctified in its

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16 Ibid., 68.
revelation, he developed basic aspects about the philosophy that served as guiding principles for those who wished to participate in the movement. The principles can fall into categories—even though they cohere interdependently—pertaining to strategic and/or tactical methods; relational or interpersonal valuations; and, lastly, the affirmation of universal truth. King would come to embody these principles and make them the credo for life and ministry.

First, nonviolence was advanced and emphasized as a method of active resistance. This was perhaps the least understood aspect of the philosophy by critics of the method and some skeptics who participated. They heard the phrase “passive resistance” and immediately thought “do-nothing,” as if the resistor was to remain quiet while evil went unchecked. They thought of stagnant passivity. Such thinking, however, could not have been any further from the true nature of the activity. While there was no physical aggression toward the opponent, instead there was spiritual and emotional activity being channeled toward the moral persuasion of the opponent of his error. For if the critic and skeptic, who viewed nonviolence as passive nonresistance, were right, the method would have been a betrayal of the belief that one should never participate in evil, even by acquiescence. But one should not practice nonviolence because s/he was afraid or was found without the instruments of violence. Nonviolence must be chosen decidedly over and against violence if it is to have credibility. King wrote: “This is why Gandhi said if cowardice is the only alternative to violence, it is better to fight.”\(^\text{17}\) Interestingly enough, he would have to defend the truth of this principle most ardently against the critical commentary of the weakness of

\(^{17}\) King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 90.
nonviolence by Malcolm X (the substance of which shall be examined a bit later). Suffice it to say, Martin concluded that Malcolm did not see that there’s a great deal of difference between nonresistance to evil and nonviolent resistance. Certainly, I’m not saying that you sit down and patiently accept injustice. I’m talking about a very strong force, where you stand up with all your might against an evil system, and you’re not a coward. You are resisting, but you come to see that tactically as well as morally it is better to be nonviolent.¹⁸

Notably, as King matures from strategy to way of living in the philosophy he does not lose any pragmatism in his leadership about the tactical gains that nonviolence offered.

A second principle in kind was the commitment to attack the evil system of segregation and not the persons perpetrating the evil, that is, segregationists. The struggle to dismantle this legal form of racialized control was cast as a theo-cosmic epic: between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between righteousness and unrighteousness, between good and evil. Nonviolent resisters sought only to defeat the evil which marred both the soul of the one who executes it and the one on whom it is manifested. It is impossible to understand and embrace this principle without the admonition of the pseudonymous Pauline writer of Ephesians (6:12 NRSV) in mind: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Moreover, the tension in the fight for racial justice was not to be perceived as tension between the races. It was to be regarded as a nobler engagement that would conquer

¹⁸ King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 266.
the divisions of humankind. King reflected, “There are those who would try to make of this
a hate campaign. This is not a war between the white and the Negro but a conflict between
justice and injustice. This is bigger than the Negro race revolting against the white. We are
seeking to improve not the Negro of Montgomery but the whole of Montgomery.”19 The
victory was to be a shared one if it was to be lasting.

Reconciliation was a third guiding principle of nonviolent noncooperation,
forming a perfect complement to the previous doctrine. To win the friendship and
understanding of the opponent was the goal, instead of humiliating or defeating them.
Noncooperation, as understood by King, was the means of resistance but it was not an end
unto itself. The intent was to produce a sense of moral shame in the opponent and, as a
result, his/her awakening to the truth of his/her participation in or benefit from segregation.
To accomplish this black Montgomerians were to affirm a shared inherent dignity with
their white counterparts, even while attempting to assert their own. It was to regard the
opponent as brother or sister, and not as enemy. Furthermore, they were called to seek the
redemption of their opponents’ humanity in acts of reconciliation. This would ultimately
lead to the creation of the beloved community.

The fourth principle follows the third closely, as a willingness to suffer violence if
necessary without retaliation. Anyone who was unwilling to go all the way was unfit to go
any portion of the way. In his struggle in India against an oppressive regime, Gandhi tells
his countrymen, “rivers of blood to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our
blood... Things of fundamental importance to people are not secured by reason alone, but
have to be purchased with their suffering.”20 Such a call to accept the violence inflicted

upon oneself without returning it can only be undergirded by the realization that unearned suffering is redemptive, as King believed. This was perhaps his most intense struggle with nonviolence for it meant dealing honestly with the possibility of death. Heretofore, he had only accounted for death as a consequence of maladjustment intellectually. But, in Montgomery, he had to settle the question existentially. After the bombing of his home, he was urged by church officers and trusted friends to hire an armed guard for his personal and family protection. His father concurred with the suggestion, and to satisfy the multiple requests King did apply for a license to carry a gun in the car. Almost like Jesus who wrestled with the weight of the divine assignment upon him in the garden of Gethsemane, King agonized over the matter. He asked, “How could I serve as one of the leaders of a nonviolent movement and at the same time use weapons of violence for my personal protection?” He and Coretta wrestled with the question and ultimately decided against taking up arms. King recalled: “When I decided that I couldn’t keep a gun, I came face-to-face with the question of death and I dealt with it. From that point on, I no longer needed a gun nor have I been afraid. Had we become distracted by the question of my safety we would have lost the moral offensive and sunk to the level of our oppressors.”

In the fifth principle of nonviolent resistance the resister not only refuses to injure the opponent but also refuses to hate him. Each aspect of the philosophy deepens the character of the practitioner, but this one calls for incredible inner strength. For the one who can abide by this teaching has sense enough and sufficient moral grounding to avoid the insidious effects of evil and hatred upon the human spirit. There was a coarse bitterness

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21 King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 82.
that consumed those who internalized the violence of Jim Crow and segregation. In the sermon “Love Your Enemies” King preached:

Mindful that hate is an evil and dangerous force, we too often think of what it does to the person hated... Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man’s sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true.\(^{22}\)

The preceding principles, whether grounded in strategy or the healing of interpersonal race relations, all hinge on a fundamental conviction that constitutes the sixth doctrine: The belief that the universe is on the side of justice. King spoke of this struggle in cosmic tones, appealing to a witness greater than material reality. Long before King’s adoption of a personalist theology, his religion inculcated the idea of an attentive God who is actively involved in human affairs. The notion of God as the Unmoved Mover in Aristotelian philosophy did not satisfy his longing to engage a Supreme Spirit who acts with beneficence in human history by exalting the lowly and bringing low the haughty. In countless speeches and sermons King reaffirmed this belief by speaking of the cosmic companionship the faithful have in God. The God whom he met in Jesus Christ had modeled for him in the pages of the New Testament a life of selfless service and undaunted sacrifice. This witness served as a source of encouragement to King during difficult moments.

King was fortified in the principles of nonviolent resistance when he emerged from the struggle of the Montgomery movement, and was commended for his courage and

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\(^{22}\) King, *Strength to Love*, 53.
commitment to the philosophy with citations and awards by numerous national organizations that watched closely what occurred in the small southern city. In presenting King with the Spingarn Medal in June 1957 “for the highest and noblest achievement by an American Negro,” Richard S. Emrich, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, said in his remarks, “It would have been easy for a lesser man to have seen the situation as a struggle of race against race, [but] Reverend King knew that you do not create fellowship by violence, or justice by injustice, or good laws by lawlessness, or love by hatred.” Ever the gracious recipient, King accepted multiple honors on behalf of the 50,000 Negro citizens of Montgomery, referring to them as a “people who dared only to dream of freedom.”

Despite the success of the bus boycott and its moral victory, the efficacy of nonviolent resistance as a strategy for social change was still very much in question. This time, however, King was not the skeptic; it was an audience outside of Montgomery. In January 1957, J. Pius Barbour, one of King’s cherished mentors in Chester, Pennsylvania, sent to him a one-line letter that encapsulated his skepticism: “Can you overthrow a social system without violence?” Barbour, the editor of the National Baptist Voice, had been featured in a lecture series at Dexter Avenue the previous year and argued that there was no discernible strategy for social change in the New Testament. The doctrine of nonviolent resistance, therefore, was strictly a personal ethic. Then, in the fall of 1957, four weeks

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
after a raucous denominational meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, which descended into brawl and concluded with the arrest of four delegates, three of whom were clergy, Barbour followed up in a letter to King: “Do you still believe that you can change a social system without [...] violence?”27 The violence that had broken out at the Baptist meeting was the “NATURE OF MAN,” Barbour concluded, arguing that when personal interests are involved human beings will resort to any tactic available to them. King would not have disagreed about the potential for violence being rooted in the constitution of human beings, for he had accepted that reality from his days at Boston. It is, however, in Barbour’s acknowledgement of available options to which people can resort that King would argue nonviolent resistance stands a chance as a viable moral alternative, thus becoming an ethical option.

Moreover, Bayard Rustin, a veteran pacifist and co-founder of In Friendship, whose organization had given strategic and financial support to the Montgomery campaign, had stressed the need for a more robust articulation of nonviolence to a growing national audience. Rustin advised him to say something more striking on the question of nonviolence one week before during King’s address at the Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington, D.C. He proffered a creative action formula28 to be incorporated in the text of King’s speech as a means of explaining the philosophy and its moral claims to those who

28 In a letter to Rev. M. L. King, Jr., dated 10 May 1957, Rustin writes: “On the non-violent emphasis, the form in creative action is always Yes—No—Yes. That is to say a positive action such as the idea of brotherhood, followed by a rejection—a No. Rejection of segregation, discrimination, injustice; this must be followed by a positive action. The positive action is brotherhood, followed by a negative rejection of. Non-brotherhood, followed by a common action.” See The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement January 1957 – December 1958, eds. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 199.
either remained opposed to it or simply skeptical. In closing the address, King stressed the need for courageous and calm leadership from the Negro community. He cautioned the crowd:

We must realize that we are grappling with the most weighty social problem of this nation, and in grappling with such a complex problem there is no place for misguided emotionalism [...]. We must never struggle with falsehood, hate, or malice [...]. There is a danger that those of us who have been forced so long to stand amid the tragic midnight of oppression—those of us who have been trampled over, those of us who have been kicked about—there is a danger that we will become bitter. But if we become bitter and indulge in hate campaigns [...], the new order which is emerging will be nothing but a duplication of the old order. 29

In this statement alone, King demonstrates keen insight about the historical moment that faced America in light of the Montgomery movement and the deleterious effects of internalizing the hostilities of an unresolved national history. The former was being compelled upon the nation by those who had been victimized by the tyranny of racism and white supremacy, while the latter was the result of the reality of the former absent any hope that things could be any different or better. King’s pastoral sensibilities were very much operative even as he took a prophetic stance.

As for the historical moment confronting the nation, King—likened unto one of the men of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) whose understanding of the times prompted the right action within them—described the post-Montgomery period as “the threshold of the most constructive period of [the] nation’s history.” 30 Tracing the evolutionary growth in race relations over three distinct periods in American life, he historicizes the ongoing fight for

29 King, “Give Us the Ballot,” 213.
freedom and justice within a larger context of a protracted national issue. He noted that each period featured a significant decision from the Supreme Court which legally validated the dominant position of that period. The first period (1619 to 1863) was the antebellum era, the time of slavery. The dominant position toward the Negro presupposed him/her to be merely a commodity and not a human being. As “depersonalized cogs in a vast plantation machine,” 31 Negroes were considered to be things for use rather than persons to be respected. Life on the plantation could be hazardous. If there was no acknowledgement of the Negro’s basic humanity, any claim or right to a family was also nullified. The 1857 Supreme Court decision in the case of Dred Scott, a slave who had asserted his freedom after his master brought him to a free area, gave the legal and constitutional affirmation of slavery, declaring that a slave possessed no rights of citizenship to demand freedom. Even while the debate between Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln continued over how slavery would be managed in the territories of new states to be included into the union continued, the legal establishment was validating the evil system.

The second period of race relations in America (1863 to 1954) was the time of segregation. Negroes had been freed from the horrors of physical bondage only to experience another kind of tyranny, exploitation, and social control. King acknowledged the improvement in the second period over the first one, but he sharply criticized it for failing to deliver fully on the promise of freedom, calling it “nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity.” 32 The climb toward upward mobility through participation in the larger society, a result of the Emancipation Proclamation, was curtailed by new laws that discriminated against Negros on the basis of race. In 1896, a new doctrine

32 Ibid., 231.
on race relations in America—*separate but equal*—was advanced by the Supreme Court in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Similar to the 1857 ruling, the court gave legal and constitutional validation to segregation laws. In terms of its legal precedent, this was the first major inquiry into the meaning of the equal protection clause set forth in the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibited states from denying “equal protection of the laws” to any person within their jurisdictions. This legal doctrine would stand until the conclusion of the second period, signaling the dawn of a new era.

Witnessing the early years of the third period of race relations, King pointed to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as the signal event of a new day that had begun to dawn in America. Speaking to the NAACP Convention, he tells them:

> This is the period of complete and constructive integration. The Supreme Court decision which came to give legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of this period said in substance that the old Plessy doctrine must go, that separate facilities were inherently unequal, and to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law.\(^\text{33}\)

The freedom so long denied the descendants of Africa in America was being born in King’s day, but it needed midwives to call it forth. To be sure, he was no victim of unwarranted optimism or dazed by a great illusion. He understood what was at stake and what it required. The Montgomery movement taught him an invaluable lesson: that the privileged will not give up their privilege by mere request. Strong resistance was required. He saw in the post-Montgomery age the best opportunity to dismantle the entire system that had justified the atrocities and practices of previous periods in American history. It was a great moral challenge confronting the nation that would determine not only the character of its

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soul but also its moral authority to lead in the world. King contended, “It is one of the ironies of present history that the Negro, in his struggle for freedom, is no longer struggling for himself alone, but he is really struggling to save America. The uncommitted peoples of the world will not follow America so long as she has this internal problem of race.”

King perceived well that the confrontation in the third period in American race relations was laden with a moral urgency. Having noted that each previous period of progress had been followed immediately by white backlash, he interpreted the reconstitution of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups, the resurgence of violence and terror as a means of intimidation, along with the rallying cry of “States rights” from elected officials—which was nothing but a throwback to the idea of “popular sovereignty” floated during the 1850s—as signs that the old order would not pass away quietly. The manifested tensions of that day represented the struggle of something old trying to remain the status quo amid the pain of something new being born. He understood, however, that the agitation and convulsions of a dying system could possess strength enough to dissuade courageous people from fighting the good fight, so he presented to that band of moral patriots a weapon that could not be overcome: nonviolent resistance motivated by love. Realizing that equality and justice would never become a reality as long as segregation remained, he gave to a national audience a means of its eradication that would not leave the nation compromised when the system would be finally just a matter of history. In describing his panoramic gaze over the global landscape, he conveyed a

35 Popular Sovereignty was a political doctrine giving residents living in a region the right of self-determination concerning their government. The doctrine was applied specifically to those who settled federal land and wished to decide the terms under which they would be joined to the Union for the purpose regulating the status of slaves. The doctrine was popularized by Stephen Douglas.
sympathy for why some oppressed people choose violence, why they rise up in an armed revolt. Violence delivered to them a temporary victory and satiated a craven desire for vengeance—a desire that could rise up in any people who do not commit themselves to more constructive means of resolving conflict. But violence could not secure a usable future nor lasting peace, for it only begets more violence. King advanced nonviolence as the only viable ethical option for confronting the moment of crisis because its ends were consistent with the spirit that sustained the philosophy. Of primary concern to the dreamer was the birth of new values in a world markedly different from the one America had seen before. Such a world could not come forth through the instruments of violence. It needed to be created by brotherhood and peace.

In addition to King’s awareness of the historical moment in the national evolution, he was deeply empathetic to those who had internalized the hostilities of racism and white supremacy, and had come to prefer a more militant, even violent, response. Borne of despair and feelings of hopelessness, the crippling bitterness that befell many Negroes posed a serious challenge to the possibility of resolving America’s race relations problem peacefully. Not only was bitterness an impediment to collective social progress, it was corrosive and injurious to those persons who gave to it the safe harbor of their hearts, minds, and spirits. King was forced to confront this reality more and more as the years passed from the Montgomery movement. Typified mainly in the fiery and demagogic oratory of Malcom X, the talk of violence—and the disparagement of nonviolence, for that matter—offered no creative alternative for positive change for Negroes and the wider society. Not that opponents of nonviolent philosophy nurtured concern for the wider society. But, even though King empathized with their tortured journey toward this method,
he found violence to be an absolutely untenable position because of its immorality and impracticality. This signaled his conversion from pragmatic nonviolence to philosophical nonviolence.

Reflecting on his intellectual juxtaposition with the man who had once been the most outspoken and esteemed public spokesman for the Nation of Islam, Martin thought that Malcolm had really misunderstood him and thus mischaracterized the nature of his nonviolent philosophy. He recalled:

> When they threw eggs at me in New York, I think that was really a result of the Black Nationalist groups. They had heard all of these things about my being soft, my talking about love, and they transferred that bitterness toward the white man to me. They began to feel that I was saying to love this person that they had such a bitter attitude toward. In fact, Malcolm X had a meeting the day before, and he talked about me a great deal and told them that I would be there the next night and said, ‘You ought to go over there and let old King know what you think about him.’ And he said a great deal about nonviolence, criticizing nonviolence, and saying that I approved of Negro men and women being bitten by dogs and the fire hoses. So I think this kind of response grew out of all of the talk about my being a sort of polished Uncle Tom.36

This was a heavy tax levied upon King for his maladjustment: to have his positions and beliefs publicly distorted by black critics. Yet, with immeasurable grace, he bore it for the greater good. Through lenses of sympathy, Martin was able to view Malcolm as “a victim of the despair that came into being as a result of a society that gives so many Negroes the nagging sense of ‘nobody-ness.’” To be sure, King was not condescending to him, but sought to identify with Malcolm’s personal narrative. In condemning the method of

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36 King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 266.
violence that Malcolm advocated, King was careful not to depreciate the continued existence of societal conditions—oppression, poverty, and unchecked injustices—that had pushed Malcolm toward despair. Malcolm was a tragic figure, as King remembered him, realizing that “a man who lived under the torment of knowledge of the rape of his grandmother and murder of his father under the conditions of the present social order, does not readily accept that social order or seek to integrate into it.”37 This forced Malcolm to live and die as an outsider. For even after Malcolm had moderated his positions as a result of the transformation he experienced during his pilgrimage to Mecca, and despite expressing a willingness to cooperate with the nonviolent movement, he could not renounce violence nor overcome the bitterness which had been invested in him by his life’s experiences. King reflected upon Malcolm’s assassination with sadness but saw in it a teachable moment.

Let us learn from this tragic nightmare that violence and hate only breed violence and hate, and that Jesus’ word still goes out to every potential Peter, “Put up thy sword.” Certainly we will continue to disagree, but we must disagree without becoming violently disagreeable. We will still suffer the temptation to bitterness, but we must learn that hate is too great a burden to bear for a people moving on toward their date with destiny.38

Unfortunately, this lesson was rejected by some early proponents of black nationalism, as the political and social movement spread in America in the 1960s. During the “March Against Fear,” which was started by James Meredith, King came to see firsthand the growing influence of militancy upon younger participants in the civil rights struggle. The march was continued following the attempted assassination of Meredith in

37 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr., 268.
38 Ibid.
June 1966, in part, because the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) thought that not proceeding would have had a chilling effect upon Negroes in Mississippi as well as deal a major blow to the nonviolent discipline of the civil rights movement. In consultation with Floyd McKissick, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), King agreed to co-sponsor the march with an openness to other organizations joining the campaign. What King did not anticipate was a growing dissatisfaction with nonviolence as the only means of protest and resistance. A younger activist shouted, “I’m not for that nonviolence stuff anymore,” while others refused to sing the words of “We Shall Overcome,” preferring, instead, the new lyrics of “We Shall Overrun.” King heard the new refrain as strange music to his ears. He acknowledged his surprise at the occurrence, admitting that he should have known nonviolence would eventually be questioned when the promises of freedom are proven false, and when violence upon Negroes continue to go unpunished, ultimately leaving many Negroes with disbelief that racism and discrimination could be eradicated in the social order. The same despair King saw in Malcolm seemed more pervasive among these young people, and he was reminded that despair only leads to bitterness, and that bitterness carries with it a blindness that cannot distinguish some from all. By the time the Black Power slogan was chanted in Greenwood, Mississippi, King truly felt the magnitude of this seismic shift which had potential to threaten the unity of the movement. Not only was the method of nonviolence called into question in a significant form, the necessity of an interracial coalition was also challenged. Black Power politics insisted upon the coalescing of Negroes around their own ethnic identity and not their mutuality with people of other ethnicities. But King had
committed himself to building a coalition of conscience comprised of people of goodwill from every race, religion, creed and walk of life. Just as he thought that violence would only produce a future of hostility and tension, a movement of blacks to the exclusion of whites would yield only to reconfiguration of the social order, this time with blacks as the perpetrators of violence.

Compelled to articulate the morality of nonviolence as a method of resistance in the face of counterproposals, King leans into the growing quest for power in order to explicate its purpose and potential as well as its complementarity with the generating principle of the philosophy of nonviolence. He contends:

Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice. One of the greatest problems of history is the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with the denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.39

In spite of the positive aspects of Black Power, King concluded that its negative values prevented it from having the substance to become a viable strategy for the movement. Unlike the revolutions that had predated Gandhi’s movement in India, King saw the civil rights struggle as replicating the Gandhian model of social transformation: a revolution on hope and love, hope and nonviolence. This was the movement’s legacy since Montgomery.

They had transformed the hate of traditional revolutions into a positive power of nonviolence. And that method could not be abandoned. In a fuller sense, he posited that “Nonviolence is power, but is the right and good use of power. Constructively it can save the white man as well as the Negro. Racial segregation is buttressed by such irrational fears [...] Only through our adherence to nonviolence—which also means love in its strong and commanding sense—will the fear in the white community be mitigated.”

Aside from its immorality, King’s thoughts about violence as a means of fighting racial discrimination and terror led him to dismiss it as simply impractical. Negroes were only ten percent of the American population, and a violent campaign would have resulted in the unnecessary death of many of them. The fate of insurrectionist brothers in history—Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner—were eternal reminders of the doomed end of violent rebellion. Even the most skilled minority had to assess the possible causalities when contemplating a fight against the armed establishment of America’s white majority, backed by military power. And since no internal revolution fueled by violence in history had ever been sustained without a government’s loss of control over its armed forces, it would have been futile to ever attempt such ill-fated campaign.

People had said to King that he was losing his grip, that he was falling out of step with the times. His views on nonviolence had come to be viewed as outdated and ineffectual. Yet, this criticism only served to strengthen his resolve to the claims of the philosophy. He embraced a new role as a molder of consensus, as his leadership matured amid challenges. And there he took another principled stand, saying “If every Negro in the United States turns to violence, I will choose to be that lone voice preaching that this is the

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wrong way [...] I would rather be a man of conviction than a man of conformity."

41 The future which King had dreamt was no mere imitation of the past. It was a step forward. It was a new creation that had rid itself of despair, bitterness, and violence. Martin was loyal to that future and chose to be its moral midwife.

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41 Ibid, 331.
Chapter Four
“Maladjustment and a Broadening Field of Moral Vision”

When the Reverend Gardner Calvin Taylor spoke about his friend of blessed memory to a company of young ministers in the intimacy of his home in Durham, North Carolina, a peculiar sadness befell the poet of the American pulpit. The commanding baritone voice of the dean of preachers descended the scale to register its lowest note when Taylor remembered Martin Luther King, Jr. as a man acquainted with sorrows and grief. Sharing with the group the unfortunate circumstances that led to the founding of the Progressive National Baptist Convention—with its bitter schism from the National Baptist Convention over civil rights and the domination of its president the Reverend Joseph Harrison Jackson of Chicago, Illinois—the sage gave voice to the deep hunger within the leaders of the new denomination to sustain a progressive and prophetic witness to the culture of their time, acknowledging the needed refuge it offered King, as the most respected leader of the movement. In Taylor’s commentary was a profound regret, though, that King had laid upon himself so heavy a weight of responsibility that it made him all too melancholy. Not that some joy or pleasure totally escaped him, Taylor insured the cadre of young clergy understood, even while expressing personal angst that he had not been more attuned to Martin’s walks through the valley of despair.¹

For the twelve and a half years that King sustained a public ministry of maladjustment a toll was exacted upon him. The physical demands alone were relentless as he kept a hectic schedule filled with movement meetings, strategy sessions, mass demonstrations, speaking engagements, manuscript writing, etc. Like Paul the apostle, who

¹ Gardner C. Taylor, lunch fellowship and conversation with a young clergy group organized by Martha Simmons, July 2011.
boasted of multiple misfortunes for the cause of preaching the gospel to his detractors in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33—imprisonments with countless floggings, stonings, and beatings with rods, shipwrecks and nights adrift at sea, amid other dangers, toils and hardships—King could have produced his own the litany of afflictions which he suffered at the helm of the struggle. Of them all, he came to identify most with Paul in the daily pressure of leadership borne of anxiety for the work to which he was called. On this score, King fulfilled a vocation of agony which brought him to identify as a prophet without honor in his own country. About this, Richard Lischer writes, “King’s encounter with despair was given focus by his personal transition from the role of “central prophet” to that of “peripheral prophet” in the Republic.”

Central prophets in ancient Israel operated within the structures of power, serving the monarchy as advisors on war and other matters of national import. Peripheral prophets, on the other hand, operated on the outside of those structures, identifying primarily as advocates of the poor or lifting their voices against war and other abuses of the empire. Relative to King, Lischer continues:

As a central prophet, Martin Luther King had been deeply involved with the Johnson administration’s efforts to pass civil rights legislation. Beginning already in the Eisenhower administration and increasing steadily throughout the turbulent Kennedy years, he had been regularly consulted on matters of interest to the Negro in America. After the March on Washington, Kennedy had scrambled to align himself with King’s beautifully articulated ideals. In some of Lyndon Johnson’s early civil rights speeches, King was gratified to hear echoes of his own ideal. No black leader had ever enjoyed comparable access to the Oval Office and the power it represented.

3 Lischer, 170-171.
This all changed, however, after King’s opposition to the Vietnam War was made public. He was sidelined by President Johnson and his administration, and openly ridiculed by the militant factions of the movement. The long trek from the center of power to the periphery began as financial contributions to SCLC dwindled and the other civil rights organizations cut ties with him, disavowing his antiwar stance. Adam Clayton Powell referred to him as “Martin ‘Loser’ King,” as others rendered the verdict of his being finished. King was beleaguered in the last year of his life, feeling more than merely a touch of abandonment.

The question of how King came to such pass seems a rather redundant one, given the nation’s fixation on war in the 1960s. But, to ask why he would take a stance fraught with so much controversy and risk the capital, respect, and prestige he had earned seems more relevant to appreciate the deeper motivations for his maladjustment. Through the various campaigns in Montgomery, Atlanta, Birmingham, and Selma a new world began to emerge, but quickly began to change. White backlash coupled with the stall tactics of the government stymied progress on many fronts. As the misadventure in Vietnam took center stage, little to no attention was given to the social issues of the American Negro and the concern for civil rights was becoming less pressing for the nation. King was amazed by the enormity of the class issue that pervaded America and grew fed up with the poverty of conscience of its white majority. Although on the periphery, he saw clearly America’s social problems and accessed them in no uncertain terms. Comparing King to John the Baptist amid a list of high-ranking officials in Luke 15, Gardner Taylor said in a sermon memorializing King at Harvard, “The Word of God came to Martin King, in the wilderness of America.”

For even there King maintained a commitment to conscience and summoned

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the fortitude to press forward despite detractions, revealing to us another enduring principle of his life’s mission: an integrated and indivisible morality. This chapter will examine the principle in its application to King’s response to America’s spreading materialism as witnessed in Northern and far western cities and its duplicity in the war in Vietnam.

Among King’s many endearing qualities was his “indescribable capacity for empathy,” as Time magazine observed in 1963 when naming him “Man of the Year.” It is a touchstone of leadership, the effortless ability to enter the lived experiences of his hearers in order to articulate their dreams and aspirations and give them hope that those were not lofty illusions but, indeed, a reality that was possible and within their grasp. One could trace the genesis of his empathy to early experiences that were the result of the worst economic downturn of the industrialized world. King had witnessed the struggle of many of his childhood playmates with food scarcity and lack of resources. The images of his friends standing in breadlines left an indelible impression upon him. He would see the same mental representations reappear before his eyes as he turned his face toward his Jerusalem of sorts in the northern campaign.

Concerned that the civil rights movement heretofore had been too middle-class oriented, King made a remarkable shift to Chicago in 1965 “to organize and gain identity with ghetto dwellers and young people in the ghetto.”5 The invitations from Negro leaders to join in the fight for integrated public education provided for him and the movement opportunities to bolster credibility at the grass-roots level and secure a big win in the nation’s second largest city. As Taylor Branch notes, “Chicago nationalized race,

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5 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 299.
complementing the impact of Watts.”\(^6\) King thought if the problems there could be solved, they could be solved everywhere else. Thus, he directed the SCLC to concentrate on building a broad-based nonviolent campaign in the North, aimed at exposing “the potentially explosive ghetto pathology”\(^7\) of the north and the social ills that produce the conditions. Pastoral empathy prompts King to act in solidarity with Northern Negroes, demonstrating that his concern for them was no less than that of Negroes who lived in the south. He chose to live among them in the heart of the ghetto to experience the realities of their living conditions.

The insight he gleaned from his time living in the dilapidated building just off West 16th, in North Lawndale would leave him amazed at the many economic disadvantages Negroes confronted dialing in America. He recalls that

> The problems of poverty and despair were more than an academic exercise. The phone rang daily with stories of the most drastic forms of man’s inhumanity to man and I found myself fighting a daily battle against the depression and hopelessness which the heart of our cities pumps into the spiritual bloodstream of our lives. I remember a baby attacked by rats in a Chicago slum. I remember a young Negro murdered by a gang in Cicero, where he was looking for a job.\(^8\)

The city of Chicago was boasting of the highest income per capita in the world, yet the conditions of Lawndale were far beyond deplorable. Life in the windy city was akin to the superlative comparison of Charles Dickens in “A Tale of Two Cities”: \emph{It was the best of times, it was the worst of times}... Many Negro parents felt the pressure of the tight economic

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\(^6\) Taylor Branch, \textit{At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 523.  
\(^7\) King, \textit{The Autobiography of Martin Luther King}, 298.  
\(^8\) Ibid, 300.
squeeze that drove them to work often two jobs and travel long distances to get to those jobs. This rendered them exhausted from the struggle to survive amid daily hostilities. King soon noticed how the children suffered emotional neglect as a consequence.

The children’s clothes were too skimpy to protect them from the Chicago wind, and a closer look revealed the mucus in the corners of their bright eyes, and you were reminded that vitamin pills and flu shots were luxuries which they could ill afford. The “runny noses” of ghetto children became a graphic symbol of medical neglect in a society which had mastered most of the diseases from which they will soon die.9

King was left to conclude that a society which would allow this kind of poverty to be hidden in plain sight suffered a more profound moral deficit.

Lawndale was emblematic of the new urban colony, a growing caste system of people who were made powerless to make important decisions affecting their own community by external forces. These concentrated slums victimized residents by dominating their daily lives with interactions with law enforcement officers and welfare workers. Even their landlords exploited them. King’s neighbors were paying more in rent for substandard housing than their white counterparts paid in modern apartments in suburban areas. Price fixing was normal as merchants joined landlords by selling consumer goods at much higher rates to residents of the slums. King’s own family endured the hellish reality in the summer of 1966. The crowded space of the apartment became rather unbearable just after a few days. He noticed a change in his children’s behavior as they reverted to infantile conduct with temper tantrums. He understood more deeply the danger

of being without forms of creative release and better grasped how slum conditions made the ghetto such “an emotional pressure cooker.”\textsuperscript{10} It was not a problem to be ignored.

America was engaged in a dangerous enterprise of building a society that excluded a large segment of people. Whether on the basis of race or class, the nation could not afford to isolate and trap Negroes in ghetto prisons, while it continued to advance in social standing and responsibility among the other nations of the world. It was simply untenable. The frustration of those who lived in such squalor was bound to generate the kind of aggression that would turn violent. So, King thought that Chicago—one of the most segregated cities in America—could follow the victories the movement won in Birmingham, Alabama for integrated public accommodations, and Selma, Alabama the pilot city for the voting rights. Specifically, he reasoned that “a meaningful nonviolent movement could arouse the conscience of this nation to deal realistically with the Northern ghetto.”\textsuperscript{11}

That summer, however, King discovered just how intractable the problems were in the north after a social eruption. Public disorder reigned on the city’s west side from July 12 to July 14 after police arrested William Young for attempting to open a fire hydrant. Young ran from two police officers and began screaming that the officers were out to kill. Young was cornered in an alley, but a large crowd of black residents surrounded the officers, demanding his release. The officers were rescued by their colleagues but looting and widespread property destruction ensued, resulting in arrests of almost 200 residents, the injury of six police officers and an undetermined number of civilians. By July 15\textsuperscript{th}, Mayor Richard Daley had called in the National Guard. Daley attempted to dismiss the

\textsuperscript{10} King, \textit{The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.}, 302.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 299.
uprising as the misdirection of juvenile delinquents, but King called it for what it was: a social disruption laid at the feet of elected officials who refused to make a commitment to eradicate slums and the forces that created and maintained them.

Recriminations of King and other movement leaders were relentless, however, as the political establishment of Chicago went into overdrive attempting to discredit nonviolent protest. There were scare headlines hyping threats of a paramilitary coup to the point that the attorney general had to intervene in order to set the record straight. In the face of this malaise King was demoralized, but not deterred ultimately. After national guardsmen took to the city, he recommitted even more vigorously to nonviolence. The ability to absorb criticism without internalizing it was a strength. As marchers demonstrated through the suburbs of Chicago “amid a rain of rocks and bottles, and burning automobiles, to the thunder of jeering thousands,”12 they heard the chants of “White power” and the aggression of onlookers who blamed the protesters for creating hostility and division. King saw through the insanity of blaming the victim and sought to expose the latent hostilities northern whites had harbored for Negroes for years.

What came as a surprise to King, though, was the deep internalized rage that lay within Negroes about their social predicament. At one meeting during the campaign King was booed by a group of angry young men. It was quite startling for him because he had never been the recipient of such behavior before, even when speaking to some hostile white audiences, but it finally dawned on him what it was all about:

For twelve years I, and others like me, had held out radiant promises of progress. I had preached to them about my dream. I had lectured to them about the not too distant day when they would have freedom, “all, here and now.” I had

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12 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 305.
urged them to have faith in America and in white society. Their hopes had soared. They booed because they felt that we were unable to deliver on our promises, and because we had urged them to have faith in people who had too often proved to be unfaithful. They were hostile because they were watching the dream that they had so readily accepted turn into a frustrating nightmare.\(^\text{13}\)

The old dream metaphor that had roused a nation was being overpowered by the unfolding events of the years after the great speech of 1963. Lischer notes how the stylistic flights of rhetoric, which were in perfect pitch for their day, had become hollow in sound in light of King’s focus on economic issues.

Moreover, the Watts Riots only seemed to exacerbate the problem. The seething tensions throughout the nation could no longer be contained. The scuffle between two white policemen and a black motorist suspected of alcohol impairment was just the breaking point of racial tensions. The crowd that had gathered to watch the arrest grew angry and began rioting in response to years of economic and political isolation. During the five days of uprising, thirty-four residents were killed, over one thousand persons were injured and almost four thousand were arrested, leaving more than forty million dollars in property damage. When King arrived on August 17\(^\text{th}\) the raging hostility could still be sensed. In Watts, he acknowledged the shared responsibility for those days of anguish. The riots were the result of people feeling hopeless about their economic dilemma coupled with their contempt for the unchecked police brutality upon their community. King recounted an experience with a youngster that put it all into perspective for him.

One young man said to me—and Andy Young, Bayard Rustin, and Bernard Less, who were with me—“We won!” I said, “What do you mean, ‘we won’? Thirty-some people

\(^\text{13}\) King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 302.
dead—all but two are Negroes. You’ve destroyed you own. What do you mean, ‘we won’? And he said, ‘we made them pay attention to us.’

When people are voiceless, they will have temper tantrums like a little child who has not been paid attention to. And riots are massive temper tantrums from a neglected and voiceless people.\[14\]

King was desperate for a new language to speak to this growing predicament, lest he be drowned out by the loud voices that were espousing violence. In a 1967 sermon, King warns, “And what we must see is that our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as justice is postponed, we’re going to have these summers...”\[15\] Lischer notes that “King was self-consciously crossing the boundary from reform to revolution, liberalism to liberationism, announcing a more profound critique of the American system.”\[16\]

Ever the discerning leader, King sensed that the outbreak of violence in Watts was not only a response to racial tensions but also a growing disillusionment even resentment toward middle-class black leadership. A widening chasm between middle-class and working-class blacks left the poor feeling imprisoned in ghettos without the solidarity of their brothers and sisters who had attained upward social mobility. While King was calling for statesmanship from the president to address the problem, he eagerly sought to retool his leadership so he could remain on the creative edge. In March 1968, speaking before the sanitation workers of Memphis—just over one month into their strike—he crystallized the need for intra-community unity beyond class lines by saying, “The Negro “haves” must

\[14\] King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 293.
\[15\] Lischer, 160.
\[16\] Ibid, 161.
join hands with the Negro “have-nots.”\textsuperscript{17} For too long the worth of all persons had not been celebrated, even within the Negro community. Thus, he encouraged middle-class blacks to “journey into that other country of their brother’s denial and hurt and exploitation.”\textsuperscript{18} To be sure, King did not discover a need for intra-community post Watts and Chicago. The coalition that won the victory in Montgomery was a mixture of professional and working-class Negroes. Now, he was more intentional in stressing need for unity, however, having seen signs of an erosion of that solidarity giving room to suspicion and fissures.

In the Memphis campaign, King not only capitalized on the opportunity to shore up the bonds of solidarity but also to nationalize the economic disparities of Negroes in America. He reminded those workers that their plight was not isolated from the realities of others across the country. For the vast majority of Negroes were still languishing on that lonely island in a literal depression. Mass unemployment and underemployment ordered the day while the nation rejoiced in material prosperity. Making his point even clearer, King destroyed the myth that the poor are simply lazy or unmotivated by noting “that most of the poor people in our country are working every day.”\textsuperscript{19} Even while speaking to a local audience he keeps a national audience in mind. Not only had America dishonored the worth of all persons, she had no honor for the dignity of all work, particularly the labor performed by the working class. But those underpaid and mistreated workers whose job it was to dispose of trash raised a challenge to the class stratification that seemed to determine and sustain an immoral hierarchy of importance.

\textsuperscript{17} Martin Luther King, Jr., “All Labor Has Dignity” in \textit{The Radical King} ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 246.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 247.
Just as he had moralized the sin of legal discrimination on the basis of race, King found his moral footing on the economic issue. Using the parable of Dives and Lazarus in the New Testament, King took the symbolism to uncover the glaring absence of a social conscience in America. He contended that Jesus had no wholesale indictment against all wealth but had a disdain for the wealthy who do not use their fortune to bridge the gulf that separated them from the poor on earth. He said,

Dives went to hell because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible. Dives went to hell because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived. Dives went to hell because he maximized the minimum and minimized the maximum. Dives finally went to hell because he sought to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty.

And I come by here to say that America, too, is going to hell if she doesn’t use her wealth. If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she, too, will go to hell.20

King proudly acknowledged that he was going beyond purely civil rights in his sharp critique and was doing so because class issues transcended the question of race, splitting the nation between the haves and have-nots. Sticking solely to the matter of race relations would have bifurcated life for American Negroes, and the gains of the previous campaigns would have simply become symbolic in the face of persistent economic crises. For instance, the ability to sit at a lunch counter with a white counterpart would have been for nothing if the Negro could not afford what was on the menu.

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20 King, “All Labor Has Dignity” in The Radical King, 248.
King was the quintessential peripheral prophet in the last year of his life, more radical and more stinging. When Michael Eric Dyson sums it up, he extolls King’s courage to stand with marginalized people on a multiplicity of issues, but particularly on the issue of economic justice. The programs supported by the Johnson administration failed to address this glaring problem. Instead, charity was dispensed as a form of governmental benevolence. But for King, charity was no substitute for justice. Charity created a relational imbalance between the one who gives and the one who receives. The one who gives can stop giving when s/he feels that enough has been given, while the one who receives remains in need because the charity has ceased. Justice, on the other hand, takes feeling out of the equation and seeks only the best outcome for the one in need. Dyson writes, “King understood, and embodied, this noble distinction. People who give money to the poor deserve praise; people who give their lives to the poor deserve honor. King is among the few who should be honored.”

Prophets deal in moral matters without segregating the issues of morality. With skillful imagery, they lay bare the effects of injustice upon the victims who are crushed by the machinery of the state and identify the perpetrator, who may very well be oblivious to the fact s/he is an instrument of evil. King practiced this indivisibility of justice well in his last years, but the roots of this commitment had always been in him. Gathered with four hundred religious leaders from twenty-two denominations at Washington D.C.’s Sheraton Park Hotel in 1959, at the invitation of Vice President Richard Nixon to support the President’s Committee on Government Contracts “in advancing its program of elimination

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of discrimination in employment in government contracts,\(^{22}\) King used his address to the audience to frame racial and economic discrimination as moral issues warranting the redress of clergy and government alike. Government leaders were made keenly aware that discrimination in employment was not an issue relegated to the American south, but also quite pervasive in the liberal and progressive cities of the north. King told them that the denial to any group opportunities to work and receive fair compensation was considered more than a political failure; it was an absolute immorality because it strangled the lifeblood of Negro participation in the economy. King was acutely aware that citizens participated in society as economic entities, so attempts to block the economic engagement of Negro communities through employment discrimination was nothing other than a new means of social control.

Then to the clergy, who ministered to the poor and knew how one’s morality can be influenced by poverty, he gave this truthful speech:

> Since the Church is the guardian of the morals of the community, it cannot look with indifference upon this pressing problem. A religion true to its nature must always be concerned about man’s social conditions. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God, but to integrate men with men and each man with himself.

> This means, at bottom, that true religion is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic

conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion in need of new blood.23

On the matter racial discrimination, King appealed to the clergy on the principle of brotherhood of man, a well-respected liberal doctrine that held sway among mainstream protestant clerics. But on the issue of economic injustice, he lifted James’ articulation of true religion. Riffing on Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *The Hope of the World*, King hangs his argument on religion’s purpose: to integrate one with God, neighbor and self. As Lischer notes, Gardner Taylor thought that King had too high a hope for the white church to discover a conscience.

A hidden motivation behind King’s arduous work for justice was the hope and possibilities he saw in children. The bitter experience of a forbidden friendship with his white playmate in Atlanta, the observance of school chums suffering in the Great Depression, the unspeakable conditions of the children in northern ghettos with so much brilliance beaming from them, and even the questions of his own four children were wind in his sails. His was a quest to secure a brighter day for them, so that they would not know of discrimination as a common experience of the human sojourn in America. On the issues of race and class, it was a commitment to conscience and the innocence of children that motivated King. And, interestingly enough, it was the children of Vietnam that prompted him at the instigation of James Bevel to speak against the evil American was perpetrating at home and abroad.

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Bevel had surrendered to “a mysterious gale of voices from the doorway”\textsuperscript{24} of his apartment in Chicago, and traveled immediately to Atlanta in search of Martin Luther King. Having stalled overtures from A.J. Muste to participate in antiwar demonstrations the spring of 1967 long enough, he finally decided to go forward with the protest. Unfortunately, King was out of the country laboring under a deadline to produce the manuscript for \textit{Where Do We Go from Here?} He had been advised by Stanley Levison that his book needed to say something meaningful about the war in Vietnam. Sealed off in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, King receives a most unexpected visit from Bevel, who blew over Andrew Young to get a ticket to the hideaway. Rushing in to recapitulate his Chicagoland vision, Bevel came to the point with this line of inquiry: “Why are you teaching nonviolence to Negroes in Mississippi but not to Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam? Are the Vietnamese not your brothers and sisters, like those you thought you heard at the door?”\textsuperscript{25} Branch records King’s attempts to shrug off Bevel’s questions as to deflect the summons implicit in it, but those questions lingered stubbornly with him.

He kept turning to one item packed with his book research, transfixed by a twenty-four-page photo essay in the January \textit{Ramparts} magazine of young Vietnamese with stump limbs, shrapnel scars, and faces melted by napalm, its text introduced by the pediatrician Spock: “A million children have been killed or wounded or burned...”\textsuperscript{26}

Bevel, who had steered King into Birmingham and Selma, had gotten to him, again. The war in Vietnam was destroying the lives of thousands and thousands of little children, and their lives were no less valuable than the lives of American children.

\textsuperscript{24} Branch, \textit{At Canaan’s Edge}, 575.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 576.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 577.
King’s entire adulthood was spent deploring violence as an instrument of resolving social problems, believing that creative nonviolence was the only force that could sustain a lasting peace. He had urged gang leaders in Chicago to try the more excellent way during the northern campaigns but saw the hypocrisy of the nation in using violence to solve its problems. Prophets expose the duplicity of nations. There was tragic irony in the conflict that young Americans were dying and killing in war supposedly for the cause of democracy when they never experienced it in America. King was disturbed by the nation’s attempt to export what it could not practice at home. He had left it to Coretta to take stands while he concentrated on civil rights. He had only made statements relative to the need to cease hostilities in light of President Johnson’s declared willingness to negotiate a peace. But as the months dragged on the promise of peace were never followed by action. In February 1967, when the United States government rejected the peace offer, King could no longer be silent. He had chided others for their silence on issues of importance, knowing that their silence would place upon them the culpability for the evil they have passively witnessed. He saw his silence as a betrayal of the truth to which he had committed his life.

I [...] am greatly saddened that such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. They seem to forget that before I was civil rights leader, I answered a call, and when God speaks, who can but prophesy. I answered a call which left the spirit of the Lord upon me and anointed me to preach the gospel [...] I decided then that I was going to tell the truth as God revealed it to me No matter how many people disagreed with me, I decided that I was going to tell the truth.27

27 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 337.
George McGovern, a former United Nations ambassador, remembers how Vietnam, the only issue which stoked a passion rivaled by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, became a most divisive issue for America. Those who supported it thought it was necessary to stop the spread of communism in Asia, arguing the “domino theory.” The antiwar activists, on the other hand, supported Vietnam’s aspirations for independence and railed against U.S. military intervention as misguided. For them the war contradicted the ideals of self-determination, liberty, and justice. The disproportionate number of black youth being called to fight in the war raised serious concerns about the gross injustice. By this time, McGovern said,

King was aware [...] that the economic cost of the war was jeopardizing domestic programs that were important to his special constituency: the poor, minorities, women, and children. In a sense, every bomb or shell that fell on a Vietnamese target also reduced the education, housing, and health of vulnerable Americans. Dollars used for killing, maiming, and destruction in Vietnam were taken from programs here at home that were meant to improve conditions of life for Americans.\(^{28}\)

One hears King’s speech at Riverside Church—exactly one year before his martyrdom—as one would imagine Hosea sounding as he beckons his beloved Gomer to return. From the platform of that liberal church he made a passionate plea to America. Outlining the major reason that brought Vietnam into his field of moral vision, King called the misadventures in that Asian country a “demonic, destructive suction tube,”\(^{29}\) drawing


men, skills and money from the building of America. It was as much an enemy of the poor as the ghettos of Watts, the slums of Chicago, and racialized discrimination of the south. With the lyrics of Langston Hughes who opined that ‘America never was America to me...’ King spoke as social physician who had diagnosed the nation’s moral ailment as soul poisoning. The 1964 awarding of the Nobel Prize for Peace had laid upon him a new burden of responsibility—one he could not shirk in good conscience. It was burden to transcend the preset boundaries, narrow allegiances, and blind loyalties of the tribe to affirm the common humanity and fraternity of all peoples. The experiences along the long road from Montgomery to the place of that protest had impressed upon him the urgent need to broaden one’s definition of brother and sisterhood. It had given him a global perspective, a moral cosmopolitan theology.

Through the lenses of past campaigns, King viewed the war in Vietnam as a national symptom of a larger phenomenon, just as he had viewed the white backlash of the Ku Klux Klan in Montgomery following the bus boycott victory. The world was on the brink of a revolution and America was on the wrong side of it. With the increased presence of America’s military forces around the globe, seeking to protect its own interests, its attempts at empire-building were proving to be futile. Oppressed people were breathing the air of freedom and were fully committed to pursuing it to its fullest actualization. King intoned,

> These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wound of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{30}\) King, “Beyond Vietnam,” 159-160.
He extended the invitation to America to lead the West in aiding this revolution, but sadly the nation did not accept the call. He lifted up the very words of the late President John F. Kennedy to serve as a harsh reminder: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” King warned America that she was impeding peaceful revolution more and more “by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that came from the immense profits of overseas investments.” He besought her, instead, to lean into the revolution and undergo a radical revolution of her own, a revolution of values.

At Riverside, the prophet took his stand in the tradition of radical social reformers calling for America to be reborn. For there was no other way to defeat the evil triumvirate of racism, materialism and militarism that King so rightly abhorred. He was articulating publicly his “world house” doctrine that would order his life in the last year. Writing in *Where Do We Go from Here?* King tells of the plot of an unwritten story of a novelist who had died. It was the tale of a separated family inheriting a house in which they all must now live. This plot was the apt metaphor for describing the problem-challenge of humanity in the latter half of the twentieth century. As he put it,

> We have inherited a large house [...] in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.  

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32 Ibid.
His critics, who had falsely claimed that he was fusing the peace and civil rights movements, did not understand his maturing global perspective. The struggle of the American Negro to be at home in the United States could not be waged in ignorance of the struggle of other oppressed people in the larger world house. In the same way that racial equality with whites without economic justice would have only been symbolic, the full integration of Negroes in American life without concern for a “world society stricken by poverty and [...] a universe doomed to extinction by war” would only be short lived. The issues of injustice were intricately arranged, and they required global solutions that were not simple, but substantive and transformative in kind. Lewis Baldwin writes convincingly about King’s embrace of global ideals: “He envisioned a totally integrated world, undiminished and undeterred by human differences, and committed to the ethical norms of love, justice, equal opportunity, peace, and community.” This, Baldwin contends further, “was consistent with King’s personal idealism, which affirmed the dignity and worth of all human personality and the communitarian and/or social nature of human existence.”

In the spirit of John the Baptist, who insisted upon Israel bearing fruits worthy of repentance, King compelled America to do the same. To actualize this world-house ideal, the nation needed to make a fundamental change: “shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.” Its commitment to all the people needed to keep pace with advancements in technology and science. King found it unconscionable that more money was being spent year after year on military defense than was being spent on domestic

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid. Also, see Rufus Burrow, Jr. God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) 157-161.
programs of social uplift. Attempts to guard the nation and others against the spread of communism and its perceived threat to Western interests through the weaponry and machinery of war was a losing proposition. War was incapable of truly defeating such an ideology—especially when democracy had not been realized for all citizens on the home front. The denunciation of war was the first move in the project to refurbish America.

Instead of the Vietnam War, King called for a global war to end poverty. The vast resources of rich nations should be used to sustain life and not destroy it. He notes that ‘the well-off and secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst.” 38 The poor have not only been excluded but also been made invisible. But the compassion which Jesus had for the least of these, that the Samaritan had for the certain man who had been the victim of a vicious robbery and assault, was the spirit in which King urged America to lead the nations of the world in responding to the plight of poorer nations. He was clear that the aid programs he advocated should not be used as a means to control those nations. That would be a new form colonialism that receiving nations would decry and resent.

Moreover, the sustaining of the world house ideal required a global fellowship with “an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best [of] individual societies.” 39 Loyalties had to become ecumenical rather than sectional. A nation closed off from the concerns of other nations will inevitably be bombarded with those nation’s problems, but through aggression instead of collaboration. Baldwin argues,

King did not separate injustice in Birmingham and Selma from injustice in Johannesburg, Hanoi, and Moscow, and he considered his nonviolent dissent and activism in America a

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part of his larger struggle for global justice, which involved, among other things, fund-raising, the call for economic and diplomatic sanctions against South Africa and the signing of appeals, petitions, and declarations aimed at the more humane treatment of Jews in Russia and rice farmers in Vietnam.”

King demonstrated this move toward the intersectional in his vision of the mass action that was planned for the spring of 1968. The inaction of government in correcting the problems around the economic alienation of the American Negro needed dramatization just as the campaigns of Selma and Birmingham compelled the government to act. But this protest would be sustained by “the swelling masses of young people in this country who were disenchanted with this materialistic society,” including representatives of the non-Negro poor—Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachians, and others. Broader coalitions were absolutely necessary to make sweeping changes to the social landscape of the nation, even the world.

What Martin Luther King, Jr. understood well was the significance of the moment that America was resisting. Quoting the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, King writes, “We live in a day when civilization is shifting its basic outlook; a major turning point in history where the presuppositions on which society is structured are being analyzed, sharply challenged, and profoundly changed.” Because it was, as Victor Hugo put it, “an idea whose time [had] come,” King knew that America could not take any deferments. Like a fever, freedom was spreading in the global village. The era of colonialism was coming to an end as the East moved westward. King saw the earth being rebalanced and made plain

41 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 347.
the choice before America: “nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation.”43 In the
spirit of humility—from what he gleaned from Jesus of Nazareth and practiced like
Mohandas Gandhi, King sought to lead a nation into making the right choice, of
transforming a “pending elegy into a creative psalm of peace.”44

43 King, “Beyond Vietnam,” 162.
44 Ibid, 163.
Concluding Thoughts

In the fifty years since the martyrdom of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., disciples of the movement have not ceased to presume what position(s) the nonviolent dreamer might (have) take(n) on any number of unfolding issues of national and global import. The wide canon of scholarship produced over the last half century offer a vast body of knowledge deduced from King’s own writings, sermons, and speeches, not to mention the documentary witness of relatives, close friends, colleagues, and allies in the struggle. Leaders from various post-sixties movements have drawn from the intellectual treasury ideas, philosophies, and strategies sufficient to claim succession to the King legacy. Theological schools have developed courses around the efficacy of King’s moral leadership as business schools have attempted to distill his work into marketable principles that sell their programs. An image of King now graces the National Mall in Washington, D.C. amid the memorials to iconic presidents of the nation. His birthday, honored as a federal holiday since 1986, has become a day of national service, with the annual memorial at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta featured as the signature event. King is given a place of prominence in America’s revised history, even as the nation moves further away from the commitments he championed during his lifetime.

In the five decades since the brutal slaying of the maladjusted prophet on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, America has either stalled or completely reversed the gains in civil rights achieved before 1968. Resegregated schools, increase in childhood poverty, modern slave plantations through mass incarceration, and emboldened white nationalists espousing an ‘America-first’ dogma, are the symptoms of the nation which emerged on the wrong side of the radical revolution of values. The National
Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders appointed by President Lyndon Johnson in response to race riots of the 1960s reported to him: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.”¹ Though positive impact can be measured from the policy initiatives of the Johnson administration, for example, a close of the achievement gap in reading between blacks and whites, that gap is now thirty percent bigger as a result of program rollbacks by the Reagan administration.² In a conference address at George Washington University, Fred Harris, the last surviving member of the commission admits the progress made on race and poverty in the decade after the report have been wiped away. Specifically, the percentage of black children living in poverty increased to twenty-one percent in 2017 from fifteen percent in 1968; twenty percent of black students attend majority white schools nationally compared to forty-four percent in the 1980s.³ The great recession of 2008 erased gains of black homeownership while black men are six times more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts. As the various municipalities across the country probe their respective numbers, they will uncover a dark truth of institutional racism, economic isolation, and militarized law enforcement. Those three hounds of hell are still with us, with a host of new manifestations.

As preoccupation in these years has centered on where King would stand on issues he did not live long enough to confront, the focus ought to shift to the tools he bequeathed his successors to march forward in the fight for a new world. Radical empathy, collective empowerment, and the ability to (re)frame social issues and prescribe solutions are the

³ Ibid.
traits of King’s leadership genius. These constitute the inheritance he has left to the moral leaders of a new generation.

Reflecting on that enduring witness, Bill George of Harvard Business School says, “In a very real sense, the character you demonstrate in achieving your purpose is the legacy you leave to those leaders coming along behind you.”

Martin King demonstrated a profound commitment to the flourishing of his people in a land that dishonored their dignity, but was mindful not to exclude the plight of other people. Movements which embrace his ideal and practice his maladjustment must maintain a broad vision of inclusion even as it advocates for the advancement of specific groups that have been left behind. Broad coalitions rooted in mutuality and shared interests cannot be dismissed by those who wield power. This is not easy work at all. It requires ongoing dialogue and reflection in order to understand nuances that are important to the various constituencies.

As the age of vibrant social movements progresses, members of the clergy cannot afford to cede ground to secular activists because the root of these longstanding issues are (im)moral in nature. When Marvin McMickle addressed the Narrative and Imagination Group of the Academy of Homiletics in 2004, he sought to initiate a recovery of the very preaching tradition that King represented so brilliantly. Noting the tendency of congregational preachers to give themselves solely to the duties of local church to the neglect of larger systemic, societal issues—which too affect them, McMickle observes the unintended consequence as the muting of the prophets. He reads the situation in the same way James and Christine Ward describe in the book, “Preaching from the Prophets”:

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The natural inclination of the Christian community, like all religious communities, is to adapt its witness of faith to its most immediate human needs. In doing this the community always runs the risk of obscuring the wider dimensions of the gospel, particularly the wider implications of God’s demand for righteousness and justice. What is needed, therefore, is the preaching that recovers these wider dimensions and illuminates ways in which the community obscures them.\(^5\)

To recover a tradition which attends to those wider dimensions of the gospel, McMickle calls for a shift in focus “from what is happening to [...] the local church to what is happening to [...] the society.”\(^6\) He saw a perfect example of this social ethos in the “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” in which King begged white Christians to look beyond the beauty of their immaculate edifices to the ugliness of racial segregation practiced not only outside those walls but also in those very houses of worship. A recovery of this tradition is possible in the present age if those who self-identify as creatively maladjusted reclaim and follow King’s model.

Nassir Ghaemi misread Martin’s melancholy, and insisted upon a theory of mental illness, some genetic abnormality to explain the prophet’s maladjustment. But, what he should have read in King was a moral indignation borne of America’s social iniquity. Melancholy was a faithful response of resistance to the brokenness of the world King inhabited. In an age which resembles the America of the King years more and more, creative maladjustment is just the right prophetic response for those who have been called not to blend into the sinful culture.

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Biography

Don Darius Butler was born to the parentage of George Delancy and Suzanne Butler, on the picturesque island of New Providence, in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. He was educated in Bahamian public schools. During his formative years, he participated in numerous civic and youth organizations, namely, the Royal Bahamas Police Cadet Corps; the Bahamas Boys’ Brigade, 42nd Nassau Company; and the Governor General’s Youth Award Program. He was also an inaugural Youth Parliamentarian in 1998, and a representative to the Commonwealth Youth Program in 2000.

Acknowledging God’s call upon his life, he started a journey toward the ministry. To prepare for his vocation, Butler studied at American Baptist College, Nashville, Tennessee, obtaining a baccalaureate degree summa cum laude. He continued at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, as a Kelly Miller Smith Scholar, where he was conferred a divinity degree with honors. He also received the Saint James Academy Award for preaching and a certificate in Black Church Studies.

Currently, Butler is the pastor of Tabernacle Community Baptist Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In addition to his pastoral duties, he serves as an associate chaplain with the Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office, and chairman of the Board of Trustees of American Baptist College. He is published in The African American Pulpit, The African American Lectionary, and Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education.