MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AS PASTOR

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In the seventeen years since his passing, the life and thought of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has received abundant, if not adequate attention. He has been presented as a social activist, a systematic theologian, a liberation theologian, a social ethicist, a ritual leader, a charismatic figure, a personalistic philosopher, a political organizer and an eminent orator.

King's life and contributions were rich and layered enough to merit these varied interpretations. We must be careful, however, never to lose sight of his fundamental calling and self-understanding. King was, before all of these, a Christian pastor. He was a pastor who felt compelled to serve in an oppressed community; and to that context he brought a rather formidable set of intellectual, spiritual and personal resources. As a pastor he affirmed the revolutionary potential of the gospel and of the churches. If America would be transformed, the churches must function as the vanguard for change, and the model or vision of a beloved and just human community.

As a black Christian pastor, he shared and affirmed the Afro-American slave population's identification with the ancient Israelite community, both of which confessed that God acts in history on behalf of, and alongside oppressed, marginalized, downcast groups in order to reveal God's loving and just nature. King identified with the folk classics of Afro-American culture and appropriated their insights as he sought to restore and heal a fragmented exiled African community. He appealed to insights in the Negro spirituals and literature, to the moral lessons and faith of the southern, black Baptist church, and to stories told by his parents and grandparents with an eye toward demonstrating the universal human truths present within black folk culture, and the liberating potential of the Afro-American appropriation of the Christian message.

As a black Christian pastor ministering in the American context, King was brilliantly perceptive of, and sensitive to, individual liberties, the common good, equal justice, and human rights. Faithful to the American Enlightenment and covenantal traditions, King employed the symbols and concepts elaborated by Jefferson and Lincoln, in an effort to remind America of the disparity between her democratic rhetoric and her racial realities.

In the following essay I will attempt to focus on King as a pastor whose theological method and understanding of the complete life merit our attention.

King was that finest of pastors who brought to bear on the practical problems of everyday life, the resources of the Christian tradition along with other religious perspectives, insights from the social sciences, philosophy, Afro-American music and culture, and his own personal faith journey. He correlated insights from a wide host of disciplines, integrated, refined, and translated them into a lan-

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guage familiar and compelling to his listeners. King's method of practical theology commends itself to us as we seek to counteract the many troubling developments in Western civilization, from racial polarization to nuclear proliferation.

Moreover, King's image of the complete life functioned as an ethical norm which consistently informed his ministerial decisions and public actions. Unlike other pastors who worked carefully with parishioners but often without a clear sense of the kind of person they were seeking to nurture, King never lost sight of the *telos* of Christian maturity on the personal level, and was thus able to be very intentional in his sermons, pastoral counseling, religious education, and public ministry. In the summer of 1958, King delivered two devotional addresses at the first National Conference on Christian Education of the United Church of Christ. In one of his meditations, entitled, "The Dimensions of a Complete Life," King explicated his image of human fulfillment using geometry as an organizing framework. Inspired by the geometric perfection of the new city of God described in the Apocalypse, he suggested that the complete life had three dimensions, each representing a major agenda for the individual's life.

The length, breadth, and height of one's life corresponded to, first, an inner concern for one's own welfare, second, the welfare of others, and third, one's upward reach for God. King claimed that:

> There are three dimensions of any complete life to which we can fitly give the words of this text; length, breadth, and height. The length of life as we shall think of it here is not its duration or its longevity, but it is the push of a life forward to achieve its personal ends and ambitions. It is the inward concern for one's own welfare.[1]

Later, he explained that the length of life is the dimension in which,

> the individual is concerned with developing his inner powers. It is that dimension of life in which the individual pursues personal ends and ambitions. This is perhaps the selfish dimension of life, and there is such a thing as moral and rational self-interest. If one is not concerned about himself he cannot be totally concerned about other selves.[2]

The first observation which should be made about King's root metaphor is its source in scripture. The Bible was the foundational text for his symbolic system. The author of the passage in the Apocalypse provided a majestic description of the new city of God. For centuries many Christians have understood this description to be a literal account of their future eternal dwelling place; but King, self-proclaimed "evangelical liberal" urged the church to apprehend the

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[1]Martin Luther King, Jr *The Measure of a Man* (New York Christian Education Press, 1959), p 21
[2]Ibid, p 22

book's contents on a philosophical and ethical level rather than at the level of prophecy alone. He maintained:

> . . . if we will look beneath the peculiar jargon of its author and the prevailing apocalyptic symbolism, we will find in this book many eternal truths which continue to challenge us. One such truth is that of this text. What John is really saying is this: that life as it should be and life at its best is the life that is complete on all sides.[3]

The most central norm of King's reflections on morality and social justice was the "sacredness of human personality." This norm operated as the criterion by which King selected and appropriated insights from a rich variety of sources and by which he assessed the adequacy of alternative conceptions of human nature and fulfillment. As he examined the thoughts and social strategies of others his fundamental concern was with their effects on the development of the whole person. Repeatedly, he argued that "Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. Any law that uplifts human personality is just."

In his most famous address at the 1963 March on Washington, Dr. King imparted his dream for America. Among his references to the just society was the hope that therein his children would not be judged "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." It is this emphasis on the content of character, the aretaic side of his moral thought which now concerns us. I maintain that one of King's most public, although brief, forums was his monthly column in *Ebony* magazine entitled, "Advice for Living." The column was printed from August 1957 until December 1958. In them he responded to questions of personal and public concern submitted by readers, who included whites as well as blacks. King was called upon to make pastoral responses to a diverse audience, responses which could bear public, non-Christian rational scrutiny. By making use of those responses here, I hope to call attention to this often overlooked segment of the King corpus. Such a focus is important for this essay because in this column, perhaps more than in his speeches, King effectively spoke to a diverse public and modelled a style of Christian discourse, critical reflection on faith and society, and practical moral teaching which was accessible to large numbers of persons.

One of the principal virtues which loomed large in King's writings and speeches was the capacity to bear trouble calmly, to disdain revenge against one's enemies, and to make sacrifices for worthy ends. I will refer to this set of capacities as magnanimity. King elaborated on this virtue while responding to a question in his column about the difficulty and efficacy of non-violence.

> It is very difficult to get over a philosophy of non-violence to people who have been taught from the cradle that violence must be met with

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 20

violence. But you must somehow continue to follow this way in word and in deed. You must get over to your comrades that the man who does not hit back is the strong man. To return violence for violence does nothing but intensify the existence of violence and evil in the universe. Someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of violence and hate. It is ultimately the strong man who can do this. He who accepts violence without returning it is much stronger than he who inflicts it.[4]

King's suggestion that the person who restrained his retributive impulses in the service of a more peaceful universe amounted to a moral rehabilitation of the concept of the strong man in the black community. In many urban black communities where discrimination and segregation have denied many men the opportunity to meet the conventional expectations of the male role, certain compensating roles have been evolved. Among the host of such roles was the "revolutionary chauvinist." In this role, popular during the civil rights movement, high value was placed on angry, articulate, courageous, socially conscious, "macho" behavior. The more evident these traits, the more dignified and revolutionary their bearer was considered. This role was best exemplified in the young Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Louis Farrakhan. Women, however, were considered "revolutionary" insofar as they submitted to the claims of their often oppressive chauvinist counterparts. Black feminist analyses of the civil rights movement now remind us that it was a movement which, in effect, advanced the liberation of the black men. Consequently, some of the most informative and lively theology being constructed in the black community today is by black women who understand the gospel to be more radically transformative than black male theologians have apprehended.

While organizing in Chicago and other northern ghettoes King encountered the tenacity and prevalence of the chauvinist ethos. The secular militance of street gang culture and of the black power camp presented profound challenges to King's southern, Christian moral strategies. For militants, the "strong man" was understood to be a fighter despite the fact that this affirmation directly contradicted traditional moral teachings espoused in most Christian churches. Here, King engaged a sensitive spot in the black male psyche. He invited them to surrender "macho" behavior and self understanding for the sake of the larger society and world. King placed the heavy burden of self-sacrificial morality on an already oppressed people and thereby sought to transmute their notions of strength. This was a courageous and often noble effort, but one which cost him the loyalty of many adolescent males who rejected Christian visions of personal fulfillment precisely because such visions were incongruent with the tough realities of urban street life.

In his lifestyle, King sought to display the character virtue of magnanimity

[4]Martin Luther King, Jr. "Advice for Living," *Ebony* XIII (February 1958), p. 84.

in a fashion that helped to validate its efficacy for the masses. On national television citizens watched the young minister urge an angry Negro crowd to disperse peacefully after his own house was bombed and his family endangered. This image stood in stark contrast to photographs of Malcolm X who, standing near a window in his household, grasped a rifle while presumably waiting for racist intruders. In response to such threatening icons King demonstrated that the magnanimous person was authentically strong, whereas Malcolm posed with weapons that he never used.

King noted that "there are some people who never get beyond this first dimension. They are brilliant people, often they do an excellent job in developing their inner powers; but they live as if nobody else lived in the world but themselves."[5] Although King was assassinated twenty months before the beginning of the 1970s decade, much earlier he had developed a critique of bourgeois individualism and the narcissistic, consumptive preoccupations which characterized the decade of the 1970s. This brings us to his discussion of the second dimension of the complete life.

> The breadth of life is that dimension of life in which we are concerned about others. An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.[6]

In this passage we note that King's vision of fulfillment unfolded beyond self-love to reveal an equal concern with neighbor-love. Within the breadth dimension, neighbor love could take the form of active positive concern for the wider public realm.

An important feature of the personal expression of neighbor love was an emphasis on family maintenance. In the *Ebony* columns Martin lent a good deal of attention to articulating methods for reconciling family members and to restoring broken relationships.

One writer inquired,

Questioner: I don't like my mother or father. They don't understand me and I don't understand them. I am a 17 year old girl. The only person who cares about me is an old friend, a married man. I would like for his wife to be my friend too, but I think she would object. What should I do? My life is a mess...

King: The best way to deal with your problem is to go back and seek to understand your parents. You may be assured that if one dislikes his mother and father, he will find it difficult to like other persons. *An integrated home makes for an integrated personality....* It is imperative, however, that you come to a new understanding

[5]King, *Measure of a Man*, p. 24.
[6]Ibid., p. 25.

with your parents. This will mean more to your personal development than anything else at the present time.[7] (author's emphasis)

King recognized that part of the solution to individual alienation lay in strengthening certain family bonds. He urged this adolescent girl to return to her parents and to work on becoming whole within that context rather than in the company of another family unit which could be strained by her presence. He urged her to heed the formula which so aptly characterized his own early family experience, "an integrated home makes for an integrated personality."

Pursuant to the ideal of family maintenance it was King's interest in the legal and human rights of women. He understood women to be the primary transformers and liberators of domestic space and as such they possessed rights and claims which men were obliged to honor. Faithful to the Kantian formal elaborations of human dignity (treat humanity as an end and never as a means only), King urged family members to exercise love, acceptance, tolerance, forgiveness, and patience toward one another. Women and mothers were urged to accept the obligations of adulthood and autonomous agency without completely abandoning traditional gender roles. Men and fathers were urged to share authority and responsibility with women; and children were taught to recognize love and humanity in their parents, and to develop trusting relationships with them. Indeed, the family itself was conceived to be a cooperative enterprise which could work only if the recognition of, and respect for, the just claims of all family members were operative.

An angry and frustrated wife who had been excluded by her husband from the household's financial matters asked King, "Is a wife entitled to an allowance or a little money from her husband for personal use? Does a wife have a right to know her husband's salary?" King responded to these sensitive emotional and ethical questions with characteristic aplomb.

> I think you are quite right in feeling that your husband should give you money for personal use. There are always those personal items and individualistic concerns that a woman should not be deprived of simply because she is married. I also feel that it is a good idea to know of your husband's salary and as many of his business concerns as possible.... I would advise you to seek to show your husband the practicality as well as the morality of discussing his salary and business concerns with you. Marriage is a cooperative enterprise in which two individuals are seeking to become one.[8]

In addition to articulating norms for marital and familial harmony, and female liberation within these contexts, King called attention to the moral dimension of such relationships. By advocating that the aforementioned wife show the hus-

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[7]King, "Advice," XIV (November 1958), p. 138.
[8]King, "Advice," XII (February 1958), p. 84.

band the "practicality as well as the morality of discussing his salary and business concerns;" he effectively broadened the perceptions of readers about the character of private, family decisions. King wanted persons to act on maxims and consistent rules which would be chosen by free practical reason. The norms of practicality and morality emerged frequently in his thought but unfortunately, without the benefit of a discussion of how the two might interrelate once conflicts arose.

King's reflections on how the breadth of life generally focussed on the broader, public issues which required thoughtful and radical religious responses. It is to that expression of neighbor love that we now attend.

In contrast to the relatively manageable level of personal relations in the family, the level of public interaction or world maintenance represented an unwieldy challenge. The social world in which King displayed his genius, moral vision, and passion for liberty was beset with deep racial, economic, religious, and national political strife. He provided a way of thinking about these big problems in local terms.

> May it not be that the problem in the world today is that individuals as well as nations have been overly concerned with the length of life devoid of breadth? But there is still something to remind us that we are interdependent, that we are all involved in a single process, that we are all somehow caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Therefore, whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.
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> As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent.[9]

King's reference to things which "affect all indirectly" resembles John Dewey's definition of the public realm in which transactions "affect others beyond those immediately concerned."[10] King's insight into the character of social reality as an "inescapable network of mutuality" suggests that he had strong sense of public life at the national level and a conviction about universal common interests at the global level. Moreover, he posited a connection between the encompassing public realm and the individual's possibilities for personal fulfillment. Personal fulfillment was possible only for those who actively worked for the over-all common good, and for a just and sustainable society. Indeed, justice and human fulfillment were inextricably interrelated. King's claim regarding the interdependence of human existence provided a check on the rabid pursuit of self-interest in America. Persons who pursued their self-interests without regard to the interests of others (length without breadth) were unwittingly indulging in self-defeating, uncivil, anti-religious behavior. Hence, if a billionaire could not be rich because of the presence of poverty in society, then the billionaire's own

[9]King, *Measure of a Man*, p. 28.
[10]John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt Publishers, 1927), p. 12.

self-interests could be better served if she were to include the interests of the poor in her own rational life plan. King's balanced perspective on personal development and communal well being offered an important and refreshing alternative to the often immature, indulgent communalism of many counter-cultural groups of the period and to the unchecked narcissism of the bourgeousie. He believed that the breadth of life would be enriched if persons cultivated certain capacities or virtues. Among them were three virtues which were prominent in his public discourse, altruism, civic spirit, and friendliness. While all of these and others were necessary to some degree for ideal relations in society, he understood altruism to be a unique, theological virtue motivated by divine agency *(agape)* and peculiar to the religious life. All rational persons were naturally capable of civic mindedness and friendliness, but the capacity for extreme self-sacrifice issued from a non-natural, religious conviction. Consequently, King recognized that in order for persons to use non-violence meaningfully, a certain receptivity, if not conversion, to the transformative power of divine energy and love must occur. "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."[11] His favorite illustration of this humanistic concern was the parable of the good Samaritan. The self-sacrificing Samaritan "was great because he had the mental equipment for a dangerous altruism. He was great because he could surround the length of his life with the breadth of his life. He was great not only because he had ascended to certain heights of economic security, but because he could condescend to the depths of human need."[12]

In another sermon entitled, "On Being a Good Neighbor," King added that the Samaritan had the capacity for a universal, dangerous and excessive altruism. "The Samaritan had the capacity for a universal altruism. He had a piercing insight into that which is beyond the external accidents of race, religion, and nationality. One of the great tragedies of man's long trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighbourly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation."[13] Regarding the dangerous quality in altruism King said, "The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life."[14] Concerning the excessive expression of altruism, King added that the Samaritan entered personally into the situation and pain of the broken neighbour and he possessed the "willingness to go far beyond the call of duty."[15] The source of this responsiveness to duties and obligations beyond rational self-interest was transcendent. He noted that, "such obligations are met by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart. Man-made laws assure justice, but a higher law produces love."[16] King contended

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[11]King, *Measure of a Man*, p. 25.
[12]*Ibid.*, p. 27.
[13]Martin L. King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 27.
[14]*Ibid.*, p. 31.
[15]*Ibid.*, p. 32.
[16]*Ibid.*, p. 33.

that authentic human sociality between blacks and whites in America would not be fully realized until universal, dangerous, and excessive neighbourly love operated to liberate persons from "fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality."[17] He noted that these barriers to a "truly integrated society" would be removed "only as men are possessed by the invisible, inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation. True integration will be achieved by true neighbours who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations."[18]

While human effort counted for much in this ethical enterprise, it is clear that King believed that the transcendent, grace-bestowing power of God operating through human nature (inner law) was essential to its success. Altruism seemed to be a capacity which each person possessed in nascent or dormant form and which could be aroused and developed depending on the individual's receptivity to the divine imperative. Once aroused, the will to love and sacrifice could be shaped into a lasting character virtue through education and imitating the noble examples of exemplary lives. He concluded the sermon by reminding his listeners that, "In our quest to make neighbourly love a reality, we have, in addition to the inspiring example of the good Samaritan, the magnanimous life of our Christ to guide us."[19] Exemplary lives offered important inspirational and motivational energy for evoking and cultivating altruism in the lives of the masses. This observation explains much about the character of Dr. King after 1955. King began his ministry in Montgomery as a middle class pastor preaching intellectual sermons to his respectable flock. Rosa Parks and the bus controversy brought out King's uncharacteristic reluctance to assume leadership; but after the bombing of his home, and the international attention he received as a symbol of the movement, self-consciously he proceeded to inspire, educate, guide, a global following along the demanding path of justice and peace. This world historical drama occurred, in part I think, because King understood himself to be responding to God's call for a bold witness to the transformative power of love and altruism.

The second virtue about which he had much to say can be thematized as civic spirit. In his book *Why We Can't Wait*, he took pains to demonstrate the contributions of the civil rights movement to American public life, and therein made his case for the necessity of civic spirit in revitalizing public life.

> American politics needs nothing so much as an injection of the idealism, self-sacrifice and sense of public service which is the hallmark of our movement.
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> One aspect of the civil rights struggle that receives little attention is the contribution it makes to the whole society. The Negro in winning rights for himself produces substantial benefits for the nation...

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[17] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

> the revolution for human rights is opening up unhealthy areas in American life and permitting a new and wholesome healing to take place. Eventually the civil rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness.[20]

As King reflected on his crusade in American history he insisted that the movement was not designed to empower blacks and place them alongside other ethnic interest groups, but to transform America's social structure and thereby make of it a model to the world community. If the movement wsa conceived to be the effort of a marginalized group to press specific reparations claims on the federal government, then the boundaries of the transaction could be limited to those two parties; but if the movement was conceived to be the effort of one community of American citizens, motivated by American traditions of protest for freedom, and faithful to American political rhetoric about democracy, to seize the conscience of every single American and compel them to act fairly and compassionately toward these faithful citizens then America would be worthy of her reputation as the home of the free and the brave. King's responsibility as the intellectual leader and folk hero of the movement was consistently to articulate this latter interpretation.

Blacks had proven the degree of their civic spirit by fighting valiantly in America's wars, resisting the vigorous recruiting of the Communist party, and by seeking to purify and participate in the electoral process. These qualities along with their idealism, self-sacrifice, and loyalty made blacks exemplary citizens who should command the respect of all Americans.

King's rhetoric about civic spirit was substantiated by a methodology for inculcating the virtue in young people. His most succinct statement on this was provided in his "Advice for Living" column. Responding to a comment which deplored parental permissiveness in child rearing, King wrote:

> ...Somewhere along the way every child must be trained into the obligations of cooperative living. He must be made aware that he is a member of a group and that group life implies duties and restraints. Social life is possible only if there exists a balance between liberty and discipline. The child must realize that there are rules of the game which he did not make and that he cannot break with impunity. In order to get all of these things over to the child it is often necessary to subject the child to disciplinary measures.[21]

King believed that the child's early socialization in the family was tantamount to a first lesson in sharing space, identifying with group purposes, learning the

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[20]Martin L. King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1963), p. 151.
[21]King, "Advice," XIII (March 1958), p. 92.

written and uncodified rules which govern social life, discerning the appropriate balance between individual freedom and the common good, and recognizing the penalties of breaching the rules of communal life. The logic of King's interpretation of the function of the civil rights movement in America (injecting public virtues) made the participation of children significant. Children needed such a first hand introduction to democratic politics and the struggle for justice. King admired the willingness of school children to put their lives on the line in pursuit of justice, a strategy which Malcolm X decried as cowardly and unmanly; but King received the adoring, youthful marchers with the understanding that as they later matured into adulthood they would have a major stake in, and sensitivity to, the fairness of the society.

The third virtue which would enrich the breadth of life was friendliness. Altruism provided the abilities for noble, sacrificial love from strangers and enemies, and civic spiritedness provided a sense of social and political responsibility for the entire society. Friendliness provided the inclination to befriend persons with whom one had experienced tension and misunderstanding. King's vision of the solidarity and interrelatedness of the human family led him to posit this personal virtue as an aid in facilitating relations between pluralistic groups. He espoused this virtue in an *Ebony* column where he encountered the following question:

Q.: I am a Negro, but I don't like Jews. What can I do to overcome this feeling?

A.: It is very unfortunate that you dislike Jews. This is a problem which you need to solve immediately, because it is no different from the attitude that many whites have concerning the whole Negro race. In order to deal with this problem, you must get at the roots of your dislike for the Jews. Most hate is rooted in fear, suspicion, ignorance and pride... I would suggest that you *seek real personal fellowship with Jews* and you will discover that some of the finest persons in the nation are members of the Jewish community. Through this type of *personal fellowship*, you will come to know them and love them and thereby *transcend the bounds of bigotry.* Men hate each other because they are so often separated from each other.[22] (author's emphasis)

On the surface, King's advice appears naive in light of the religious and other tensions which have frequently characterized the relationship between black Christians and American Jews. As Christians, most blacks have absorbed the anti-Semitism of historical Western Christianity, and as Americans, most Jews have absorbed the racism of white America. Hence, any degree of personal friend-

[22]King, "Advice," XIII (August 1958), p. 78.

ship between the two has often taken place in spite of these historical obstacles.

It should be noted that King enjoyed amicable relationships with Jews and received his legal counsel from Stanley Levinson, a Jewish attorney and friend who helped to edit King's first book. As time passed, King grew sensitive to the increasingly fragile alliance between blacks who were growing more militant toward white resistance to reform, and Jews who were increasingly identifying with the privileged status of other middle class, white Americans. King despaired that the two groups might become enemies and personally sought to hold their interests together. Given their common interest in America which tolerated nonconformist groups, along with his personal affiliation with Jews in the movement, King's advice concerning the need for personal fellowship was rational, practical and not naive.

This capacity to befriend persons with whom one experienced tension was a necessary virtue for transforming the *status quo* in race relations. King presumed that a friendly disposition was a prerequisite to eliminating the irrational dimensions of human hatred. Such a disposition signalled to others one's willingness to communicate and develop common ends. Thereby popular stereotypes could be challenged and corrected at this micro level of human association; and ultimately through personal fellowship, blacks, Jews, and whites could transcend the "bounds of bigotry" and this personal liberation would lead to social transformation.

Having examined King's understanding of the breadth dimension of the moral life, I shall elaborate his notion of the height dimension.

> Finally, there is a third dimension. Some people never get beyond the first two dimensions of life.... They develop their inner powers, they love humanity, but they stop right here...if we are to live the complete life we must reach up and discover God.[23]

For King, a personal relationship to God entailed a host of positive functions of religion. He claimed that: 1. religious and scientific knowledge are complementary; 2. religious faith is wholistic and indivisible; and 3. Christian faith should encourage tolerance for ecumenism and religious pluralism. For King, the divine-human relationship went beyond the warm emotions often sought by pious believers. Rather, relatedness to God entailed a demanding moral agenda in which the person was energized by God to challenge all forms of evil and to work for the creation of the beloved community. The third dimension of the complete life initiated persons into the deeper aspects of their own humanity as they came to discover the character and will of God.

1. Religious and Scientific Knowledge

King believed that the moral person in modern society faced the challenge of integrating knowledge derived from very different spheres of reality; and each

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[23]King, *Measure of a Man*, p. 29.

respective world required the other for completion and accuracy. For this reason, mature and healthy religious faith must be nurtured through dialogue with contemporary knowledge and science. Such knowledge helped to refine naive faith and to add evidence for the existence of the God whom he confessed. Consequently, King did little to spare the feelings of "softminded" despisers of science and critical reasoning. In a sermon entitled, "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart," he maintained,

> There may be a conflict between softminded religionists and toughminded scientists, but not between science and religion. Their respective worlds are different and their methods are dissimilar. Science investigates, religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary. Science keeps religion from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism. Religion prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism.[24]

King understood the importance of delineating the boundaries or zones of authority for the various disciplines. He realized that dissimilarities in subject matter required different methods of investigation, contrasting types of evidence for various claims, and different levels of explanation. King could have been more skeptical and critical of the nature of scientific discourse. He was too sanguine in claiming that science deals mainly with facts; but this distinction was widely shared at the time, and King's non-specialist position would have been contemporary. Philosophers of science have now demonstrated that scientists are not value free, and that their value orientations inexorably influence their scientific investigations. As a liberal theologian he respected the authority of modern science without trying, as others did, to reconstruct theology using science as a model. Instead he argued for an openness to the insights of science while maintaining that religious faith was a privileged mode of perception which would not be compromised by the dialogue.

King demonstrated his comfort with scientific knowledge by his frequent use of social scientific data and analyses. He generally used them to elaborate the nature of racism and its harmful effects on human development. Thereby, he modelled a kind of religious leadership which could employ science in the struggle for liberation. Throughout his writings, King demonstrated familiarity with contemporary sociological and psychological knowledge and theories. He also railed against segregationists who turned to "pseudo-scientific writing" in order to substantiate Negro inferiority claims. He engaged the debate by citing his own authorities. "Great anthropologists like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and

[24]King, *Strength to Love*, p. 11.

Melville J. Herskovits, agree that, although there may be inferior and superior individuals within all races, there is no superior or inferior race."[25]

King's trust in the clear and corrective voice of science assigned enormous influence to science in the lives of religious persons and non-believers as well. Thus, the authentic life was to be characterized by a wholesome appreciation for religion and science, and the mutually critical role which should obtain between them.

2. Religious Faith is Wholistic

King insisted that "healthy religion" possessed the capacity to integrate the spiritual and the material, the body and soul. He disdained those who sought to draw a radical dichotomy between the two. He assigned high value to the body as part of God's good creation, and as a lad enjoyed dancing, wrestling and fashionable clothing.

King believed that his warrants for a religious faith which integrated concern for the welfare of the body along with the soul were biblically and rationally grounded. In his famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," he observed, "many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which makes a strange, un-biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular."[26] He also claimed as a "fact" that "the gospel of Jesus Christ deals with the whole man—his body as well as his soul, the earthly as well as the heavenly."[27] In his first book, he presented a systematic statement of his conviction concerning wholistic faith.

> Religion at its best deals not only with man's preliminary concerns but with his inescapable ultimate concern. When religion overlooks this basic fact it is reduced to a mere ethical system in which eternity is absorbed into time and God is relegated to a sort of meaningless figment of the human imagination.
>
> But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man's social conditions. Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. 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 the Christian gospel is a two-way road.[28]

A healthy religious faith was one which could affirm the value of this world as an object of God's loving concern, and authorize believers to work for its transformation. With this conviction King countered the folk beliefs of many black churches which had turned away from the cruel world and the possibility of redeeming it. He insisted that looking away from this world toward the next

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[25]*Ibid.*, p. 43.
[26]King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 90.
[27]King, "Advice," XIII (September 1958), p. 68.
[28]Martin L. King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 28.

was not a biblical or Christian option in the face of suffering. As the people of God they were supposed to "seek to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; (and) seek to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul (would) have a chance after it (was) changed."[29]

Healthy, integrated, wholistic faith embraced and transformed the world and valorized the life of body and flesh; a realm of human existence historically disdained by much Western Christian thought. Against the tide of folk belief and evangelical theology King affirmed this world, the body, and history, and sought to integrate rather than subsume them under the related categories of heaven, the soul, and eternity. For any faith which would divide and segregate its provinces of concern King pronounced:

> 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 dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind the Marxists like to see—an opiate of the people.[30]

3. Christian Faith, Tolerance, and Pluralism

King espoused his conviction that Christian faith should encourage tolerance for the differences among Christians and should deepen the Christian's awareness of, and respect for, non-Christian religions. His fundamental attitude toward pluralism could be summarized in these words, that which unites persons is of greater consequence than that which differentiates them. One of the achievements of the civil rights movement was to unite persons of diverse religious, racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds in the pursuit of a just and compassionate society. In one of his magazine columns he responded to a sensitive religious problem in the following way.

Questioner: Please help me and my wife to settle our differences. My understanding is that a man and his wife are to be as one in everything. I am a Baptist and she is a Seven-Day Adventist. She goes to church on Saturday and I go to church on Sunday. I don't think this is being as one and I don't think God is pleased.

King: There can be no gainsaying of the fact that it is always a wonderful thing when husband and wife attend the same church. However, when such an arrangement does not exist, the family need not live in continual disharmony. The problem may be solved by concentrating on the unity of your religious views rather than accentuating your differences. There are certain basic points, such as the God concept, the lordship of Christ and the brotherhood of man that

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[29] *Ibid.*

[30] King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 36.

all Christians should be united on. Consequently, there can be unity where this is not uniformity. If you and your wife will concentrate on these points of unity and seek to minimize the ritualistic and doctrinal differences, you will come to see that you are not as far apart in your religious views as it appears to you on the surface.[31]

The pastor's respect for individual liberty is obvious here. King skillfully introduced a formula, "unity without uniformity," which, in principle, affirmed the right of the wife to maintain her religious preference without succumbing to or conforming to the husband's subtle demand for the same. King also affirmed Christian monotheism as the basis for an enduring coooperation between Christians of different local traditions. He assumed that an appeal to the "God concept" would mitigate the marital controversy. However, a portion of the husband's anguish seemed to be generated by a conviction that God was displeased about religious disunity in the household. Theological appeals themselves were controversial and could not reliably provide authoritative responses to difficult practical issues. While King did not recognize this, his inclination for teleological modes of reasoning led him to affirm the non-moral end, a harmonious family in this case, as an adequate reason for unity and cooperation despite differences. By positing the peaceful household as a non-moral good for Christians, King was able to suggest that the morally right thing to do in this situation was to follow the course of action which maximized peace and harmony.

On a broader scale, Christians should affirm their theological unity, deemphasize their historical differences, and seek to create a beloved community of peace, harmony, and justice. Herein, King elaborated a skeletal method for Christian ecumenism. By virtue of his intellectual familiarity with the great religious traditions of the world, King was convinced of the value of each and believed that Christian faith should increase one's awareness of, and respect for other religions.

In another *Ebony* column he confronted a delicate theological issue which also called on his resources as an historian of religions.

Questioner: Is Christianity, as a religion, more valid than the tribal religions practiced at one time by Africans?

King: I believe that God reveals Himself in all religions. Wherever we find truth we find the revelation of God, and there is some element of truth in all religions. This does not mean however, that God reveals Himself equally in all religions. Christianity is an expression of the highest revelation of God. It is the synthesis of the best in all religions. In this sense Christianity is

[31]King, "Advice," XIII (June 1958), p. 118.

> synthesis of the best in all religions. In this sense Christianity is more valid than the tribal religions practiced by our African ancestors. This does not mean that these tribal religions are totally devoid of truth. It simply means that Christianity, while flowing through the stream of history has incorporated the truths of all other religions and brought them together into a meaningful and coherent system. Moreover, at the center of Christianity stands the Christ who is now and ever shall be the highest revelation of God. He, more than any other person who has ever lived in history, reveals the true nature of God. Through His life, death and resurrection the power of eternity broke forth into time.[32]

In this and other responses, King demonstrated a sophisticated form of moral casuistry and theological reflection on hard questions which has not been, in my judgment, adequately continued by pastors and theologians in the Protestant tradition. From my perspective, King fulfilled the highest mission of black liberation theology as his discourse was rooted in the black church, conversant with other symbolic systems, and was articulated in a rational fashion appropriate for a pluralistic, public audience. Moreover, he sought to liberate individuals by teaching them to think through difficult problems, by occasionally answering their hardest questions, and by helping them to change their self-understanding by appealing to resources in Christianity, Afro-American culture, and American democratic traditions. Finally, his discourse grew out of the experience of people who had suffered because they chose to bear witness to the political implications of the gospel. King understood, as so many other black moral thinkers before him did, that the true gospel entailed social as well as personal transformation, and that neither could be sufficient without the other.

I believe that the post-modern person in America earnestly desires and needs a compelling vision of personal fulfillment. Dr. King's image of the complete life may be well suited to meet that need by recommending a sober, rational self-interest, by re-integrating individuals into families, religious communities, and other mediating institutions in our alienating society, and by permitting persons to acknowledge their deepest yearnings for a knowable God and a meaningful future. As we celebrate his life, let us also carefully and critically appropriate his model of pastoral leadership and his method of practical theological thinking.

Glory to God for Martin Luther King, Jr.