Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African-American Social Gospel

Most recent studies of Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasize the extent to which his ideas were rooted in African-American religious traditions. Departing from King's own autobiographical account and from earlier studies that stressed the importance of King's graduate studies at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, contemporary scholars have focused attention on King's African-American religious roots. The Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project has contributed to this scholarly trend by documenting the King family's long-standing ties to Ebenezer Baptist Church and the social gospel ministries of his father and grandfather, both of whom were civil rights leaders as well as pastors. The King project's research also suggests, however, that the current trend in scholarship may understate the extent to which King's African-American religious roots were inextricably intertwined with the European-American intellectual influences of his college years. The initial volumes of the project's fourteen-volume edition of King's papers have contributed to a new understanding of King's graduate school experiences, demonstrating that his academic writings, though flawed by serious instances of plagiarism, were often reliable expressions of his complex, evolving Weltanschauung. Moreover, King's writings make clear that his roots in African-American religion did not necessarily separate him from European-American theological influences, because many of the black religious leaders who were his role models were themselves products of predominantly white seminaries and graduate schools. Rather than being torn between two mutually exclusive religious traditions, King's uniquely effective transracial leadership was based on his ability to combine elements of African-American and European-American religious traditions.

King was deeply influenced by his childhood immersion in African-American religious life, but his years at Crozer and Boston increased his ability to incorporate aspects of academic theology into his sermons and public speeches. His student papers demonstrate that he adopted European-American theological ideas that ultimately reinforced rather than undermined the African-American social gospel tradition epitomized by his father and grandfather. Although King's advanced training in theology set him apart from most African-American clergymen, the documentary evidence regarding his formative years suggests that his graduate studies engendered an increased appreciation for his African-American religious roots. From childhood, King had been uncomfortable with the emotionalism and scriptural literalism that he associated with traditional Baptist liturgy, but he was also familiar with
innovative, politically active, and intellectually sophisticated African-American clergymen who had themselves been influenced by European-American theological scholarship. These clergymen served as role models for King as he mined theological scholarship for nuggets of insight that could enrich his preaching. As he sought to resolve religious doubts that had initially prevented him from accepting his calling, King looked upon European-American theological ideas not as alternatives to traditional black Baptist beliefs but as necessary correctives to those beliefs.

Tracing the evolution of his religious beliefs in a sketch written at Crozer entitled "An Autobiography of Religious Development," King recalled that an initial sense of religious estrangement had unexpectedly and abruptly become apparent at a Sunday morning revival meeting he attended at about the age of seven. A guest evangelist from Virginia had come to talk about salvation and to seek recruits for the church. Having grown up in the church, King had never given much thought to joining it formally, but the emotion of the revival and the decision of his sister to step forward prompted an impulsive decision to accept conversion. He reflected, "I had never given this matter a thought, and even at the time of [my] baptism I was unaware of what was taking place." King admitted that he "joined the church not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister." In the same sketch, he wrote that, although he accepted the teachings of his Sunday school teachers until he was about twelve,

this uncritical attitude could not last long, for it was contrary to the very nature of my being. I had always been the questioning and precocious type. At the age of 13 I shocked my Sunday School class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. From the age of thirteen on doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly.

King's recognition that he did not share some of the religious convictions of other family members might have been emotionally devastating, but his inalienable sense of belonging to the church led him toward reconciliation rather than continued rebellion. Although his convictions removed him from the kind of fundamentalist faith that placed great importance on emotionalism and a conversion experience, he never considered abandoning his inherited faith. His early doubts did not interfere with his intense involvement in church life, his love of church music, or his fascination with the art of preaching. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr., noted the way in which his son absorbed attitudes ("he loved church ... the feeling for ceremonies and ritual, the passionate love of Baptist music") and skills ("a great speaker ... and he sang,
too, in a fine, clear voice") that would prepare him for a preaching career. Letters written to his parents in his early adolescence reveal an intimate knowledge of the details of Baptist church life: congregational governance, ward meetings, church finances, and continual social events.

Moreover, King was aware that the accomplishments of his father's generation of African-American religious leaders represented more than just emotional folk preaching and scriptural literalism. Despite theological differences, King attributed his decision to enter the ministry to the influence of a father who "set forth a noble example that I didn't [mind] following." King's father and grandfather were not only Baptist ministers but also pioneering exponents of a distinctively African-American version of social gospel Christianity. When King's grandfather, the Reverend A. D. Williams, arrived in Atlanta in 1893, social gospel activism was becoming increasingly common among both black and white urban clergymen. After taking over the pastorate of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church in March 1894, Williams built a large congregation through forceful preaching that addressed the everyday concerns of poor and working-class residents. Baptist denominational practices encouraged ministers such as Williams to retain the support of occasionally rebellious congregations through charismatic leadership that extended beyond purely spiritual matters. Having arrived in Atlanta on the eve of a major period of institutional development among African-American Baptists, Williams joined two thousand other delegates and visitors who met at Atlanta's Friendship Baptist Church in September 1895 to organize the National Baptist Convention, the largest black organization in the United States.

For the remainder of his life, Williams played a leading role in Baptist affairs, both at state and national levels. In addition, he took the lead in responding to W. E. B. Du Bois's call for civil rights activism by joining five hundred other black Georgians in February 1906 to form the Georgia Equal Rights League. In 1917, Williams became one of the founders of the Atlanta branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After becoming president of the local chapter in 1918, he mobilized newly enfranchised African-American women in a campaign to register black voters. He also led a successful drive to pressure white officials into providing improved educational facilities for black children. This effort resulted in the establishment of a black high school that Martin Luther King, Jr., later attended.

Martin Luther King, Sr., continued this tradition of social gospel activism after he married Williams's only daughter in 1926. Although his son would
sometimes depict him as a conservative, King, Sr., identified himself as a social gospel preacher who believed that his ministry should be focused on the everyday needs of his congregation rather than otherworldly concerns. While a theology student at Morehouse College, King, Sr., had been exposed to the liberal theological ideas of C. D. Hubert, who headed the school's theology program. As the two ministers struggled to retain the loyalty of their congregations during the Great Depression, King recalled that Williams insisted, "Whosoever carries the word must make the word flesh." King explained that Williams used church funds to "make food available to the hungry and clothes to those without them. We kept children while mothers worked. The church bought and supplied medicines. Ebenezer tried to be an anchor as the storm rose."

After taking over Ebenezer upon Williams's death in 1931, Martin Luther King, Sr., expanded the scope of his predecessor's politically engaged ministry. Early in 1935, he organized meetings to encourage blacks to register to vote and, despite resistance from more cautious clergymen and lay leaders, organized a march to City Hall. A year later he became chairman of the Committee on the Equalization of Teachers' Salaries, which was formed to protest against discriminatory policies that paid higher salaries to white teachers than to equally qualified blacks. In spite of receiving threatening hate letters, he played a leading role in the sustained struggle for pay equity. 'King's firm insistence that the Christian church should participate in civil rights activities set him apart from politically conservative scriptural fundamentalists. In 1940, he revealed his commitment to social gospel Christianity in an address on "the true mission of the Church" delivered to the Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association:

Quite often we say the church has no place in politics, forgetting the words of the Lord, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath [anointed] me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised."

... God hasten the time when every minister will become a registered voter and a part of every movement for the betterment of our people. Again and again has it been said we cannot lead where we do not go, and we cannot teach what we do not know.
As ministers a great responsibility rests upon us as leaders. We can not expect our people to register and become citizens until we as leaders set the standard.

In addition to seeing his father as both a social activist and a scriptural conservative, King, Jr., was also aware of many other models of politically engaged religious leadership. He admired the Reverend William Holmes Borders, who had built Wheat Street Baptist Church into Atlanta's largest black church and who possessed the academic credentials that King's own father lacked. Although both ministers had struggled from poverty to graduate from Morehouse College, Borders had also obtained a divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary and a master's degree from Northwestern before returning to Atlanta, where he taught religion at Morehouse and became an outspoken preacher at Wheat Street. According to biographer Taylor Branch, King and his friends studied "Borders' mannerisms, his organizational style, and above all the high-toned sermons in which he aroused his congregation without merely repeating the homilies of eternal life."

After entering Morehouse College at the age of fifteen, King was profoundly influenced by the example of the college's president, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, a family friend who was the kind of dedicated, intellectually sophisticated religious leader that King wished to emulate. Selected in 1940 to succeed John Hope as head of Morehouse, Mays was the first Morehouse president with a Ph.D. Although not a "Morehouse man" himself, Mays had internalized the Morehouse tradition calling for students to use their skills on behalf of the black community. An outstanding debater during his own undergraduate years, Mays often used his Tuesday morning talks to the student body as occasions to express his commitment to the social gospel and to challenge Morehouse students to struggle against segregation rather than accommodate to it. By the time King entered college, Mays had returned from a trip to India as one of a growing number of African-American disciples of Mahatma Gandhi. King later described Mays as one of the "great influences" in his life.

At Morehouse, King received his initial exposure to modern critical theology when he took a course on the Bible taught by another family acquaintance, Professor George D. Kelsey, a Morehouse graduate who had recently received his doctorate from Yale. In 1945 Kelsey had initiated an Annual Institute for the Training and Improvement of Baptist Ministers and had thereby gained the admiration of King, Sr., who described Kelsey as a teacher who "saw the pulpit as a place both for drama, in the old-fashioned, country Baptist sense, and for
the articulation of philosophies that address the problems of society." Kelsey later remembered King, Jr., as an earnest student who took the subject matter of the course seriously. "I made it my business to present lectures on the most strenuous teaching of Jesus," Kelsey recalled. "It was precisely at this time that Martin's eyes lit up most and his face was graced with a smile." "Shortly after teaching King, Kelsey published an article arguing that "the problem of race is indeed America's greatest moral dilemma," giving King a phrase that he would use in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958).

In addition to Mays and Kelsey, King was also undoubtedly aware of many black religious leaders who combined academic erudition with a thorough grounding in African-American religious traditions. While at Crozer Seminary, King often debated theological and political issues with J. Pius Barbour, a family friend and Morehouse graduate, who had graduated from the seminary a decade before King's arrival. King was also familiar with the progressive ideas of Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, whose 1949 speech in Philadelphia recounting a trip to India stirred King's interest in Gandhian ideas. Howard Thurman, whose influential social gospel statement *Jesus and the Disinherited* appeared in 1949, was also a family friend of the Kings: he had attended Morehouse with King, Sr. When Thurman became Boston University's dean of the chapel, he developed a personal acquaintance with King, Jr., who was then attending the university.

Benefiting from this extensive exposure to proponents of African-American social gospel, King was able to perceive theological training as a means of reconciling his inclination to follow his father's calling with his desire for intellectual respectability. King's descriptions of his decision to enter the ministry reveal that he had accepted the social mission of the church even though he had not yet resolved his theological doubts. He realized that the Baptist religion he had absorbed during his youth had derived mainly from daily contact with church life rather than from theological reflection. Growing up in the church provided a substitute for orthodox theological convictions; born a Baptist, he never felt the need to affirm all the tenets of the denomination. In his "Autobiography of Religious Development," he explained: "Conversion for me was never an abrupt something. I have never experienced the so called .crisis moment.' Religion has just been something that I grew up in. Conversion for me has been the gradual intaking of the noble ideals set forth in my family and my environment, and I must admit that this intaking has been largely unconscious."
The consistency of King's basic religious and political convictions throughout his life suggest that his collegiate training was not a transformative experience but was rather a refinement of preexisting religious attitudes. Recognizing that a Ph.D. degree from a northern university would set him apart from most other Baptist ministers, he approached his graduate education with skepticism and perhaps even a touch of cynicism, self-consciously acquiring academic credentials that would add intellectual respectability to ingrained beliefs rooted in early religious experiences. King's rejection of scriptural literalism did not lead him away from the Baptist church but toward an increasing interest in liberal theology. His understanding that religious belief could be rooted in reason also enabled him to think more seriously about an idea he had previously rejected: becoming a minister.

The elder King had always wanted both of his sons to follow his career choice and eventually, perhaps, serve as pastors for the Ebenezer congregation. He listened to his wife's entreaties on the need for the children to make their own career choices, while hoping that his sons would make use of his connections among Baptists: "family ties, school and fraternal relationships, the so-called hometown connections that kept phones ringing and letters moving in consideration of help requested and granted, favors offered and accepted." Despite being aware of their father's wishes, however, King, Jr., and his younger brother, A. D., were reluctant to conform to paternal expectations. The latter dropped out of Morehouse before finally deciding on a ministerial career, and the former spent his first three undergraduate years determined to become first a physician and then a lawyer—but not a minister like his father. Determined to assert his independence from his father and continuing to question aspects of his father's religious beliefs, King, Jr., nevertheless received a strong impetus toward becoming a preacher from his father's ever-present example.

A crucial period in King's deliberations about his career came during the summer of 1947, when he led religious services for his fellow student workers at a tobacco farm in Simsbury, Connecticut. Even before leaving Atlanta he had received his preaching license, and—more than he had during his 1944 stay in Simsbury—welcomed the opportunity to lead the weekly religious gatherings at the farm. After several weeks of deliberation, he telephoned his mother from Simsbury to tell her of his intention to become a minister. By the time he returned to Morehouse for his final year, he had pushed doubt out of his mind. His initial inclination to become a doctor or lawyer was overwhelmed by an "undying urge to serve God and humanity through the ministry." The decision
was the culmination of his experiences. 'My call to the ministry was neither
dramatic nor spectacular," he later wrote in his application to seminary.

It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light
experience on the road of life. Moreover, it was a response to an inner
urge that gradually came upon me. This urge expressed itself in a desire
to serve God and humanity, and the feeling that my talent and my
commitment could best be expressed through the ministry.... During my
senior year in college I finally decided to accept the challenge to enter
the ministry. I came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon my
shoulders and the more I tried to escape it the more frustrated I would
become.

Once the decision was made, King's friends recognized its inevitability, given
his experiences, contacts, and abilities. Even at this early stage in his
development as a preacher, his abilities as a pulpit orator were evident to those
who heard him. Samuel DuBois Cook recalled that King delivered a "Senior
Sermon" in the Morehouse Chapel a week before graduation. "He knew almost
intuitively how to move an audience," Cook remembered. "He asserted that
there are moral laws in the universe that we cannot violate with impunity,
anymore than we can violate the physical laws of the university with impunity."
King resolved to become a minister, but he continued to reject the anti-
intellectualism that he associated with fundamentalism. His subsequent critical
study of biblical texts and religious practices was driven by a desire to
strengthen the rationale for a decision he had already made. He applied to
several seminaries known to be academically rigorous and hospitable to liberal
religious views, including Andover Newton in Massachusetts, Union in New
York, and Crozer in Pennsylvania.

King's graduate school education should be viewed within the context of his
struggle to synthesize his father's Christian practices and his own theological
skepticism. Seen from this perspective, King's experiences at Crozer and
Boston constituted neither a pilgrimage toward the social gospel views of his
Crozer professors nor a movement toward the personalism of those at Boston.
Instead, King eclectically drew upon the writings of academic theologians as he
moved away from Christian liberalism toward a theological synthesis closer to
aspects of his father's religious faith, particularly toward a conception of God as
a source of support in times of personal need. Rather than becoming more
liberal in college, he became increasingly skeptical of intellectualized
conceptions of divinity. As King became increasingly aware of the limitations
of liberal Christian thought, he acquired a renewed appreciation for his
southern Baptist roots. His Crozer papers occasionally referred to his experiences in order to explain his theological preferences. He noted that his initial attraction to liberalism stemmed from its willingness to answer new problems of cultural and social change, "unlike its theological opponent, fundamentalism, which sought "to preserve the old faith in a changing milieu."

As he continued his studies, however, King found his initial attraction to liberal theology "going through a state of transition." His personal experience with "a vicious race problem" had made it "very difficult ... to believe in the essential goodness of man"; on the other hand, he explained that "in noticing the gradual improvements of this same race problem I came to see some noble possibilities in human nature." While remaining wary of his father's conventional religious beliefs, King was becoming, he acknowledged, "a victim of eclecticism," seeking to "synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology."

At Crozer, King was introduced to personalism, a philosophical school of thought that had developed in the late nineteenth century at Boston University and other American universities. After reviewing a text by Boston professor Edgar S. Brightman, a leading personalist theologian, King reported, in an essay for one of his classes, that he was amazed to find that the conception of God is so complex and one about which opinions differ so widely. King conceded that he was still "quite confused as to which definition [of God] was the most adequate," but thought that Brightman's personalist theology held the greatest appeal. Its emphasis on the reality of personal religious experience validated King's own religious experiences. King reaffirmed his belief that "every man, from the ordinary simplehearted believer to the philosophical intellectual giant, may find God through religious experience." His reading of Brightman led him to discover his own spirituality:

How I long now for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book. It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless. As I reflect on the matter, however, I do remember moments that I have been awe awakened; there have been times that I have been carried out of myself by something greater than myself and to that something I gave myself. Has this great something been God? Maybe after all I have been religious for a number of years, and am now only becoming aware of it.

Brightman's explanation of religious experience convinced King that he could experience God's powerful presence in his own life without the benefit of a sudden religious conversion. Personalism validated the notion that experience
rather than intellectual reflection should be the basis of religious belief "It is through experience that we come to realize that some things are out of harmony with God's will," King wrote in another essay. "No theology is needed to tell us that love is the law of life and to disobey it means to suffer the consequences."" King's adoption of personalism as a theological orientation enabled him to reject abstract conceptions of God while continuing his search for cogency and intellectual sophistication.

By the time King entered Boston University, he was learning how to use his theological training to enrich his preaching and, in the process, return to his roots as a Baptist preacher. King's academic theological studies at Crozer had encouraged him to question many aspects of his religious heritage, but by his final year King had also become skeptical of many tenets of theological liberalism. The church of his parents and grandparents had imparted an understanding of God and of the purposes of Christian ministry that could not be displaced by theological sophistication. He later explained that his study of personalism at Crozer and Boston reinforced his beliefs rather than supplanted them. Personalism's "Insistence that only personality--finite and infinite--is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me a metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality."

At Boston, King expanded his criticism of theological liberalism by adopting many of the ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr. King applauded Niebuhr's rigorous analysis of "the fundamental weaknesses and inevitable sterility of the humanistic emphasis" of liberalism in the twentieth century. He was also drawn to Niebuhr's economic and moral analysis of capitalism, such as the notion that modern industrial civilization was responsible for "appalling injustices," particularly the "concentration of power and resources in the hands of a relatively small wealthy class." Injustices are inherent in human society, Niebuhr argued, because humans engaged in collective activity are essentially immoral, whereas individuals acting on their own possess a moral conscience. Niebuhr sought to resolve the tension between "moral man and immoral society" by reinterpreting the traditional Christian notion of *agape*, or divine love. Agreeing with Niebuhr's analysis, King stated that *agape* may not be achievable in an immoral society but "remains a leaven in society, permeating the whole and giving texture and consistency to life."

King was particularly receptive to Niebuhr's criticism of love and justice as conceived in both liberal and orthodox theology. In orthodoxy, "individual perfection is too often made an end in itself," whereas liberalism "vainly seeks
to overcome justice [through] purely moral and rational suasions." Liberalism, King wrote, "confuses the ideal itself with the realistic means which must be employed to coerce society into an approximation of that ideal." King agreed with Niebuhr's emphasis on making realistic moral choices and with his social analysis, but he believed that Niebuhr lacked an adequate explanation of how agape operates in human history: "He fails to see that the availability of the divine Agape is an essential [affirmation] of the Christian religion."

Given the academic environment in which he attended graduate school, it is hardly surprising that King's theological writings did not explicitly draw upon the insights of African-American religion. Yet, although King's graduate school writings understated the degree to which his attitudes had been shaped by African-American religious writings, he was certainly aware of the publications of Kelsey and Mays and probably those of Thurman and Borders. Once accustomed to contrasting the religious emotionalism of his father's religion with the intellectual sophistication he saw in the writings of white academic theologians, King became aware during his graduate research that orthodox Christianity was not necessarily anti-intellectual.

Overall, King's theological development in seminary and graduate school reflected his lifelong tendency to incorporate the best elements of each alternative. As when choosing between capitalism and communism or between power politics and pacifism, King sought to synthesize alternative orientations: "An adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy, but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both." King described his graduate training as an attempt to bring together "the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology" in order to come to an understanding of man. His enormous respect for the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr derived from the pleasure he felt in finding a theological stance that synthesized faith and intellect. He probably heard echoes of his father's fundamentalism in Reinhold Niebuhr's neo-orthodoxy, which reaffirmed the limits of human perfectibility. Niebuhr provided an intellectual rationale for King's recognition of the limitations of liberal theology. As King wrote during these years, he had become "so enamored of the insights of liberalism that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything it encompasses." After reading Niebuhr, King recalled becoming more aware of "the depths and strength of sin" and

the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil. I realized that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism. I
also came to see that the superficial optimism of liberalism concerning human nature overlooked the fact that reason is darkened by sin. The more I thought about human nature, the more I saw how our tragic inclination for sin encourages us to rationalize our actions. liberalism failed to show that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.

By the time he finished his course work, King had come to affirm some of the enduring values of his religious heritage, particularly conceptions of a divine goodness capable of acting in history. In one qualifying examination King declared that, despite modern society's moral relativism, God's judgment was final and eternal. "God has planted in the fiber of the universe certain eternal laws which forever confront every man. They are absolute and not relative. There is an eternal and absolute distinction between right and wrong." One indispensable answer to the theodicy question, King argued, was contained in the concept of the suffering servant, one of the "most noble" teachings of the Old Testament. "His suffering is not due to something that he has done, but it is vicarious and redemptive. Through his suffering knowledge of God is spread to the unbelieving Gentiles and those unbelievers seeing that this suffering servant is innocent will become conscious of their sins and repent and thereby be redeemed. The nation would be healed by his [wounds]." The death of Jesus Christ on the cross was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the suffering servant, but King argued that humanity should not wait on His saving grace. An individual's "faith and fellowship with God," King wrote, was the "ultimate solution to the problem of suffering."

King's choice of a dissertation topic reflected an interest in the nature of God that derived both from his academic studies and from his preaching. In addition to writing several term papers on the topic, King wove the theme of theodicy into several sermons while at Boston, including one entitled "What Does It Mean to Believe in God?" In his introduction to the dissertation King explained that the conception of God should be examined because of "the central place which it occupies in any religion" and because of "the ever present need to interpret and clarify the God-concept."

By early 1953, when King enrolled in a course on dissertation writing at the beginning of his research, he was fairly certain about the conclusions he would reach in his dissertation. King recognized the limitations in the thinking of theologians Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. "Both overstress one side
of the divine life," he wrote, "while [minimizing] another basic aspect. Wieman stresses] the goodness of God while minimizing his power. Tillich stresses the power of God while [minimizing] his goodness."

With his own beliefs still rooted in an African American religious tradition that perceived God as a personal force interceding in history, King found Tillich's and Wieman's conceptions of divinity unworthy of worship. In the evaluative chapter, King expressed belief in a "living" God, not Tillich's "being-itself" or Wieman's "source of human good." "In God there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart; this God both evokes and answers prayer." Conceiving of such a God as a person was preferable to Tillich's and Wieman's use of abstract philosophical terms. "It would be better by far to admit that there are difficulties with an idea we know--such as personality--than to employ a term which is practically unknown to us in our experience."

King concluded that Tillich and Wieman both set forth a God who is less than personal, despite their comments to the contrary suggesting that God was more than personal, unable to be defined by the concept of personality. "Both Tillich and Wieman reject the conception of a personal God, and with this goes a rejection of the rationality, goodness and love of God in the full sense of the words."

Despite his disagreement with certain aspects of both men's conceptions of divinity, King appreciated their criticism of humanism. King approvingly noted that Tillich and Wieman both emphasized God's immanence, or "the primacy of God over everything else in the universe." "Such an emphasis," he argued, "sounds a much needed note in the face of a supernaturalism that finds nature so irrational that the order of creation can no longer be discerned in it, and history so meaningless that it all bears the 'minus sign' of alienation from God."

In a characteristic effort to reconcile two positions that were in dialectical tension, King extracted what he considered positive aspects of their thought to create an eclectic synthesis. Echoing his preliminary analysis of their positions, King asserted that "both Tillich and Wieman are partially correct in what they affirm and partially wrong in what they deny. Wieman is right in emphasizing the goodness of God, but wrong in minimizing his power. Likewise Tillich is right in emphasizing the power of God, but wrong in minimizing his goodness."

In the sermons King delivered while writing his dissertation, he expressed his conception of God using more vivid language than his stilted, derivative academic diction. He skillfully incorporated into his sermons those aspects of his theological training that affirmed his ties to the religion of his parents and grandparents. His father later affirmed that his son's roots in the African-
American preaching tradition remained strong even after years of graduate study. "M. L. was still a son of the Baptist South, there'd never be any doubt about that."

King's ability to blend these elements can be seen in his earliest known recorded sermon, "Rediscovering Lost Values." King delivered the sermon to a large Baptist church in Detroit in late February 1954, just days after finishing his final comprehensive examination and a few weeks before the graduate school approved his dissertation outline. In the Detroit sermon, King told the familiar biblical story of Joseph and Mary, who realized, while walking to Nazareth, that they had left Jesus behind in Jerusalem. Just as Joseph and Mary had returned to rejoin Jesus, King advised, society should rediscover the precious values that had become lost in the rationalizations that guided behavior in the modern world. "If we are to go forward," he said, "if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to go back. We've got to rediscover these precious values that we've left behind." Despite the many technological advances and material comforts of American society, King argued, humanity had lost the spiritual compass provided by a deep and abiding faith in God. "The real problem is that through our scientific genius we've made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius we've failed to make of it a brotherhood." King insisted that "all reality hinges on moral foundations," that "this is a moral universe, and ... there are moral laws of the universe, just as abiding as the physical laws." Decrying ethical relativism — "Now, I'm not trying to use a big word here" -- King expressed a belief in moral absolutes that evoked enthusiastic responses from the congregation.

I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. (Yes) Eternally so, absolutely so. It's wrong to hate. (Yes, That's right) It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong! (Amen) It's wrong in America, it's wrong in Germany, it's wrong in Russia, it's wrong in China! (Lord help him) It was wrong in two thousand BC, and it's wrong in nineteen-fifty-four AD! It always has been wrong, (That's right) and it always will be wrong! ... Some things in this universe are absolute. The God of the universe has made it so.

In King's view contemporary society had lost sight of this "mighty precious value," adopting instead "a pragmatic test for right and wrong." In the modern world, he asserted, most people believed that "it's all right to disobey the Ten Commandments, but just don't disobey the Eleventh, Thou shall not get caught." The moral decay that King identified in modern culture could be
recovered only by ethical living. "The thing that we need in the world today, is a group of men and women who will stand up for right and be opposed to wrong, wherever it is."

King argued that making ethical decisions was impossible without rediscovering the precious value of faith in God. King charged that many people, including those who attended church every Sunday, had lost their faith in God. "We must remember that it's possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips and deny his existence with your life." Returning to the biblical parable, King asserted that "we had gone a whole day's journey, and then we came to see that we had unconsciously ushered God out of the universe." The materialism of American consumer culture had caused some to lose sight of God, and King cautioned that "automobiles and subways, televisions and radios, dollars and cents, can never be substitutes for God."

King's sermon drew upon traditional African-American religious ideas, particularly the notion of God acting in human history. Alluding to a verse in Psalm 23 and to a familiar hymn, King concluded by affirming faith in the God "who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and causes us to fear no evil," in the God "who has been our help in ages past, and our hope for years to come, and our shelter in the time of storm, and our eternal home."

King concluded with a rousing affirmation of God as an integral part of his life. "As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. But to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Seen in the context of his preadult experiences, King's graduate school years enabled him to acquire academic credentials while retaining his basic religious beliefs. When he applied to Boston University's doctoral program, King had stressed his desire to enter the world of theological scholarship, stating that he was "desirous of teaching in a college or a school of religion. At Crozer, King had initially been estranged from his roots, but by the time he entered Boston University he had rediscovered the liberating potential of his African-American Baptist heritage. Although he clearly wanted to base his religious beliefs on solid theological foundations, he left Boston as a preacher rather than as a scholar. Forging an eclectic synthesis from such diverse sources as personalism, theological liberalism, neo-orthodox theology, and the activist, Bible-centered religion of his heritage, King affirmed his abiding faith in a God who was both a comforting personal presence and a powerful spiritual force.
acting in history for righteousness. This faith would sustain him as the civil rights movement irreversibly transformed his life.

King's rapid rise to prominence resulted from his ability to combine the insights of European-American theological scholarship with those of African-American homiletics. Although his published descriptions of his 11 pilgrimage to non-violence" generally emphasized the impact of his academic training," in more personal statements he acknowledged his black Baptist roots. "I am many things to many people," King acknowledged in 1965, "but in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergymen, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher." Rather than being torn between mutually exclusive cultural traditions, King's public, transracial ministry marked a convergence of theological scholarship and social gospel practice. Drawing upon a variety of intellectual and religious traditions to arouse and enlighten his listeners, King was profoundly affected by his experiences both as a preacher's son at Ebenezer and as a diligent student at Crozer Seminary and Boston University. King's theological education distinguished him from all but a few African-American preachers and temporarily separated him from his childhood environment, but theological studies ultimately led King to a deeper appreciation of traditional African-American conceptions of God as a source of support, especially in times of personal crisis. Later in his career as a movement leader, King would reflect that when he had "been battered by the storms of persecution," he had gained strength and determination from

the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believe[d] in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years.

Clayborne Carson