

Martin Luther King, Jr., as Scholar: A Reexamination of His Theological Writings

Clayborne Carson, with Peter Holloran, Ralph E. Luker,
and Penny Russell

What is the historical and biographical significance of the papers Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote as a divinity student at Crozer Theological Seminary and as a doctoral student at Boston University? Judged retroactively by the standards of academic scholarship, they are tragically flawed by numerous instances of plagiarism. Moreover, even before the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project's discovery of the citation deficiencies in the papers, only a few students of King had thought them deserving of the type of careful study that would have exposed those deficiencies. Scholars, seeing the papers through the distorting prism of King's subsequent fame and martyrdom, usually considered them insignificant, except for the few clues they provide regarding the nonviolent protest strategies King later advocated.¹ These papers disclose new meanings, however, when they are studied as evidence of King's effort to construct an identity as a theologian and preacher rather than as undistinguished scholarship or as evidence of King's adoption of ideas regarding nonviolent strategies of change.

King's appropriations of the words and ideas of others should certainly not be

Clayborne Carson is senior editor and director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers project. Peter Holloran is an editorial assistant on the project. Ralph E. Luker and Penny Russell are editors of volumes 1 and 2 of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* The King Project is sponsored by the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., in Atlanta, and conducted in association with Stanford University and Emory University. The University of California Press will publish volumes 1 and 2 of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* during 1992.

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¹ For studies that consult Martin Luther King, Jr.'s student papers, see James P. Hanigan, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Foundations of Nonviolence* (Lanham, 1984); John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, 1982); Frederick L. Downing, *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon, 1986); Thomas Jarl Sheppard Mikelson, "The Negro's God in the Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Social Community and Theological Discourse" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1988); Ervin Smith, *The Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1981); Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, 1974); and Warren E. Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Nonviolence," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (Jan.-March 1973), 97-111.

understood merely as violations of academic rules. They also indicate his singular ability to intertwine his words and ideas with those of others to express his beliefs persuasively and to construct a persona with broad transracial appeal. Though in large measure derivative, King's student papers document an important stage in the development of his thought and leadership qualities. As he mined theological texts for nuggets of cogency that would serve his academic ends, King resolved longstanding religious doubts and refined a method of eclectic composition that would enrich his sermons, speeches, and published writings.

King himself complicated scholarly understanding of his academic experiences through ambiguous autobiographical statements about his years at Crozer and Boston. Particularly in his first and most widely read book, *Stride toward Freedom*, King drew on various sources to strengthen his public image as a knowledgeable exponent of Christian-Gandhian strategies of nonviolent struggle. As Keith D. Miller has demonstrated, King's account, in a chapter entitled "Pilgrimage to Non-violence," obscured the extent to which his understanding of Gandhism and other social reform strategies derived from a network of Social Gospel advocates, both black and white. Miller's work reflects a trend in King scholarship toward greater recognition of the impact of African-American religious influences on King's thought and of black religious leaders as models for his ministry.² Rather than acknowledging his dependence on nonscholarly and African-American sources, however, King, in *Stride toward Freedom*, suggested that his sociopolitical ideas derived mainly from his readings of major theological texts. King downplayed the impact of his early experiences as the grandson of the Reverend A. D. Williams, a founder

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (San Francisco, 1958). See Keith D. Miller, "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," *PMLA*, 105 (Jan. 1990), 70-82. Miller suggests that King's description of his intellectual development in *Stride toward Freedom* masked a "careful process of self-making." Miller has also indicated how King, in his published writings and oral statements, used appropriated passages to construct a persona. Miller's work builds upon earlier suggestions that King, as a minister and political leader, appropriated the ideas and words of others. David J. Garrow, for example, mentions that King's publications were often collectively authored and, drawing on the work of Ira Zepp, indicates that some passages of *Stride toward Freedom* were taken from unattributed sources. See David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 50; and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., "The Intellectual Sources of the Ethical Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., As Traced in His Writings with Special Reference to the Beloved Community" (Ph.D. diss., St. Mary's Seminary and University, 1971), 145, 208, 143-47. See also Keith D. Miller, "The Influence of a Liberal Homiletic Tradition on *Strength to Love* by Martin Luther King, Jr." (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1984); Keith D. Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Borrows a Revolution: Argument, Audience, and Implications of a Secondhand Universe," *College English*, 48 (March 1986), 249-65; Keith D. Miller, "Comment and Response," *ibid.*, 49 (April 1987), 476-80. On the black influences on King, see, for example, Lewis V. Baldwin, "Understanding Martin Luther King, Jr., within the Context of Southern Black Religious History," *Journal of Religious Studies*, 13 (no. 2, 1987), 1-26; Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Church, and the Black Messianic Vision," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 12 (Fall 1984/Spring 1985), 93-108; James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today*, 40 (Jan. 1984), 409-20; James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 40 (Jan. 1986), 21-39; David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *ibid.*, 5-20; Paul R. Garber, "Too Much Taming of Martin Luther King, Jr.?" *Christian Century*, June 5, 1974, p. 636; Paul R. Garber, "Black Theology: The Latter Day Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 2 (Spring 1975), 100-113; and Mikelson, "The Negro's God in the Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr." Mikelson argued that "the distinctive attributes of God in his thought belong preeminently to his people, to Americans of African descent." *Ibid.*, 1.

of the Atlanta chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); the son of the Reverend Martin Luther King, a leader of civil rights protests in the 1930s and 1940s; and an acquaintance of numerous other black proponents of the Social Gospel, including President Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College, Morehouse religion professor George D. Kelsey, and Atlanta minister William Holmes Borders. Instead, King emphasized the refinement of his ideas at predominantly white institutions. "Not until I entered Crozer Theological Seminary in 1948 . . . did I begin a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil," he explained. While emphasizing his concern with social justice issues while a student, King also understated the importance he gave to the abstract theological issues that were actually the focus of his graduate school papers. "Although my major interest was in the fields of theology and philosophy," King remarked, "I spent a great deal of time reading the works of great social philosophers." Providing graphic descriptions of his initial encounters with the ideas of Walter Rauschenbusch, Karl Marx, and Mahatma Gandhi, King mentioned only briefly his study of systematic theology. His references to his theological readings were vague and usually in connection with their political implications. The section on his graduate school experiences includes only a brief passage describing his study of "personalistic philosophy" under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. This "personal idealism," King asserted, became his "basic philosophical position." He added that when he received his doctorate from Boston University in 1955, the "relatively divergent intellectual forces" of his academic training were "converging into a positive social philosophy."³

King's desire to stress the social and political implications of his theological training was understandable given his intended audience. As is usual for the autobiographical writing of public figures, *Stride toward Freedom* was intended to mold an image as well as to reveal personal experiences. Stressing the political uses he would make of his studies, rather than his primarily theological concerns when he wrote them, King reconstructed his past to serve his current purposes. He also overstated his familiarity with the ideas of leading intellectuals, thus underrating the importance of less prominent intellectuals and influences. The book succeeded in shaping scholarly understanding of King's intellectual development; few subsequent biographies have departed from its interpretive framework. Unfortunately, King's explanation of the development of his social and political views discouraged later researchers from giving adequate attention to either the African-American sources of his religious activism or the European-American sources of his theological perspective. Discounting the scholarly significance of his student writings in systematic theology has led many King biographers to neglect their biographical significance. Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s generally laudatory biography, initially published during King's lifetime, set the tone for later accounts by offering faint praise for

³ King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 90, 91, 100, 101. For a similar account, see Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," *Christian Century*, April 13, 1960, pp. 439-41. This article was revised for inclusion in Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Cleveland, 1963).

his academic achievements and concluding that King's dissertation gave him "discipline and training in the organization of ideas, if not in the creation of ideas." In the initial edition of his biography, David L. Lewis described King as lacking "the comprehensive critical apparatus and the inspired vision that bless good philosophers"; although "highly competent scholastically," King possessed an intelligence that was, in Lewis's view, "essentially derivative." James P. Hanigan, one of the few scholars to attempt a systematic study of King's ideas, similarly dismissed the notion of King as a major theologian—"a somewhat surprising assessment of a man who wrote not one word of formal theology after finishing his unpublished doctoral dissertation." This tendency to downplay King's scholarly abilities and aspirations probably accounts for the failure of previous accounts of King's student years to note the citation deficiencies of his academic writings.⁴

King's academic papers nevertheless deserve serious study because they provide crucial evidence about his struggle to reconcile his deep feeling for African-American religious practices with his persistent theological doubts. King overcame his initial reluctance to enter the ministry only as he began to recognize his father and grandfather as appealing role models who had shown that pastoring could be combined with social activism. Like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him, King came to accept the black church as an institution in which he could gain distinction and a sense of rectitude while serving the black community. As a dutiful minister's son, he felt an inalienable sense of church membership and clerical competence even while becoming a dissenter within the black Baptist tradition. King's student papers reveal both his scholarly pretensions and his honest effort to reconcile the emotional satisfactions of traditional African-American religion with the intellectual clarity he sought in theological scholarship.

In an especially revealing Crozer paper entitled "An Autobiography of Religious Development," King traced this tension in his religious beliefs to his childhood, when he had felt unmoved by an evangelist visiting Ebenezer who urged his audience to join the church. King had followed his older sister in coming forward, but he realized that he "joined the church not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister." A "questioning and precocious type," he remembered shocking his Sunday school class at the age of thirteen "by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus." After entering Morehouse College at the age of fifteen, he had seen "a gap between what I had learned in Sunday School and what I was learning in college." His religious doubts "began to spring forth unrelentingly" until Professor Kelsey showed him "that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape." Despite this religious skepticism, however, King had already decided on a ministerial career by the time he graduated from Morehouse. Theological differences did not undermine his admiration for his father's "noble example." As a student at Crozer, he still felt

⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago, 1976); David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1970), 45; Hanigan, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence*, 38. See also the similar assessment of Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion* (Boston, 1966), 5-9.

the effects "of the noble moral and ethical ideals I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me, and even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away from them." Having already joined the ministry in response to "an inescapable urge to serve society," King at first accepted the Christian liberalism of his Crozer professors "with relative ease."⁵ But his theological studies focused increasingly on the metaphysics of God and religion, rather than on the social role of the Christian church. His religious upbringing had supplied satisfying answers regarding the latter; it offered him less guidance on the former.

At Crozer, King clarified his views of God and humanity and struggled to reconcile his own experience with his readings in theology. Choosing Crozer because of its reputation for liberalism and critical biblical scholarship, King initially identified with that ethos. The papers he wrote during his first-year courses on critical biblical scholarship demonstrated his appreciation of the significance of archaeological and historical evidence in the study of Scripture. Those essays satisfied the demanding standards of the distinguished biblical scholars James Bennett Pritchard and Morton Scott Enslin, but they lack self-revelatory passages and seem to have engaged King only superficially. King was more drawn to theology as taught by George Washington Davis, and he took nearly a third of his courses at Crozer with Davis.⁶ Davis exposed King to the writings of leading modern theologians, introducing him to the issues that would become the central concerns of his doctoral studies. As he became absorbed in the modern theological literature, King increasingly referred to his personal experiences to explain his gradual movement from an uncritical liberalism toward greater appreciation for traditional religious perspectives. In an essay for Davis entitled "How Modern Christians Should Think About Man," he argued that liberals too "easily cast aside the term sin, failing to realize that many of our present ills result from the sins of men." King admitted that his conception of man was

going though a state of transition. At one time I find myself leaning toward a mild neo-orthodox view of man, and at other times I find myself leaning toward a liberal view of man. The former leaning may root back to certain experiences that I had in the south with a vicious race problem. Some of the experiences that I encountered there made it very difficult for me to believe in the essential goodness of man.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development," paper written at Crozer Theological Seminary for the course Religious Development of Personality taught by George Washington Davis, [Sept. 12–Nov. 22, 1950], folder 22, box 106, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University). King referred to his "inescapable urge" in Martin Luther King, Jr., Application for Admission to Crozer Theological Seminary, [Feb. 1948], Crozer Theological Seminary Records (Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y.).

⁶ King received B+ or higher grades in Davis's theology courses after receiving B and B- grades in his first-year Old and New Testament courses. Davis's enthusiastic assessment of King's "exceptional intellectual ability" and his belief that King had "the mind" to "make an excellent minister or teacher" contrasts with Enslin's racially defined judgment that King would become "a big strong man among his people," who would "find ample opportunity for useful service" as one of the "comparative small number of forward-looking and thoroughly trained negro leaders." George W. Davis, "Crozer Theological Seminary Placement Committee: Confidential Evaluation of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Nov. 15, 1950, Crozer Records; Morton Scott Enslin, "Crozer Theological Seminary Placement Committee: Confidential Evaluation of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Nov. 21, 1950, *ibid.*; Enslin to Chester M. Altet, dean of Boston University's Graduate School, Dec. 14, 1950, *ibid.*

On the other hand part of my liberal leaning has its source in another branch of the same root. [In] noticing the gradual improvements of this same race problem I came to see some noble possibilities in human nature. Also my liberal leaning may root back to the great imprint that many liberal theologians have left upon me and to my ever present desire to be optimistic about human nature.

In the essay King acknowledged that he had become "a victim of eclecticism," seeking to "synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology," particularly the writings of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. Rejecting "one-sided generalizations about man," he concluded that "we shall be closest to the authentic Christian interpretation of man if we avoid both of these extremes." This statement, although largely appropriated from Walter Marshall Horton, was consistent with the views King expressed in other papers and exams; that consistency indicates how King's papers could be derivative yet reliable as expressions of his views.⁷

King's increasing tendency to acknowledge the validity of some neoorthodox criticisms of Christian liberalism may have been related to events in his personal life that contradicted Crozer's ethos of interracial harmony. On one occasion a southern white student pulled a gun on King because he mistakenly believed that King had victimized him as a prank. During the summer after his second year at Crozer, King was involved in another incident that reminded him of his vulnerability to racial discrimination when he ventured off campus and was denied service at a New Jersey tavern.⁸

At the heart of King's search for an intellectually and emotionally satisfying religious faith was an inquiry into the nature of divinity. Having failed to experience God's presence directly through an abrupt conversion experience, King sought a set of theological ideas that would satisfy his desire for a conception of God that was consistent with his experiences. Although King was initially convinced "that the most valid conception of God is that of theism," he had found himself during his last year at Crozer "quite confused as to which definition [of God] was the most adequate." King's intellectual search culminated in Davis's course on the Philosophy of Religion when he read Edgar S. Brightman's *A Philosophy of Religion* and adopted personalism as his theological perspective. King's essay on Brightman's book displayed the intensity of his search for religious understanding while at the same time appropriating many of Brightman's words. "How I long now for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book," King concluded. "It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless." In a remarkably candid statement for a third-year seminarian, he reflected on his struggle to achieve a sense of religious contentment.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "How Modern Christians Should Think About Man," [Nov. 29, 1949-Feb. 15, 1950], folder 14, box 112, King Papers (Mugar Library). Cf. Walter Marshall Horton, "The Christian Understanding of Man," in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, ed. T. E. Jessop et al. (London, 1938), 240.

⁸ L. D. Reddick, *Crusade without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1959), 82; Complaint lodged by Walter R. McCall, *State of New Jersey v. Ernest Nichols*, June 12, 1950 (in W. Thomas McGann's possession).

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.⁹

Choosing Boston University's School of Theology because of the presence of Brightman and other leading personalists, King continued his inquiry into the nature of divinity while depending increasingly on the use of appropriated passages to formulate his synthesis of competing theological perspectives. King's Boston papers are, for the most part, competent yet routine responses to assignments, but some also include the personal digressions that enliven some of the Crozer essays. King's dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," though unoriginal in its expository chapters and stylistically languid, reflected King's religious perspective as he concluded seven years of graduate study. Cautiously critical of Wieman and Tillich, King reaffirmed his commitment to personalist theology and implicitly to conceptions of God rooted in African-American religious traditions.¹⁰ Setting forth a theme he would develop in many later sermons, King rejected the view that God was "supra-personal"—that is, unable to be defined by the concept of personality: "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." Evaluating Tillich and Wieman according to the standards of personalism and the needs of the preacher, King questioned the "positive religious value" of their conceptions of God and posited instead a God who made possible "true fellowship and communion," who was "responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart," a God who "both evokes and answers prayer." He concluded that Tillich's and Wieman's theologies were "lacking in positive religious value. Both concepts are too impersonal to express adequately the Christian conception of God. They provide neither the conditions of true fellowship with God nor the assurance of his goodness." King, in short, evaluated the two theologians primarily on the basis of his preconceived, experiential notion of a personal God rather than on the basis of logical shortcomings in their theological writings. Even when he applauded Tillich's and Wieman's acknowledgment of "the primacy of God over everything else in the universe," his evaluation was rooted in a priori assumptions.

They do insist that religion begins with God and that man cannot have faith apart from him. They do proclaim that apart from God our human efforts turn to ashes

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Examination Answers, Christian Theology for Today," [Nov. 29, 1949–Feb. 15, 1950], folder 23, box 113, King Papers (Mugar Library); Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Conception and Impression of Religion Drawn from Dr. Brightman's Book Entitled *A Philosophy of Religion*," [March 28, 1951], folder 14, box 112, *ibid.*; Edgar S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 1940). King later explained personalism's appeal for him. Its "insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality." King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 100.

¹⁰ The following discussion of King's dissertation is informed by Mikelson, "The Negro's God in the Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr."

and our sunrises into darkest night. They do suggest that man is not sufficient to himself for life, but is dependent upon God. All of this is good, and it may be a necessary corrective to a generation that has had all too much faith in man and all too little faith in God.¹¹

King's assumptions about God and humanity drew from homiletic traditions as well as from a distinctive African-American Social Gospel intellectual tradition represented in the ideas of Benjamin Mays, William Holmes Borders, Howard Thurman, and others.

King's struggle to come to terms with his African-American religious heritage expressed itself through his continuing preference for concepts of God that provided emotional as well as intellectual satisfaction and through his deepening acceptance of his calling as a preacher. During his first years of study at predominantly white institutions, King's enthusiasm for theological abstractions and interracial campus life may have contributed to occasional feelings of alienation from his cultural roots and seemingly preordained career path. A black pastor who observed King's performance as a participant in Crozer's fieldwork program found him only average in pulpit ability. Given his experience at Ebenezer, that area should have been a strength. The evaluator also asserted that King exhibited "an attitude of aloofness, disdain & possible snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of ordinary people. Also, a smugness that refuses to adapt itself to the demands of ministering effectively to the average Negro congregation." Notwithstanding this evaluation and his continuing uneasiness with the emotionalism and scriptural literalism he associated with African-American religion, King became effective as a preacher, serving as Ebenezer's assistant pastor during summer breaks and taking many homiletics courses at Crozer. Taylor Branch's account suggests that King gradually learned to combine scholarly sophistication with oratorical skill, with the result that his fellow students "so admired his preaching technique that they packed the chapel whenever he delivered the regular Thursday student sermon, and kibitzers drifted into practice preaching classes when King was at the podium." Rather than allowing his theological studies to detract from his effectiveness as a

¹¹ See Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1955), 268, 272, 275, 285-86. In the last-quoted passage, as elsewhere in the dissertation, King borrowed from his own earlier papers as well as from other writers. See similar ideas in George Washington Davis, "Some Theological Continuities in the Crisis Theology," *Crozer Quarterly*, 27 (July 1950), 217-48.

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

See also King, "Karl Barth's Conception of God," [Jan. 2, 1952], folder 20, box 113, King Papers (Mugar Library); Martin Luther King, Jr., "Contemporary Continental Theology," [Sept. 13, 1951-Jan. 15, 1952?], folder 14, box 112, *ibid.*; and Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther with that of Calvin," May 15, 1953, folder 17, *ibid.*

preacher, King filled voluminous notebooks with passages from his readings that would later embellish his sermons.¹²

While King studied at Boston University, his preaching activities absorbed ever greater amounts of his time and became more central to his persona. King's Boston writings suggest that, rather than being driven by a need to resolve religious and career doubts, he had become content to refine the personalist perspective he had adopted at Crozer and to assimilate those aspects of scholarship that could be useful in preaching. When applying to Boston, King had insisted that "scholarship" was his goal and expressed the belief that theology "should be as scientific . . . as any other discipline," but he soon decided that he should practice his academic skills as pastor of a southern church. At Boston, while acquiring more theological erudition, King increasingly questioned the intellectual assumptions and professional values associated with academic theology. King's ardent effort to find a middle ground between academic rationalism and the comforting verities of African-American religion can be seen in his earliest recorded sermon, "Rediscovering Lost Values," delivered in 1954 to a large black Baptist church in Detroit. After utilizing language that identified him as a student of systematic theology—"all reality has spiritual control" and "there is a God behind the process"—King employed language that resonated with the rhythms of the black Baptist tradition and evoked passionate responses from the congregation. King emphasized enduring religious values and advised against "little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow."

I'm not going to put my ultimate faith in the little gods that can be destroyed in an atomic age (*Yes*), but the God who has been our help in ages past (*Come on*), and our hope for years to come (*All right*), and our shelter in the time of storm (*Oh yes*), and our eternal home (*Come on*). That's the God that I'm putting my ultimate faith in (*Oh yes, Come on now*). That's the God that I call upon you to worship this morning.¹³

King's formal academic work at Boston was guided by DeWolf, who took over as King's adviser when Brightman died. A former minister himself, DeWolf occasionally listened to King preach and appreciated his student's preaching abilities. He later judged King as "a very good student, all business, a scholar's scholar, one digging deeply to work out and think through his philosophy of religion and life." But DeWolf was a lax mentor who did not demand of King the analytical precision that might have prepared him for a career of scholarly writing. Even if DeWolf was not consciously aware of the plagiarized passages in King's essays, his obliviousness to them suggests that he asked little more of King than accurate explication and judicious synthesis. DeWolf may have conceded more than he realized when he argued,

¹² See William E. Gardner, "Crozer Theological Seminary Field Work Department Raising Sheet for Martin Luther King, Jr.," [Sept.-Dec. 1, 1950], Crozer Records; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York, 1988), 75.

¹³ Martin Luther King, Jr., Application for Admission to Boston University, Jan. 11, 1951 (in S. Paul Schilling's possession); Martin Luther King, Jr., "Rediscovering Lost Values," sermon at Second Baptist Church, Detroit, 1954, tape (Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, Stanford, Calif.).

soon after King's death, against those who questioned the originality of King's religious views. Asserting that "all modern theology which is competent is 'essentially derivative,'" DeWolf even surmised that King as a public figure had derived his "system of positive theological belief" from his mentor: "occasionally I find his language following closely the special terms of my own lectures and writings."¹⁴

DeWolf recommended his student for several academic positions, and King never completely abandoned his ambition to pursue an academic career. Even after deciding to become pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King was tempted by an offer from an Illinois college. He replied that he was not considering leaving Dexter in the immediate future but might be available in a few years.¹⁵ Yet, despite occasional expressions of interest in academic positions, King increasingly accepted his calling as an academically educated activist minister, rather than an academic theologian. By the time he received his doctorate, King had already served almost a year as Dexter's pastor; within a year, he would begin to construct a new public identity as a sophisticated advocate of social change. His identity as a preacher remained the common element linking his years as a theological student and his years as a public figure. One of only a few black ministers with a doctorate from an accredited university, King ultimately used his scholarly credentials to supplement, rather than replace, his identity as a preacher. After leaving Boston, he displayed little interest in making an original contribution to scholarly discourse. His later writings probably reflected his recognition that preaching and political advocacy were his principal gifts.

As he entered public life, King's theological training became an asset, distinguishing him from other black leaders and providing him with intellectual resources that enhanced his ability to influence white middle-class public opinion. Even his ability to appropriate texts to express his opinions was a benefit as he drafted public statements that would not require citations. His characteristic compositional method contributed to the rhetorical skills that became widely admired when King was called unexpectedly to national leadership. His appropriations of major scholarly texts satisfied his teachers and advanced his personal ambitions; his use of political, philosophical, and literary texts—particularly those expressing the nation's democratic ideals—inspired and mobilized many Americans, thereby advancing the

¹⁴ L. Harold DeWolf interview by Mervyn Warren, March 6, 1966, quoted in Mervyn Warren, "A Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., Pastor and Pulpit Orator" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1966), 41; L. Harold DeWolf, "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Theologian," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 4 (Spring 1977), 10. DeWolf commented: "The main original theological contribution of his tragically shortened career was his remarkably consistent translating of this theology into action. In this process he related his theological beliefs in an authentic and original way to various social theories and movements." *Ibid.* DeWolf also referred to King as one of his "half dozen best scholars" during his years of teaching. See L. Harold DeWolf interview by John H. Britton, April 23, 1968, Oral History Collection (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.).

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., to Dean M. C. Ballenger, Shurtleff College, Dec. 15, 1955, folder 50, box 117, King Papers (Mugar Library). In 1958, King rejected an offer from Garrett Biblical Institute, a predominantly white seminary in Illinois, stating that although the desire to teach "still lingers somewhere in my subconscious mind," he felt that his "place is here in the deep South doing all in my power to alleviate the tensions that exist between Negro and white citizens." King to Dr. Dwight Loder, Aug. 5, 1958, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Library and Archives, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Ga.).

cause of social justice. His use, as a student and as a leader, of hegemonic or canonized cultural materials enabled him to create a transracial identity that served his own needs and those of African Americans. Deciding against a career as a theologian, King nevertheless became one of the most effective popularizers of theological ideas in the twentieth century.

In his ministry and his civil rights leadership, King continued to utilize African-American and European-American cultural resources to enhance his oratory and writing. As a public figure, King gradually became more conscious of the tension between the two traditions, occasionally contrasting them and expressing his preference for black folk religion. During the early 1960s, reflecting on the changes in his religious beliefs that had resulted from years of civil rights activism (and borrowing words from his dissertation), he acknowledged that

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 experiences of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. . . . So in the truest sense of the Word, God is a living God. In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart; *this* God both evokes and answers prayer.¹⁶

The upsurge of racial militancy among blacks during the mid-1960s made King ever more conscious of the tension inherent in his roles as a racial leader and a racial diplomat. Although he left behind no diary or reflective journal that would allow scholars to measure the psychological costs of his effort to respond to the conflicting demands placed upon him, King's writings and oral statements hint that he struggled to maintain his core identity while sustaining his public personae. While the influence of the African-American religious tradition was immediately apparent in King's oratory, it was less evident in his theological writings, whose vocabulary contained few traces of African-American folk culture, linguistic patterns, or religious idiom. Yet, although King's literary persona remained largely that of a culturally assimilated religious leader, he occasionally noted the contrast between theological discourse and the emotionally evocative language of the black church. In a 1965 sermon, King advised his congregation that "we do not need to get philosophical about Him, because we get lost in the atmosphere of philosophy and theology sometimes." He compared Tillich's notion of God as "the new being" to the "poetic language" of black religion. "Sometimes when we've tried to see the meaning of Jesus we've said he's the lily of the valley, . . . a bright and morning star. . . . a rock in a weary land. . . . a shelter in the time of storm. . . . a mother to the motherless, and a father to the fatherless. At times we've just ended up saying he's my everything."¹⁷

As a minister and protest leader, King benefited from his academic credentials and made effective use of the skills he gained as a graduate student. Notwithstanding his often-expressed desire to leave the pressing demands of movement

¹⁶ King, *Strength to Love*, 154-55.

¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Is the Universe Friendly," sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dec. 12, 1965, King Papers (King Center).

leadership for the relative calm of academic life, however, he moved readily into the ministry and after leaving Dexter served as a pastor at Ebenezer until his death. His primary identity was clearly that of a preacher. In 1965, for example, while noting that he was "many things to many people: Civil Rights leader, agitator, troublemaker and orator," King reaffirmed those facets of his personality that preceded his formal education, undergirded his public image, and encompassed his strengths and limitations as a student and a leader: "I am fundamentally a clergyman, 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."¹⁸

King's few public recollections of his graduate school experiences did not indicate conscious concern that his student compositions might have violated academic rules. Uncomfortable with his public image, even while sometimes cultivating it, he often acknowledged his limitations and insisted that he was a product of a freedom movement greater than himself. Accepting the possibility that his flaws might detract from his public image, King understood that his historical importance ultimately derived, not from his intrinsic attributes, but from the remarkable uses he made of them.

King's borrowings from European-American and African-American religious thought supplied him with a framework for understanding the flaws in his character. He may simply have concluded that his academic credentials and theological readings had served positive purposes. In one of his last sermons, King may have spoken of his own life when he addressed the Ebenezer congregation on a passage from the book of Mark. Recounting the request of James and John to sit beside Jesus, King saw the two men's desire for recognition as understandable: "Before we condemn them too quickly, let us look calmly and honestly at ourselves, and we will discover that we too have those basic desires for recognition. . . . We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade." He explained, "Somehow this warm glow we feel when we are praised, or when our name is in print, is something of the vitamin A to our ego." He warned, however, that the "drum major instinct" was dangerous if not restrained. "It causes you to lie about who you know sometimes," "to try to identify with the so-called big name people." Feelings of snobbishness could even invade the church: "The church is the one place where a Ph.D. ought to forget that he's a Ph.D." King's interpretation of the biblical story was that Jesus did not oppose the drum major instinct but instead believed that it should be put to good purposes. "If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. . . . You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve." He ended the sermon by referring to his own desire for recognition, separating those aspects of his identity that were superficial from the ones that

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," *Ebony*, 20 (Aug. 1965), 76.

he deemed were essential. Suggesting the text for his eulogy, King advised: "Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. . . . Tell him not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others."¹⁹

¹⁹ This sermon appears in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco, 1986), 267. The sermon is based on J. Wallace Hamilton's "Drum-Major Innings." See Keith Miller, "Epistemology of a Drum Major," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 18 (Summer/Fall 1988), 225-36; and J. Wallace Hamilton, *Ride the Wild Horses!* (Westwood, 1952).