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The Preaching and Public Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.

MT703 Integrative Theological Reflection Paper

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This is a theological reflection paper; so I will make a few assertions which seem to me relevant today, particularly in overcoming cultural and racial division and the quest for a peaceful and just world. That is to ask, “What can we learn today from the Civil Rights Movement and how shall what we learn be applied in today’s world?”

The foundational approach to answering this question is, for me, the use of dialog. At least that is what Dr. King would have said. King drew from Gandhi, who believed that “the spirituality of nonviolence begins within persons, and moves out from there ... *It pursues dialogue...*”¹ The dialog I propose for Martin Luther King is not with myself, but with Martin Buber, one who was King’s elder by one generation, Buber largely a product of WWI and King the product of the aftermath of WWII.

Both are 20th century theologians, both spoke to a traumatized people, both advocated a response of nonviolence, and both lived to see the the first fruits of their life work (the establishment of Israel for Buber, the passing of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act for King). Unfortunately, the problems they sought to address remain with us today (Israeli-Arab war for Buber, racial animosity for King). Therefore I intend to compare and contrast the lives and teachings of these two great theologians and draw assertions from how a dialog of Buber and King would unfold.

My historical sources are Maurice Friedman, Buber’s primary English translator and author of *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*, and Richard Lischer, author of *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word that Moved America*. I am also drawing significantly from Anthony Hunt’s *I’ve Seen the Promised Land: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the 21st Century Quest for the Beloved Community*, Sydney Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of the*

1. Anthony C. Hunt. *I’ve Seen the Promised Land : Martin Luther King, Jr. And the 21st Century Quest for the Beloved Community*, (Levering, MI: Wyndham Hall Press), 63

American People, and “Josiah Royce”, an entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Kelly A. Parker and Scott Pratt.

These assertions are clarified by practices and principles contained in the Arbing Institute’s principles which are based on the teachings of Buber and applied in their “outward facing” workshops. These workshops include Outward Inclusion, a workshop that addresses inclusion and diversity in corporate environments.² They are also clarified and shaped by my participation in Anthony Hunt’s *Retracing the Steps of Freedom Alabama Immersion 2025*.

My assertions are:

1. King’s message about “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” is not only a message for individuals, but also for what he identified as the beloved community. When applied to social realities we have not only a dream or vision, as articulated by King, but also a roadmap for achieving a peaceful world, through dialogue, as articulated by Buber. King’s 3-dimensional instincts of 1953 illustrate his essential desire. They were solid as a desire or vision, but without a means of implementation. Buber’s dialogical principles might have provided him and the Civil Rights Movement a method of solidifying political gains with social enhancement.

2. Martin Buber’s I-Thou focus might have been a better mentor to King than was Gandhi’s teaching of Satyagraha. Buber was no pacifist; he rebutted Gandhi’s call to not use violence by any means. King preached nonviolence, particularly regarding political objectives and prophetic leadership. But his “aggressive, even coercive tactics,” noted by Lischer,³ would likely have been channeled by Buber’s call to “use force and give myself up into God’s hands... In an echo of his 1926 poem ‘Power and Love,’ Buber confessed: ‘We should be able even to fight for justice—but to fight lovingly.’ ”⁴

2. I acknowledge that the Arbing Institute teachings are not peer reviewed, but they are relevant in a way that historical treatises are not able to provide. I became aware of the Arbing Institute in 2019 when The United Methodist Church struggled with the possibility of splitting because of disagreements about homosexuality. Leaders in the denomination had engaged with Arbing to help resolve the differences. My own denomination was struggling with division, not about homosexuality, but about racial justice. After reading *The Anatomy of Peace*, an Arbing publication, I attended their Outward Performance workshop in Tyson’s Corner and, over several years, became licensed to facilitate that workshop and also Outward Inclusion.

3. Richard Lischer. *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word That Moved America*. Updated edition. (New York: Oxford University Press), 213

4. Maurice S. Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*. 1st ed. (New York: Paragon House), 256

3. Dr. King was *called* to be a pastor. He was *pulled* into becoming a prophet and subsequently *pushed* into becoming an apocalypticist. The pull into his prophetic ministry is well documented and well presented in Dr. Hunt's Alabama Immersion offering. The push into apocalypticism, occurring primarily after the legislative victories of 1963 and 1965 and after the events which occurred in Alabama, was something Martin Buber would have cautioned King to resist.

From Dream/Vision to Roadmap for Social Enhancement. By the end of his life, King was disappointed with liberalism in general and with the response of white ministers in particular. Lischer implies that this disappointment led to a relinquishment of his vision of the beloved community:

Young King was loath to relinquish a vision of the whole, what the Social Gospellers had called "the beloved community" on earth. King's eventual break with liberalism had less to do with the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr than it did with his disgust at liberalism's paternalism in the Civil Rights Movement and its failure of nerve on Vietnam. By the end of his life King was disillusioned not only with theological and political liberalism but with liberals who betrayed him in his hour of greatest need.⁵

Is it not possible that King's disillusionment was because there was no apparent practical way to solidify the gains achieved with the civil rights and voting rights legislation into constructive engagement with moderate whites? That is not to say that King did not begin all his campaigns with a call for dialog with his political opponents. He did. Further, the Lischer and Hunt sources do not reveal any reluctance on King's part during or after the campaigns, nor after the legislative achievements, to enter into dialog with anyone. So, in a sense, there was an impasse in the movement for the beloved community.

Here is what Buber might have said to King. Dialog is "*dialogue in the face of the utter newness of every moment.*"⁶ Such dialog cannot occur with any expectations, according to Buber. They do not occur to find "common ground" or seek a compromise; rather they can only occur to discover in the other something that is human. In the Arbiner terminology, dialog occurs in

5. Lischer, 61

6. Freidman, 248

order to “meet to learn” because the other is regarded as a person, not an object of resistance. Such dialog makes no promises.

I remember well, as a 12-year-old boy, watching Lyndon Johnson emphatic statement “We shall overcome” in his 1965 State of the Union message. My naive impression was that Johnson had a plan to resolve racial animosity, something more than passing of Voting Rights legislation. As a naive white boy I thought somehow my white community (rural Pennsylvania) would become an integrated community of middle class whites *and blacks*. To me, the President, as head of state as well as head of government, meant he was as much a cultural leader as were the clergy. We don’t know what might have occurred if Johnson had pushed for and facilitated dialog after the 1965 Voting Rights Act had been passed. That did not happen and the shift by King from racial injustice to opposition of the Vietnam war alienated Johnson.

If King were to reply to Buber’s about his form of dialog in the face of utter newness of every moment, dialog without expectation, he would likely have said that establishment of the beloved community has not yet been accomplished. Protest has worked thus far and protest is necessary to complete the work. He would have brought up the many injustices that remained: black men being killed in Vietnam in greater numbers than white men, the slow pace of economic progress, and continued violence by racist whites. Where do we draw the line? We do not know the answer. Further, it is unfair to blame King for the lack of dialog. What we do know is that Buber’s prescription was never implemented and we now, 50 years later, continue to yearn for a beloved community.

Rethinking the Universal Applicability of Nonviolence. Several sources cited in Hunt quotes King as saying, "It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months."⁷ What worked in Alabama, however, may not have been as effective outside of the South:

Undergirding King’s interpretations and use of nonviolent resistance were the traditional black family and church. It was these that provided the context and foundation for King’s

7. Hunt, 83

effective use of nonviolent direct action. He did his best work in the South where family and church traditions for blacks were strongest.⁸

Lischer writes: "At Holt Street in 1955 the young preacher had moved the people by intuiting their rage; in Chicago he spoke for himself."⁹ So it may be that the Gandhian principles were not as universally applicable as is commonly assumed.

Why might this be so? Hunt provides a clue in citing Gandhi's nationalism: "Gandhi saw national self-respect as a religious and spiritual virtue. ... He was a strong Indian nationalist. A core of nationalism always resided in him."¹⁰ As will be illustrated further down, the African American experience is more closely related to the Jewish experience in that both are people without a land. Indians knew the land to which they belonged. Africans in America and Jews in Eastern Europe were without a homeland. They had no realistic sense of nationalism. So the question is raised (and, I believe, answered below) if the Satyagraha proposed by Gandhi was universally applicable in the pursuit of justice.

Another clue could be the emphasis of suffering love in Satyagraha:

Gandhi explained the effectiveness of Satyagraha in terms of the spiritual impact of suffering love. ... the Satyagrahi's uncomplaining suffering denied his opponent the pleasure of victory.¹¹

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the overemphasis on nonviolence occurred when Sue Bailey Thurman (Mrs. Howard Thurman) asked, "How am I to act, supposing my own brother was being lynched before my very eyes?" Gandhi responded: "There is such a thing as self-immolation. ... Of course, a mechanical act of starvation will mean nothing. One's faith must remain undimmed while one's life ebbs out minute by minute."¹²

It was not only African Americans that Gandhi called to self-immolation. In 1922, Gandhi had issued a call for the Jews in Palestine to leave the region, claiming that the Arabs had a right to national autonomy, proposing that if they remained in Palestine

"that they (the Jews) should win Arab hearts and goodwill and the sympathy of world opinion by offering themselves to be shot or thrown into the Dead Sea without raising a

8. *ibid.*, 75-6

9. Lischer, 264

10. Hunt, 63

11. *ibid.*, 59-60

12. *ibid.*, 73

finger against the Arabs. ... In his reply, Buber pointed out that the 150,000 Indians in South Africa were nourished by the more than 200 million in India... Dispersion is bearable, even purposeful, if somewhere there is an ingathering ... Otherwise, dispersion becomes dismemberment.”¹³

Buber’s reply was respectful but adamant. According to Friedman,

“We have not proclaimed, as you do and as did Jesus, the son of our people, the teaching of nonviolence,” Buber added. We believe that a man must sometimes use force to save himself or, even more, his children. ... Although Buber would not have been among the crucifiers of Jesus, he would also not have been among the supporters of his absolute nonviolence. “I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself,” and although he strove not to have to do so by force, if there were no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, he trusted that he would “use force and give myself up into God’s hands.”¹⁴

Buber was asked by a member of the Jewish Peace Fellowship why Israel did not unilaterally disarm. He replied, “Because the first day the Bedouins would look on in amazement, and the second they would ride in.”¹⁵

“I and Thou is not a teaching of compromise but of spiritual realism. The question is not what one ought to do in general, but what is possible and desirable for us at this moment and in this situation. Those who instead profess the ideal of total love and renunciation of power rob power of its direction, love of its force, and life of its reality. This is what Buber clearly stated in the poem ‘Power and Love’ (1926):¹⁶

Our hope is too new and too old—
I do not know what would remain to us
Were love not transfigured power
And power not straying love.
Do not protest: “Let love alone rule!”
Can you prove it true?
But resolve: Every morning
I shall concern myself anew about the boundary
Between the love-deed-Yes and the power-deed-No
And pressing forward honor reality.
We cannot avoid
Using power,

13. Friedman, 255

14. *ibid.*, 256

15. *ibid.*, 345-6

16. *ibid.*, 134-5

Cannot escape the compulsion
 To afflict the world,
 So let us, cautious in diction
 And mighty in contradiction,
 Love powerfully.

So Buber might have proposed that King not seek suffering love that has power but rather to seek to love powerfully.

How might King have responded to Buber? My sense is that King would have asked Buber to clarify what it means to “love powerfully.” For many, even King, understanding Buber’s philosophy has been difficult. Ansbro quotes King criticizing Marx and capitalism as being “more I-centered than thou-centered.”¹⁷ If Buber had heard King say that he would have replied that “I-Thou” is a single term, indivisible, giving being, compared to “I-It”, another single term, indivisible, destroying being. That is to say without “Thou” there *is* no “I.”

King might have brought to Buber’s attention the a well known term in the movement: *Black Power*. Julian Bond writes,

“King saw Black Power as a positive way for ‘black people to amass the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals.’ But he remained troubled that Black Power supporters focused too much effort on what he felt were harmful—Black separatism, retaliatory violence, and isolationism—and that they had a defeatist attitude.”¹⁸

King, having in mind “Black Power,” a term more comprehensible than “I-Thou,” likely would have asked Buber for something more concrete, and less “mighty in contradiction” than to “love powerfully.”

From Pastor to Prophet to Apocalypticist. Lischer opens his *Preparation* section of *The Preacher King* by describing the the general positions taken by Black leadership by the 1950s:

There were actually two lines of progenitors trailing behind King, the Sustainers and the Reformers. The longer line was the Sustainers, who, like Great-grandfather Williams, ministered to the spiritual needs of enslaved and segregated people but never attempted to revolutionize the conditions under which they lived. The second and much shorter line

17. John J. Ansbro, Martin Luther King, Jr. : The Making of a Mind. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 184

18. Julian Bond, Danny Lyon, and Vann R. Newkirk, Julian Bond’s Time to Teach: A History of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press), 299

was the Reformers, who, like his grandfather and to a lesser extent his father, were willing to raise hell for the freedom of the race.¹⁹

If we associate Reformers as those who will “raise hell” (a prophetic stance), then the following from Lischer adds a prescient remark about the Sustainers:

“It was not the apocalyptic wrenching of heaven and earth that they foresaw but the placid aftermath of Armageddon. Before the time was ripe for a holy war, the slave preachers and later the free Negro preachers projected a heavenly vision against the dark, low ceilings of slavery and segregation.”²⁰

Lischer’s remark suggests a third “line of progenitors trailing behind King,” the Apocalyptists, who found themselves in a time of holy war. This is not surprising, given the African American use of “figural” Biblical interpretation, which, according to Lischer, represents a worldview where the “the Bible and contemporary experience take the shape of a single, enormous tapestry whose figures are repeated in many locations with a variety of significations.”²¹ The Apocalyptists emerged in 1965:

The year 1965 also witnessed the culminating demonstration of the civil rights movement, when twenty-five thousand people from all over the country converged on Selma, Alabama. This event brought President Johnson himself to declare that “We shall overcome.” For the many who were there it took on almost pentecostal significance. Yet it also marked the beginning of the end of joint interracial protest. In the following summer, on 9 June, the shooting of James Meredith as he walked from Memphis to Jackson led to a convergence of black leaders on that highway march—and from that time forward a new sense of black responsibility became manifest. CORE dropped the term “multiracial” from its statement of purpose, and SNCC became even more black in its makeup and orientation. ... “Black Power” became the chief slogan during the next cycle of years.²²

I believe King, internally, was drawn into a sense of Armageddon. Lischer writes, “King frequently preached on the necessity of being ‘maladjusted’ to the evils of segregation and discrimination, a notion he probably picked up from Heschel, who taught that the prophets in Israel were ‘morally maladjusted’ to society’s ‘conventional lies.’” Lischer continues,

19. Lischer, 28

20. *ibid.*, 29

21. *ibid.*, 201

22. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), 1073-4

Thus according to Abraham Heschel, “To identify God with the moral idea would be contrary to the very meaning of prophetic theology. God is not the mere guardian of the moral order.” In a 1963 sermon King conflates the prophetic style and the civil idea in a way Jeremiah (or Lincoln) would have never done: “American is doomed. . . because she has failed to live up to the great dream of America and to her great ideas.”²³

Is it not possible King, referring to “America is doomed,” was projecting an inner struggle? Is it not possible he recognized the enormity which had been placed upon him as leader of his people and found the enormous weight difficult to carry? If so, the internal struggle with forces of evil had taken their toll:

By the time of his death, the immense responsibility of being Martin Luther King had become a heavy burden. He found himself trapped by his own symbolic function. The pastoral liking for people that he had cultivated in his Dexter days now coexisted with a growing sense of his own importance. The legendary humility that was rooted in the acknowledgment of his own limitations gradually gave way to pomposity. According to one of his closest aides, he began to receive the opposition of fellow African Americans as a personal affront, as an act of *lese majesty*. On one occasion he responded to the criticism of an opponent with a condescending, “I shall *pray* for him.” “King is a frustrating man,” David Halberstam wrote in 1967.²⁴

King became in C. Eric Lincoln’s suggestive phrase, “the unbearable symbol.” His prophetic edge alienated his liberal white audience; intimations of corporate self-sacrifice worried and puzzled his own people. The split in King’s sense of role (and America’s religious consciousness) signaled the end of the Civil Rights Movement as a Christian phenomenon.²⁵

At this point, I believe Buber would have reminded King of a philosophy they shared:

Personalism. Hunt describes King’s understanding of Personalism:

King defined personalism as “...the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position.” It seems apparent that when Davis claimed, “We know now that we must live together or perish. If we will not have one world, we may have no world” - he presages one of King’s main themes, his oft-quoted statement that “the choice of humankind is not between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and nonexistence.”²⁶

23. Lischer, 177

24. *ibid.*, 192

25. *ibid.*, 194

26. Hunt, 28

King's sense of personalism stresses we do not exist individually, that we must live in harmony or not at all. Buber's "I-thou" stressed that the person, in order to live in harmony, must walk individually, free of all collectivist or cultural influence, on a "narrow ridge" between two abysses:

the abysses on either side of the narrow ridge tended to become symbolic for Buber: the evasion of the concrete situation through one or another type of abstraction—psychologism, historicism, technicism, philosophizing, magic, gnosis, or the false either/ors of *individualism versus collectivism*, freedom versus discipline, action versus grace. [emphasis added].²⁷

Buber would have identified the "narrow ridge" which lay before King as the path of a prophetic Reformer who walks between two abysses: the abyss of the Sustainers and the abyss of the Apocalyptists.

This might have been too much for King to bear, a product of southern, African-American culture. I would like, in my final assertion, to not predict how King might have responded. Rather, I want to suggest that the nature of Buber's philosophy — "*dialogue in the face of the utter newness of every moment*" — has an quality which is unpredictable.

Conclusions. The following are three things I have learned in this course and by writing this paper: There is no liberation without healing, the walk of justice is a narrow ridge, we need to always challenge our internal scripts.

Victims of oppression are not liberated unless they are healed inwardly. Buber's biographer shared "there were persons there who, because of their participation in the Nazi extermination of the Jews, no longer had faces for him."²⁸ It was not until the mid 1950s that Buber was able to see the faces of a Nazi German. For African-Americans, 70 years out, many animosities remain. This is not to imply that animosities are a "black problem." They are not. Animisities are a problem for anyone—black or white—who see others as objects, not as people. But we need to acknowledge the need for healing.

27. Friedman, 44

28. *ibid.*, 322

Advocacy for justice has two huge abysses: the apathy of Sustainers and the collectivism of Apocalyptists. To advocate for justice is, at all times, to walk a narrow ridge, fraught with possible missteps that lead to defeatism or violence. My opinion is that violence is more problematic than apathy, but King and others spoke about white apathy being more detrimental than white extremism. Regardless, we need to stay on the narrow path.

The true task before us is challenging our inner scripts—the sum of what we have individually learned about navigating life. And we need to do this through dialog and excursive studies like the Alabama Immersion program. My opinion is that identity politics has taken its toll on the American psyche. Any form of fervently held identity diminishes the ability to dialogue *in the face of the utter newness of every moment*.

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