

Transformed Nonconformity: Spirituality, Ethics, and Leadership in the Life and Work of Martin Luther King, Jr.

by WALTER EARL FLUKER

Walter Earl Fluker is the Executive Director of the Leadership Center, and Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Morehouse College and Visiting Professor of African-American Religious Traditions at Harvard University Divinity School. He is the author of They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. (1989) and editor of The Stones That the Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition (1998) and co-editor of A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life (1998). Director and editor of the Howard Thurman Papers Project and an ordained Baptist Minister, Dr. Fluker gave a shortened version of this Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture on December 1, 2003 in Miller Chapel.

*The face of man is the medium through which the invisible in him becomes visible and enters into commerce with us.*¹

Levinas

Lord guide me

*If you try me, send me out into the foggy night,
so that I cannot see my way.*

Even if I stumble, this I beg,

that I may look and smile serenely,

bearing witness that you are with me and I walk in peace.

If you try me,

send me out into an atmosphere too thin for me to breathe

*and I cannot feel the earth beneath my feet,
let my behavior show men that they cannot part me forcibly from you
in whom we breathe and move and are.
If you let hate hamper and trap me,
twist my heart, disfigure me,
then give my eyes,
his love and peace,
my face the expression of your Son.*

Don Helder Camara

The Desert is Fertile

Introduction And Overview

In the following discussion, I am using Martin Luther King, Jr.'s language of "transformed nonconformity," as a critical resource to examine the relationship between spirituality, ethics, and leadership in African-American churches.² I am also building on an argument begun in an earlier essay, entitled, "Recognition, Respectability, and Loyalty: The Quest for Civility in African-American Churches," where I contend that civility, as understood within the Black Church tradition, is both problematic and redemptive.³ It is problematic because of its historical roots in what has been variously described as *the American dilemma*, i.e., the problem of *doubleness* in African- American history and culture. It is redemptive because black churches have dealt with the problematic in ways that have also produced three underlying social practices: recognition, respectability, and loyalty. These practices have informed a transformative praxis that has sought the best in American democratic idealism. My general inquiry is concerned, therefore, with black churches' socio-historical entrapment in race and ideology expressed most profoundly in the language of the *American dilemma* and the genealogy of civility in black churches as a *post-bellum* phenomenon.

In this continuing examination, I am interested in the question of African-American church leadership and the ways in which King's thematic of

transformed nonconformity provides a conceptual and practical framework for rethinking leadership strategies for this new season of struggle and possibilities. I begin our discussion with operational definitions of spirituality, ethics, and leadership. I build upon the discussion of leadership literature that incorporates spirituality and ethics with a model of discourse that I refer to as “ethical leadership” which finds resonance with King’s transformed nonconformity formulation. Secondly, I examine the ways in which his dialectical appropriation of knowledge, faith, and practice informed his view of transformed nonconformity. Finally, I recommend a conceptual grid for black church leadership that captures the inherent tensions in the *doubleness* of black life and offers directions for new subversive possibilities utilizing the triune ethical constructs of character, civility, and community.

Definitions

Spirituality

Discussions of spirituality cover a broad and increasingly complex spectrum of beliefs, practices, and approaches within and beyond traditional religious circles. For our purposes, *spirituality refers to a way or ways of seeking or being in relationship with an Other who is believed to be worthy of reverence and highest devotion*. In this definition, I am concerned with the Other as inclusive of both individuality and community or in the language of Emmanuel Levinas, the Other has a face—and the face of the Other is the foundation of ethics and the origin of civil society.⁴ I encounter the face of the Other, in its strangeness and transcendence—but also in its force of obligation and interdependence. The human face is also the Face that is hidden and present for me in all its force and meaning. The Face invites me to revel in memory—collective memory as diverse and beautiful as the world. If such a human face were to visit me then I would understand that I am not alone, unrelated neither to history nor to memory.⁵ Spirituality is also a discipline that places emphasis on *practice*—spirituality is something that we *do*. Prior to any act of cognition, spirituality has to do with the

practical, day-to-day encounter with the Other, the Other being both friend and stranger, comrade and opposer, individual and collective, divine and demonic. In its active, dynamic expression, spirituality is *life generating* and *disfiguring*. Utilizing these indicators, I would like to talk about spirituality from three perspectives: 1) formal notions of spirituality that are related to established religions; 2) informal notions of spirituality that are “self-actualized” or self-defined by individuals or small groups not associated with an established religious institution; and 3) philosophical or ethical notions of spirituality related to values and perceived goods, e.g. truth, beauty, justice, etc. King’s understanding of spirituality is located within the first category of established religions, and incorporates the third category as it pertains to faith-based notions of ethics that are philosophically justified. I also use these three categories as heuristic devices that provide lenses through which to look at the vast landscape of a developing literature that incorporates ideas, beliefs, and practices from an array of traditions and perspectives—health, science, technology, politics, business, and education.⁶

Ethics and Leadership

I have outlined my thoughts on ethics and leadership in an earlier publication, where I define *ethical leadership* as the critical appropriation and embodiment of moral traditions that have historically shaped the character and shared meanings of a people (an *ethos*). Ethical leadership does not emerge from an historical vacuum, but arises from the *lifeworlds* of particular traditions and speaks authoritatively and acts responsibly with the aim of serving the collective good. Ethical leaders are leaders whose characters have been shaped by the wisdom, habits, and practices of particular traditions, often more than one, yet they tend to be identified with a particular ethos and cultural narrative. Ethical leadership asks the question of values in reference to ultimate concern.⁷

Moreover, ethical leadership demands that we cultivate and nourish a *sense of self* that recognizes the interrelatedness of life or a *sense of community*. Spirituality plays a key role in this process. A *sense of community* refers to the

larger extended ecological sphere made tangible by nature, defined as the universe and the cosmos, but in its final essence, it is *spirit*. This idea of spirituality finds resonance with Peter Paris's definition of spirituality in the African context, i.e., spirituality is never individualistic, but is part of a larger sphere of unity that is diverse in its dynamics and character. "The spirituality of a people," he writes, "refers to the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences."⁸ For Robert M. Franklin, spirituality refers to "a person's sense of identity in relation to other people and that which is conceived as ultimate concern. Rooted in spiritual identity are a person's fundamental values, moral commitments, and ability to engage in ethical reasoning. Spiritual health is reflected in a person's ability to trust and care for others."⁹

Looming large in this perspective is the question of ethics. In respect to its ethical dimension, spirituality is *life generating* and *disfiguring*, and its primary ethical locus is the human face. James Hillman writes, "The Other's face calls upon my character. Rather than thinking my character shows in my face and that my face is my character exteriorized...character requires the face of the Other. Its piercing provocation pulls us from every possible ethical potential. In bad conscience we turn away from the face in the wheelchair, the face of the beggar; we hood the face of the executed, and we ignore the faces of the socially ostracized and hierarchally inferior so that they become 'invisible' even as we walk down the same street."¹⁰

Significantly, this vulnerable face is *disfigured* in encounter with the Other—especially the Other who presents itself as Diabolos—as threat, tempter, and destroyer. In the struggle for social transformation the ethical leader experiences the transformation of self, which is a *disorienting*, *disfiguring*, and ultimately, a *dying* encounter with the Other. Don Helder Camara's prayer, in *The Desert is Fertile*, has much of the same force and import:

If you let hate hamper and trap me,
twist my heart, disfigure me,
then give my eyes,

his love and peace,
my face the expression of your Son.

In the experience of *disorienting*, *disfiguring*, and *dying*, the ethical leader also becomes aware of the transforming power of the encounter with the Other. For ethical leaders, as transformed nonconformists, this means that each encounter with the Other carries within itself the danger of *disfiguring*; of being tested and proven so that that which is hidden (and that which *calls* me) *discloses* itself in acts of compassion and justice. Ethical leaders, therefore, are *transfigured* and *transforming* actors who present themselves to the world as symbols and for instances of what is possible and hopeful. In the experience of encounter, one is readied or predisposed to hope; hope being simultaneously the transformation of threat, temptation, danger, and death into a vision of the possible, a sense of values, a sense of the future, i.e., having faith to move on in creative activity that aspires to goodness. The task of the ethical leader is to *inspire* and *guide* others in the process of transformation through spiritual acts of defiance and resistance against systems of injustice. At a personal level, this process involves reliving and recovering their cultural futures through life stories, rituals and creative actions which give meaning to life; a focus is placed on reconciling acts of community with the primary theological and ethical question being, "*What Can I Hope For?*"

Spirituality, Ethics, and Leadership

Why is the relationship between spirituality, ethics, and leadership important? First, leaders in many public venues are increasingly turning to approaches that emphasize some form of spirituality as an authoritative source in making decisions that impact the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors of many people—especially in the areas of government, health, science and business. Often these appeals to spirituality fail to address the larger ethical questions of justice, equity, and truth-telling that are raised in public life.

The second reason is the role that spirituality and ethics will increasingly play in the development of leadership for the future. A significant challenge for the next generation of leadership will be the promotion and advancement of science,

technology, and business to serve the interests of human development and the environment. The changes produced by this triumvirate have already resulted in a significant upheaval in society, the meaning of life, intelligence, and work. For example, there is a growing movement within profit and not-for-profit sectors to incorporate ethical principles and practices pertaining to issues of transparency, diversity, transcultural dynamics, sustainability, the environment, and human development. Increasingly, large corporations, think-tanks, and political leaders are relying upon spirituality as a form of human resource development to address these larger structural issues.

Finally, in order for a just civil society to exist, persons in responsible leadership roles must make decisions based on ethical guides.¹¹ Some of us argue that the most significant problem besetting civil society in the United States of America is the failure of ethical leadership.

For historically marginalized peoples, the relationship of spirituality, ethics, and leadership is most urgent. With the long-range economic, political, and social costs of war, a troubled market economy and rapid advances (crusades) in technology, science, and global democracy, if we believe analysts like Robert Kaplan, we now have the makings of a social anarchy that threatens the very foundations of our social purpose. The impending catastrophic fall-out of the present situation will have far-reaching negative consequences for the least of these—those whom Samuel Proctor called “the lost, the left-out, and left behind.” At a deeper level, however, there is a spiritual malaise, a nihilistic threat promoted by the predominance of a utilitarian individualism that appeals endlessly to therapeutic remedies that begin and end with *self*. Who will lead in the 21st century? Better yet, how shall they lead?¹² *Who will go for us, and whom shall we send?* What are the resources and methodologies at our disposal to train a new generation of leaders for this millennium?

Martin Luther King, Jr. As A Critical Resource

The leadership legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. provides a critical resource for answers to these questions as we enter a new century beset by ethical issues and challenges. More than any other American leader in the twentieth century, King challenged the nation to take seriously the role of spirituality and ethics in resolving what the authors of *Habits of the Heart* called the most important unresolved contradiction in our history, the tension between “self-reliant competitive enterprise and a sense of public solidarity espoused by civic republicans.”¹³ It was King’s spiritual genius that provided for him the essential assets and tools to lead a revolution of values that expanded the moral grammar of American history and culture from parochially applied democratic principles to concrete proposals for inclusiveness and action. This amazing feat, performed in a brief period of our history—from 1954 to 1968—was no doubt the nation’s finest example of what Martin Buber called “turning.” In doing so, King also changed the leadership equation: public leadership no longer belonged to the strict province of position, power, and privilege, but also to the marginalized moral minority—those whom King labeled “transformed nonconformists.”

Much of the scholarship on Martin Luther King, Jr. has centered on his role as a civil rights leader, his eclectic intellectual formation, and his distinctive place within the African-American church tradition.¹⁴ Little attention, however, has been given to the relationship between spirituality, ethics, and leadership in his thought and praxis.¹⁵ This, of course, strikes one as surprising since the most casual observer of King’s life and work cannot help but be struck by a deep-seated spirituality wedded to a strong sense of Christian character and vocation. It is not surprising, however, that with the noble heritage bequeathed to him by his family, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Morehouse College, and the larger black Atlanta community, that King emerged as a luminous exemplar of the black church tradition of spirituality and social transformation. Equally revealing is his articulation of the thematic which characterizes the wedding of the notions of “spirituality” and “social transformation” in the language of “transformed nonconformity.” Embedded in his formulation of “transformed nonconformity” are

significant elements of King's biography and thinking regarding the place of spirituality, ethics, and leadership in his dream of human community.

I will examine King's contributions in respect to the three overarching dimensions of character, civility, and community. At stake in this discussion is not the claim to a metaphysical model or mandate for spirituality. Rather we are looking at a developmental model which allows us to examine the ways in which spirituality, ethics, and leadership might be linked and provide a resource for training a new generation of leaders who are spiritually disciplined, morally anchored, and socially engaged. First, we will give attention to the ways in which his dialectical appropriation of knowledge, faith, and practice informed his view of transformed nonconformity.

The Dialectic Of Transformed Nonconformity

Truth is the Whole: King's Use of Dialectical Methodology

An important element in King's thinking about spirituality, ethics, and leadership is the dialectical methodology which he employed as a critical and hermeneutical principle in his quest for truth-as-praxis. King acknowledged his indebtedness to Hegel for the philosophical method of rational coherence.¹⁶ King rejected Hegel's "absolute idealism" because he felt it tended to merge the One and the Many, yet he was deeply influenced by the Hegelian contention that "truth is the whole." This contention led King to a philosophical method of rational coherence, which is a key personalist doctrine.¹⁷ The dialectic enabled King to develop a methodology for dealing with conflict and struggle, in both his personal and public life. More revealing, however, is the fact that dialectical thinking has long been a hallmark of black religious traditions. Cornel West claims that

Black theologians have either consciously or unconsciously employed a dialectical methodology in approaching their subject matter. This methodology consists of a three-step procedure of negation, preservation, and transformation; their subject matter, of white interpretations of the Christian gospel and their own circumstances. Dialectical methodology is critical in character and hermeneutic in content. For black theologians, it is highly critical of dogmatic viewpoints of the gospel, questioning whether

certain unjustifiable prejudgments are operative. It is hermeneutic in that it is concerned with unearthing assumptions of particular interpretations and presenting an understanding of the gospel that extends and expands its ever-unfolding truth.¹⁸

The Dialectic of Self: Freedom and Finitude

Transformation, for King, is a dynamic process born of dialectical tensions between the freedom and finitude of persons and the corollary notions of individuality and democracy. A consistent theme in King's moral anthropology is his view of the dialectical nature of persons that is rooted in their spiritual and physical existences. While we share our physical existence with other forms of nature, persons are also spiritual and rational beings. For King, this is our crucial link with God. Human beings are not only biological creatures; they are also spiritual beings with the capacity for reason and self-transcendence.¹⁹ Persons are both children of nature and children of spirit; they live in two realms, the internal and external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by which we live.²⁰ The existential problem of persons, according to King, is the struggle to live a balanced existence in which the "means" by which we live do not outdistance the ends for which we live. This is the ongoing struggle for each person and whenever one allows the "means" to dominate the "ends," the occasion for sin is present.²¹ This creates a "persistent civil war" within, "a tragic schizophrenic personality divided against ourselves."²² This inner struggle, according to King, presents itself as a test—a test of character; character being the revelation of freedom over fatedness. (Later, in our discussion, I will comment on how this inner tension is a sign of the disfiguring, nonconforming praxis of spirituality, ethics and leadership.) The resolution of this inner conflict is wrought about by the grace of God. The inherent potential for goodness within persons and the intervening grace of God were the basis for King's hope in respect to the actualization of human community.²³

The Dialectic of Society: Individuality and Democracy

As part of King's embrace of the dialectical interplay with thought and action, there is also the social corollary of individuality and democracy.²⁴ For King, because persons are decidedly communitarian, the logic of individuality is fulfilled in community and the best-suited social political context for this realization is democracy. In his many statements about law and resisting unjust laws, the underlying assumption is that moral agency is best equipped to interact and respond to power in situations that are *rational* and *just*. But since the rational nature of human beings seeks conformity to law, people are inclined to make conformity the normative equation for truth and justice. Such conformity, according to King, yields to blindness of action and staleness of culture. Blind conformity makes us paranoid and distrustful of opinions that go against the majority; stale conformity quietly supports the status quo through inaction that leads to apathy and neglect of our duties as citizens. "[M]ost people," he writes, "and Christians in particular are thermometers that record and register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society."²⁵

Nonconformity, on the other hand, is not a good in and of itself; rather it must be transformed through spiritual regeneration, which is an ongoing, disciplined and deliberate practice characterized by love for the neighbor. Untransformed nonconformity, for King, leads to unwarranted suspicion and calloused intolerance. Important for King, therefore, was the pragmatic thrust of law as an active, dynamic article that is renewed through conflict and struggle, through negation, preservation, and transformation. Democracy at its best, for King, is a squabble; a contentious exchange of ideas, opinions, values, and practice within the context of civil relations.

The Dialectic of Spirit: Love and Justice

King's spiritual quest was rooted in his belief in a personal God of love and justice. Although King perceived the primary nature of God to be in the divine goodness expressed in *agape*, he made a critical distinction between the love of God and the justice of God. In his sermon entitled "A Tough Mind and a Tender

Heart,” he holds the two concepts in dialectical tension. God’s relationship to persons is presented as a creative synthesis between the wrath and justice of God and God’s love and grace. King claims, “God has two outstretched arms. One is strong enough to surround us with justice, and one is gentle enough to embrace us with grace.”²⁶ The justice of God is manifested in the moral law of the cosmos, which is an imperative for persons to struggle against all forms of injustice working against the actualization of human community. The power of God furnishes those who struggle for justice with the inner resources to bring about creative change that leads to just and loving human relations.²⁷

For King, transformation is possible because of the way in which the universe is structured. He believed that God “has placed within the very structure of the universe certain absolute moral laws. We can neither defy them nor break them. If we disobey them, they will break us.”²⁸ King’s belief in the moral law enabled him to maintain optimism in the ultimate victory of good over evil as persons choose to become co-workers with God in fulfilling divine purposes in human history. This belief in the moral law was the basis for his attack upon unjust structures and laws that desacralized human personality. Segregation statutes and other unjust laws, he argued, should be abolished not only because they are against the principles of democracy, but also because they are ultimately against the moral law of the cosmos. An unjust law, according to King, is a human code that is not in harmony with the moral law. Therefore, it is the transformed nonconformist’s moral responsibility to break unjust laws. Just laws, on the other hand, are laws that uplift human personality and should be obeyed because they are in harmony with the moral law.²⁹

The transformed nonconformist, according to King, is under obligation to the moral law. Christians, as a creative minority, must never conform to the prevailing laws and customs of a society when they are in conflict with human dignity and justice. Moreover, Christians are called upon to break the law as an expression of their respect for law itself. “The hope of a secure and liveable world

lies with the disciplined nonconformists, who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood.”³⁰

But more is at stake in his view of transformed nonconformity—the regenerated individual is a “transformed nonconformist” in society, and following the way of Christ, is willing to suffer redemptively for others.³¹ The “transformed nonconformist” refuses to cooperate with evil systems that exploit and destroy human personality, and willingly suffers the penalty of law for nonconformity. For the person who suffers redemptively for the sake of others, life becomes a living sacrament of the Presence of God in the world, working for universal wholeness.³²

The Ethical Dimensions Of Transformed Nonconformity: Character, Civility, And Community Character

King’s dialectical treatment of transformed nonconformity helps us to better understand the place of character in respect to leadership. For the most part, character is relegated to a type of abstract individualism in leadership literature where the emphasis is placed on certain principles or practices that the individual appropriates in order to become an effective leader. Character, in both King’s biography and in his expressed opinions on the same, emphasizes the dimensions of freedom and finitude, individuality and democracy, and love and justice. Character, in this perspective, is the narrative script that defines individuality: the stories that name the individual’s experience and the “inner experiences” or core philosophies espoused by the individual within the context of a given community. A significant variable that is often not emphasized or completely neglected in leadership studies is the role of systems (institutions, traditions, practices) and their impact on the moral development of leaders. Simply stated, individuals are socially constructed, yet by definition, are responsible and accountable for moral choices within the context of their social histories and stories. Hence the pertinent questions for ethical leadership in this respect are: Of what story or stories is the individual a part and how does the

story (or stories) inform moral practices and habits? What is the role of institutions in this narrative perspective and how might the moral agent develop habits and practices that conspire against unjust institutional practices that promote unhealthy and self-destructive existence?

Most mark King's public career with his leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association, but before Montgomery his was a story intertwined with other stories that produced the grandiloquent baritone, which proclaimed the message of transformed nonconformity to America and the world. We must ask, therefore, "What was the narrative script that King was reading when he arrived in Montgomery?" "How had history uniquely prepared him for this grand performance?" Some of the answers lie in his early formation, in the contexts of his family environment, the fellowship of the black church, and in the larger context of the black community of Atlanta, Georgia. In these interrelated environs one sees most clearly the genesis of his spiritual quest and the developing character that accompanied his vision.³³ In a revealing statement in his "Autobiography of Religious Development," written while he was a student at Boston University School of Theology, King reflects on his reasons for entering the ministry and his early childhood experiences with his family and church.

At present I still feel the effects of the noble moral and ethical ideals that 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. Even though I never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to life. In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life.³⁴

Character and the Larger Dramatic Repository of Transformed Nonconformity

King's dialectical appropriation of knowledge only touches the surface of what was at stake in his inner struggles of spirit and his inherited historical burdens of recognition, respectability, and loyalty.³⁵ The dialectical formulation of the theme of transformed nonconformity is at once an expression of King's sermonizing and of his own existential struggle with personal freedom and social liberation.³⁶ Michael Eric Dyson and others have documented this internal struggle and

shown how this inner tension of opposites informs the social discourse of King. Dyson, commenting on the criticisms of King's promiscuity and plagiarism, suggests:

Character cannot be understood through isolated incidents or a fixation on the flaws of a human being during a selected period in life. Assessment of character must take into account the long view, the wide angle. Character is truly glimpsed as we learn of human beings negotiating large and small problems that test moral vision, ethical creativity, and sound judgement. Character cannot be grasped in disjointed details or sporadic facts. Character can only be glimpsed in a sustained story that provides plausible accounts and credible explanations of human behavior.³⁷

King firmly believed that inner transformation is essential to involvement in social transformation. Transformation, however, is not equated with moral perfectionism; rather it is understood as an inner quality of life that issues forth in deeds of goodwill and love for the neighbor. "In the final analysis," says King, "what God requires is that your heart is right. Salvation isn't reaching the destination of absolute morality, but it's being in the process and on the right road."³⁸ For him, the person who opens her life to God in Christ experiences a new birth and a reorientation of values that enables her to struggle for social transformation. "Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in an humble and loving spirit," King writes.³⁹

For the development of leaders for the church and society, King provides a helpful insight into the centrality of "the inner theater" in the formation and care of leaders. "The inner theater" represents those core themes that affect an individual's personality and leadership style. "For each of us, our unique mixture of motivational needs determine our character and creates the triangle of our mental life—a tightly interlocked triangle consisting of cognition, affect, and behavior. No one of these dimensions of the triangle can be seen as separate from the other."⁴⁰ The cultivation of the private life or one's "inner theater" is the basis for spirituality and ethical awareness. Leaders involved in acts of social transformation must begin by remembering, retelling, and reliving their own

stories. Again and again we must ask ourselves what and whom are we seeking to change. This is the first step in the realization of calling and character.

Character, in this sense, refers to “the morally-anchored self in the context of socio-historical narrative.”⁴¹ For our purposes, this means the person’s life experiences in relation to larger historical and social narratives. Reclaiming the ethical center requires that the unfinished business of one’s life story (the pain, the hurt, the unresolved contradictions) be addressed. It also means reattachment to historically grounded virtues, which have protected the community through ritualistic healing: integrity and self-esteem, trust and empathy, and courage and hope as both personal and political practices. One should not (or better, cannot) begin the work of creating a just and healthy civil society until one has explored the deepest regions of self-knowledge and the motivational content of agency that mark the core of individuality, personal morals, and practices.

While there are formidable social, political, and economic issues that must be confronted, I am convinced that a critical dimension of the battle must be waged from within. King teaches us that even though the contradictions of life may never be completely resolved, our inner tensions can become the creative sources for self-reflection, healing, and dynamically engaged social praxis—in other words, self-reflection and personal healing are inextricably tied to empathy and care for others. In King’s language, the cross is the single interpretive paradigm for understanding the role of the transformed nonconformist in the quest for civility and community:

My personal trials have taught me the value of unmerited suffering...I have lived these past few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolish, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can humbly say, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”⁴²

Spirituality and Social Justice

King's character was intricately related to his spiritual life and his quest for social justice. The pre-Montgomery King or the faces of "Little Mike," "Tweed," and "The Philosopher King," do not readily lend themselves to the character that is disclosed in the moments of testing that follow his public ministry in Montgomery and thereafter.⁴³ It is rather in engagement with the struggle for social justice that one begins to see the deep, furrowed glance of the preacher become leader of the people. This understanding of spirituality is not the same as the market-stimulated self-help philosophies on spiritual growth that promote personal development and solipsistic narcissism as the means to attain spiritual awareness that crowd the shelves in mega-bookstores. Rather his brand of spirituality stands in direct contradiction to the conforming, anesthetizing cultural deluge that dominates the printed and audio-visual media on leadership.

The Kitchen Vision

I cite here two events in King's life where one sees clearly the relationship between spirituality and social transformation in his portraiture of character. One is the oft-cited "kitchen vision." David Garrow maintains that the "kitchen vision" of 27 January 1956, which took place in the early stages of the Montgomery boycott, was the paradigmatic moment in King's spirituality.⁴⁴ The experience captures for us an example of the way in which King understood spirituality to be part of a larger dynamic of ethics and leadership. It is also a revealing portrait of the testing of character that is integral to the spirituality of transformed nonconformity. Caught in the early phases of the Montgomery bus boycott, he received a chilling telephone call threatening his life and the life of his family: The voice on the other end of the phone, said, "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you are not out of town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house." King says he "sat there and thought about his little daughter who had just been born" and his "devoted and loyal wife" who was asleep. He thought about how he might be taken from her or she from him. He thought about his father and mother who had always been the steady

influences for him in trying moments, but they were one hundred seventy-five miles away in Atlanta. He said to himself:

You've got to call on that something in that person your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way...And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it...I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord I must confess that I am weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak."

Then it happened:

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world."...I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.⁴⁵

Howard Thurman and the Harlem Stabbing Incident

In a lesser-known incident, Howard Thurman made one of his famous pastoral visits to Martin Luther King, Jr. Thurman states in his autobiography that on more than one occasion he felt a premonition to minister to leaders engaged in the thick of the struggle. His relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr. is but one example.⁴⁶ After the stabbing of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Harlem on 20 September 1958, Thurman felt the inner necessity to go to him. In reference to this movement of the Spirit upon him, he writes:

Many times through the years I have had strange visitations in which there emerges at the center of my consciousness *a face*, a sense of urgency, a vibrant sensation, involving some particular person. On a certain Friday afternoon, Martin emerged in my awareness and would not leave. When I came home I said to Sue [Thurman's wife], "Tomorrow morning I am going down to New York to see Martin. I am not sure why, but I must talk with him personally if the doctors permit."⁴⁷

During his visit with the young civil rights leader, Thurman encouraged him to extend his convalescence four weeks beyond those recommended by his doctor in order “to reassess himself in relation to the cause, to rest his body and mind with healing detachment, and to take a long look that only solitary brooding can provide.” Thurman suggested, “The movement had become an organism with a life of its own to which he [King] must relate in fresh and extraordinary ways or be swallowed up by it.”⁴⁸ King’s biographers indicate that he did indeed take an extended convalescence culminating in his trip to the land of Gandhi in February 1959. Taylor Branch writes: “Recovering at home, King settled into a period of relative stillness unique to his entire adult life. He delivered no speeches or sermons outside the Dexter pulpit for many weeks. Nor did he travel.” Branch also reports that King turned down the pressing agenda within the Movement during this period.⁴⁹ Stephen B. Oates reports that

As he convalesced, King had time to do what he had longed for all these months: he read books and meditated. And he talked a good deal about the trial he was going through. He decided that God was teaching him a lesson here, and that was personal redemption through suffering. It seemed to him that the stabbing had been for a purpose, that it was part of God’s plan to prepare him for some larger work in the bastion of segregation that was the American South.⁵⁰

These two events point to ways in which King understood spirituality to be more than a matter of personal development. For him, the issues of justice and community and the place of suffering are integral parts of the ongoing spiritual process that the transformed nonconformist must endure in his or her quest for wholeness. Such a process is fraught with provocations, challenges, and hopes that are rooted in larger historical and social narratives than the popular, mass-produced therapeutic formulae for personal healing and virtue. Moreover, they are statements about the *disorienting, disfiguring, and dying* experience of transformed nonconformity. Unlike the popular discourse on spirituality, which isolates the individual from the traffic of lifeworlds and systemworlds, King’s experience of the divine is at the dangerous intersection where these worlds collide. Spirituality, ethics, and leadership, in this view, complicate the rather

naïve conjecture that the leader experiences the transforming power of the divine apart from engagement with the powers of this world. Far from the pollyana, wishful practices of leadership defined by corporate behemoths, here the emphasis is on the care of others who are impacted by the leader's ethical discernment, deliberation, and decisions. The ability to hear the voice of the divine is intricately interwoven with the care of the vulnerable other—the other, in the first case, being the black and poor people of Montgomery who have entrusted the young King with their future.

In the Harlem Hospital event, there is clearly a sense of self that is related to the larger spiritual community. Thurman sees King's *face*—a *face* that is tested—and in this *face*, the fulfillment of the possibility and hope a larger community.

Thurman's advice and counsel provides King with the opportunity to deepen his own channels and commitment to the struggle for social transformation in the American South. For Thurman, spiritual discipline exposes the individual to "the tutor" or the "unseen model" by which one structures the facts of his or her experience. For this reason, Thurman counseled:

[T]he person concerned about social change must not only understand the materials with which he has to do, the things which he is trying to manipulate, to reorder, to refashion but again and again he must expose the roots of his mind to the literal truth that is the tutor of the facts, the orderer and reorderer of the facts of his experience.⁵¹

This must be done, Thurman contended, so that in the quest for social justice, one's vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is "modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in his spirit."⁵² Therefore, it was his insistence that those who were engaged in acts of liberation continually examine the sources of their motivation and the ways in which the circling series of social processes that they seek to change are related to their spiritual pilgrimages. Always, the primary questions for the social activist are, "*What are you trying to do with your life? What kind of person are you trying to become?*"⁵³ It was Thurman's conviction that the individual in his or her actions "is trying to snare into the body of his facts, his conviction of those facts." He

cautioned, however, that faith thusly understood always runs the risk of becoming idolatrous as in patriotic visions of “the American way.”⁵⁴ Therefore, one must always examine the motivational content of action that involves a tutoring of the will by an unseen model, which for him was the truth that is resident within the individual. Here the issues of *identity*, *purpose*, and *method* are combined in relation to the social context in which the individual finds himself or herself.

Civility

Civility is used in a variety of contexts often masking complex historical, sociological, and methodological issues. Civility in common usage refers to a set of manners, certain etiquette and social graces that are rooted in specific class orientations and moral sensibilities.⁵⁵ Civility, however, does not simply refer to etiquette, manners, and social graces; rather it is inclusive of *social capital* and the inherent benefits accrued by *networks of reciprocity*. Civility also has to do with the individual’s social dignity within that system. In the following discussion, the term civility is used as a framework for discussing the role of *social capital* in the leaders’ repository of skills and competencies essential for negotiation and working for transformation in public space.⁵⁶ I do not limit civility, however, to social capital, but refer more broadly to the concept as *the social-historical script or contract that the individual citizen negotiates within the context of the larger society. Civility is the psychosocial ecology of the individual; a certain understanding or self-referential index of the individual’s place within a social system as it relates to character*. For King, as we shall see, civility is used as a subversive instrument to exaggerate the creative tension between conformity and nonconformity in the quest for a higher synthesis of transformed nonconformity.

Transformed Nonconformity and Subversive Civility

In black life generally, civility as a social and political option is severely limited. In fact, some scholars even question its utility as a political good.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, in black churches, because of the ideological and cultural precedents of *doubleness* and racial uplift among black elites, civility has come to represent precisely that—

a social and political good elevated to the level of *civic virtue*. In this respect, it has to do with “the rules of association of free members (of society) and so the basis of social dignity.”⁵⁸ Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham’s examination of the “politics of respectability” signals part of what is at stake in the usages of civility as a social and political strategy for citizenship rights among women of the Negro Club Movement.⁵⁹ Similarly, early architects of the modern civil rights movement utilized civility as a means of cultivating habits and practices that conspired toward engagement in democratic society. Most notable among these leaders in mid-twentieth century were black religious elites and pastors such as Reverdy Ransom, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and William Stuart Nelson.⁶⁰

The leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the modern civil rights movement represents the most outstanding example of this legacy of civility. Perhaps better than any other leader of the twentieth century, King was able to forge civility into a subversive weapon in the struggle for equality and justice in American society. By subversive civility, what I have in mind is akin to Jeffery Goldfarb’s observation that intellectuals “contribute to a democratic life when they civilize political contestation and when they subvert complacent consensus; when they provide enemies with the discursive possibility to become opponents and when they facilitate public deliberations about problems buried by the norms of civility.”⁶¹ King’s distinctive contribution in this regard is the way in which he dialectically explores the options afforded by democratic life and forces existing tensions through nonviolent direct action. Stephen Carter makes a similar observation. According to Carter, King and other leaders in the Southern Leadership Conference were able “to spark a dialogue” through nonviolent acts of civility. The transformed nonconformist is primarily concerned with the disruption of “negative peace” as a way of bringing to surface hidden tensions that create the conditions for creative understanding and new discursive possibilities.⁶²

Critical to this understanding of subversive civility is the practice of love or what King called “excessive altruism.”⁶³ Excessive altruism is concretely expressed in acts of sympathy. It is to be distinguished from acts of pity that are general in application; rather sympathy is concerned with particularity. “Sympathy,” writes King, “is fellow feeling for the person in need—his pain, agony and burdens.” Sympathetic concern does not do something *for* others; rather it does something *with* others. It is only in this respect that the dignity and self-worth of others are preserved. Excessive altruism, therefore, goes beyond deontological decrees, universality as a criterion for duty, and uncritical compliance to law; it goes the “second mile.” Therefore it cannot be enforced by external decrees, but is motivated by unenforceable, self-imposed sanctions.

King makes a distinction between enforceable and nonenforceable obligations. Enforceable obligations refer to moral demands (rules, laws, statutes) that are externally imposed, while unenforceable obligations refer to the inner sanctions of persons, which are self-imposed. Unenforceable laws “concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify.”⁶⁴ Enforceable obligations are human laws that insure justice; unenforceable obligations belong to a higher law, rooted in the moral order of the cosmos, and they produce love.⁶⁵ Although behavior can be regulated by external decrees, King’s view of civility as “excessive altruism” cannot be legislated. This was the logic of his argument against the limits of desegregation as an enforceable demand and integration as an unenforceable demand. “Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they come together spiritually because it is natural and right.”⁶⁶

Finally, King’s brand of subversive civility was rooted in a profound sense of spirituality and a “searching ethical awareness.”⁶⁷ Religion, for King, played a prominent role in sustaining the “negative peace” of the culture of conformity. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King challenged the white religious leadership to imitate the example of the early Christian church by becoming

“disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” Black leadership was not exempt from King’s scathing critique. Throughout his public career, King was a critic of the two extremes of emotionalism and classism that he felt plagued black church leadership. Some of King’s severest critics were fellow black clergy and elites who saw him as a “disturber of the peace,” especially in his decision to speak out against the Vietnam War.⁶⁸

Leaders of the new century can take an important cue from King and leaders of the modern civil rights movement. The call for a new kind of subversive civility is echoed from many corridors as war escalates and violent acts of injustice are perpetrated through laws that silently exclude and relegate entire peoples to the margins. How might leaders who stand at the intersection where worlds collide maintain a disciplined, yet disruptive movement of presence without succumbing to the temptation to become physically violent and self-destructive in the process? The lessons of subversive civility represented by King and the civil rights movement may well be the salvation of American democracy if we have the courage to experiment with new forms of nonviolent dissent and resistance.

Community

Considerable work has already been done on King’s concept of community.⁶⁹ I am most interested in the final years of King’s life and ministry (1964-1968). Although beleaguered with controversy and sabotage, these years are the most crucial in understanding the maturation of his spiritual and intellectual growth in respect to community. It is in this period that one sees most clearly King’s own transformed nonconformity in his wrestling with nonviolence as a means of achieving human community, his increased realization of the international implications of his vision of community, his understanding of the nature and role of conflict (especially his courageous stance against the Vietnam War), and the place of hope in the realization of human community.⁷⁰ In the remainder of our discussion, I will focus on his legacy of hope as a critical insight for transformed nonconformists in the twenty-first century.

Transformed Nonconformity, The Legacy: Hope And Community

The basis for the profound hope in King is found in the experience of transformed nonconformity. In his “Christmas Sermon on Peace” (1967), King spoke of the disparity between his dream of 1963 and his personal nightmare that evolved over the following four years:

Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up on life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose the courage to be, that quality to go on in spite of all. And so today I still have a dream.⁷¹

Faces tell stories and disclose mysteries of character and being. The final *face* of King is the one we most remember—the somber, distant, almost melancholic look—a *disfigured countenance that returns from the mountain*. No place in King is this face more vividly portrayed than in his bold excoriation of the Vietnam War and in his trials within the African-American community around the political philosophy of black nationalism, articulated by Malcolm X. It is *the face of hope*. Professor James Cone suggests that Martin King's perspective on “racism, black empowerment and war led to a shift in emphasis and meaning regarding the themes of love, justice, and hope” which were operative concepts in his articulation of the beloved community.⁷² The theme of hope, according to Cone, became “the shining center of Martin's thinking, revealing new interpretations of love and justice.”⁷³ This shifting emphasis had significant implications for King's theological and spiritual perspectives surrounding the theological constructs of “exodus” and “exile.” There is evidence in the later King that there was a movement toward an “exilic” metaphor as a way of understanding the “shifting” epistemic grounds for the liberative claims for African-Americans. King's last speech is normally interpreted in light of the exodus paradigm. In that speech, King stands on the summit of the mountaintop and sees the “Promised Land.” The “Promised Land” conjures up images of the conquest of Canaan, but a “shift” in lenses would offer a different reading. A closer examination of the substantive discourse in the speech reveals several levels of meaning. One is that King speaks out of a diasporic perspective. He begins his speech as a type

of journey on which he takes a panoramic view of Western history. He calls his listeners to remember with him the long journey of Western civilization. He then locates himself in the latter half of the twentieth century in which there is a worldwide struggle for freedom. The exodus event is included as one instance in the long march of humanity toward freedom. The civil rights movement is situated in the broader context of a world movement that is taking place in America. This is a recurring theme throughout King beginning with his initial speech at Holt Baptist Church in 1955. The primary discursive note throughout the speech is the element of "hope." In the exile motif, the dominant existential category is "hope." What is the source and direction of this hope for King? A reading from within the exile paradigm favors the source of hope in the history of suffering peoples to create new meanings out of overwhelming oppression. The direction of the hope is toward a worldwide revolution. King viewed the boycott of the garbage workers in Memphis as part of a worldwide struggle for equality and freedom. This line of thinking points toward an exilic existence within the United States in the hope for a global eruption of freedom.

Before his tragic death in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded this nation that we no longer live in a small house, but rather we have inherited a world house of interrelatedness and interdependability. He suggested in clear and strident language that we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or die apart as fools. During his latter years, King was acutely aware of the need for a broader interpretive framework for understanding what he perceived as a crucial passage in history. He wrote that:

The civil rights movement in the United States is a special American phenomenon which must be understood in the light of American history and dealt with in terms of the American situation. But on another and more important level, what is happening in the United States today is a significant part of a world development.⁷⁴

He further suggested that the struggles of African-Americans must be understood in light of a "shifting" of the West's basic outlooks and philosophical presuppositions about "power." King argued that indeed

We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live together with each other in peace. However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war.⁷⁵

This dream of a “world house” has striking implications for the development of black church leaders as we prepare to meet the challenges of this century. Dr. King’s prophetic insight of a global community is not quite the same as the “I Have A Dream” speech of 1963 of which many are so fond. That was a speech directed to the issue of the civil rights which African- Americans had been denied. But the notion of a “world house” places the struggle within the context of liberation movements throughout world. It implies that the freedom of African- Americans, our human rights, is inextricably bound with yearnings and hopes of oppressed people everywhere. King often reminded us that “injustice anywhere is against justice everywhere.”

As we witness the shifting grounds of world change, leaders from historically marginalized communities must ask new questions about the nature and scope of our long, arduous journey on these shores. We must ask what does this new season of worldwide struggle mean for us, for this nation and the world? Who will lead? Dare we hope or must we conclude that we are at “the end of history?” King did not think we were at the end of history. King believed that what we are witnessing is a worldwide revolution that challenges the very foundations of Euro-western hegemony. In his last public sentences, King said that he was pleased to live during this chaotic and precarious age because beyond the despair and hopelessness that abounded, he believed that this was a great moment for the united struggles of people throughout the world. King said:

I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.
And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way

that men, in some strange way, are responding—something is happening in our world. The masses of the people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee—the cry is always the same—“We want to be free.”¹⁶

¹Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, Sean Hand, trans. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1990), 140.

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²In his sermon, “Transformed Nonconformist,” one first notices King’s improvisational play with great ideas, borrowed from the critique of social conformity by Harry Emerson Fosdick, Eugene Austin, and other sources. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Transformed Nonconformist,” in *Strength To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 17-25. See also Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) 105-108, 110-111, 164.

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³See *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, edited by R. Drew Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 113-141.

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⁴Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Alfonso Lingis, trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 201. The question, “Can things have a face?” is important for the definition above. Levinas suggests that art may be an appropriate lens through which to identify “Being” in the face of a thing. He asks, “Is not art an activity that lends faces to things? Does not the façade of a house regard us?...We ask ourselves all the same if the impersonal but fascinating and magical march of rhythm does not, in art, substitute itself for sociality, for the face, for speech.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and

Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10.

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⁵Luther E. Smith's definitions of spirit and spirituality are helpful. He writes, "Spirit is the 'breath of God' in creation, providing value and meaning to existence. Realizing and expressing itself in the material world, the work of the spirit is historical and political. It is the source for the definition of the individual, and the individual in relationship to the collective. As it discerns self, it discerns God and what it means to be a creature of God... *Spirituality is a way of life committed to understanding the nature and urgings of the spirit; the life organizes all its desires, energies, and resources so that they might be dominated by the spirit. Spirituality brings a harmony to living consistent with the peace and will of God.*" Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic As Prophet* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1981), 12.

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⁶Examples of the first perspective on spirituality are those promoted within established religious institutions. Here there is a vast array of definitions and approaches to the subject. See for instance, Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds. *The Study of Spirituality* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially "Note on Spirituality," xiv-xvi. Emphasis is placed on traditions of contemplation, reflection, and mystical life practices within institutionalized religious forms. In recent years, there has been growing interest and awareness of ecumenical and interfaith practices of spiritualities that enhance understanding of respective religious traditions through common dialogue and sharing. See Thich Nhat Hahn, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999) and Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds. *A Strange Freedom: Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). African-Americans tend not to place emphasis on "formalized structures" of spirituality. However, there is a significant presence and a growing literature, which suggest that the

place of liturgy, ritual, and inherited practices have long standing in the life of African-American churches. In this perspective one finds the recent writings of Peter J. Paris, Cheryl Sanders, Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, Dwight Hopkins, and Renita Weems very helpful.

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In respect to the second usage of spirituality, a stream of public conversations from Parker Palmer to Deepak Chopra, that incorporate therapeutic and self-actualization discourses have found audiences beyond the traditional academic and ecclesiastical institutions that have long dominated the contest. African-American women writers, theologians, preachers, clairvoyants, movements like the broadly defined New Age Spirituality, and Promise Keepers, are among the many competitors who compete for voice and place on a quickly changing playing field. See Deepak Chopra, *How to Know God: The Soul's Journey Into The Mystery of Mysteries* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000); Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams* (Amber-Allen Publishing and the New World Library, 1994); Herbert Benson, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Scribner's, 1996); Larry Dossey, M. D., *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and The Practice of Medicine* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993); Larry Dossey, M. D., *Prayer Is Good Medicine: How To Reap The Healing Benefits of Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

The third area refers to the broader philosophical and ethical notions of *spirit*. Here spirituality is discussed as source of authority for private and public discourse that again are located across the spectrum of conservative, liberal, and progressive ideologies. William Bennett, ed., *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life's Journey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Marianne Williamson, *Healing the Soul of America: Reclaiming Our Voices as Spiritual Citizens* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) and Michael Lerner, *Spirit Matters* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Road Publishing Co., 2000) may well represent the

broad social and cultural context for the language game of spirituality in this perspective. See also Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *Balm in Gilead: The Journey of Healer*, James M. Washington, *Conversations With God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), Michael Dash, Jonathan Jackson, and Stephen Rasor; Peter J. Paris, Robert Franklin, and Stephen Carter are outstanding exemplars of theologians, ethicists, and educators who have done some significant work in the area of African-American spirituality.

⁷Walter Earl Fluker, ed., *The Stones That The Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership From The Black Church Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

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⁸Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for A Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 22

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⁹Robert Michael Franklin, *Another Day's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 86. See also Franklin's taxonomy in *The Spiritualities of the Black Church* where he places King in the social justice tradition, 42.

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¹⁰James Hillman, *The Force of Character and The Lasting Life* (New York: Random House, 1999), 142.

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¹¹The question arises whether we must become ethical in order for society to exist or whether we are necessarily ethical in so far as we enter into the make-up of any actual society. The latter, of course, means that society is always, already directed by ethical—technically directive—principles and could not otherwise exist. But this forces us to distinguish between the ethical principles that happen to exist, and competing ethical principles that are after. Hence ethical principles are always embedded in actual practice, which means that leadership principles are necessarily based on ethical guides. In this view, the problem cannot be to

categorically intrude ethical guides, which did not previously exist, but rather first to disengage the guides we know must be there; and second, to confront these with alternates, which we seek to demonstrate to be better. This is another way of saying there is always room for argument and discovery in ethics as a science, and that we must press on with counter-arguments, and open ourselves to its inherent possibilities, if we are to make spiritual progress. (Many thanks to Preston King for this observation).

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¹²In determining or establishing how we ought to lead, we must clearly identify the sort of leadership that it is vital to change—and why. In short, moral argument ought to clarify not just what it supports but also what it opposes. In the case of King, the question that arises is: Did he introduce new principles within the ethos of his *koinonia*? If so, what traditional principles was he opposing? If he was deploying merely traditional principles, how is it possible to explain their failures in the past and their triumph via King?

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¹³Robert N. Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 256.

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¹⁴Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (N.Y.: Maryknoll, 1991); Clayborne Carson, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951*, Volume I, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); John Ansbro, *The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982); Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*

(New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986); David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Stephen Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: New American Library, 1982); Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America In the King Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). See especially Branch's treatment of Vernon Johns, pp. 1-26. William D. Watley, *Roots of Resistance: The Nonviolent Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985). See especially Chapter 1, "Formative Influences: Black Religious Experience, Evangelical Liberalism, and Personalism," pp. 17-46. Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked For A City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is A Balm in Gilead: Understanding Martin Luther King, Jr. Within the Context of Southern Religious History* (Fortress Press, 1991); Lewis V. Baldwin, *To Make the Wounded Whole* (Fortress Press, 1991). For examples of articles which address the impact of the African-American church on King's intellectual and social development, see Cornel West, "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual," in *Prophetic Fragments*, pp. 3-12; James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today* (January, 1984): 409-20; and Paul R. Garber, "King Was A Black Theologian," *Journal of Religious Thought* 31 (Fall-Winter 1974): 16-32.

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¹⁵With the notable exceptions of Peter J. Paris, Lewis V. Baldwin, Vincent Harding, and to some extent, Michael Eric Dyson, very little scholarship has been devoted to the spiritual biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ways in which it shaped his role as a leader.

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¹⁶King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958; 1964) 82; Ansbro, 119-128. King's major philosophical and theological studies at Boston University were with Edgar Sheffield Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. It was mainly under these thinkers that King studied

personalism. Smith and Zepp suggest that there are four significant themes of personalism which shaped King's intellectual quest for the beloved community: 1) the inherent worth of personality; 2) the personal God of love and reason; 3) the moral law of the cosmos; and 4) the social nature of human existence. Smith and Zepp, *Search for Beloved*, 118. King stated that personal idealism was his basic philosophical position. He credits personalism with two valuable contributions to his developing religious and ethical convictions: the metaphysical and philosophical grounding of the idea of a personal God and a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality. King, *Stride*, 82. Under E. S. Brightman's tutelage, he began studying the philosophy of Hegel. Although he was primarily concerned with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, he also read his *Philosophy of Right* and *Philosophy of History*.

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¹⁷Brightman had written that rational coherence is a method of verification of truth. He maintained that a proposition was true if it met the following criteria: 1) it is self-consistent; 2) it is consistent with all known facts of experience; 3) it is consistent with all other propositions held as true by the mind that is applying this criterion; 4) it establishes explanatory and interpretative relations between various parts of experience; and 5) these relations include all known aspects of experience and all known problems about experience in its details and as a whole. Edgar S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1940), 128.

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¹⁸Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 108-9.

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¹⁹Rationality, says King, distinguishes persons from the lower animals for "Somehow man is in nature, and yet he is above nature; he is in time, and yet he is above time; he is in space, and yet he is above space. This means that man can do things lower animals could never do. He can think a poem and write it; he

can think a symphony and compose it; he can think up a great civilization and create it.” Martin Luther King, Jr., “What Is Man?” in *The Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: The Christian Education Press, 1959), 8.

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²⁰King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 171

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²¹King sermon, “Unfulfilled Dreams,” in *A Knock At Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 194-195; King sermon, “Thou Fool,” Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, Chicago, August 27, 1967, 4-5, King Archives, Atlanta, GA; and King, “What Is Man?”, 11.

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²²King, “Loving Your Enemies,” in *Strength to Love*, 49.

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²³See King, “An Answer to a Perplexing Question,” in *Strength to Love*, 134-137; King’s understanding of the moral life of persons is religious, i.e. faith precedes morality. While it is true that we all are created in the image of God, there is a tension at the heart of human nature “between good and evil” which tends to drag persons down to lower levels of existence. King, op cit, “Unfulfilled Dreams.” Because of the dialectical nature of self, there is an endless struggle between freedom and finitude, which wars against moral perfection. King affirmed with the Apostle Paul, “The good that I would, I do not; and the evil that I would not, I do.” King, “What is Man?”, 12.

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²⁴Cornel West aptly states this idea in his treatment of “prophetic Christianity”: “For prophetic Christianity, the two inseparable notions of freedom are existential freedom and social freedom. Existential freedom is an effect of the divine gift of grace which promises to sustain persons through and finally deliver them from the bondage to death, disease, and despair. Social freedom is the aim of

Christian political practice, a praxis that flows from the divine gift of grace; social freedom results from the promotion and actualization of the norms of individuality and democracy. Existential freedom empowers people to fight for social freedom, to realize its political dimension. Existential freedom anticipates history and is ultimately transhistorical, whereas social freedom is thoroughly a matter of this worldly human liberation.” Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 18.

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²⁵King, “Transformed Nonconformity,” in *Strength to Love*, 19.

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²⁶King, “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” in *Strength to Love*, 15.

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²⁷Ibid, pp. 14-16. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, The New American Library, 1964), 82; see also King, “Transformed Nonconformist,” in *Strength to Love*, 17-25.

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²⁸King, “Our God Is Able,” *Strength to Love*, 110. King writes, “There is a law in the moral world—a silent, invisible imperative, akin to the laws of the physical world—which reminds us that life will only work in a certain way. The Hitlers and the Mussolinis have their day, and for a period they may wield great power, spreading themselves like a green bay tree, but soon they are cut down like grass and wither as the green herb.” Ibid, 109.

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²⁹Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, The New American Library, 1964), 82.

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³⁰King, “Transformed Nonconformist,” in *Strength to Love*, 22.

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³¹King writes, “To be a Christian, one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonizing and tragedy-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which

only comes through suffering.” Ibid., 25.

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³²King, “Loving Your Enemies,” *Strength to Love*, 53-54.

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³³Walter Earl Fluker, *They Looked For A City*, 82-86.

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³⁴King, “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” in Clayborne Carson, Senior Editor, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Called To Serve*, Volume I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 363; see also King, “Statement to the American Baptist Convention,” 7 August 1959, in Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers. Here King shares his call to ministry.

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³⁵Fluker, “Recognition, Respectability, and Loyalty,” in R. Drew Smith, ed. *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 113-141.

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³⁶A cursory reading of King’s sermons reveals how he utilizes this methodology to analyze and reinterpret long standing biblical truths in his quest for personal and social transformation. See “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” 13-14; “Transformed Nonconformist,” 18-19; “On Being a Good Neighbor,” 35-46; “Loving Your Enemies,” 47-55; “How Should a Christian View Communism,” 96-105; “Antidotes to Fear,” 115-26; “The Answer to a Perplexing Question,” 127-37 in *Strength to Love*. See also King’s unpublished sermons: “Is the Universe Friendly,” 8-9, “Thou Fool,” 2-4; and “Discerning the Signs of History,” King Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

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³⁷Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The Real Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 166.

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³⁸King, "Unfulfilled Dreams," 6.

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³⁹King, "Transformed Nonconformist," 23.

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⁴⁰Manfred Kets De Vries, *The Leadership Mystique*, 5.

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⁴¹Laurence Thomas, *Living Morally: A Psychology of Moral Character* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 17-26.

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⁴²King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in *Strength to Love*, 154.

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⁴³These "faces" refer, respectively to the early stages of King's development. "Little Mike," refers to his early formation under the shadow of a powerful father-figure; "Tweed" was the nickname of his teenage years at Morehouse College; and "The Philosopher King," as he was dubbed, is a reference to his university days in Boston. Levinas writes, "The face of man is the medium through which the invisible in him becomes visible and enters into commerce with us."

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⁴⁴King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 58-63; see also, David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 57-58; David Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership," in *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 11-34. I agree with Lewis Baldwin and Preston Williams that this vision, while important, should not be considered as an isolated phenomenon, but should be understood as one among other experiences in King's spiritual odyssey and as an example of the black church's belief in the intimacy of the divine in struggles for justice. Lewis Baldwin, *There Is A Balm*, 189; and Preston N. Williams, "The Public and Private Burdens of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The Christian Century* (25 February 1987), 198-99.

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⁴⁵Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 58.

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⁴⁶Several writers have made reference to the influence of Thurman on his younger visionary. See Lerone Bennett, *What Manner of Man*, 2nd rev. ed. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1976), 74-75; John Ansbro, *The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982), 27-29, 272; "Dr. King Mentor Remembered," *The Boston Globe*, 15 January 1982, 13-14; Lewis V. Baldwin, "Understanding Martin Luther King, Jr. Within the Context of Southern Black Religious History," *Journal of Religious Studies* 13:2 (Fall 1987):19; Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, the Black Church and the Black Messianic Vision," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Center* 12:1-2 (Fall 1984/Spring 1985):1; and Larry Murphy, "Howard Thurman and Social Activism," in *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1983), 154-155. Perhaps, Thurman's own accounting of his relationship with King is sufficient for our purposes: "I am one of a few and maybe the only person who was a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Theology at Boston University when Dr. King took his doctorate degree who did not have him in the classroom. I think this is a mark of distinction. We had contacts, but our primary contact was sitting around my television watching the World Series...I've known him and his family, his mother and father for many years. And Mrs. Thurman's and my relationship to those two young people (Martin and Coretta King) was a personal and primary one. It was not involved in the light and the drama. My concern was always about the state of his spiritual life all the time. And I felt it was my relationship with him that gave me the right to do it, while Mrs. Thurman's interest was always in the little things involving the children and the wife of a man who had to live his private life in public. And this is a great agony. I understand from one of his biographers that a book that I wrote in 1949 was very influential on his thinking: *Jesus and the Disinherited*. But I did not hear this from him and I do not make a claim of it; but lest someone may know that it is in this biographical statement you will think that I am trying to be

falsely modest by not mentioning it; so I've done it and now I can go on with my work." Thurman, "Litany and Words in Memoriam for Martin Luther King, Jr.," The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, San Francisco, California, 7 April 1968, Howard Thurman Educational Trust, San Francisco, California.

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⁴⁷Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Harcourt, Brace and Javonovich and, 1979) 254-255.

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⁴⁸Ibid, 255. Thurman recommended an "additional four weeks to those that the doctor felt you [King] needed for complete recovery." "Howard Thurman to Martin Luther King, Jr.," 20 October 1958, King Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University.

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⁴⁹Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 245.

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⁵⁰Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 140. See also David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1986), 111-113.

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⁵¹Thurman, "He Looked For A City." Taped Sermon, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 2 January 1955, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

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⁵²Ibid.

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⁵³See Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 26-37, where he discusses three primary questions related to the discipline of

commitment. They are respectively, “Who am I?”, “What do I want?” and “How do I propose to get it?”

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⁵⁴Thurman, “He Looked For A City.”

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⁵⁵Amitai Etzioni’s definition of civility is helpful. “The term civility has been used in different ways, most commonly it has referred to the need to deliberate in a civil manner about the issues society faces, and to sustain intermediary bodies that stand between the individual and the state.” Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 95-96.

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⁵⁶Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* is one example of the ongoing public debate on the significance of civil discourse and social networking that is part of a larger conversation about the need to recapture, reappropriate, and sustain the habits and practices essential for the survival of an American ethos of generalized reciprocity and mutual obligation. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). See especially Putnam’s discussion on the significance of “social capital” as both a bonding and bridging social phenomenon and its relationship to civic infrastructures that build community. Bonding refers to the ways in which social capital tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. Bridging refers to ways in which social capital tends to produce broader and more inclusive group behavior and to encourage reciprocity. (22-24)

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⁵⁷James Schmidt, “Is Civility a Virtue?” in *Civility*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 17-19.

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⁵⁸Lawrence Cahoon, “Civic Meetings, Cultural Meanings” in Rouner, *Civility*, 46.

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⁵⁹Higginbotham writes, “[T]he politics of respectability assumed a fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African-American resistance. Through the discourse of respectability, the Baptist women emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest, such as petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice.” Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

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⁶⁰See Anthony Pinn, ed., *Making the Gospel Plain: The Writings of Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999); Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White*: Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, “Faith of the American Negro” in *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1760 to the Present*: Boston: Houghton Mifflin [1971]; Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds. *A Strange Freedom: Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, in a memorable speech, entitled, “The Faith of the American Negro,” declared, “Since their Emancipation from slavery the masses of American Negroes have lived by the strength of simple but deeply moving faith. They have believed in the love of and providence of a just and holy God; they have believed in the principles of democracy and in the righteous purpose of the Federal Government, and they have believed in the disposition of the American people as a whole and in the long run to be fair in all their dealings.” Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, op. cit. 681.

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⁶¹See Jeffrey C. Goldfarb’s excellent discussion in *Civility and Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1. Although the example he cites is the disruptive public speech of Malcolm X, the civility practiced by King and the modern civil rights movement represents the epitome of civility as disruptive speech and action. In this sense, King is rightly depicted as a *bricoleur*. See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The*

Languages of Morals and Their Discontents (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 74.

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⁶²King, "Love, Law and Disobedience," in Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 51. See also, King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," where he writes: "I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured." Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 295.

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⁶³King, "On Being A Good Neighbor," in *Strength to Love*, 32.

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⁶⁴Ibid., 33.

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⁶⁵Ibid.

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⁶⁶King, "The Ethical Demands of for Integration," in James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 124.

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⁶⁷Howard Thurman makes this observation in his eulogy of Martin Luther King, Jr. He stated, "Always he spoke from within the context of his religious experience, giving voice to the ethical insight which sprang out of his profound brooding over the meaning of his Judeo-Christian heritage. And this was indeed his great contribution to our times. He was able to put at the center of his own personal religious experience a searching ethical awareness. Thus organized religion as we know it in our society found itself with its back against the wall. To condemn him, to reject him, was to reject the ethical insight of the faith it proclaimed. And this was new. Racial prejudice, segregation, and discrimination were not regarded by him as merely un-American, undemocratic, but as a mortal sin against God. For those who were religious it awakens guilt; for those who are merely superstitious it inspires fear. And it was this fear that pulled the trigger of the assassin's gun that took his life." Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*, 186.

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⁶⁸King, "A Knock at Midnight," in *Strength To Love*; King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"; and King, "A Time To Break Silence, in Washington," *A Testament of Hope*, 497-504, 289-302, 231-244.

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⁶⁹For Martin Luther King, Jr., community is the ideal that serves as the goal of human existence and the norm for ethical judgment; it is the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of persons in which they realize the solidarity of humanity by freely assuming responsibility for one another within the context of civil relations. Community provides the context for the sensuous articulation of the values of love, justice, and courage as dynamic and interrelated constructs. The search for community was the defining motif of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and thought. From his early childhood until his death, there is a progression in his personal and intellectual understanding of the nature and goal of human existence, which he refers to as "the beloved community." The early development of the ideal of community in King reached its zenith in the march on Washington in 1963, but the following four and a half years proved to be a period in which his

vision of community received its severest criticisms and challenges.

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⁷⁰Walter Earl Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community In Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

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⁷¹King, "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," in Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 257.

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⁷²Cone, *Martin & Malcom & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 235.

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⁷³Ibid.

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⁷⁴King, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, 169.

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⁷⁵Ibid, 167.

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⁷⁶King, "I See The Promised Land (3 April 1968)," in Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 280.

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