

An interview with Lewis Baldwin

Fortress Press: From your book, it is plain that Martin Luther King Jr. was born and bred and fully soaked in black-church culture. Yet he also stands apart from that tradition in some ways, especially in his activism. What accounts for that?

Lewis Baldwin: *Never to Leave Us Alone* establishes that Martin Luther King Jr. was born, bred, and deeply rooted in black church culture. It argues that the prayer life of King was rooted in spiritual values and cultural traditions that extended back to King's slave foreparents, who brought the concept and habit of prayer and praying to these shores from various parts of Africa, and who made prayer one of the key markers of the faith of the black church. That church culture afforded the formative influences for King's attitude toward and participation in the art and activity of prayer. In other words, King found his model for practicing and centering prayer in African American church traditions. It is also important to note that for King, the imperative to pray came not only from a sense of his own personal finitude before God but also from a deep consciousness that was grounded in the African American religious experience and especially black church traditions.

I would not conclude that King stood over against black church traditions in his activism. It is better to say that King drank from the wellsprings of that tradition, while also enlarging it in the context of a nonviolent crusade for freedom, justice, and equality of opportunity. The black church, to which King was heir, was born in protest, and its founders and early pioneers, such as Richard Allen and Frederick Douglass, advocated moral suasion and nonviolence in their challenge to racist values, structures, and institutions. But King was the first to employ moral suasion and nonviolent direct action in the context of organized civil rights campaigns that involved not only prayer vigils and mass meetings but also boycotts, street marches and demonstrations, sit-ins, and acts of civil disobedience. Nonviolence for King was more of a well-conceived social ethic, and it was more radical, confrontational, manipulative, coercive, tied to a broader sense of social responsibility, and geared toward the elimination of a multitude of social ills (that is, racism, poverty, war, and so on).

FP: Do you think that MLK really fundamentally changed his attitude toward prayer as he dove more and more deeply into the civil rights movement and the personal perils of involvement there?

LB: As you suggest, Martin Luther King Jr.'s attitude toward prayer developed and matured "as he dove more deeply into the civil rights movement and the personal perils" in that context. Clearly, King moved beyond the idea of prayer as simply some sacred indulgence or overly pious act and came to a greater sense of prayer and praying as creative energy. King reclaimed the language of freedom and deliverance in the prayers of his forebears, but he made it useful in and relevant to an organized, mass movement of nonviolent direct action that involved Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and even many who were not devoted to organized, institutionalized religion. Although prayer had always been a central ingredient for African Americans involved in movements for social change, King, by uniting the prayer circle and the picket line, and by stressing the need for "prayer vigils," "prayer campaigns," "prayer marches," "prayer pilgrimages," and "prayer rallies," was the first to make such a creative use of this spiritual discipline in a church-centered nonviolent crusade for freedom, justice, human dignity, and peace.

FP: This is now your fourth book on Martin Luther King, and your work ranges from an intellectual biography to a study of his ethics and a volume on his international engagements, especially with South Africa. What has been the source of your own fascination with King? And what do you see as your own particular angle or insight about King that most people and most scholars need to learn from?

LB: My fascination with King extends back to my high school and college years in Alabama, where I was exposed to civil rights activities. I participated in some student demonstrations in Camden, Alabama during the voting rights campaigns in 1965, and was inspired by King's preaching, his vision of the beloved community, and the courage he displayed as he sought to translate that vision into practical action and practical reality.

Scholars and people in the public square can learn from my treatments of the most important formative influences on King. I was the first scholar to devote an entire book-length work to King's cultural background, giving special attention to his roots in and indebtedness to southern culture and, more specifically, to black church and extended family traditions. Through my scholarship on King, I have sought, on the whole, to answer one important question: What was the source of King's identity, life, thought, vision, sense of purpose and mission, and efforts to translate an ethical ideal into practical reality? Unlike many King scholars, I have focused primarily on King as a product of African American culture, while also showing that King is best understood when both his cultural-experiential sources and his academic-intellectual sources are seriously considered.

FP: Nowadays, with changes in the whole religious scene among African Americans, some scholars question the whole category of the "black church." What do you say to that, and what does King have to teach us about the ongoing religious journey of black peoples?

LB: You are quite right to note that changes in the religious scene among African Americans are leading to questions about the whole category of black church. A recent exchange of ideas occurred between the Princeton scholar Eddie Glaude and other African American scholars around Glaude's claim that the black church is dead. It is better to say that the black church is being redefined primarily by the emergence and visibility of the mega church phenomenon, with its stress on materialism, prosperity, praise, and personal enrichment themes. This represents an unfortunate shift from King's idea of church as prophetic voice and presence. I hold that King's model of the church as prophetic witness and praxis, not the entrepreneurial spirituality of the mega churches, affords the best model for African Americans in their continuing quest for equality and survival. At a time when many are questioning the relevance and reformability of the black church, King remains not only a powerful prophetic voice and a paragon of Godly devotion, but also a model for reflection. One finds in King's sermons, mass meeting speeches, writings, and social activism both a critique of the church and proposals for effecting its spiritual, theological, and ethical renewal. King is still relevant to our quest for a liberating and empowering church for the twenty-first century.