

*Never to Leave Us Alone: The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King Jr.*, by LEWIS V. BALDWIN. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010. xvii+159 pp. \$16.95.

Before Martin Luther King Jr. was the leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States or a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, he was a minister. In his public work for justice and peace, he always maintained a minister's heart. One of the most regular ways his minister's spirit found expression in his public work was through prayer. This point is presented in a straightforward manner in Lewis Baldwin's recent *Never to Leave Us Alone*. In this short book, Baldwin attempts to trace the essence of King's public and private prayers by mining those prayers that have been preserved and are available to researchers.

In this effort, Baldwin continues the trajectory of King scholarship he has maintained for over twenty years, namely, grounding King's life and thought both in African-American cultural and religious traditions and in the liberal theology of his day. Baldwin has been a leading voice in highlighting the ways that King's

theological- and social-ethical commitments naturally emerge out of the black church milieu in which he spent his entire life. By focusing on King's prayer life, however, he adds a new layer to this field of study. Surprisingly, *Never to Leave Us Alone* is the first book to deal primarily with King's prayers as the starting point for reflection on King's legacy.

Baldwin organizes this study chronologically. The first chapter traces "the wellsprings of the black prayer tradition" and its probable influence on King. The book then moves through four chapters that address King's prayers as a student, in his sermons, as a pastor, and as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. The book then concludes with a reflection on the implications of this study for public prayer in the United States today.

We may gain many interesting insights by reading this study, but one stood out above the others in my eyes as a social ethicist: King, from an early age, recognized the mutual interdependence of a vibrant spiritual life that finds regular expression in prayer and a life of social activism on behalf of the poor and marginalized. According to Baldwin, King understood prayer to be the "creative energy" that inspired and sustained a socially engaged Christian faith that risked suffering for the causes of justice and peace. In fact, for King prayer was a form of social activism. As Baldwin makes clear on multiple occasions, King believed that prayer changes things.

However, Baldwin also points out that, while King fervently believed in the power of prayer to bring about social change, he was also sharply critical of those who used prayer as an excuse for social inaction or lazy thinking about social issues. Rather than falling into dichotomous understandings of prayer as opposed to "the life of the mind" or social engagement, King insisted that spirituality, expressed through prayer, and justice-seeking at the personal and social levels were dependent upon each other.

Baldwin concludes his book with some reflections on lessons we may learn from King's prayer life. Interestingly, he concludes that King would both encourage prayer in public and discourage popular movements to reinstate mandated prayer in schools. Rather than imposing faith on others, King would encourage a dynamic public sphere in which religious language and practices were given legitimate space. In addition, Baldwin highlights the fact that King was a pioneer of interreligious prayer.

I recommend this book to all interested in King studies and the relation of spirituality and social change. I hope this marks the beginning of a sustained conversation about the role of religious practices in King's public ministry.

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