

Foreword

Martin Luther King Jr. was the most influential civil rights activist in the United States in the twentieth century. This point is well established in the growing body of scholarship on this phenomenal figure. But King was far more than a celebrated civil rights activist who gave dynamic speeches, led nonviolent demonstrations, and engaged in creative acts of civil disobedience. He was also a great thinker and man of ideas and letters, and the scope and vitality of his mind were such that he should be considered a part of that rich story that constitutes American intellectual history.

Rufus Burrow Jr. traces King's metamorphosis as both an intellectual and activist, noting that in both categories his life was filled with incredible fulfillment and achievement. For Burrow, the arresting power of King's ideas and idealism, and the ways in which this grounded his quest for social change, cast him in the image of the quintessential *organic intellectual*. Burrow teases out and analyzes the major features of King's thought and intellectual sources and categories, while also linking his life to the broader cultural and political contexts that surrounded him. The finished product is a King who has been elusive and largely unknown to much of this nation and the world.

An Extremist for Love is a superb work in several respects. First, it is a vivid character assessment of a complex individual who thought and acted out of the proud heritage of his southern forefathers and mothers. Burrow reminds us that King's thinking and activism were pervaded by the same visions that caught the imaginations of his grandparents and parents. The contention, then, is that the familial roots of King's nonviolence and protest activities constitute the proper point of departure in any credible reconstruction of King's public career as a thinker, idealist, and social activist.

Second, Burrow has given us perhaps the most extensive examination of King's key ideas and concepts, such as the love and rationality of God, the dignity and worth of human personality, the essentiality of the love ethic, the communitarian nature of persons, and human freedom and sin. Careful attention is also devoted to Mohandas K. Gandhi, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and other formal intellectual influences, which provided King with intellectual categories, interpretive models, and a conceptual framework to articulate many of these ideas. At the same time, Burrow reminds

us of King's amazing creativity in translating ideas into practical action and reality.

Third, Burrow highlights King's connections and indebtedness to some of his most progressive-minded and socially active contemporaries, such as Vernon Johns, Jo Ann Robinson, James M. Lawson, Ella J. Baker, Bayard Rustin, and Glenn Smiley. Although these figures loomed large in King's early development as a thinker and practitioner of creative nonviolent dissent and protest, they have, up to this point, received little attention in studies of King. Burrow corrects this pattern of neglect while establishing King's rightful place in a movement that included numerous thinkers and courageous activists.

Finally, Burrow offers a fresh perspective on King's legacy and what it means for our times, especially as we continue to grapple with the enduring problems of white supremacy, black intracommunal crime and violence, sexism, and other social ills. We are thus challenged to read and understand King not only *in context*, but also *beyond context*. Although much is revealed about King's relevance and meaningfulness as a cultural and political icon for this age, Burrow also gives some indication as to why the intellectual legacy of King promises to be richer as time goes on. There is already a notable increase in interest in that part of King's legacy.

But we are also confronted with caricatures of King that arise not only from a procrustean attitude toward figures of the past, but also from a lack of acquaintance with his words and ideas. Thus, it is not surprising that we are increasingly confronted with the image of the gentle, harmless southern black Baptist preacher who made love, nonviolence, and redemptive suffering the heart of the Christian faith. Images routinely fix themselves in the public consciousness, and this image of King is not easily shattered. In such a climate, Burrow's book should be seen as part of a breakthrough toward a more enlightened understanding of King. With an admirable grasp of King's thought and social activism in all of their depth and scope, Burrow has performed a significant measure of iconoclasm in the process of projecting a more accurate and balanced portrayal of King the man and his times.

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