

Introduction

This book is comprised of five parts, with a total of ten chapters. Each part introduces the major subject to be discussed and provides an overview of the chapter(s) therein. Part 1 focuses on the family roots of the protest tradition of Martin Luther King. Did King come from a family that was steeped in the tradition of nonviolence? Many, including Coretta Scott King, have given a negative answer to that question, especially if they heard the story of King's paternal grandmother's violent encounter with a white man who beat her young son (Daddy King). But can we reasonably conclude from this incident that the spirit and practice of nonviolence was absent from King's entire family lineage? The three chapters in Part 1 address this and the related question: What, if anything, did King's paternal grandparents (chapter one), maternal grandparents (chapter two), and parents (chapter three) contribute to the protest and nonviolence traditions that were so important to his adult life and civil rights ministry? We will see that the family influences contributed much to making King who he came to be, and also helped to lay the foundation for his moral conviction that we ought to protest injustice, but *only* by engaging in nonviolent direct action as the sole means. King's family also nurtured and influenced his intellectual development and his burning desire to help eradicate the injustices that were undermining the humanity and dignity of his people. Martin Luther King was an ordinary human being who did some very extraordinary things, a theme that permeates this book.

In Part 2, we turn to an in-depth discussion of some of the formal intellectual influences on King. Because of my firm conviction that Martin Luther King was a man of ideas and ideals, and that this warrants even more attention in King studies, the two chapters in Part 2 (four–five) are devoted to a deeper examination of two thinkers who influenced his developing theology and philosophy, as well as how he thought about socio-ethical practice. Chapter four is devoted to a careful examination of the social gospel ideas of Walter Rauschenbusch and King's claim to have been a staunch advocator of the social gospel even before reading Rauschenbusch. In chapter five, I engage in an extensive discussion of the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and how it influenced the theology and social ethics of King. In each case, the reader will be reminded that these formal ideas actually had their beginnings in teachings and practices that King was exposed to during his family upbringing,

in religious instruction at the Ebenezer Baptist Church where his father was senior minister, in conversations with his father and in observing him do ministry, as well as in the contributions of his teachers and mentors at Morehouse College. Therefore, when King was formally introduced in seminary to liberal theological ideas such as the significance of subjecting all things to reason, the inherent goodness of human nature, God as personal, and the application of the historical-critical method to the study of the Bible, he easily resonated to these because of what he had already been exposed to at home, in church, and at Morehouse. When he arrived at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania in the fall of 1948, his mind was not a *tabula rasa* or blank sheet, and he was already developing into a serious thinker, willing to subject his own long-held faith claims to critique.

In the two chapters in Part 3 (six–seven), we take up the important idea that King did not begin his civil rights ministry in a vacuum, a point that he himself acknowledged many times during and after the Montgomery bus boycott. He made no effort to get the media and other forces to focus on him as a kind of “great man” as the source and sole driving spirit of the movement. King did not initiate the Montgomery struggle. Instead, he was happy to point out that there were forerunners or trailblazers who paved the way, and that he just happened to be in Montgomery and was able and willing to carry out the leadership role into which he was cast. However, unlike the claim of some writers on King, such as Peter J. Ling, as well as civil rights activists Ella Baker and Edwin D. Nixon, this should not be taken to mean that Montgomery or the movement *made* King. This is at best a half-truth. The larger, broader truth is that King both made, *and* was made by, the movement. Indeed, in many ways he contributed as much to the movement as it contributed to him. Thus, it seems to me that one positions self to get the best and fullest understanding of King and the movement by focusing not on one or the other—King “the great man” *or* the movement—but both. King himself always seemed aware that both he *and* local movements were making significant contributions to the civil rights of blacks, although his tendency was to downplay his own role.¹

1. See Clayborne Carson, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987): 448–56, and Nathan I. Huggins, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charisma and Leadership,” *The Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987): 477–81. Carson, Huggins, and others discuss whether the focus should be on King or the movement. Most of the contributors, including Carson, rejected the “great man” approach, preferring that emphasis be placed on the movement, since this would mean that more focus could be placed on local grassroots leaders who contributed greatly to the struggle for freedom and civil rights. Huggins concluded that the emphasis should be placed on King, which need not preclude stressing the contributions of grassroots local leaders

Chapters six and seven, then, focus on the contributions of some key forerunners of the movement: the venerable Rev. Vernon Napoleon Johns, and black women trailblazers, respectively. Johns was King's immediate predecessor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He was intellectually brilliant, inimitable, prophetic, sometimes eccentric, and he paved the way for King like no other single individual. To date, not much has been written on Johns, and yet what is known about him is quite a fascinating story that deserves to be told. But in the present book, Johns is presented as only one of the primary characters who actually broke ground for and paved the way for Martin Luther King and the work that lay ahead of him. We will see that although King had occasion to meet Johns just prior to succeeding him as pastor at Dexter, most of what he knew about him was secondhand, based on the stories of other black preachers. Nevertheless, the reputation of Johns convinced King that he was not only one of God's "bad boy" preachers, but a fearless and passionate pastor in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets of the eighth century bce, and that he never backed away from a good fight, especially when it had to do with working for justice for those counted among the least of these. Indeed, Johns was often heard saying: "If you see a good fight, get in it," advice he claimed to have gotten from his mother.²

For far too long, the contributions of black women to the civil rights movement from Montgomery onward were not given the attention they deserved in books and articles by scholars and popular writers. When this pattern of neglect began to be broken, the effort, not surprisingly, was led by black and other women themselves.³ Although King himself was not always forthcoming about the significant roles that women played from the time he was cast upon the stage as a leader, there is no question that he had some awareness of this, and periodically said so. Chapter seven, then, considers the

who might also possess charisma. He was careful to point out: "There is as much danger in romanticizing movements as in romanticizing individual leaders" (481). It seems to me that the richest, fullest understanding will come from seeing the two in dialectical relationship, which is consistent with King's method. As far as possible, the effort should be made to place equal emphasis on both King (the great man) and the movement.

2. Houston Bryan Roberson, *Fighting the Good Fight: The Story of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, 1865-1977* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88.

3. For example, see Zita Allen, *Black Women Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1996); Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Scribner, 2001); and Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003). Allen, Robnett, and Ross are Afrikan American writers and scholars; Olson is an Anglo one.

woman factor in paving the way to the civil rights movement commencing in Montgomery. The focus is primarily on the contributions of black women, a number of whom were influenced by their pastor, Vernon Johns. However, the chapter also considers the contributions of a couple of southern white women as well, especially during the Montgomery bus boycott. Who were some of these black and white women? They include members of the Women's Political Council, such as Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson, two teenagers who in March and October of 1955, respectively, were arrested on buses for violating Montgomery's segregation ordinance (the same year of Rosa Parks's arrest on December 5), and a librarian who was openly friendly to blacks' struggle. While the chapter will cite other Montgomery residents who helped to break ground for King, the focus is on the contributions of black women, since it is only in fairly recent civil rights scholarship that they have been made more visible and given their much-deserved recognition and credit.

The purpose of including the contributions of the two teens, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, is to show that black youths were involved in a significant way in the movement from start to finish. This means, among other things, that the contributions of black children and youths did not begin with the sit-in movement and the Freedom Rides of 1960 and 1961, respectively. Rather, they were involved and active in the struggle for freedom and liberation from Montgomery to Memphis, and beyond. This chapter also aims to provide a sense of King's reaction to the woman factor and how (or whether) he was influenced by it in any significant way(s). This is a topic that screams for deeper, systematic exploration. While I am convinced that male writers can, and should, explore this in attempts to tell more of the untold stories about the contributions of women to the civil rights movement, my hope is that discussions like the one in this chapter will generate increasing interest among women scholars such that growing numbers will begin devoting even more of their genius and way of seeing and being to scholarship on King and the movement, including the role that women have, and must continue to play. Although at this writing, no book-length text has been written on King by a woman,⁴ in recent years, second-generation womanist religious scholars such as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan of Shaw University Divinity School and Traci West of

4. It should be noted, however, that two important comparative books have been written on King by white women, one from the United States, and the other from Germany. See Mary E. King (former leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999), and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, *Dreams and Nightmares: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Struggle for Black Equality in America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

Drew Theological School have begun devoting significant space and attention to King in the context of some of their publications.⁵ First-generation womanist ethicist Katie G. Cannon devoted a strong comparative chapter on King and Howard Thurman in her seminal book, *Black Womanist Ethics*.⁶

Part 4 brings us to a consideration of Christian love and Gandhian nonviolence, and especially on how these influenced King and what he contributed to them as he sought the *practiced* use of his ideas in nonviolent direct action campaigns throughout the South and in some places in the North as well. The two chapters in Part 4 (eight–nine) will look more carefully than has heretofore been the case, at the roots of King’s understanding of Christian love, from the teachings and example of his mother and maternal grandmother, to his formal study of love in seminary and during doctoral studies. This will be the primary emphasis in chapter eight. Although in numerous writings and speeches King discussed the difference between *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*, we will see that he at times spoke also of three other levels of love: motherly love, humanitarian love, and utilitarian love. In every case, however, he was clear that *agape* is the highest form of love and is applicable not only to individuals, but to groups and nations as well. In this regard, he rejected Reinhold Niebuhr’s view that *agape* is not applicable to groups such as nations, arguably the largest, most complex of groups. He also rejected what he saw as Niebuhr’s ethical dualism. In addition, the chapter examines the question of whether King actually read and pondered the most definitive study on *eros* and *agape*, written by Anders Nygren (*Agape and Eros*), a classic book that was included in the collateral reading list of one of his courses in seminary. More than previous books on King, chapter eight will provide a deeper discussion on Nygren’s view of *agape* and what King, in light of his personalistic stance and his experience as a black

5. See Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Refiner’s Fire: A Religious Engagement with Violence* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), ch. 5, “Ballads, Not Bullets: The Nonviolent Protest Ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr.” Kirk-Duggan has given attention to King in the context of other writings as well, although not as extensively as in the aforementioned book. See her *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), especially ch. 9, “Mass Meeting”; and *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 87, 179, 180. Traci C. West, “Gendered Legacies of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Leadership,” *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 41–56. In addition, Kirk-Duggan and West each contributed a creative and instructive chapter to Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Burrow Jr., eds., *The Domestication of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Clarence B. Jones, Right-Wing Conservatism, and the Manipulation of the King Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), chapters 5 (“Drum Major for Justice or Dilettante of Dishonesty”), and 7 (“Gay Rights and the Misuse of Martin”), respectively.

6. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), ch. 6, “Resources for a Constructive Ethic in the Theology of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.”

person in a racist society, considered to be a major flaw in his position. The chapter also examines the influence of Gandhian nonviolence, and how King's doctrine of nonviolence began to take shape once agape and black cultural and religious ideas and practices were combined with Gandhian ideas. It will also be seen that contrary to what many believed, King did not begin his leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott by focusing on explicitly Gandhian principles and techniques of nonviolence. He had not, by this time, had any experience applying relevant aspects of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and its techniques, and thus did not know how to apply them. Moreover, consistent with much southern culture, he was initially committed to an ethic of self-defense, owned a pistol, and had armed bodyguards around him as well as around his house. A key question to be addressed in this chapter is: When did King actually begin to commit to the Gandhian type of nonviolence and what led him to do so? Whether King's mature doctrine of nonviolence differed from Gandhi's and was more relevant to the United States context will also be explored.

Chapter eight aims to do something else as well, namely, to clarify some misleading statements that King made in various places regarding his evolution toward his stance of nonviolence as a way of life. For example, when we read either of the two versions of King's brief intellectual autobiography, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,"⁷ we are given the impression that he was first introduced to Gandhi's concept of nonviolence while he was in seminary, that he heard a lecture on Gandhi given by Howard University president Mordecai Johnson during his senior year, and that he was forever after a committed Gandhian. In truth, all of this, except the fact that he heard Johnson's lecture on Gandhi, is misleading. We will see that Bayard Rustin of the War Resisters League and Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation did much to help King to move from an ethic of self-defense to the type of nonviolence that was advocated by Gandhi. King was not a Gandhian when he arrived in Montgomery, but having met and been advised by these two men he quickly evolved as a proponent of Gandhi's ideas as he worked to devise a type of nonviolence that was more relevant to the Deep South context.

Chapter nine probes the process of actual training in nonviolence and how it evolved in King's practice, beginning with the very first informal training session near the end of the Montgomery bus boycott. We will also get a clearer sense of how important Richard Gregg's concept of *moral jiu-jitsu* was for King's doctrine and practice of nonviolence. Indeed, it may be reasonably

7. See Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), ch. 6, and *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), ch. 17.

argued that what “success” there was in places like Birmingham and Selma was a result of applying moral jiu-jitsu, thus effectively knocking and keeping the likes of Police Commissioner Bull Connor and Sheriff Jim Clark off balance morally.

The final section of this book, Part 5, is comprised of one chapter (ten). It examines the question of where we go from here. By his own admission, Martin Luther King was wedded to nonviolence as the only way of living in the type of world created by the God of his faith. This God, he believed, infused the world with morality and intends that human beings live in ways that are consistent with this. For King, a world that hinges on morality works best when people behave and live nonviolently. And yet, as committed as King was to nonviolence as a way of life, one wonders why the trilogy of social problems he was so devoted to eradicating (meaning racism, militarism, and economic injustice) continue to exist long after he was assassinated. What, if any, forces did King believe created openings for hope that the United States could—indeed would—more nearly approximate the beloved community? This final chapter explores five such forces. Just how relevant is the Kingian model of nonviolent direct action in the twenty-first century? These and related questions are explored in chapter ten.