THE THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

by

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Department of Religion
Duke University

Date: __________________________

Approved:

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Frederick Herzog, Supervisor

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

(Religion--Systematic Theology)

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This dissertation is a study of the theology of Martin Luther King's response to the experience of black oppression in America as illustrative of a transition to a new anthropological focus for Christian theology. This emerging focus is reflected specifically in the development of various theologies of minority concern and in the Humanum Studies of the World Council of Churches. Especially do the observations and findings of the latter suggest that theology address itself concretely to the problem of being human by directing its efforts at the removal of the dehumanizing features of the human situation, by contributing a doctrine of man that interprets genuine humanity in concrete terms that cannot be made to sanction man's inhumanity to man, and by moving the human situation toward that understanding of genuine humanity.
The thesis of the dissertation suggests that significant features of this emerging theological focus were present in the theology reflected in the work of Martin Luther King. His response to the experience of black oppression reflected both a concrete and a thorough understanding of its nature, breadth, and depth; concrete efforts aimed at the removal of dehumanizing features of the human situation; a concrete understanding of man that did not sanction continued dehumanization; and a theology of reconciliation guided by a purpose which sought the creation of human community where genuine humanity could be realized.

The argument of the dissertation proceeds as follows: the first chapter presents the problem of considering King as a theologian and suggests that to do so requires a particular understanding of the nature and purpose of the theological task. Then the thesis that the theology of King's response to the experience of black oppression is illustrative of a new and concrete focus for the approach, content, and purpose of Christian theology is stated and clarified by giving attention to what is meant by the "experience of black oppression" and by contrasting the self-understanding of traditional dogmatics with that of the kind of theology illustrated by King.
Chapter two puts King's particular theology into historical perspective by setting forth the theological and theologically related responses that have been made to the American black experience. It suggests furthermore that each of these responses also has contributed to the dehumanization of man's situation, thereby setting the stage for the suggestion that among historical responses made to the experience of black oppression King's was distinctively and concretely humanizing.

The third chapter points to the combination of personal background, academic contexts, and appropriated ideas that influenced King in the development of the perspective that was the basis for his particular kind of theology.

Chapter four suggests and demonstrates that King's analysis of and approach to the human situation is illustrative of the concrete, direct, and comprehensive approach proposed for contemporary theology.

The fifth chapter states the centrality of the doctrine of man in King's theology and sets forth the features of his understanding of the individual and collective dimensions of humanity and his understanding of genuine humanity as free man and community man.
Chapter six details King's theology of reconciliation as an illustration of a theology whose purpose is not so much the interpretation of what Christian humanity is as it is the attempt to make Christian humanity a reality in the contemporary context. The chapter demonstrates also the priority in King's work of the principle of reconciliation as a basis for suggesting that in King's particular context his work was a distinct expression of Christian theology.

The final chapter states the conclusion of the study that King was a transitional theologian whose work represents a concrete expression of Christian theology for the particular context of the American South.
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Expressions of appreciation to those who have contributed to a given study must necessarily be selective. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made here, for there are several whose contributions have been significant.

First, in addition to those on whose published works this study has drawn, sincere appreciation is expressed to the staffs of the Special Collections division of the Mugar Memorial Library of Boston University and of the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia, for making available their archives of materials pertinent to this study.

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J. C. H.
CHAPTER I

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.--THEOLOGIAN?

Statement of the Problem

Within a few days after the death by assassination of the famous civil rights leader, a flood of published statements and articles of appreciation and analysis had appeared. Among them was an article entitled "Martin Luther King--Unsung Theologian." Its author chose to call attention to a facet of King's overall contribution that he believed might go unnoticed in favor of attention to his more concrete accomplishments in the struggle for human rights. He observed that King was not only an actor and a doer but also a thinker; and behind and in his analysis of the contemporary human situation and his response to it was a theology that was precise, relevant, and potentially constructive for developing the kind of community in which the problems that plague

1Herbert Warren Richardson, "Martin Luther King--Unsung Theologian," Commonweal, 3 May 1968, pp. 201-3.
society could be overcome. His was a theology which addressed the human problem as an ideological conflict rather than as a surface blemish, and one which took seriously the structures of evil that operate within human existence. King was, the author said in a deliberate statement, "the most important theologian of our time." 

Persons from various perspectives and disciplines are likely to see famous and significant figures through the lens of their particular concerns; and it is not surprising to find such an analysis and classification by a theologian when the effect of the Memphis tragedy was still warm. After all, the surface evidence was indeed there: King was a clergyman; he had done graduate study in the field of systematic theology; and his speaking and his writing were filled with theological terms and categories. Moreover, the areas of his concern, such as the establishment of voting rights, the elimination of racial discrimination, and the addressing of national attention to the problems of poverty and war were concerns that were shared by many in the various dimensions of theological endeavor. In a general sense, it is difficult


2Ibid., p. 201.
to think of him otherwise; and the label "theologian" falls easily upon him, even though the precise meaning of the term theology in this context remains unclear.

It was not only this theologian, however, who saw King as one himself. King's close associate, Ralph Abernathy, implied the same understanding of his colleague in an expression that also closely followed the assassination.¹ He recalled:

From the grand action of the Montgomery movement, our lives were filled with the action of doing God's will in village, hamlet, and city. We used to talk theology and then we learned to do theology.²

While again it is true that the content of this theology was not explicitly set forth, Abernathy's identification of what they did in the years 1954-68 with theology is unmistakable.

Others in less direct ways pointed to the theological dimensions of King's life and work in the spring of 1968. In a brief tribute, historian Benjamin Quarles observed:

He did not leave any new system of theology—he was not a Paul Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr. But as


²Ibid., p. 224. (Italics mine.)
a soundly trained man of the highest academic credentials, he had read these thinkers and others like them. And he knew how to unlock their insights so that his own readers and listeners would be enriched.¹

Such a classification of King as a theologian was not limited to the relatively rapid reflections that found persons trying to discover new ways of stating his significance. A year later, in the introduction to a collection of essays representing a variety of perspectives on the slain leader, a careful analyst of the American black experience wrote of the same feature of King's life and work, though without directly applying the label "theologian."² Calling him "the most extraordinary American of the century,"³ Lincoln notes that the "peculiar genius of Martin Luther King is that he was able to translate religious fervor into social action."⁴ Lincoln's implication is that in King a basic

²Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., a Profile, pp. vii-xv.
³Ibid., p. xi.
⁴Lincoln's overall assessment of King's contribution saw it more of deed than of word: "It may well be the final judgment of history that Martin Luther King's greatest contribution to black freedom was made in Montgomery when he helped black people free themselves from self doubt and self abasement." Ibid., p. xiii.
orientation in the Christian religion expressed itself in concrete involvement in a particular program of social action. The point is similar to Abernathy's noted above, even though the explicit identification of this involvement as theology is not made.

A recent and direct statement of this understanding of King appears in a review of a recent analysis of theology and the religious experience of America.¹ On the basis of this study of whence theology in America has come and whither it is likely to go, the reviewer asserts that the unique nature of the American experience suggests that theology in this context will find its most fertile ground in the realm of the relationship of black and white. Because of this, "it is perhaps the black Martin Luther King, Jr., . . . who can be seen as the best exemplar of the contemporary American theologian."² The ideas operative in King's work sought the establishment of a community of mankind in which the distinctions of class, race, and nationality would be made


²Ibid., p. 473.
irrelevant by a concern for mutuality. "This direction surely is the most profitable for American theology in the next few decades."¹

It is apparent that some persons are convinced that Martin Luther King was a theologian, and an important one at that, even though it is yet unclear just what the operative definition of theology is that is used in the classification. While the above noted surface criteria are there, one notices quickly that when the traditional models of theologian are recalled, there is some difficulty in fitting King into the mold. He wrote no systematic interpretations of the major doctrines of the Christian faith, he carried out his work more in the streets than in the reflective context of academia, and he preferred to think of himself as a "drum major for justice" rather than as a composer or academic critic of the music that expresses it. Still, he is classified by these persons as a theologian. The how and the why are important questions.

As its ambiguity might suggest, this classification has not gone unchallenged. As is the case with any prominent and controversial figure, King's presuppositions, theories,

and methods have been the subject of careful and penetrating criticism. Before his death, a notable objection to the Kingian approach came from within the ranks of what has been called the "black power" movement. Upon the premise that the nature of racial oppression in America calls for more direct, less accommodating, and possibly violent action, spokesmen for this perspective have tended to regard King's methods as playing into the hands of manipulative whites. King's approach was less than what the black people need, they said. Blacks need liberation from the bondage of a subtle slavery, and they need it now.\textsuperscript{1} With the benefit of retrospect, it can be noted that the struggle of 1954-68 has yielded less in concrete results than King had hoped it might. The criticisms of King in this regard cannot be dismissed as wrong or without basis.

Of more pertinence to the present concern, however, are those criticisms that have addressed themselves to King's theological thought, or the lack of it. One of the earliest and most direct of King's theological challengers is Joseph

Washington, who as early as 1964 noted that in King's use of Jesus and his teachings as a norm for Christian behavior, "the absence of any real theological understanding is blatant."\(^1\) Appreciative of King's work but at the same time critical of its supposed bases, he pursued this point by observing that King found in the nonviolent method of Gandhi a workable way to attain the goals he sought. In the particular context of the civil rights struggle, which until that time had been confined generally to the South, this method was aided by King's ability to relate the method to the religious categories of the Christian faith. Here, according to Washington, was the limit of King's theology: he used theological terms and categories, but only as a helpful tool in arguing for the philosophy of nonviolence. Thus he was no theologian at all, but a philosopher of nonviolence attempting to plug into the religious sensibilities of his audience—King the Gandhian philosopher rather than King the Christian theologian. His words express the point clearly:

King has come to understand love through the syncretistical religion of Gandhi. His philosophy

has led him to see Jesus of Nazareth as a man who taught love in his Sermon on the Mount. King did not come to love or to Jesus through the eyes of the Christian faith.¹

Washington is helpful here in pointing to the theological problem created by the tendency to use religious sanction as a support for a social or political program of maneuvers. It has been used often as a handy and powerful support on both sides of the same issue. It is difficult to say whether this is the case in a given situation, even when one looks back from beyond the particular controversy. The theological question here concerns whether King's concern for human justice and the welfare of all humanity was an implementation of his Christian faith and thereby an expression of theology, or whether he simply used religious categories to bolster a program of social action.² Washington clearly opts for the latter conclusion.

James Cone has spoken of King more as a prophet than as a theologian.³ Though this distinction may be more

¹Washington, Black Religion, p. 11.
²This question will receive direct attention in chapter VI.
³James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 108. Washington, whose criticism of King is noted above, rejects as well the
ambiguous than helpful, the point is that he regards King more as a forerunner of black theology than as a black theologian. He was a man with a dream and a vision of the future, both grounded in God, on the basis of which he could deliver a biting criticism of the present. While he did not endorse black power, it was the direct result of his work. Inspired by his dream, black power sought to make that dream become reality.\(^1\) Reflected in this interpretation is the implication that King was the proclaimer of the gospel of liberation but that the task of interpreting and implementing that gospel fell to those who followed him. There is no question for Cone that King did the work of a liberator, but the task of black theology is "to interpret the forces of black liberation as divine activity.\(^2\) This emerging technical particularity classification of King as a prophet. See his Politics of God (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 163. He points to King's acceptance by "the dominant voices of our time" as a "sure sign" that he is not a prophet in the Old Testament sense. While it is not the point to take issue with Washington here, it should be noted that the criterion for prophetic expression in the Old Testament was that the prophets spoke clearly and uncompromisingly the word of Yahweh, which frequently, but not always, was met with rejection. See Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962-65), 2:80ff.

\(^1\)Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, p. 109.

for the category of the black theologian would not include Martin Luther King, at least so it seems in the judgment of Cone.

An often observed feature of King's thought does not relate directly to the theological question concerned here, but it does have some pertinence. Frequently students of King's work point to what they call the "eclectic" or "syncretistic" quality of his expressed thought. In his writing and speaking, he displayed an obvious fondness for drawing upon the names and ideas of classical philosophers and literature; but he was not always consistent in his use of these sources, nor were they always compatible with each other. Further, his references to the great men and ideas of history were often little more than that, revealing an apparent satisfaction with only the surface appearance of a

1In referring to King's thought, reference will be made throughout this study not only to his published expressions but also to two collections of miscellaneous papers. One consists of King's personal papers given to Boston University in September, 1964. References to this collection will appear as Boston Archive, followed by a designation of section and file, as, for example, IV, 5. The other collection, consisting primarily of papers and correspondence since 1964, is housed in the archives of the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia. References to this collection will appear as Atlanta Archive, followed by a similar designation of section and file.
thought, without much concern for its meaning in its own context or its drawn out implications.¹ Some observers have concluded that King tried hard to be a philosopher and/or a theologian, but that he simply did not make it. For example, in his analysis of King's development, biographer David Lewis has called attention to what he calls a marked lack of originality in his thought;² and with Washington he points to King's inability to escape the influence of the provincial background of a Baptist, southern Negro.³ Though he nowhere

¹King's student papers reflect this tendency as well. His professors noted with some frequency a need for more attention to detail and creative use of ideas rather than generalizations and paraphrasing of lecture material. Boston Archive, XII, 47, 49; XIV, 54, 57, 71. It can be noted in King's defense here that his audience was most often made up of persons who would grasp a name and a basic thought, but who would not be too concerned with the finer points of philosophical analysis. And, when the need arose to do so, King demonstrated an ability to make analytical distinctions in interpreting ideas. See, for example, a file of selected papers on philosophy of religion, theology, history of doctrine and philosophy, church history, and biblical theology. Boston Archive, XIV, 3. Also note his response to Niebuhr's critique of pacifism in Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride toward Freedom (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 80.


³Ibid., and Washington, Black Religion, p. 16. Lewis's concluding statement to this consideration is worth noting: "Highly sensitive and intelligent, highly competent scholastically, capable of insights bordering on genius, his intelligence was essentially derivative." Biography, p. 45.
explicitly says so, it is unlikely that Lewis would classify King as a theologian.

A recent analysis of King's thought which examines the roots of his method of militant nonviolence is in the same perspective, but speaks more directly to the point:

He was not properly speaking a theologian at all, nor an original religious thinker. His writing and speeches on religion are aimed at persuasion and action rather than at analysis and understanding.¹

While the foregoing is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the increasingly numerous responses to King's life and work, it is sufficient to illustrate the point that whether or not Martin Luther King, Jr., was a theologian seems to be at present an open question. Theologically sensitive persons both propose and challenge the classification, and both sides appear to deal accurately and fairly with the man and his expressed ideas. Their analyses of King's religious significance and his contribution to theology are instructive in their sympathetic but realistic assessments, even though they disagree on whether the classification fits. An interesting and appealing description, it is also a perplexing one.

It is here suggested that what is at issue in this question is not so much the validity of a particular interpretation of King's life and work as it is the understanding of the nature of Christian theology. In the above observations and analyses, classifying King as a theologian or not appears to depend not on a particular way of viewing King but on variations in the interpretation of what theology is. It is to this problem that the following thesis addresses itself.

The Thesis

It is the thesis of this dissertation that Martin Luther King's response to the experience of black oppression in America reflects a theology that is illustrative of a new focus for the task of Christian theology which has grown from a praxiological concern with the concrete problems of human existence.

This emerging focus and King's participation in the shaping of it have reference points on two contemporary theological fronts. The first can be seen in the general statements of the Humanum Studies of the World Council of Churches, whose preliminary findings suggest the need for contemporary Christian theology to address itself in concrete
terms and in direct methods to the human problems of the present day.¹ Traditional theology and its institutions, these findings suggest, have not taken seriously enough the concrete problems of the human situation; and they have operated on an understanding of man that has allowed the continued exploitation of certain groups of men. The conclusion drawn is that theology itself has tended to be more the agent of dehumanization than the agent of the realization of genuine humanity. Derived from these critical observations is a threefold suggestion for contemporary Christian theology: first, that it take with new seriousness the concrete problems of the human situation and that it give direct and active attention to them; second, that it contribute to the church and to society a new Christian understanding of man as a corrective to those prevailing concepts of man that foster and sanction man's continued inhumanity to his fellow man; and, third, that it participate actively in a process that has as its goal the bringing of the human situation closer to genuine humanity.²

¹The emergence of this understanding will be noted in detail at the beginning of chapter IV. Here note David Jenkins, "Man's Inhumanity to Man: The Direction and Purpose of Humanum Studies," The Ecumenical Review 25 (January 1973): 5.

²The emergence of liberation theology, especially against the context of the Third World, is a specific expression of this understanding. A recent and representative
The second theological front which is a point of reference for the present concern is the manifestation of this suggested focus in the theology that is being done in the concrete context of black oppression. Here the issue of the black experience moves from the periphery to the center of theological concern. Black theology seeks to be an interpretation of the Christian faith in the concrete terms of the black experience, independently of the previously normative, culturally oriented values that were identified with a system which excluded and exploited blacks. As a statement of this perspective is Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973). A discussion of the issues raised by this approach can be seen in Christianity and Crisis, vol. 33 (17 September 1973).

theological effort which addresses itself to the concrete aspects of a particular human context, it illustrates in a specific way the concreteness proposed as needed in contemporary theological endeavor.

What is illustrated by both these fronts of theological concern is not a new theology, but it is a new direction and focus for theological concern that calls into question the assumptions of traditional theology. When theology has directed its attention to the human context, as in the experience of black oppression, it has done so with the assumption that the particular features of that context were less significant in themselves than they were as manifestations of or deviations from the larger abstract pattern. The shift of focus finds the concrete particularity of the human situation as significant in itself and worthy of direct theological attention.

The suggestion of the thesis is that in the work and the expressed thought of Martin Luther King there was present this emerging shift of focus later cited as needed by the Humanum Studies and formulated for the particular American context in black theology. His theology reflects an emphasis upon the concrete aspects of human experience, in his case the experience of black oppression; and in this respect he
represents a pivotal point for contemporary theological thought. The distinctiveness of his theology, when viewed from the perspective of what has happened theologically since his death, is that he is one of the lodestars of the transition from traditional theological effort to the kind suggested by the Humanum Studies and illustrated by black theology and liberation theology.

Clarification of the Thesis

For the purpose of clarification, it will be helpful to call attention to several assumptions and observations that underlie the choice and precise formulation of the thesis.

The Theological Context:
The American Black Experience

Christian theology is continually in the process of interpreting the meaning and setting forth the implications of the Christian revelation for the cultural setting of its own time. Any theological interpretation, formulation, or application, therefore, will be at least implicitly a response to the experiences and forces that have shaped and continue to shape its context. Consequently, it can be assumed that a criterion for responsible theology is that the theologian
not only seek to be consistent with the normative and historical mediations of the revelation he interprets, but also to know in as profound a way as possible and to relate to as carefully as he can the nature of the context in and for which he does his theology.1

It is here assumed and suggested that the contemporary context of American society is characterized to a significant extent by a feature that we shall label "the experience of black oppression"--an experience which, especially in its American setting, no one has been able to escape. This suggestion and its implications deserve some clarification.

It is obvious that there are massive numbers of people who have been and are the direct victims of this experience. They have been chosen by the color of their skin and subjected to a history of deprivation and injustice for which only the imagination can provide a realistic limit. The facts of that history are too well known to be recounted--they have been known all along--and the creative expressions of increasing numbers of persons from within the black community itself

1The continual appeal for "relevance" in theology is a capsule expression of this theological concern. Obviously the appeal can easily become "faddish." It often has. But the principal issue involved is thereby not eliminated.
are making known the meaning that is involved in those facts.¹

Perhaps the most significant general consequence of these contemporary expressions is that people outside the black community are being confronted as never before with the deep-seated effects of this experience of oppression and the system that perpetuates it. The non-black community in the United States has been forced to recognize that the abolition of slavery did not occur with the Emancipation Proclamation or with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The same reality that expressed itself in the formal institution of slavery prior to and during the Civil War has expressed itself in more subtle but no less real ways since then: opposition to equal employment, to open housing, and to the various means of providing equal educational opportunity. The contribution of those who speak to this issue from within the black community is that they present a forceful and uncompromising picture of how this reality expresses itself, even in its disguised forms.²

¹One might cite here as an example the works of James Baldwin, as well as those of Kenneth Clark, Cleage, Cone, Lincoln, Washington, and others in their own specialized fields. Each in his own way addresses himself to the question, "What does it mean to be black in America: what has it meant in the past, what does it mean in the present, and what will it mean in the future?"

²The name of this reality is, of course, racism—the perspective that believes one race to be superior to
A notable by-product of these recent emphases has been attention to the oppressor as also a victim of the experience of black oppression. The direct victims of a system of oppression are obvious enough to those who care to look. They are rightfully the subject of more concern, for their situation is the more obvious and the more urgent. But the reality of oppression, in whatever form it assumes, involves at least two component groups. The other side of the experience consists of those who are the oppressors; and the fact that both the oppressor and the oppressed participate in the experience of black oppression is no longer easily overlooked. To state the point plainly: a system of oppression and injustice has two sets of victims—those who are its recipients and those who, actively or passively, are its perpetrators.

The experience of black oppression, therefore, is an integral part of the fabric of contemporary American society; another. It is a "faith" that becomes normative in its influence on thought and behavior. See George D. Kelsey, Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 9. In a way that calls attention to the subtleties of its expression, Washington has utilized the concept of "pre-conscious racism" to refer to this deep-rooted reality in American life. The Politics of God, p. 104. He points also to its effects as a result of its being enmeshed in power politics. Ibid., p. 33.
and it affects in one way or another all of its members. An understanding of the nature, breadth, and depth of this experience is thus a proper concern for the one who would do theology in this context. Part of the present thesis is that King's theology reflects this developing consciousness of both the depths and the concrete expressions of the experience of black oppression and their effects upon both sets of victims--the oppressed and the oppressors.

The Nature of Theology

The significance of King's theological response to the experience of black oppression is not limited to his overall grasp of the depth and breadth of that experience. He was indeed not the first to perceive the problem and to probe its implications in the modern period, even though in the forefront of the attempt to overcome the effects of the experience, he was more aware of the nature of the problem than were his adversaries. More importantly, though, the theology that is explicit and implicit in his response to this experience illustrates a new and in his context unique

approach to the task of theology itself. This part of the thesis deserves clarification also.

Those who have proposed to "do theology" or to make a theological response to a given context have generally chosen one of three approaches. For one, they may choose to divorce completely theological principles and the specific needs of the situation, thereby tending toward a kind of otherworldly spiritualism. As a second choice, they may choose to shape and interpret theological principles according to what they see to be the needs of the situation, thereby tending toward a theological relativism. This option can express itself two ways: it can identify theological principles and concepts with policies and programs designed to change the situation,¹ or it can identify theological principles with those forces that are necessary to preserve and maintain the status quo.² In both cases, theological principles tend to be molded by the context. A third option is the approach of articulating theological principles in terms appropriate for the context and pointing to their implications as criteria for that context, but regarding the theological task as primarily interpretative.

¹King described the approach of the Social Gospel movement as being in this category. *Stride toward Freedom*, p. 73.

²This, for example, is the meaning of the recently used term "civil religion."
The major theological methodologies that affected the contemporary American context up to the time of King have tended to choose the third of these options. Brief attention to a few influential theological voices will illustrate.

Its [theology's] task is . . . to criticise and revise language about God by the standard of the principle peculiar to the church. Theology is the science which ultimately sets itself this and only this task, in fact subordinating to this task all other possible tasks in man's investigation of truth.¹

Illustrative and representative of the approach suggested in the third place above, Barth here reflects a conception of the theological task as essentially an intellectual discipline. Its primary concern is the conceptual criticism of the language employed in speaking of God: "Dogmatics is the self-test to which the Christian Church puts herself in respect of the content of her peculiar language about God."²


²It would be inaccurate to imply that there is no place in Barth's conception of the theological task for the realities of the situation. His oft-cited assertion that the preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and that morning's newspaper in the other is indicative of his perspective in that regard. The broad scope of theological concern includes, indeed requires, the application of theological principles to concrete situations; but such application is the practical expression of theology that is secondary to its principle task. Ibid., p. 11.
Theology, then, is primarily ecclesiastical and academic: it is faith interpreting itself in as consistent terms as possible, and for the sake of the integrity of the church. Theology is inquiry and analysis rather than application or creation. The threat of this understanding of theology to the contemporary situation is potentially there; but it is minimized by its leaving open the possibility of separating the realm of theological concern from the places, or at least some of the places, where life is lived. Though unintended, the possibility is there.

The definition of theology's task employed by Paul Tillich is illustrative of this point also. Theology is basically intended to serve two needs: "the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation."1 Theology's "object" is "what concerns us ultimately"; and the application of this observation for the theological task is that theology and the theologian must not try, as theology and theologian, to function within the realm of preliminary or penultimate concerns, as in making artistic or political judgments.2

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2 Ibid., p. 12.
Even though it is noted that for Tillich this principle does not prevent the theologian from making theological observations and criticisms against a context of concrete concerns, his work here is related to the way in which these preliminary concerns reflect or embody ultimate concern; and the theologian's role remains primarily reflective or interpretative:

Social ideas and actions, legal projects and procedures, political programs and decisions, can become objects of theology, not from the point of view of their social, legal, and political forms, but from the point of view of their power of actualizing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately in and through their social, legal, and political forms. ¹

While a door is opened here for working out a theology of concrete action, the philosophical and psychological category of the "ultimate concern" is the primary focus or target of theological endeavor; and the political and social phenomena of human experience are theologically significant only insofar as they are pointers to or expressions of what Tillich sees as this more basic element of experience.

The concept of the theological task reflected in the work of John Macquarrie is of a similar vein:

Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious

¹Systematic Theology, 1:13-14.
faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.¹

And further, "theology, as the very name implies, is discourse, and although it is rooted in the total life of faith, it aims at verbal expression."²

Theology as reflection and articulation is thus the task undertaken by Macquarrie; and while there is no explicit denial of the relation to the socio-political order, the relationship, if there is one, is unclear. Theology must clearly perceive itself in relation to such disciplines as philosophy, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and the natural sciences with the hope of mutual illumination—the better for theology to articulate its formulations.³

Theology remains primarily interpretation—an informed and sensitive interpretation, an interpretation responsive to the complex needs of the context, but still an interpretation which may or may not find concrete expression in the particular circumstances of the human situation.


²Ibid., p. 4.

³Ibid., pp. 18ff. The absence of politics or political science from this list is worthy of note.
A resulting observation is that the theological approaches which have been influential in the shaping of the theological thinking of the contemporary American context, especially until the late sixties, have operated upon the assumption that the theological task, in its relationship to the contemporary context, is primarily reflective, descriptive, and abstract, rather than active, creative, and concrete. Its effect upon the context is dependent upon how well theologically oriented persons can translate the language of theologically described principles into the deliberative activity of political and social decision making. Theology remains the discipline of the articulation of theological principles, and it is left to related disciplines (Christian ethics, education, sociology) to attempt the application of these principles to the concrete situation. The relationship of theology itself to its particular context can thus be described best as indirect and abstract. It is definitely related in that it analyzes carefully and comprehensively the complexion of the situation and articulates its principles in relevant concepts and language. But, as theology, it tends to stop with that contribution, which is by no means an insignificant one. The net result, however, of this concept of the theological task is that the effect of theological
thought upon the context in which it is done becomes modified by other concerns of political, social, and economic expediency. It becomes, then, subject to being either an ineffectual expression of lofty ideals that the context does not have to take seriously or a religiously expressed rationalization and justification for the characteristics and functions of that context—an effect similar to that of the second option noted above.

What is illustrated in the theological thought reflected in King's response to the experience of black oppression is an approach to theology that moves the expression of its principles directly to the concrete circumstances of the context. He was grounded in and appreciative of the doctrinal and interpretative approaches which have preserved and refined the content of the Christian tradition, and he drew upon the contributions of these approaches in the formulation of his own thought. But, his work brought about significant changes in the particular context of race relations; and, the thesis suggests, his work is illustrative of a significant change in the self-understanding of Christian theology.

\(^1\) King's "launch" into this kind of theological endeavor was brought about at least partially by the accidents of time and place. The Montgomery boycott and his being selected a
Martin Luther King and a New Focus for Theology

The thesis implies that King's theology is not so much unique and novel as it is an early illustration of an emerging notion that theology needs to relate itself in more direct and concrete fashion to the human situation. It is important to note further that more than just increased emphasis, this emerging theological self-understanding proposes that theology significantly reorient its whole approach. Rather than adapting traditional theology to particular circumstances, it suggests that theology use the needs of particular situations as starting points. Rather than directing its attention to interpreting humanity, it suggests that theology direct its attention to affirming humanity and working for its realization by challenging and

leader in it helped him make the transition from academic student of theology to crusading "doer" of theology.

It will be observed that a by-product of this direct kind of theological approach is an absence of conceptual precision in several areas. One such absence is the lack of a clear distinction between theology and ethics. This is not to imply that the functions of interpretation, deliberation, and application are absent but that he does not distinguish clearly where one stops and the other begins. This lack of rigid distinction among the functions of the overall theological effort is itself indicative of the focus and character of the kind of theology he illustrates.
removing the dehumanizing forces that plague it (including dehumanizing institutions and theological methods). It suggests that theology seek to contribute a new way of putting the questions of human existence rather than trying to find new ways to state old answers. It suggests, in short, that theology rejoin the quest for genuine humanity rather than speak *ex cathedra* from a self-declared discovery of it.

It is proposed here that King is a case study of this kind of theology. His work reflects an impatience with traditional institutional ways of addressing the human problem, seeing them more as symptoms of the problem than as solutions to it; his approach moves from the concrete to the universal, taking seriously its particular context, but with a concern for its overall significance; and his purpose reflects a concern not just for understanding genuine humanity but also for working for its realization. His particular approach was not so much an effort, for example, to interpret and analyze such a theological principle as reconciliation; he tended to regard such as one of the "givens" of faith. Rather, his was an effort to involve himself in a direct attempt to make that reconciliation a reality among men. His theology was not so much faith seeking understanding as it was faith's understanding seeking concrete expression.
Certain difficulties are obvious for such a study as this. A prominent one is the problem of writing as a white about a black's response to the black experience. In response to this problem, it needs to be stated that the present study does not represent a white's attempt to speak for a black about the experience of black oppression in America. Rather, it represents an attempt to listen to a black about the black experience, allowing him to speak for himself without imposing upon him the criteria of preconceived, and white, theological thought.

Another difficulty arises from the recognition that the full impact of King and his career cannot be fully assessed at this point; for the context is still fluid and the issues raised there are not yet resolved. Still, one is justified in approaching the subject by the recognition that in the struggle to overcome the problems imposed by the experience of black oppression and in the theological response to that experience, King was a pivotal figure.\textsuperscript{1} He was the acknowledged

\textsuperscript{1}The months following the assassination coincided with my acquaintance with the emphases of "political theology," the emergence of "black theology," and the general understanding of theology as action and involvement rather than only reflection and interpretation. The accelerating force of these emphases at this particular time suggest the impact of King and the events that surrounded him.
leader of a major movement in American society during a period that saw more change aimed at correcting the physical and psychological damage of black oppression than any other period of our history. It may be, of course, that his approach to the situation and his proposals for it will prove to be less than adequate; many have concluded this already. It may be that his application of the principles of the Christian faith directly to that situation represents an inadequate theology or no theology at all; many have said this, too. But the fact remains that he has suggested an analysis of the situation and proposed a solution to it that must be considered by anyone approaching the same context from a theological perspective. An examination of King's response to the experience of black oppression as an illustration of an emerging understanding of Christian theology is the subject of this study. It is hoped that it will contribute to the common responsibility of theological thinking a perspective not only to the theological significance of Martin Luther King but also to the understanding of the theological task as well.

An examination of King's theology along the lines suggested by the thesis can be helped by giving attention to two preliminary areas of concern. The first involves what
is meant by "a theological response to the experience of black oppression" and the historical context of these responses. The way in which King's theology illustrates both a new approach to the American context and a new approach to the task of theology will be clarified by attention to the ways in which theological responses to this experience have expressed themselves in the past and have been agents rather than correctives of the dehumanization of man. The next chapter, therefore, will outline a brief survey of the ways that persons and groups have responded with explicit or implicit theological bases to the circumstances of black oppression.

No analysis of the theological thought of a person can excuse itself from taking account of not only the historical context of the kind of theology a person does, but also the personal context of the particular theologian. The formative factors and developmental influences that make a person who he is are essential in clarifying particular features and directions of thought. Therefore, the third chapter will address itself to the ingredients of King's development that are most influential in the theology he did later.
The next three chapters will address themselves directly to the main elements of the thesis. First, attention will be given to King's particular approach to the human situation and his resulting assessment of it. Next, King's contribution toward a new Christian understanding of man will be explored. Then, the features of King's theology of reconciliation will receive consideration. Each of these three chapters will seek to demonstrate how King's response to the experience of black oppression illustrates the above mentioned emerging concept of the nature of Christian theology in terms of its approach, its content, and its purpose.

A final chapter will set forth the conclusions of the study.
The first chapter has raised two issues that create the need for the considerations of this chapter. The first results from the recognition that Martin Luther King was not the first person to address himself to the problems of the experience of black oppression in America, nor was his analysis the most thorough and probing. It is also to be noted that neither was he the first to apply the principles and concepts of Christian theology to this experience, even though the previous chapter suggested that until the late sixties modern theology and theologians as such seemed to prefer giving attention primarily to the task of interpreting the meaning of the Christian revelation and shaping the church according to its implications rather than to the task of confronting directly so broad an aspect of the human situation as the experience of black oppression.
The oppression of blacks in American society has been so pervasive and has involved persons in such different ways that there has been a variety of responses to it which have drawn upon the support or supposed support of the Christian faith. It is for this reason that the phrase, "theological response to the experience of black oppression," has been chosen to describe the general historical category into which King's theology falls. When seen against the context of these responses, his way of addressing theological principles to the experience of oppression is one among several.

The second issue that is raised by the previous chapter emerges from the implication of the thesis that the response of theology to the human situation has tended to serve, consciously or unconsciously, the continuation of man's inhumanity to man. From this implication comes the suggestion that those responses that constitute the historical context of King's own response have themselves participated in the continued dehumanization of the human situation.

This chapter will speak to the need created by these two points by giving direct attention to four ways that responses claiming some theological basis have been made to
the circumstances of black oppression. Such a consideration of these responses will serve the double purpose of setting the historical context for King's own response to the same situation and of illustrating by historical example the way that theology can intentionally and unintentionally become a supporter and agent of man's inhumanity to man. A basis will then be laid for the main argument of the thesis, which suggests that King's theological response to the experience of black oppression is illustrative of an emerging understanding of the theological task which proposes a more thorough, concrete, and humanizing approach to the human situation.

It will be helpful in this consideration to keep in mind two points. First, the term "theological response" does not necessarily mean the production of systematic theological treatises with black oppression as the guiding theme. Instead, it refers to any of the varied responses made or attitudes taken to the experience which have claimed some religious basis. While some of the perspectives did produce carefully stated "theological" writings, the present concern is not limited to those which were preserved in systematic statement. Second, the most important aspect of the various responses about to be mentioned is not the labels they were given in any particular period. Rather, the important point is that they represent human perspectives which transcend particular historical circumstances and find expression in other periods. The perspective, for example, that appears in the pro-slavery arguments was not limited to the Ante-bellum South. This same perspective, clad in different historical garments, is still alive and well. These responses, therefore, are not only the historical context of King's particular theology; they are part of its contemporary context as well.
Justification and Support of a Dehumanizing Context

A clear example of the way in which theological concerns can be brought to bear upon the experience of black oppression and an equally clear illustration of the way theological ideas can be made to serve a dehumanizing situation is the claim of religious justification for the existence of the conditions of oppression. It generally appears in the affirmation that the structure of society and the relationships within it (master-slave, black-white, rich-poor) are the order of things ordained by God. To this perspective, any attempt to question that structure or to change any of its relationships is an infringement upon God's purpose for the universe. Because of the complexity of this response, its persistence as an ideological option, and its presence in the context of King's work, it deserves attention here.

In the historical context of the American situation, this way of responding to the experience of black oppression has expressed itself in at least three ways that illustrate its preservation of dehumanizing features in the human situation. The first is reflected in the theory and practice of the patronizing efforts at the religious instruction of
slaves in the two centuries prior to the Civil War.\(^1\) This instruction may have had its beginning in a genuine religious concern for the spiritual welfare of the slave,\(^2\) but its practical value of providing religious reinforcement for the dehumanizing master-slave relationship was soon a not-so-secondary purpose.\(^3\) The religious instruction of slaves thus served the institution of slavery rather well: the slaves were made aware of their divine obligation to be submissive to their masters; and the masters were assured of their righteousness in their efforts to extend the Christian gospel.

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\(^1\) Beginning with Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* (1673), which provided the basic directions for the proper expression of the master-slave relationship, the literature of the pre-war South reflects widespread commitment to the task of providing religious instruction for the slave population. Representative statements are Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842); J. G. Bruce, *A Sermon on the Duty of Instructing Slaves* (Georgetown, Ky.: Wise & French, Printers, 1846); Alexander Glennie, *Sermons Preached on Plantations to Congregations of Negroes* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1844); James H. Thornwall, *The Rights and Duties of Masters* (Charleston: Walker & James, 1850).

\(^2\) This is the tone of such expressions as Bruce and Glennie, noted above.

to the "lost."¹ In all, there was little question raised concerning the validity of the institution itself.

Religious instruction may have at least begun as an attempt to express religious conviction within the context of slavery, even though it did result in the perpetuation of a dehumanizing status quo. By contrast, the second expression of this response was from its beginning a direct attempt to justify on theological grounds the institution itself. This was the claim for theological basis that accompanied the pro-slavery side of the debate that came to full expression in the three decades before the Civil War.²

¹This is the rationale expressed in Jones, Religious Instruction. Society would benefit by having a disciplined slave population; the church would benefit by fulfilling its obligation to preach the gospel to the poor; the slave would benefit by having his soul saved.

²Two extensive collections of the published thought of slavery's defenders in the years prior to the Civil War are E. N. Elliott, ed., Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on This Important Subject (Augusta, Ga.: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860) and The Pro-Slavery Argument; as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States, Containing the Several Essays on the Subject, of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Sims, and Professor Drew (Charleston: Walker, Richards & Co., 1852). A later analysis of these arguments is Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South, which is especially helpful in classifying the arguments and in the extensive bibliography. A recent and carefully selected representation of the arguments on behalf of
Developed largely in response to the challenges to slavery that were emerging from the abolitionists, this careful and systematic defense of slavery occupied the minds of knowledgeable southerners and called into service elements of classical philosophy, economics, science, and, of course, the Bible in its argument for the practical and religious rightness of slavery.¹

These pre-Civil War responses to the experience of black oppression would be of less consequence for contemporary theology if the perspective they reflect had disappeared with the formal institution of slavery. That perspective has persisted in various forms, though, in the theory and practice of racial discrimination, especially, but not exclusively, in the South. This third expression of this response was one of the chief elements in the context of King's theology. An elusive opponent because of its subtlety and because of the way it can disguise itself in other terms, such as concern

¹McKitrick, *Slavery Defended*, p. 2.
for "quality education," for "property values," and for "social stability," the response that takes the form of segregationist thinking was the enemy of progress during Reconstruction; it was a primary enemy in the civil rights struggle; and it has continued to stand in the way of efforts to overcome the dehumanizing effects of the oppression of black humanity.¹

The details and techniques of this approach to the racial situation in America are a matter of record and do not require repetition here. The point that is of pertinence in the present consideration concerns the way this response illustrates the employment of theological words, concepts, and ideas in ways that result in the preservation of a dehumanizing situation. The thesis has suggested that theological effort has tended to participate in the dehumanization of man either by not taking the concrete human situation with direct enough seriousness, or by operating on an inadequate or false doctrine of man, or by serving purposes that are themselves dehumanizing, or by combinations of any or all of

¹A recent collection of statements reflecting this perspective, with a helpful bibliographical essay, is I. A. Newby, ed., The Development of Segregationist Thought (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1968).
these. The purpose of the following observations, and of those which follow each of the responses described in this chapter, will be to underline the features of each response that cause it to be a participant in the dehumanization of man's situation.

This particular response represents a theological approach to the human situation which attempts to reconcile a sense of religious commitment to humanity and the dehumanizing circumstances of a given situation. Two conflicting assumptions in the slavery period created the need for such a reconciliation. One was the conviction, drawn from an influential religious heritage, that the souls of all men are equal—equally unjust before the judgment of God and equally in need of conversion and spiritual nurture. The other was the realistic observation that their way of life was dependent upon the institution of slavery, which in turn rested upon the belief that one man had the right to own another and to have control of the disposition of his life.¹ The result of the "reconciliation" was an interpretation of the Christian faith in terms that would not pose a threat to the existing

order of society. One could make and act upon a profession of commitment to the Christian faith with little hint of a suggestion that there might be something inconsistent between the principles of that faith and the maintenance of an oppressive and dehumanizing situation.

It is instructive to note that the makers of this response illustrate clearly the way in which the Bible can be used as a supporter of a dehumanizing situation. In their attempts to provide theological justification for the understanding of society that expressed itself in slavery, frequent and thorough appeal was made to the content of both testaments for support. The argument usually followed the pattern that since slavery (or segregation) was a part of the biblical

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1 See Thornton Stringfellow, "A Scriptural View of Slavery," in McKitrick, Slavery Defended, pp. 86-98; Albert Taylor Bledsoe, An Essay on Liberty and Slavery (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1857), pp. 139ff.; Fred A. Ross, Slavery Ordained of God (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1857), pp. 5-7. Other examples of such work are Josiah Priest, Bible Defense of Slavery; or the Origin, History, and Fortunes of the Negro Race, as Deduced from History, Both Sacred and Profane, Their Natural Relations--Moral, Mental, Physical--to the Other Races of Mankind, Compared and Illustrated--Their Future Predicted, etc. (Louisville: J. F. Brennan for Willis A. Bush, Gallatin, Tenn., 1851) and M. T. Wheat, The Progress and Intelligence of Americans; Collateral Proof of Slavery from the First to the Eleventh Chapter of Genesis, as Founded on Organic Law; and from the Fact of Christ Being a Caucasian, Owing to His Peculiar Parentage (Louisville: no publisher cited, 1863).
world, it is also a part of the biblical revelation. The failure here, whether it be innocent or intentional, to separate the message of the biblical record from the particular circumstances of its own context suggests that while the literal content of the Bible was mastered, the grasp of its theological content was either lacking or ignored, thus allowing the Bible itself to be a sanction for man's inhumanity to man.

This response reflects a doctrine of man that helps it to contribute to the continuation of a dehumanizing situation. Even while accepting on many fronts the principle of the equality of the souls of all men before God, a qualification is introduced that opens an interesting distinction. God has revealed his purpose for the world in two ways: primarily in the Bible and secondarily in the observable conditions of the world itself. In the context of slavery's defense, and, by implication, in the context of defenses of other forms of dehumanization, it has been a popular and persuasive argument to make observations about the degraded condition of the slave and to draw the conclusion that slavery was a benevolent institution, since it provided for
the care and usefulness of this segment of humanity. The slave and his heirs to oppression can thereby find their greatest fulfilment--their genuine humanity--by knowing and staying in "their place." In this concept of man, the priority of the status quo is evident; for genuine man is the man who is perfectly adjusted to his station in life, no matter how dehumanizing it may be.

The primary dehumanizing feature of the concept of man reflected in this response is not that it fails to be realistic in its observations of the human condition, but that it fails to recognize the reasons for that condition. Because of that failure, it has tended to elevate the circumstances of the human situation to normative status in its interpretation of the meaning of genuine humanity.

The resulting picture of the theological response to the black experience of oppression finds in it what seems to be a direct application of theological terms and categories

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1 One such detailed study, written shortly after the Civil War, promises to show the futility of any attempt to grant equality and proposes to perform the service of teaching its readers how they should "act and vote in the great Presidential contest now inaugurated, and to be decided next November, between niggers and mongrel traitors on one side, and the constitutional, liberty loving, and God fearing democracy on the other." J. H. Van Evrie, White Supremacy and Negro Subordination (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1868), from "To the Reader."
to the human situation; but in fact it represents an accommodation of theological ideas to the dominant structure of society. The purpose of the theological effort of this response has not been to change society according to the principles of the Christian faith but to give the current conditions of society theological sanction. In brief terms, the purpose of this theological response has been anything but an effort at humanizing the contemporary situation. Its explicit purpose has been the preservation of a dehumanizing status quo. It is not difficult at all to see this response as a verification of the suggestion that theological effort can be and has been carried out in dehumanizing ways.

Attacking the Form of Oppression

A second major and significant response to the experience of black oppression in America has emerged from the tradition of abolitionism. The abolition movement was, like the defense of slavery, a many-sided and complex phenomenon. Its period of greatest thrust came during the thirty years prior to the Civil War—the period when its spokesmen focused their attention on slavery and worked
vigorously for its elimination. But, also like the defense of slavery, the abolition perspective has not been limited to any particular period.

While it was not primarily a theological movement, concern for the wholesale commitment of a race of men to slavery was motivated by religious principles as well as a basic concern for human justice; and the cause did not hesitate to point to the support for its emphases found in the Bible and theology. Thus, at the same time that slavery

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was being defended theologically, it was being attacked on religious grounds as well; and it was quite possible to "do theology" in the context of black oppression by working for the elimination of its particular forms.

Like the previously mentioned one, this response has had several historical expressions. Typical of what might be called "mainline abolitionism" was the life and work of William Lloyd Garrison, whose career spanned the three-decade period of the movement proper.¹ Garrison's "theology" was simple: Christianity and slavery are inconsistent; therefore, in the name of dedication to Christianity, abolish slavery. Another form of this response appeared in the American Colonization Society and its suggestion of the deportation of all slaves.² By supporting such a move, a person could be an abolitionist and still not have to change his own


social arrangements to include the emancipated slave. A third type of abolitionist response is found in the insurrectionist movements, such as those of John Brown, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Motivated by religious ideas, they sought to overcome oppression by destroying the oppressor.

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2The basic treatment of this phenomenon is Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943). See also Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower; a History of the Negro in America, 1619-1966* (Chicago: Johnson-Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 96-126. There are historical problems and disagreements concerning the actual extent of insurrections among slaves. Compare, for example, the treatments of Aptheker and Bennett with the observation made by Elkins, pp. 221-2, that most of the information about slave revolts comes from rural newspapers and likely consists of unsubstantiated rumors fed by fear. This question can be bypassed in the present concern, for there seems to be ample evidence that this response was significant in threat if not in fact. Turner's rebellion has been recently romanticized in a novel by William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967); and several black writers have responded to the representations in this novel in John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron's Nat Turner, Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

3John Brown's famous attack on Harper's Ferry was by intention, according to him, to have avoided violence. Still, his actions were motivated by the teachings of the Bible, a book which to him emphasized concern for those in bondage; and he was perfectly satisfied with his intentions and felt no guilt. See his "Trial Speech," reprinted in Albert P.
While the contrasts are striking between a Garrison and a Nat Turner, they were alike in the hope that once the master-slave relationship was dissolved, the problems of black oppression would be well on the way to being solved. The target for this perspective was definitely the concrete form of oppression, even though its different representatives perceived that form in different ways and used radically different methods of attacking it. But, in spite of its worthy purpose and of the obvious benefit this response has rendered the cause of humanity, there are features of it that enable it to serve a dehumanizing purpose as well, as the following observations will suggest.

The approach of the abolitionist response has been indeed a direct confrontation with a concrete human problem. It was an approach that resulted from a disturbed conscience—a conscience informed by the principles of the Hebrew-Christian tradition both in its normative literature and in the history of the church. Like the conscience of slavery's defender, that of the abolitionist was troubled by the inconsistency of its foundational principles and the realities it observed in the experience of black oppression. But, whereas the

defender of slavery salved his conscience by "theologizing" the dehumanizing conditions of the oppressive situation, the abolitionist sought to overcome the inconsistency by attacking the immediate occasion and structures of oppression. At this point the response of the abolitionist tradition appears to be consistent with the suggestion for a humanizing theological approach to the problems of the human situation.

It should be noted also here that though the historical abolitionists were not so thorough in their use of biblical material as were slavery's defenders, they recognized a difference between the circumstances of the biblical context and the spirit of the teaching of both testaments. To the perspective of this response, there is little if any justification in the Bible for the kind of dehumanization that is found in the experience of black oppression.

In spite of this positive point, there is a feature of this response that allows it to participate in the preservation of a dehumanizing situation. This feature lies in its grasp of the dynamics of the human situation that is characterized by oppression. In brief terms, it has tended to oversimplify the human problem, dealing with only its symptoms, with the assumption that if the official end of slavery could be declared, all the problems created by it would be solved.
As with any movement of reform, the tentative goals can become the ultimate goals if the historical or ongoing nature of human life is forgotten. The abolitionist response, especially in its simplified expressions, has tended to assume that if the external structures or particular forms of the current expression of black oppression can be eliminated, black oppression will cease to exist. Unfortunately, historical experience has not verified this assumption; and the abolition of slavery, while a most appropriate response to the pre-Civil War experience of black oppression, was not all that was needed. The elimination of one expression of a problem is not necessarily its solution; and such was the case here. The form of black oppression was slavery, but its content was the more subtle assumption that there is something inherently superior about the white race, a superiority that can and should be maintained by relegating the black race to a position of political, economic, social, and educational subordination. Slavery was the form of the problem, but its

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1The presence of this kind of racism even in the work of the abolitionists has been noted by Cone in his observation that American society, in its attempts to liberate the slaves, never satisfied the basic theological requirement of recognizing the full humanity of black people. A Black Theology of Liberation, p. 38.
content was racism; and the response of the abolitionist perspective, as beneficial as it has been, has contributed to continued dehumanization by its tendency to direct itself to only the surface expressions of oppression.

**Overcoming Oppression by Gradual Improvement**

The Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation brought at least a temporary change of attention from the "theological" debates for and against the institution of slavery, though the issue was far from settled in the minds of the participants. In spite of the efforts of those who sought to keep the issue of the theological basis of slavery alive, the official end of the institution made it necessary that attention be turned elsewhere.

The post-war effort by and on behalf of the American black and his climb from the pit of slavery took a variety of forms, and this effort constitutes a third general type of response that can be made to the experience under consideration. Spokesmen such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois and organizations such as the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People worked in their various ways to secure a path of progress for
the American black population.\textsuperscript{1} Contrasting in methodologies and critical of one another's approaches, these men and groups had in common the emphasis on the importance of education and of progress based upon the cultivation of individual talent and skills. The black man had received freedom, officially at least; and the privileges of a free society would become his as he persisted in his efforts to upgrade himself educationally, economically, and socially.\textsuperscript{2}

Sharing this belief that the proper response to the experience of black oppression was in the realm of educational endeavor, it was in the theory behind and in the methods employed by this educational task that the chief issue of debate among them lay. Washington's emphasis, for example, seemed to be product-oriented as he stressed the need for

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\textsuperscript{1}While these historical expressions made no claim to being "theological" responses, the perspective they represent has been influential in subsequent theological expressions which have found it to be a handy and respectable compromise between religious commitment to overcoming oppression and comfort in a dehumanizing status quo. In addition, there was no reluctance to appeal to religious principles for support.
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\textsuperscript{2}A brief but thorough treatment of these developments with representative documents that illustrate the thinking of the period is Fishel and Quarles, \textit{The Negro American}, pp. 356-401.
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learning trades and developing particular skills.¹ DuBois, on the other hand, saw another level to the educational task and stressed educating the person not only with skills and techniques but also with values for their proper use. His famous emphasis on educating the "talented tenth" for the purpose of being teachers, not just of techniques but of persons, underlines this aspect of his thought.²

These differences were by no means insignificant, but the point of agreement was the main thrust of this response to the experience of black oppression: the oppressed black can and must elevate himself through the slow process of education. The devastating effects of the several generation long situation in slavery were honestly recognized, as was the fact that the damage of those effects could not be repaired immediately. It was obvious that there was a long way to go, but there was never a question of the black's potential to make the climb. The quest for freedom and equality was a difficult one, but it was not impossible.


The emphases of this response continue to be live options in the approach to the experience of black oppression. As a general type of response, we can address the following critical observations to it.

On the surface, this response seems to provide, in the terms of the thesis, both a direct and a realistic approach to the problems of the human situation. The emphasis upon education and training represents a direct confrontation with the disadvantages that had accumulated from the several generations of slavery; but it represents also a recognition that those disadvantages were of such a nature and depth that they could not be overcome immediately. The problem which has attached itself historically to the approach of this response, and which has enabled it to serve the cause of continued dehumanization, is that by its nature and its own internal methodological disagreements, it has been in a position of being played into the hands of those who have defended an inferior position for the black, at least in the attempts to preserve racial segregation.\(^1\) Its lack of

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\(^1\)Washington's famous "Atlanta Exposition Address," delivered in 1895 (reprinted in Brotz, *Negro Thought*, pp. 356-9), is a classic example of the kind of statement that falls into manipulative hands. "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social
insistence on immediate change made it much more acceptable to the white majority than other proposals had been; for it could easily be made to serve the cause of stalling any significant change in the oppressive structure.

The concept of man that is implicit in this response contains two features that render it a humanizing improvement over the concepts of man in the two previously mentioned responses. On the one hand, there is a recognition here of a basic equality of potential between the races. Racial distinctions in and of themselves do not affect the amount of potential that is present or can be realized in man. The capacity for good and progress, as well as the capacity for evil and exploitation, are to this perspective human rather than racial qualities; and they find expression in both races. Therefore, there are no inherent distinctions in the black's

equality is the extremest folly, and that progress . . . must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing. . . . The opportunity to earn a dollar now in a factory is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house" (p. 359). "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (p. 358). DuBois called this address the "Atlanta Compromise," while later observers have described it as "a consummate statement of what whites wanted to hear and what Washington believed was best for Negroes at that time." Fishel and Quarles, The Negro American, p. 342.
ability to participate fully in society which would make full equality an impossible or unreasonable goal.

On the other hand, this response reflects a recognition of the effects of historical circumstance upon man's basic capacities. Historical conditioning can indeed produce a pronounced inequality, and it has done so in the context of black oppression. But, instead of concluding either an inherent inferiority or an irreversible deprivation, this response suggests that the natural capacities of the black, blunted as they may be by slavery and continued discrimination, can be restored by education carefully tailored to the specific needs of his situation. Nevertheless, the difficulties created by this historical process are seen to be real difficulties, which cannot be solved by an immediate pronouncement of liberation but by sustained and careful effort.

It can be said that this response to the experience of black oppression has been honorable in its motivation, realistic in its assessment of the human situation, and beneficial in the starting of a process the good effects of which no one will deny. The primary weakness of the response, when seen in terms of the criteria of the present concern, is that it allowed the principal dehumanizing feature of the
experience of black oppression—the racism that persists in the white man—to remain intact. While emphasis on the education and gradual improvement of the abilities of the black has had the result of eroding parts of that racism, it has not forced the white man to confront it. So this response, too, by its confidence in education to overcome the effects of black oppression, in its own way has participated in the continuation of man's inhumanity to man.

**Overcoming Oppression by Separation**

Because of its recent popular appeal, because of its quasi theological character, and because of the way it, too, contributes to the dehumanization of man, a fourth type of response to the experience of black oppression in America deserves comment in this setting of the context for a consideration of King's theological thought. This is the response that has expressed itself in black separatist ideologies and programs, a convenient example of which is the Black Muslim movement. The familiarity of this particular movement makes it a suitable example to cite to illustrate this perspective.¹ It is instructive to consider

¹The principal statement of the Black Muslim perspective
both how it came to be and what its theological implications are.

Following the First World War, large numbers of American blacks were drawn into the Universal Negro Improvement Association, under the leadership of Marcus Garvey. This organization sought to replace the American dream with an African one by emphasizing for blacks the integrity and dignity of the African heritage. Here was the beginning of a kind of thinking that led to a separatism which later resulted in the emphasis on black nationalism such as is found in the Black Muslims.¹

C. Eric Lincoln calls this perspective—this acceptance, indeed celebration, of being black—“mood ebony.”

¹C. Eric Lincoln, My Face Is Black (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 85. Others have traced the beginnings of this kind of thought farther back, regarding it as a slow process of transition from the hope that followed the Emancipation to the hatred that resulted from the frustrations of that hope. See, for example, S. P. Fullinwider, The Mind and Mood of Black America (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1969), pp. 1-25.
It is a two-sided coin emphasizing both an acceptance of blackness and a rejection of the standards of life that are identifiably white. The man who has accepted his blackness no longer strives to attain those white characteristics and status symbols which formerly were prerequisites for success in a white-oriented society.¹

Thus, this response to the experience of black oppression in America is essentially one of separation: one overcomes oppression and its effects by an attitudinal and, as far as possible, actual separation of oneself from the oppressor, his standards, and his way of life.²

This particular form of this response disclaims any affiliation with the Christian tradition in America, and it

¹In his interpretative remarks on the nature of mood ebony, which is synonymous with what is being considered here as a response to the experience of black oppression, Lincoln says that mood ebony "is not so much a desire to identify with Africa as it is a determination to enjoy ham hocks and turnip greens here in America without caring whether or not the white man is watching, and not giving a damn if he is." My Face Is Black, p. 90.

²Lomax describes the phenomenon this way: "The Black Muslims represent an extreme reaction to the problem of being a Negro in America today. Instead of working to improve conditions within the framework of American society, as do other Negro leadership organizations, the Black Muslims react by turning their backs on society entirely." Louis Lomax, The Negro Revolt (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 177.
regards itself as a reaction to the characteristics of that tradition.\footnote{Malcolm X and Haley, Autobiography, pp. 241-2; Lincoln, My Face Is Black, pp. 27ff., 87; Washington, Black Religion, p. 125; and Lomax, The Negro Revolt, p. 177, who observes that if the problem of the experience of black oppression were tackled deliberately, the Black Muslims would cease to exist. Cf. Lincoln, Black Muslims, p. 255.} Still, it represents a perspective that does operate within the Christian tradition and became increasingly a part of the context of King's work. Its implications for the present concern need to be clarified.

The approach of this response to the problems of the human situation is direct and specific; and, like many extremist approaches, it has as its bases some sound, humanizing principles. The emphasis found there on the dignity of being black can certainly be deemed appropriate in a context that traditionally has ascribed no dignity at all to those who are black. Mood ebony is a humanizing approach to the human situation insofar as it fosters the acceptance of one's blackness and emphasizes the full humanity of those who for a long time have been deprived of their humanity. But mood ebony goes a step beyond this, and here is the dehumanizing feature of its approach. Along with the acceptance of one's blackness goes a rejection of everything associated
with the white man, which in effect tends to reverse the previous dehumanizing situation rather than to correct it.

Further, it cannot be denied that there is validity to the Muslim critique of Christianity and its failure to deal forthrightly with the experience of black oppression.¹ Few would claim pride in the record of white Christianity's attempts to confront and correct this problem area of American life. While the truth of this observation might tend to justify a rejection of Christianity, it can be noted fairly that at its base lies a failure to distinguish between the offenses of individuals, communities, and institutions who claim to be part of the Christian religion and the principles of the Christian religion itself.²

There is a positive and a negative feature—a humanizing and a dehumanizing one—in the doctrine of man that is reflected in this response. The humanizing feature of the separatist emphasis lies in the sense of group consciousness it creates. For the potential and the actual member, the

¹Lomax has observed: "Muhammed's gospel as a whole will not be accepted by the Negro. But—and this is the important thing--no gospel that fails to answer Muhammed's criticism of Christianity will be accepted either." The Negro Revolt, p. 174.

²Lincoln, Black Muslims, p. 252.
movement represents a consolidated power which is strong enough to overcome the effects of black oppression; and identification with the movement allows one to have a share in that power. The collective identity of man is thus recognized and utilized in a way that has provided for many persons a means of discovering themselves as genuine human beings. The dehumanizing feature, the particular by-product of this emphasis on group identity, is the feature of separation, the necessity of which is emphasized by the spokesmen.\(^1\)

In calling attention to the weaknesses of this response which cause it to serve the continued dehumanization of man, one finds this emphasis on separation to lie at the heart of them. Segregation, regardless of its nature or source, serves to reinforce whatever dehumanizing characteristics that a segregated society has produced rather than to eliminate them. The reactionary polarization that results from separatist assertiveness leads to the observation that those who opt for segregation, including both its black and its white spokesmen, are "siding with the disease against the cure."\(^2\) In effect, this response is as much a failure to

\(^1\)Lincoln, Black Muslims, p. 72. \(^2\)Ibid., pp. 252-3.
confront the dehumanizing features of the concrete human situation as ignoring them is; and it amounts to the substitution of a counter symptom for a cure. Simple and appealing, the solution proposed by the separatist is the rejection of every white man and his potential contribution to the common life of humanity. Its simplicity ignores the complexity of the situation and puts it into the category of those solutions which create black and white answers to problems that are in reality many shades of grey. If the point can be maintained that the dehumanizing problem of the human situation is racism or racial alienation, then the response of separatism contributes little to its alleviation. The overall effect of such a response is the maintenance or increase of the problem, for the response itself is a conscious expression of racism and racial alienation.

Concluding Observation

This chapter set out to describe a representative variety of ways that persons and groups have responded to the dehumanizing experience of black oppression in America.

1 See especially Lincoln's concluding analysis of mood ebony in the last chapter of My Face Is Black, pp. 118-53.
It has been noted that each of these, with varying degrees of explicitness, has claimed the support of theological principles in its perspectives. The critical observations directed to each one have suggested that there is validity to the implication of the thesis that when theological concerns and categories have been brought to bear upon the particular experience of black oppression in America, the result has been something less than a direct and effective removal of the dehumanizing features of the human situation.

The historical stage is now set for the suggestion that, while a participant in this same tradition, Martin Luther King represents the beginning of a new way of doing theology against the context of black oppression, dealing both with concreteness and with significant depth with the circumstances of the human situation.
CHAPTER III

INGREDIENTS OF A NEW PERSPECTIVE:
INFLUENCES ON THE THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT
OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

The thought and action of any person is to a significant extent the result of circumstances and influences that have accompanied and guided development. In the attempt to understand Martin Luther King's response to the experience of black oppression as illustrative of a new focus for theology, another preliminary step involves attention to the combination of influences that primed him for that response. In considering the particular kind of theology that emerged from his response to the American black experience, three general areas of influence appear to have been most significant. The first is the context in which he grew to adulthood--the nonacademic background in which he began to develop many of the presuppositions that were operative in his later thought. The second is the influence of his formal education--the tone of the contexts in which he studied and
the teachers under whom he worked is reflected in his later expressions. The third area includes the persons and ideas that serve as the specific ingredients of his particular perspective and which together account most directly for the tone and direction of Kingian theology. The following sections will give attention to these formative factors.

It should be noted here that extensive coverage of biographical detail is not the concern of this study. There are an increasing number of biographies chronicling the events of King's life,¹ and these provide resources for

¹The number and variety of biographical works are illustrated by citing some of those available. Appreciative and sympathetic general biographies include Lerone Bennett, What Manner of Man: a Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1968); Edward Clayton, Martin Luther King--the Peaceful Warrior (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964); Lionel Lokos, House Divided, the Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1968); Edward Preston, Martin Luther King: Fighter for Freedom (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1968); and L. D. Reddick, Crusader without Violence: a Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1959). Popularized forms of the King story have appeared, such as Jim Bishop, The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971); and one must not overlook the sensitive personal treatment of King's adult career in Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969). An example of an unsympathetic treatment is James D. Bales, The Martin Luther King Story (Tulsa: Christian Crusade Publications, 1967), an account that is quite polemical and reactionary. Since King's death, tributes, analyses, and "critical" biographies have appeared, such as Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., a Profile. A tribute which speaks of the
reflection upon the meaning of those events. The present purpose is to call attention to those elements of his personal context that became the building blocks of the theological thought that resulted in his pivotal response to black oppression.

The Nonacademic Background

The social and economic situation into which Martin Luther King, Jr., was born was not the hand-to-mouth existence of many in the South who shared his skin color. The King significance of King with reference to another context (Haiti) is François Duvalier, A Tribute to the Martyred Leader of Non-Violence: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., trans. John E. Pickering (Port-au-Prince: Presses Nationales, 1968). An analysis of King's life and work with reference to a specific discipline is Hanes Walton, Jr., The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971). A recent and thorough "critical" treatment is Lewis, King: a Critical Biography. Another recent but less thorough treatment is Kenneth Slack, Martin Luther King (London: SCM Press, 1970). Written after the Lewis biography's first appearance and written primarily for a British audience, Slack's book represents an inquiry into the lasting significance of King's life and work, with an attempt to cut through the inadequacies of both hero worship and categorizing criticism.

1 An interesting and instructive look into this area of influence is an autobiographical essay written for a seminary course entitled "The Religious Development of Personality." Boston Archive, XIV, 29. (Hereafter cited as "Autobiographical Essay.")
family was part of what has been called "black bourgeois Atlanta."¹ King's father was a leader in the black community; and this relative amount of power, coupled with a continual, determined resistance to both the overt and the subtle expressions of discrimination, provided an immediate context for his son that offered freedom both from the pains of hunger and from the ground-in sense of being the lowest of human creatures.

Beyond this immediate context, though, is the fact that Martin King, Jr., was only one generation removed from the less advantaged status of the majority of southern blacks.² In spite of his own successful efforts to overcome the disadvantages of his own childhood, the elder King did not join the ranks of those who, once out of the pit, forget the plight of those who remain. This memory with its accompanying sensitivity was passed on to his son, whose later expressions exhibited an awareness of the depth of the experience of being black in the American South that went beyond his own immediate experience with it.


²Lewis, Biography, p. 6.
Such a position of relative material and social security, however, was not sufficient to protect one from frequent and direct expressions of racial discrimination. Everyday experiences with white clerks and particular encounters such as the one from his high school days with a discriminating transportation system made the young King painfully aware of the reality of oppression, in spite of the fact that he was protected more than most from its harshest expressions. In his own words, his exposure as a teenager to racial injustice brought him "perilously close to resenting all white people."  

In this consideration of the nonacademic background of his theological thought, it is helpful to point to the religious element of King's early life. In addition to the general role that religious expression has played in black communities, religion pressed itself upon King all the more

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1His first exposure to the race problem came at age six, when he learned that a previously close white playmate could not play any more. "Autobiographical Essay," pp. 11-12.


3King, Stride toward Freedom, p. 72.

4It has been observed that religion has been a dominant reality among blacks. The circumstances of the
since his home was that of a clergyman.\textsuperscript{1} Though he early reacted against the expectation that he follow his father's profession, by the time he reached an age for making a vocational choice, his future was that of the Christian ministry. No one who heard him later in the context of pastoral leadership or of the civil rights struggle could fail to observe the influence of his early exposure to the religious expression that was part of his upbringing. The colorful use of language, polished oratorical eloquence, and carefully measured cadence of his public addresses reflected techniques that had long been employed in the black religious expression of the South. But, more than just professional techniques, King brought with him from his early religious context a deep-grained attachment to the Hebrew-Christian tradition that had a decided effect on the way he responded to the human situation.\textsuperscript{2}

The point here that is most pertinent to this study is that the nonacademic formative background of King provided a unique combination of circumstances that contributed to black experience lent themselves well to the expression of religion. See, for example, Washington, \textit{Black Religion}, pp. 31ff.

\textsuperscript{1}"Autobiographical Essay," p. 6. \textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
the distinctiveness of his later theological perspective. His closeness to the painful experience of being black enabled him to identify with the pain; his relative distance from the crippling effects of that experience provided him with a measure of objectivity and the opportunity to develop the intellectual and cultural tools needed to probe and express the implications of that experience; and his personal and professional commitment to the Christian faith provided him with position, motivation, and direction for addressing himself theologically to the problem of oppression and working for its solution.

The Contexts of Formal Education

From this background King did not develop overnight into an apostle of nonviolence and an advocate for the rights of men against unjust discrimination. The ten years from his entering Morehouse College to the conclusion of his doctoral work at Boston University represent a development of thought that reflects exposure to, criticism, modification, and embracing of a variety of perspectives. The specific ingredients that were stirred into his developing theological thought will be considered in the next section; but first it is instructive to call attention descriptively to the
attitude, spirit, and perspective of the educational contexts in which he encountered these ingredients. In any educational endeavor one comes away reflecting not only the content of that to which he is exposed, but also the spirit of the context in which he is exposed to it. King's exposure to these three academic contexts reflects a progressive orientation that accounts in part for the particular orientation of his perspective toward the human situation.\(^1\)

Morehouse

King began his formal theological pilgrimage at Atlanta's Morehouse College, an oasis of dignity and prestige for those blacks fortunate enough to attend. There one could undertake a serious quest for truth and develop a consciousness of being a person that was difficult if not impossible in the black and white outside world. With an enlightened and dedicated faculty and administration, Morehouse provided King with a stimulating and sympathetic context for the sharpening of his own focus on the horizons of the future.

\(^1\)The writer is indebted primarily in this section to King's biographer, David L. Lewis, for his portraits of the three institutions of higher learning in which King studied.
He chose sociology as an academic major; and his major professor read the contemporary situation in a way that was to make a lasting mark upon his student's point of view: the primary evil in society was that of racism, and the economic system was both its root and its tool.\textsuperscript{1} The combination of his study and his work experiences in discriminating Atlanta businesses confirmed for him his teacher's observation.

The prime value of the Morehouse context for the concern of the present study was that it provided King with an opportunity to observe, discuss, and reflect upon both ideas and experiences with faculty and fellow students. He began to develop there the attitude and the apparatus for critical reflection upon the human situation which was to make any placid acceptance of its dehumanizing features impossible.

It was also within the Morehouse context that he made the ministry his vocational choice.\textsuperscript{2} The influence of President Benjamin Mays and Professor George Kelsey enabled him to create a concept of the ministry that was more intellectually respectable to him than were his earlier impressions.

\textsuperscript{1}Lewis, \textit{Biography}, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{2}Boston \textit{Archive}, III, 12.
The combination of deep personal involvement and of philosophical respectability represented by these two men was influential in his choice. That choice, combined with the desire to further his education, propelled him to his next formal educational context—Crozer Theological Seminary of Chester, Pennsylvania.

**Crozer**

Though in another part of the country, the context of Crozer was similar in many ways to that of Morehouse. It, too, was a kind of oasis; for Chester was a conservative town where the experience of being black could be as unpleasant as it was in the South. Like Morehouse, it provided a context for careful study and reflection under the guidance of sensitive teachers about the tradition and implications of the Christian religion.

But Crozer was different, too. It offered a less protective context than had Morehouse, for it was a less parochial, professional school. Its students were from all parts of the country and of all races, so the primacy of the black experience was not there, as it had been at Morehouse. This new context produced a behavioral change in King; for he felt a need to overcome the stereotype of the southern
black man as sloppy, irresponsible, and happy-go-lucky. Those who knew him at the time have observed that he overcompensated for this stereotype by an obsession with neatness, punctuality, and seriousness.¹

The primary contribution of the Crozer situation to the theological development of King was a context for broadening the base of his encounter with the experience of being black—the encounter upon which he had begun to reflect seriously at Morehouse. As one would expect in a theological curriculum, the course of study there made available to him both the current and the classical works in philosophy, theology, and ethics. In addition, close personal relationships with individual faculty members and fellow students provided the opportunity for serious discussion of the implications of these works for the contemporary human situation. It was here that King became acquainted with Rauschenbusch, Marx, Gandhi, and Reinhold Niebuhr; and the effect of this acquaintance never left him, though he incorporated their

¹Lewis, Biography, p. 28. Though it is suggested that King never outgrew completely this "obsession," those who knew him later have observed that he was not so bothered as he might have been when the complexity of schedule and arrangements made punctuality impossible. Also, transcripts from informal conferences reveal a King who, though not light-hearted, was certainly capable of casual dialogue.
insights with a considerable amount of modification. Thus, at Crozer, what had begun as a sensitivity to the experience of black oppression began to move in the direction of becoming a response to it. It was a response that was searching for, and beginning to find, a theological base; and it was a response that was beginning to incorporate a unique combination of ingredients that would make it distinctive among other responses to the same experience.

Boston

From Crozer, the next step in King's formal educational pilgrimage was enrolling in the graduate school of Boston University as a doctoral student in philosophy. Again, there was a change of context that required some personal adjustment. From the warmth of the educational community at Morehouse, to the theological seminary of a northern town, to the situation of a large general university in a large, still more northern city, there was a progression that inevitably broadened the scope of King's horizons beyond what they would

1The breadth of King's exposure to the various areas of the history of philosophy and theology is reflected in the Boston collection of his student papers.
have been had he yielded to his father's wishes and terminated his formal education after Morehouse.

Boston's influence was significant in many areas of his personal development. It was there that he met the woman who would become his wife and co-worker, and it was there that he confirmed his desire to return to a southern pulpit. But, most importantly for the present concern, it was there that he had opportunity to put together the ingredients of his developing theological perspective under the influence of the personal idealism of his teachers, especially Edgar Sheffield Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. A significant key to understanding the theological underpinnings of King's response to the experience of black oppression in America is the personalism of the school of philosophy at Boston University, to which attention will be given later in the chapter.

The overall effect of these academic contexts and the progression they represent is that they provided King with a broadening context of concern for his response to black oppression. These contexts did not remove from him his identification with the concrete circumstances of his
own background,\(^1\) and for the present study it is significant that they did not. They did, however, provide him with the means to interpret the concrete struggles against racial oppression as part of a larger historical and ideological human struggle.

**Specific Ingredients of Theological Development**

Having given attention to the specific effects of both the personal and the academic contexts of King's development, it is appropriate now to consider the content of that development. This section will point to the ideas and methods of thinking that reflect themselves most prominently in the particular kind of theology he represents. The items that appear most influential in the development of what we are describing as King's distinctive theological perspective are Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the personalism of Boston University.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Lewis, *Biography*, p. 45.

\(^2\) It is necessary here to comment upon the obvious omissions from this list of specific influences, especially the civil disobedience of Thoreau, the dialectical materialism of Marx, and, most notably, the nonviolence of Gandhi. By
Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel

The systematic quest for "a method to eliminate social evil" undertaken during his seminary days led King to the main building blocks of his developing theological perspective. One of the first of these was his encounter with the Social Gospel movement and its spokesman, Walter Rauschenbusch, who helped him forge a "theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up . . . as a result . . . of early experiences."¹

Rooted in the liberal Protestantism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Social Gospel movement suggested that man's basic difficulty was a kind

King's own assessment (Stride toward Freedom, pp. 72-88), these influences were significant; and their presence is obvious to any observer of King's career. Their omission here is not to suggest any lack of significance in the development of King's overall perspective and methods for dealing with the human situation. Rather, it is to limit the present concern to those influences that were most significant in the development of what we are describing here as the distinctive features of his theological perspective. It is here suggested that those influences are represented by the kind of thinking found in Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and personalism.

¹Ibid., p. 73. The literature of the Social Gospel movement is part of the literature of theological liberalism and would include a variety of spokesmen. The works that influenced King primarily at this point of his development, though, were those of Rauschenbusch.
of ignorance that could be and was being overcome. This generally optimistic view that the historical process is moving in a positive direction and the emphases on the social nature of existence, both in terms of its evils and its goods, all find expression within the "theology of the Social Gospel."¹

The central doctrine for this theology was the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, and the "Kingdom ideal" served as the criterion for every historical religious expression. The Kingdom of God was a reality that was both present and future: an ideal to be hoped for but also a reality to be experienced in the present, not only in the church but also in the clash of social and economic forces.²

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of such a theological formulation to a young man whose experience included an awareness of the reality of social evil and an awareness of the un-historical, otherworldly nature of much religious expression. This appeal was so apparent that a

¹The book by that title, Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel (New York: Abingdon Press, 1945), was an attempt to formulate a systematic theology around what was seen to be the loud, clear, and unmistakable social emphasis of the Christian Gospel.

²Ibid., pp. 131-46.
former teacher is said to have described him as initially an "uncritical disciple of Rauschenbusch"; and King did point with much appreciation to Rauschenbusch's emphasis on the "wholeness" of man and on the fact that the Christian Gospel is concerned with the physical, mental, and social aspects of man's life as well as the spiritual ones.

Even though he may have been at first an uncritical acceptor of the Social Gospel, his later response to it contained some qualifications. One of his criticisms was that Rauschenbusch tended to be too optimistic about man's nature in subscribing to a belief in his inevitable progress. Historical experience seemed to indicate that there was more to the problem of evil than universal education could solve. A second difficulty was what King observed to be the tendency to identify the Kingdom of God with a particular set of historical conditions. In spite of these qualifications, however, the resulting theology of King, both in presupposition and direction, stands in a line of tradition that includes the Social Gospel movement.

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1Lewis, Biography, p. 35.
2Stride toward Freedom, p. 73.
3Ibid.
For the present concern, the important point to note about the contribution of Rauschenbusch to King's perspective is that here was a direct effort to do theology within the particular struggles of men to overcome concrete forms of oppression. The concreteness of the Christian Gospel was suggested forcefully enough to create in King the idea that the religion or the theology that does not take seriously the concrete problems of human existence is a "spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."¹ Here, it is suggested, was a significant step in the process of development that resulted in the particular nature of King's theological perspective under consideration in this study.

King did not stop his development of a theological response to the experience of black oppression in America with the incorporation of a Christian theological statement that was adequate with qualifications. The seminary provided him with opportunity and resources to look further.

Reinhold Niebuhr

A second major specific ingredient in the development of King's particular theological perspective was the influence

¹ Stride toward Freedom, p. 73.
of Reinhold Niebuhr. Acknowledged by King as one of the more
significant elements in his development, Niebuhr's thought
was encountered directly near the end of the stay at Crozer
Seminary. His own assessment of the effect of that encounter
was that he found Niebuhr's perspective and emphases so
appealing that he "almost fell into the trap of accepting
uncritically everything he wrote."¹

The direct effect of Niebuhr's theological interpre-
tation of the human situation was not so obvious in King's
response to the experience of black oppression as was the
effect of others, such as Gandhi. Niebuhr, however, served
for King a useful corrective purpose on two significant
points. His basic service was the contribution of insights
that helped King modify what could have been a too easy
optimism about human nature. Niebuhr's emphasis here was
his thoroughgoing reminder of the nature and pervasiveness
of sin at every level of life.²

¹_Stride toward Freedom_, p. 79.

²_Ibid.,_ p. 81. King is not specific here in acknowl-
edging which of Niebuhr's already voluminous writings were
the most influential; but by this time his systematic treat-
ment of the human situation, _The Nature and Destiny of Man_
(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), was available.
In an undated paper on the theology of Niebuhr, student King
observed: "Niebuhr's anthropology is the necessary corrective
The second primary influence of Niebuhr was indirect, also. His critique of pacifism provided King with the occasion and the stimulus to reinterpret the principles of Gandhi in and for the American theological context. King was able to refine his own concept of nonviolence to include a distinction between "passive non-resistance to evil with naive trust in the power of love" and nonviolent resistance to evil, which is vigorous, not passive, resistance, but with love instead of hate as its basis.

It is rather a courageous confrontation of the power of evil by love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it, since the latter only multiplies the existence of violence in the universe, while the former may bring about a transformation and a change of heart.¹

This distinction between passive non-resistance and non-violent resistance was a crucial one in King's thought, especially as it expressed itself in the struggle for civil rights; and he was prompted to make this distinction by Niebuhr's critique of pacifism.

Whether or not King oversimplified Niebuhr's response to pacifism is an open question, but the outcome of the

¹Stride toward Freedom, p. 80.
encounter was King's adoption of what he called a "realistic pacifism"—seeing the pacifist position as "the lesser evil in the circumstances." This "realistic" pacifist perspective was intended to aid in avoiding the tendency toward self-righteousness that both King and Niebuhr observed in the "idealistic" pacifist position.

Even though King would soon modify the influence of Niebuhr by subjecting it to what he felt was the needed corrective found in personalistic philosophy, the lasting effect of Niebuhr's thought can be observed in the depth with which King perceived the nature of the experience of black oppression as a human, and not just a black human, phenomenon.

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1Stride toward Freedom, p. 81. Niebuhr's "Critique" appeared in the Atlantic Monthly 139 (May 1927): 637-41, and reflected of course a different context. His criticism is not directed so much at the ethical validity of the individual pacifist position as it is to the practical naiveté that suggests its adoption as a national policy. Trust without willingness to sacrifice, he says, will not achieve the ends desired; and the affluent pacifism of American proponents suggests this attitude. "It is quite impossible for the strong to be redemptive in their relations to the weak if they are not willing to share the weakness of the weak, or at least to equalize in some degree the disproportion of advantages" (p. 640). This point finds direct expression in the features of King's thought under consideration.

For the present consideration, it can be observed that with the thought of Niebuhr we see a second step in the honing of the theological focus that is distinctive in King. While not rejecting the directness and the optimistic perspective of the Social Gospel, King was helped by Niebuhr to qualify that optimism with a realistic recognition of the depth of the human problem.

**Personalism**

The keystone in the structure of intellectual development that was being built by the encounters so far mentioned was the philosophy of personalism as King encountered it at Boston University. Claimed by him as his "basic philosophical perspective," it provided him a basis for criticism as well as a method for the incorporation of the variety of interpretations that had appealed to him. It thus served for him an integrative function, and its influence at a foundational level upon King's later thought and work justifies attention here to several of its features.

"Personalism" is a general term which can be used to refer to any system of thinking that emphasizes the value of

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1 Stride toward Freedom, p. 82.
human personality. The personalism to which King was heir, however, can be spoken of more specifically; for it has an observable train of development. The present purpose can

The presence and influence of this perspective in King's thought, plus a relative lack of previous attention to its specific influence, justify a lengthy note here on its development. The personalism of Boston University can trace its ancestry to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century philosopher, Borden Parker Bowne, professor at Boston from 1876-1910. His contribution to the development of personalism is preserved in his major works: The Immanence of God (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905); Metaphysics, a Study in First Principles (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882); Personalism (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908); Philosophy of Theism (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887); The Principles of Ethics (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895); Studies in Christianity (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909); and Theory of Thought and Knowledge (New York: American Book Company, 1897), something of a modification of his earlier work on metaphysics. It was Bowne's contention that the real is that which has the capacity to act or to be acted upon and that persons, or personal selves, are the greatest possessors of that capacity. Hence, Bowne's starting point for any philosophical consideration of ultimate reality or for any theology is personality. Since personality is the best reflection of what is real, its dynamics are the keys for understanding the dynamics of ultimate reality or God. His Philosophy of Theism contains his argument for theism on the basis of the elemental religious nature of human personality. In a sense, then, Bowne can be pointed to as the "founder" of the school of personalism that King met and appropriated at Boston University. He contributed to this way of thinking a systematic methodology, in which the entire inquiry concerning the nature of reality is "organized around one central and all-illuminating principle--that of the self-sufficiency of personality." Albert C. Knudson, The Philosophy of Personalism (New York: Abingdon Press, 1927), p. 87; Cf. John Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 65ff.

The development of this personalist tradition moved from Bowne to his successor Edgar Sheffield Brightman, under
best be served by calling attention to some of the tenets of this perspective that find particular expression in King's theology. In doing so the need is filled for at least a whom King had opportunity to study for a short while. He was professor of philosophy at Boston from 1919 until his death shortly after King's arrival in 1953, and his primary contribution to the tradition was not so much innovation as it was refinement of the articulation of the personalist perspective. Among his chief works that illustrate this refinement are these: Is God a Person? (New York: Association Press, 1932); Personality and Religion (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934); Person and Reality, an Introduction to Metaphysics (New York: Ronald Press, 1958); A Philosophy of Religion (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1940); and The Problem of God (New York: Abingdon Press, 1930). Part of the refinement consisted of pushing the personalist inquiry to a concept of a finite God and of emphasizing to a greater extent than Bowne had done the social relevance of the personalistic approach to religion.

King's major professor at Boston was also a participant in the personalist tradition, the theologian L. Harold DeWolf, who had just begun his public writing career at the time that King was his student. The two books that had appeared by and during that time were The Religious Revolt against Reason (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1949), DeWolf's critique of the neo-orthodox interpretation of the place of reason in religion and theology, and A Theology of the Living Church (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), a systematic treatment of the basic presuppositional and doctrinal points of Christian theology. Still active as a teacher and writer, his latest book, dealing with the role of theology in religion's prophetic task of transforming society, is Responsible Freedom (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1971). It was primarily through him that the maturing King encountered and appropriated for himself the philosophy of personal idealism, the appeal of which is reflected in his student papers, e.g., Boston Archive, XIV, 32, 33, 61, 71. Significant among DeWolf's emphases is one that found fertile reception in King--his insistence on the social relevance of the theological task.
partial grasp of the philosophical perspective that was claimed by King as his own. His theological response to the experience of black oppression had at its base a personalistic analysis of reality.

Personalism is part of the perpetual pendulum swing of philosophical inquiry, and the personalist tradition that developed at Boston came about partly as a reaction to both the exclusively pluralistic emphasis of empiricism and the exclusively monistic emphasis of absolute idealism.¹ It is, according to one definition,

that form of idealism which gives equal recognition to both the pluralistic and monistic aspects of experience and which finds in the conscious unity, identity, and free activity of personality the key to the nature of reality and the solution of the ultimate problems of philosophy.²

Personalism as a philosophical perspective seeks to do justice to the totality of experience by being comprehensive, but it seeks also to be honest by subjecting comprehensive concepts to the criterion of concrete experience. How this is done and some of its results will appear as the consideration is carried further.

¹The development of personalism against its background is traced in Bowne, Personalism, and in a less extensive way in Brightman, Is God a Person?
²Knudson, Philosophy of Personalism, p. 87.
One of the basic epistemological assumptions of the personalism which found expression in King's work was that in any quest for truth one must postulate that the whole of reality is at least consistent with the experienced elements of it. On this basis, it is suggested that personality is a consistent and reliable, though not exhaustive, indicator or reflector of the nature of the universe. The personalist believes in the existence of an external truth that is reflected in the personal self, though it is not itself in the personal self.¹ Theologically, the starting point in the quest for understanding God would be the human personality.²

Consequently, when addressing this perspective and method to the question of God, the personalist observes that

¹ Brightman, Personality and Religion, pp. 28-9, 60ff.; Reason and Reality, p. 35. The limitation expressed here by Brightman—"though it is not itself in the personal self"—may represent a modification of the kind of "panpsychism" expressed by Bowne. See especially the latter's The Immanence of God, p. 153.

² Bowne, Philosophy of Theism; Brightman, Is God a Person? p. 45. A significant qualification is implied here. Personalism is one perspective among many others engaged in a quest for truth. Because it seeks to do justice to the many faceted nature of reality, it does not limit its inquiry to one realm. Hence, personality is for the personalist a valid reflection of reality, but it is not the totality of reality. Personality is a valid starting point for any inquiry about reality, but it is a starting point and not the entire area of concern. Brightman, Personality and Religion, chapter 1, deals with this methodological qualification.
the evidence of personal experience (when considered in its total context and subjected to the tests of reason) leans strongly toward personalistic theism rather than toward any sub-personal interpretation of reality. But, this theism can be neither proved nor disproved in the sense of absolute empirical verification.\(^1\) God, therefore, is the supreme Person, the ground and cause of all reality, which is essentially a community of persons. As supreme Person, God is present and involved in his personal universe, creating and developing persons. The dynamics of personality, both of man and of God, because of their own ability to act, thus prevent a purely naturalistic or behavioristic interpretation of reality.\(^2\) The emergent point of this basic assumption is that there is a definite continuity between experienced reality and ultimate reality. As we shall see, the implications of this assumption for contemporary theology are illustrated by King.

This God who is personal is also limited. The critical evidence of experience, including the evolving

\(^1\)Brightman, *Personality and Religion*, p. 60.

\(^2\)Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, p. 66.
creation of the universe, the structural limitations of personality, the dialectic of the struggle between good and evil, and the religious experience of suffering and redemption support for Brightman such a concept of a limited, or finite, God.¹ But, against the tendency to view this concept as implying a God who is weak, Brightman is careful to develop the kind of limitation he implies as a positive rather than a negative characteristic:

There is no perfect person, whose being is completed and whose perfection is finished; but there may be a person whose will is unfailingly good and whose task is eternal and inexhaustible. Such a person would be divine; his perfection would not be an infinite completeness but an infinite perfectability. . . . He would be such a God as is revealed in evolution—a God of eternal active change, yet a God of unchanging laws and principles.²

Brightman believes in "a God who has more to do than he has yet done, and so is capable of growth."³

This limited quality of God expresses itself in the struggle in which he himself engages to wrest order out of chaos: God must always contend with disorderly experiences,

¹Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, p. 67.

²Personality and Religion, p. 79.

³The Problem of God, p. 11; cf. Person and Reality, pp. 322ff.
but it is in his infiniteness that he is eternally capable of victory over them.\textsuperscript{1} The consistency of this concept with the emerging understanding of the nature of Yahweh in the religion of Israel is worth noting.\textsuperscript{2}

The God of the personalist, then, is a God who hammers out reality on the anvil of history, voluntarily limiting himself to work in that arena, but reserving for himself the ultimate capability of fashioning there what he wills to fashion. This concept of God was incorporated directly by King as a means of giving expression to his own; and along with the qualification to be mentioned next, it became the theological undergirding of his response to the experience of black oppression.

A logical consequence of the personalist perspective is an emphasis upon the relation of religion and philosophy to the total historical process. The social relevance of religious concepts and concerns was one of the emphases of

\textsuperscript{1}Brightman, \textit{Personality and Religion}, pp. 99-100.

Boston personalism that found fertile ground in King's developing perspective:\(^1\)

The chief function of religion is to bring man to realize, in feeling, in thought, and in action, a due sense of the worth of personality, individual and social, human and divine. Religion has eminent social utility.\(^2\)

With these words Brightman concludes a critical observation of what he considers to be a tendency toward the seeking of truth for truth's sake. His evaluation of this kind of endeavor is that it is mere intellectual game-playing--serving no useful purpose beyond its own enjoyment.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Each of the major spokesmen includes this emphasis, but its dominance seems to follow the development of the school, which parallels the growing general concern with social relevance. In his *Principles of Ethics*, Bowne had applied the personalist perspective in an effort to bridge the gap between the moral and the natural, the speculative and the practical. Against the tendency to compartmentalize the elements of reality, his was a concern for recognizing the relationships that exist between facts and values, between philosophy and history, and between religion and life.


\(^3\) Note also the following statement: "If reason speaks and no deed follows, reason itself has failed. Reason cannot be reduced to action, as the pragmatists would have it, but reason must either lead to action or be self defeating. The life of reason is not the life of pure contemplation; it is tested and guided by comprehensive insight." *Personality and Religion*, p. 101.
Brightman observes that the social nature of personal experience points to the necessary social aspect of personal religion—religious beliefs point to the need for involvement in the social process:

The finite-infinite God . . . is a God who himself has a task and who seeks the cooperation of all men in bearing burdens, facing problems, and lifting humanity from its bondage and degradation. Faith in such a God is harmonious with the testimony of personal religion, and points the way to the participation of his worshippers in the process of social change.\(^1\)

The prophetic responsibility of religion has always been the recognition and removal of social injustice. On those occasions when organized religion has become the tool and the support of a system which perpetuates injustice, "the essence of religion gradually vanishes and only the form remains. . . . True religion is social."\(^2\) The relationship of religion to the political structure of the state naturally comes to mind; and in this regard the personalist recognizes a basic legitimacy for the laws of the state. But, one is reminded that one of the functions of religion is protecting society against itself, which means "opposing the state when the state contradicts the principles of right."\(^3\)

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\(^1\)Personality and Religion, p. 128.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 149.
\(^3\)Ibid.
In evaluating King's direct action theology, it is important to understand the difference in the perspective of the personalist between what might be called a "social reformer" and a "religiously social" individual. The former might be a champion of any worthwhile cause and the enemy of certain forms of social injustice; but at the same time he may be so involved with the manifestation of a particular social problem that he fails to see its relationship to the whole of society. Consequently, the total value of his involvement and his contribution is reduced; for the results of his labors cannot be (or usually are not) applied to other manifestations of the same problem. The latter, on the other hand, is conscious of the breadth and depth of his field of concern:

One mark of the religiously social individual is that his social concern is universal and not merely particular, local, provincial, national, or racial; it is restricted by no limits of creed, color, or language, caste, or class. As God is the father of all, so the religious man is the brother and lover of all.¹

The presence of this emphasis of personalism is dominant in King's theological response to the experience of black oppression; and, it will be argued later, it is one of the chief values of his response.

¹Brightman, Personality and Religion, p. 148.
It is important to note that concern for everyone who is involved in an oppressive situation—the oppressor as well as the oppressed—does not imply a compromise with evil for the sake of harmony. The personalist carries his emphasis further to point out that the prophetic function of the church requires that there be no compromise with the expressions of evil that surround it; but its overlapping pastoral function requires that it not reject the persons who are ensnared in those evils:

For example, in this day the Church must condemn flatly the devices by which neighborhoods and apartment houses exclude people by race. At the same time, the Church seeks to minister to the individuals engaged in such practices in a positive way which will remove their fears and hostilities, expand their perspectives, and eliminate their prejudiced activities.¹

L. Harold DeWolf, the man directly under whose guidance King studied at Boston, has emphasized, as did his predecessors, the quality of usefulness as a necessary component of any inquiry. There must be a connection between the principles of faith and action in the direction of bringing the human situation more in line with those principles. The articulation of theological truths is not enough; there must be as well a sustained effort to incorporate those

¹DeWolf, Responsible Freedom, p. 209.
truths into individual as well as corporate life. But, usefulness alone is an insufficient criterion. Programs to improve the human situation that have no base will be doomed to self-contradiction and ineffectiveness, in spite of perhaps brilliant initial success. In the long run, their contribution will be insignificant. Equally ineffective and irresponsible, though, is the system of theological thought that does not result in or at least point toward concrete action consistent with articulated principles.¹

An approach to reality, then, which is concerned that philosophical inquiry and theological statement deal honestly with all aspects of experience; which points to the relationship between experienced reality and reality as a whole; which emphasizes the involvement of God in the dialectic process of his creation; and which requires the involvement of religion in the context of its expression--this is the personalism whose home is Boston University. It was the system of thinking which King found to be the most adequate for structuring his own developing concepts; and it was the perspective whose influence was obvious in his reflections

¹Note, for example, the suggestions for a Christian approach to the economic order. DeWolf, Responsible Freedom, pp. 271ff.
of what was at stake, what was happening, and what the possibilities and implications were in the struggle for civil rights. But, most importantly for the present study, the personalist perspective was the philosophical background whose presuppositions and implications provided King with the foundation for putting the principles of the Christian faith into concrete expression in the struggle for human justice in the context of black oppression.

Upon leaving the formal academic context at Boston, King returned to the South, to a Montgomery pulpit, armed with the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of a decade of concentrated study. In Montgomery a combination of racial ferment, accident, and careful responsive action launched him into a career as a leader in the intensive black struggle from 1954 until 1968.¹ It was that career which was the occasion for the emergence of a theological approach to a particular human situation that was distinctive not only as a response to the experience of black oppression in America but also as an expression of Christian theology. Having

considered now both the historical and the personal contexts of the subject, it is appropriate to turn attention to King's own theological response to the American black experience.
CHAPTER IV

KING'S APPROACH TO THE HUMAN SITUATION:

THE BEGINNINGS OF A NEW APPROACH

This chapter and the two which follow it will give direct attention respectively to the ways in which the thought and work of Martin Luther King illustrate a developing concern that theology adopt a new approach to the human situation, that it orient its content around a new understanding of man, and that, in the final analysis, it be a humanizing theology rather than a dehumanizing one.

An Emerging Direction of Emphasis

It is increasingly difficult to speak of Christian theology in terms of a carefully worked out doctrinal system in which every element of human experience is categorized neatly according to particular formulations of the faith. This is due in large measure to a rapidly emerging awareness of complexity both on and beneath the surface of human
experience, which has made it difficult if not impossible to make meaningful generalizations about man, society, existence, or faith. Something called by the same label might be a different reality altogether for different persons or groups. Consequently, Christian theology, as a dialogue between the human situation and the truths of the Christian revelation, loses in this complexity its capacity to be universal, at least in the beginning, and to have at the same time an effective pertinence to the particular context.

A pressing contemporary question, then, is this: where amid this complex situation is theology to begin and what is it to do? One helpful suggestion grows out of a previously mentioned analysis of the American religious situation, which finds the most characteristic (and most worthy of being preserved) feature of the American religious life to be its plurality. The conclusion of this analysis

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1 King himself pointed to this difficulty in black-white relations by observing that while equality means exactly that for the black, for the white it means some kind of limited improvement—a basic difference of assumption that produced much of the conflict between blacks and white liberals. Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 9.

2 Sontag and Roth, The American Religious Experience.

3 Ibid., pp. 12-22.
is that theology in this context needs an approach which recognizes its own particularity and feels no compulsion to eliminate particular problems by categorizing them away into some universal context. Theology thereby should recognize, preserve, and benefit from plurality rather than discourage it.¹ A reviewer of this analysis cited King as perhaps the best example of this kind of theologian--one who identifies closely with the concrete particulars of his own situation while recognizing their relationship to the wider human context.

More helpful because they reflect a broader field of concern than a single study of the American context, and illustrating this same grappling with the needed focus for contemporary Christian theology, the Humanum Studies of the World Council of Churches--also referred to in the first chapter--have arrived at a similar conclusion. Reflected in the coordinator's periodic progress reports is an observable progression from concern with the question of what is distinctively human to concern with the question of how theology


is done. The conclusion is that the needed task of Christian theology at the present time is not so much an attempt to understand God as it is an attempt to arrive at a new understanding of man—where he is—and to relate the Christian Gospel to him—there.

1The progression of this emerging awareness is reflected in the following articles by David E. Jenkins: "Towards a Purposeful Study of Man," Study Encounter 5 (1969): 151-62, which introduces the suggestion of dealing with the human situation as it is rather than as the experts or surface generalizations might describe it; "The Case for Pessimism--Some Interim Thoughts Concerning the Human," Study Encounter 6 (1970): 108-16, which proposes the impossibility of dealing with the "problem" because the plurality of particularities prevents the problem from being conceived in the same way or attacked in the same way; "Towards One New Man in Jesus Christ," Ecumenical Review 23 (April 1971): 152-67, presents the positive side of the previous point, proposing the necessity for concentrating on particular human problems: "My hope and belief is that it is by wrestling with particular human problems that we shall discover and rediscover the meaning of the truths of the Gospel and of our Christian tradition for and in the human problems we have to face" (p. 165); "Man's Inhumanity to Man, the Direction and Purpose of Humanum Studies" is the most recent article and puts the point plainly: the circumstances of the contemporary human situation require a new response to needed change, especially at the institutional level, and a new emphasis in the way theology is done (p. 5).

2Concrete expressions of this emphasis appear, as has been noted, in liberation theology and black theology. A similar emphasis with reference to another particular context is illustrated in an article by Sally Bentley and Claire Randall, "The Spirit Moving: a New Approach to Theologizing," Christianity and Crisis 34 (4 February 1974): 3-7. Jenkins' critical observation behind this suggestion is that much of what is done and said "is based upon a false doctrine of man
Methodologically, this emphasis suggests that theology begin not with universal categories into which particulars can be placed but with the concrete, particular features of human experience. Once these features are allowed to speak for themselves, taken seriously, and understood, then and only then is one in a valid position to begin talking about their relationship to ultimate reality. Theology does not thereby become anthropology, political science, or sociology; but it does adopt a new attentiveness to these disciplines. It is not a substitution of human perspectives and findings for the Christian Gospel; it is rather an attempt to hear the human situation speak for itself, an attempt to hear the good news of the Gospel, and an attempt to enable them to hear each other. ¹

The natural result of such an emphasis is that theology will become theologies--more regional in nature, more concerned with the particulars of human existence, and less universalistic in appeal. And, rather than being limitations, these features will enable theology to make a more

which shows itself in the fact that our work is often conducted in dehumanizing ways." "Man's Inhumanity to Man," p. 5. (Italics his.)

significant contribution to the implementation of the humanizing forces of the Gospel by providing a better understanding of the nature of humanity and the dehumanizing forces that obstruct its realization.

Now it is necessary to ask where the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., fit into this approach to the theological task. The thesis has suggested that King provides an illustrative case study of this kind of theological emphasis. Against an historical context of a variety of dehumanizing ways of bringing the Christian religion to bear upon the experience of black oppression and against a personal context of a rather traditional orientation in theological and philosophical thought, King participated in this breaking of new theological ground for the sowing of the seeds of faith in a new season whose harvest is not yet complete.\(^1\)

This chapter will seek to begin a demonstration of how King's life, work, and reflection upon it offer an illustration of this emerging direction of emphasis for doing theology. He began his particular kind of theology by a concrete confrontation with the dehumanizing features of the

\(^1\)Obviously, King's theology will not be a systematic structuring of doctrinal concerns with careful attention to fine points of interpretation.
human situation where he was and working for their elimination. From these confrontations there emerged for him a concept of the overall human problem that was derived from rather than prerequisite to these encounters. His was a theology that began with the concrete, particular problems of humanity in a specific context, allowed them to speak for themselves, and moved them toward a genuine hearing of the Christian Gospel.¹

It should be emphasized that King did not interpret human existence in any radically different terms; but he did approach the human situation in a way that, for theology, was a distinctive approach—indicative of the emerging emphasis noted above. Brief attention to the contrast between this approach and those of both traditional theology and the more direct theological responses to the experience of black oppression will serve a clarifying purpose here.

The several theological voices which have been influential in the theological thinking of modern America have all been concerned with the circumstances of the human

¹King's concern for the relevance of the Christian faith to the concrete aspects of life is reflected in earlier expressions, especially in the "Autobiographical Essay," p. 15. See also Boston Archive, XIV, 41.
situation, even though they have probed, analyzed, and described that situation in a variety of ways. Common to them all, though, is a feature that is consistent with their general approach to theology; and that is the tendency to speak of theology's context in terms of broad generalizations, often quite abstract, which may be quite accurate but leave one wondering just how these abstract qualities might manifest themselves in the concrete situation. Liberal theology's "deficiency," neo-orthodox theology's "sin," Tillich's "estrangement," Macquarrie's "conflicting polarities of existence," and radical theology's loss of the transcendent are all general and rather abstract ways of describing the human situation. If asked how these might express themselves concretely, these perspectives would no doubt point to such things as broken relationships, exploitation, discrimination, and war; but theology's responsibility seems here to be to describe and classify rather than to engage in an effort to correct.

At the other end of this spectrum of concern, efforts such as those described in chapter II do address themselves directly to the more immediate expressions of the human problem. In the context of the experience of black oppression they have attacked the institution of slavery head-on; they
have pushed carefully but persistently for educational opportunity and advancement; they have revolted against the establishment which is dominated by white values and white power; and they have supported efforts at attaining voting rights, desegregation of schools and public facilities, open housing, and equal employment opportunity. The primary concern of these efforts has been precisely the concrete manifestation of the problem. A man hurts and suffers, they say, not because there is some basic disorientation in his quest for authentic selfhood or because the society of which he is a part has drifted too close to the pole of facticity and too far away from the pole of possibility, but because the color of his skin prevents him, no matter how intelligent he is or how hard he is willing to work, from earning enough to feed and clothe his children.

The resultant situation is that what we have described as traditional theology, by its own approach to its own task, has put itself into a position of ignoring the concrete elements of the human situation if it wants to and of participating by acquiescence in the dehumanizing of man. On

1 Jenkins, "Man's Inhumanity to Man," p. 5: the way we do theology is included among those features of institutional life for which repentance is needed.
the other hand, because of their basic concern with alleviating the immediate problems of oppressive situations, attempts to deal with these concrete elements of the context put themselves into a position of being concerned with only the symptoms, assuming that once these particular difficulties are overcome (school segregation, job discrimination, etc.), the problem will be solved.

Martin Luther King is part of a theological consciousness that understands and appreciates all these interpretations of the nature of the human situation, but which feels a need for something more. He had no difficulty, for example, in speaking of the deficiency that could be improved by education and social programming, of the sin that separates man from God and renders him in need of the word of grace, of the anxiety and estrangement—both individual and collective—that keep man from being who he can be, and of the need for affirming the goodness of creation and the secular world. Nor did he have any problem with the principle of directing attention to the place where a problem is most obvious and of doing something about it. His career from 1954 to 1968 found him doing just that.

The theology of King’s response to the experience of black oppression is, in effect, a bringing together into one
expression the emphases of both these approaches to the human situation. He differs from traditional theology not in his seeing black oppression as a manifestation of a deeper problem but in the directness and the concreteness of his approach to it. He differs from other direct approaches in his persistent lack of contentment with surface solutions.

To give material substance now to the suggestion that King is an example of this new theological approach to the human situation, the following pages will refer to his own approach to it, first in terms of the immediate problems he chose to face in his particular context, and then in terms of the deeper, more basic problems of which these were seen to be symptoms. His analysis of contemporary society is well enough known to excuse a lack of detailed reporting here. What is of concern and pertinence is how this assessment illustrates a new concreteness of theological approach and how it sets the stage for King's doctrine of man--the concern of the next chapter--which lies at the heart of his theology of reconciliation.

The Human Situation--The Symptoms

Martin Luther King began to do his distinctive kind of theology in 1954. He had arrived in Montgomery, fresh
from a decade of the academic study of theology and philosophy, and had assumed the pastoral leadership of a people whose primary realities were discrimination, exploitation, and poverty. Though the contrast between the relative comfort of the academic questions of human existence and the agony of the real issues of black human existence in the deep South was marked, immediate identification with the concerns of his particular group was not difficult; for his formal educational pilgrimage had not removed his attachment to his own background, even though it had given him resources to interpret it in an analytical way. ¹ Within a few months of his arrival, he was selected to give directive leadership to a spontaneous and in many respects accidental assault on the structure of black oppression there. Thus began a nearly fifteen year career of leading and participating in a particular group's quest for full humanity and of bringing the principles of the Christian faith to bear directly upon that quest.

During this time, King directed his active attention to several concrete features of the human situation, each one

¹Lewis, Biography, p. 45. As noted previously, in terms of the criteria suggested by the thesis, this continued identification with his own background was an asset rather than a liability, as suggested by Lewis; for it enabled him to identify with the concrete features of the situation in which he found himself.
in its own way a denial of some aspect of man's humanity. In calling attention to these features as King met them, the points of particular pertinence for the present concern are the concreteness of his approach¹ and the progression that can be seen from the specific boycott of a segregated bus system to the attempts near the end of his career to relate the struggle for civil rights and racial justice to a universal and overarching opposition to man's inhumanity to man in the total world context.

Segregation

The most obvious dehumanizing feature of the human situation in the Montgomery of 1954 and in the South for the next decade was the practice of racial segregation. It expressed itself in every area of life, except in the sale of merchandise; but its existence in the city's public transportation system became the target for the first large scale assault. Its presence in that form meant that any black person, regardless of age, health, or strength, had to yield

¹King's statement to the Republican Party Platform Committee, San Francisco, 7 July 1964, is illustrative of this concreteness: "The Negro today is not struggling for some abstract, vague rights, but for concrete and prompt improvement in his way of life" (p. 8). Atlanta Archive, I, 5.
his seat to any white person just because he was white. Weary but determined defiance of this expectation by a hard-working seamstress precipitated the boycott that began a chain of events which became the course of King's theological career. 1

He maintained from his earlier encounters with it that segregation was morally evil, and this conviction took on an uncompromising directness after Montgomery. 2 He involved himself directly in the boycott as coordinator, stimulator of morale, continual advocate of the necessity for nonviolence, and negotiator with the various authorities about possible and acceptable ways for ending the boycott and the problem it protested. It was a lengthy project, for the

1 King's published report and interpretation of the Montgomery Boycott is his Stride toward Freedom. The confidence brought by initial success is apparent in his interpretation of the significance of these events. See also the related statements and correspondence in Boston Archive, I, 5, 32; IV, 19, B.

2 He saw segregation as a direct contradiction of the heart of the Christian Gospel, and he suggested that it was impossible to be a Christian and a segregationist at the same time. "Advice for Living," Ebony, October 1957, p. 53. See also "The Future of Integration," speech to the National Convention of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Green Lake, Wis., 21 August 1959, p. 2. Boston Archive, I, 21. King would soon begin a movement of concern that would locate the evil of segregation in the institution itself rather than in the individual who happens to be a segregationist.
structure of segregation did not yield easily; but after almost a year of a crippling boycott, the appeals of King and his colleagues were met.

This particular effort was significant not only in its effect of removing one particular dehumanizing feature of the human situation but also in its influence as a stimulus for other direct attacks on the practice of legal segregation. From the local facility to the interstate freedom rides to the lunch counter sit-ins to the Birmingham of 1963, it was open season on legal racial segregation;¹ and the outcome of all these efforts was the official declaration that the racial segregation of public facilities is illegal.

Even though King saw segregation as the outer shell of the evil that dehumanizes man and as the problem that needed attention first, his response to it contained the seeds of a perception that would emerge more fully later.²


²In King's "First Annual Address" to the Institute on
Segregation is not just separation: it is a separation that makes it possible to ignore a whole segment of humanity; it carries with it an implicit denial of the basic worth of another human being;\(^1\) and, in the South at least, it had become an unchallenged element of society's institutions. What is worse, though, is that segregation is a kind of de-humanization that breeds an inequality that in turn becomes

Non-violence and Social Change, Montgomery, Alabama, December 1956 (printed in Phylon 18 [April 1957]: 25-34), he suggested that the Negro's quest for freedom in the South is the beginning of a change from the old order to the new and part of the universal quest for freedom everywhere. The challenge of this new age is to "rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity" (p. 29). The attack on segregation was for him a particular, regional concern; but its importance was not so limited. See "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," Christian Century, 6 February 1957, p. 166, and "A View of the Dawn," Interracial Review 30 (May 1957): 82. See also Boston Archive, XIII, 3.

Even before Montgomery this idea was apparent in King, as his student papers and examinations indicate. His fondness for fitting things into the larger pattern seems to be a result of his exposure to Hegel's system of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, which King employed in a variety of ways. A series of papers on Hegel reflects this fondness (Boston Archive, XIV, 40), even though he had earlier rejected Hegel's system as a "grandiose scheme." Boston Archive, XII, 53.

\(^1\)The "separate but equal" situation following the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of 1896 was for King a cause of the Negro's loss of his own concept of himself as a person. "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," p. 165. He viewed the lunch counter sit-ins as a direct confrontation of the attitude toward the black that welcomes his money but denies his worth as a person. "The Burning Truth in the South," p. 9.
a reason for continued segregation. King frequently pointed to the absurdity of using the bad results of an unjust system as an argument for its continuation. Racial segregation was for King the particular dehumanizing feature of the human situation that needed most immediate attention.

Discrimination

The legal segregation of public facilities was only a façade of a dehumanizing situation. It was a real and crippling façade, and one which had to be dealt with; but the end of its legal life revealed that there were other levels of dehumanization to be met. The arbitrary denial of opportunities for employment was another feature of the human situation seen and attacked by King as an obstacle to full humanity for black people. As segregationist thought had ruled the public realm, so did it the semi-private domain of business; and it did so in the form of job discrimination.

The place where King and the SCLC met this kind of dehumanization head-on was Birmingham of 1963.¹ A combination of demonstrations, political maneuverings, and nonviolent

resistance to questionable authority brought national attention to the injustices that existed in Birmingham and moved equal opportunity within closer reach of black people. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 sought comprehensively to eliminate such discrimination as well as the segregation of public facilities and services.

Discrimination of this sort is more subtle and subjective than outright segregation; and it is perhaps easier to get away with in the name of individual, private freedom. But, for King in the South of the early sixties, it was clearly a way of preserving the inequality that had existed since the days of slavery; and it was as clear an obstacle to the quest for full humanity for black people as one might find.

Disenfranchisement

For King, another particular symptom of the dehumanizing character of the human situation in the South was the still more subtle deprivation of power through the mechanisms that prevented the vote from being effectively exercised. Even though one might theoretically have the privilege of using public facilities freely and the opportunity for educational and economic advancement, there were
forces, legal and illegal, which prevented him from participating effectively in the selection of his political authorities. Theoretical and legal equality meant little as long as those who were bent on preserving inequality remained in power. So, along with efforts to combat segregation and discrimination, King began early to address himself to the need and the power of the vote as a means of correcting this prominent dehumanizer.¹

The direct confrontation with resistance to the right to vote came in the events of Selma in 1965.² A combination of poor registration, unfair literacy tests, and local intimidation had worked together to render the black voiceless in the governance of a city and county in which he was in the racial majority.³ The Selma-to-Montgomery march had as its purpose the petitioning of the governor to abolish

¹In the "Annual Address" cited above (p. 119, n. 2), King pointed to the ballot as an effective means of correcting the problems confronting man in this situation. He reflected an awareness there that would express itself repeatedly later that while law cannot itself insure justice, it can control unjust behavior while religion and education work on changing the inner man (p. 32). See also "Advice for Living," Ebony, December 1958, p. 154; Boston Archive, I, 30, and IV, 25.

²King, "Selma--the Shame and the Promise," p. 19.

³Ibid., pp. 20-1.
these unjust obstacles to the voting privilege.\textsuperscript{1} This was a step in the process that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

To this point, ten years after the Montgomery bus boycott, the arena for King's activity was primarily the South; and the particular problems he chose to confront were especially, though not exclusively, southern problems. From this recognition emerges the observation that a distinctive feature of his work was his close involvement and identification with the concrete problems of a particular group and serious effort aimed at their solution.\textsuperscript{2} A related distinctive feature of this approach to the human situation is the progression it follows from the concrete, local expressions of the human problem toward the more widespread difficulty of which they are a part. He joined the effort to help humanize man by starting where he saw man being most dehumanized--in the concrete structures of racial oppression in the South.

\textsuperscript{1}Martin Luther King, Jr., "Behind the Selma March," \textit{Saturday Review}, 3 April 1965, p. 57.

\textsuperscript{2}While help from any source was welcome, King emphasized the importance of local leadership and indigenous energy. \textit{Boston Archive}, I, 18.
These confrontations had an effect on King's own perspective, too; and there began to emerge from them a concrete awareness of the power of a more basic, underlying problem in man's situation. From his bouts with segregation, job discrimination, and disenfranchisement, King perceived that under it all was the problem of racism, which will receive brief attention after two other specific features of the human context are noted.

Poverty

The mid-sixties saw a further step in the progression of King's direct approach to the concrete problems of oppression. The nonviolent movement had been effective in eroding parts of the structure of oppression in the South, and in 1965 he began to address himself and his approach to the distinctive needs of the North. The specific problem

1. The combination of the deep-seated roots of the problems faced and some disappointments from failure in some aspects had begun to temper by 1960 the easy optimism that had flourished as a result of earlier decisive successes and to cause it to take on additional concreteness. Compare, for example, the above noted tone of Stride toward Freedom with "Pilgrimage to Non-violence," Christian Century, 13 August 1960, p. 441.

of the North was the ghetto; and confronting the circumstances of the ghetto was an encounter with a complex interplay of social and economic forces that had a strangle hold on large segments of humanity. King had earlier assumed that the successes of efforts in the South against black oppression would have constructive by-products in the North, but the reverse had been the case. The circumstances of the ghetto were too different from those of the earlier South to fall easily into a mold cast in the South; and the actual, net result was that attention to the South had neglected the North, conditions had worsened, and there was building there the kind of cynicism that would make the conditions of the human situation even more difficult to deal with than those of the South had been.¹

King saw the ghetto to be a closed system, an economic trap from which one could not escape alive. Crime flourished there and became the atmosphere for nurture. Economic exploitation was the cause of the ghetto, and crippling poverty was its result.²


²"Next Stop: the North," p. 34. King's recognition of poverty as a deep-rooted concrete problem of human
Therefore, King began to attack poverty and the exploitive system that produces it as, on a broader scale, another of the dehumanizing problems in the contemporary context. He was aware that there was nothing new about poverty, but he was insistent that there was something new about the fact that we now have the means to get rid of it. From 1965 to the day of his death he involved himself specifically and directly in efforts to enable persons caught in the pit of poverty and economic injustice to gain a base for climbing out of it.

King's attention to the issue of poverty is also indicative of the broadening of his concern from a primarily racial basis. A recognition of oppressive poverty is a recognition that not all oppression is racial in nature: poverty is a dehumanizer not only of blacks but also of significant numbers of whites as well.

existence of course began earlier. Notes and statements from his trip to India in 1959 reflect the effect of his confrontation with poverty there. Boston Archive, I, 5, A. Still earlier, King's academic encounter with the economic problems of human society via Karl Marx created for him a sensitivity to this particular form of dehumanization.

War

King directed his efforts against one more particular problem in the human situation, and the final step in the progression we are tracing here involves his response to war. By 1965, King's travels and reflections had pressed upon his mind new varieties of specific problems; and he summarized these when speaking to the occasion and implications of his Nobel Peace Award. He suggested there that the three most pressing problems that confront mankind are racial injustice around the world, poverty, and war; and "though each appears to be separate and isolated, all are interwoven in a single garment of man's destiny." It has been acceptable and even popular in the American context to speak of the evil of war; and King had much earlier expressed his views on the general issue. It

1"The Quest for Peace and Justice," p. 247. Even earlier, though, in a letter to Kyle Haselden of the Christian Century, dated 29 May 1961, King placed world peace alongside the race question as the most crucial issue of the day. Boston Archive, VII, 2, A.

2"Dreams of Brighter Tomorrows," Ebony, March 1965, p. 35.

3See, for example, his "Advice for Living" column in Ebony, December 1957, p. 120, which affirms the necessity of a ban on nuclear weapons and suggests that "the principal
was not an altogether popular thing, though, in 1967 for him to speak directly and specifically of the evil of the involvement of the United States in Southeast Asia.¹ Friend and foe alike criticized him for speaking out against the war.² His foes declared him unpatriotic and unable to see the difference between civil rights and foreign affairs. His friends feared that such a stand would compromise his effectiveness in the still unfinished quest to overcome the problems associated with racial oppression.

The truth was that King did see a difference between civil rights and foreign affairs; but in both the lack of human rights at home and the involvement in war abroad, he saw a dehumanizing process at work. In spite of objections, objective of all nations must be the total abolition of war." Still earlier, King had expressed this general perspective as a student.

¹ King's basic statement on this issue was his April 4, 1967, address at Riverside Church, New York City, reprinted as "A Time to Break Silence," Freedomways 7 (Spring 1967): 103-17. He did not make this particular step without agonizing over the practical wisdom of making direct and public his stand on the war. Lewis, Biography, p. 397.

² A collection of correspondence and statements on this point is found in Atlanta Archive, I, 3. It was at this point that a waning of support among his followers became obvious. In moving into economic and foreign affairs, biographer Lewis suggests he was moving too fast for his followers. Lewis, Biography, p. 397.
he protested the Vietnam war as an example on an international scale of the tendency of men to dehumanize each other.

These two more broadly based symptoms of the human problem--economic exploitation and war--contributed toward a more comprehensive concept of the deeper problem in the human situation. We shall label this problem "alienation" and consider it along with the earlier mentioned problem of racism.

The Human Situation--The Deeper Problem

All the while that King was addressing himself to the concrete problems of the human situation, there was in the background an awareness that these were symptoms of a deeper problem. They deserved and got direct attention in his work, but a review of his approach to the human situation would be incomplete if it did not call attention to the way he set the symptoms of the problem into the deeper context. Brief attention to the two concepts of racism and alienation will attempt to illustrate this depth of his approach to man's present situation--a depth which does not come at the expense of the concreteness already observed.
Early in the efforts to overcome segregation, discrimination, and the lack of voting rights, King recognized that the real enemy lay not just in the structures of oppression themselves but beneath the surface in the minds of those who maintained the structures. One could be made to yield a segregated facility or to give a job or to allow a vote; but all this could happen without changing or removing the basic cause of the problems of oppression. As long as King's struggle was for racial equality, he conceived of this deeper problem as racism--the dehumanizing idea that lay behind and justified the dehumanizing practices and structures.

Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and the object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future.¹

¹Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? p. 82.
King here reflects a perspective similar to that of his former teacher George D. Kelsey, who suggests that racism is not just a characteristic of a person or his behavior, but a "faith," a phenomenon that grows from a rationalization of certain structures of society to an interpretation of human existence in general. Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man, p. 9. King regards it in precisely the same way (Where Do We Go from Here? p. 85); and elsewhere he spoke of
A recognition of the existence and power of racism is, of course, not new; nor is it unique to the experience of the American black;¹ but King's perception of it in his own context, his recognition of how it operated there, and his far-reaching suggestions as to how to deal with it buttressed his approach to the human situation and gave depth to his concrete efforts to humanize the American South.² Racism was a valid way of describing most aspects of the problem of black oppression in the South, but other encounters and specific problems that were not exclusively racial led King to a concept that was his final analysis of the human problem: the problem of alienation.

¹Racism as here described can exist wherever there is racial identification and discrimination according to racial classifications. A careful historical study of this phenomenon is Jaques Barzun, Race: A Study in Superstition, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965).

²King's most comprehensive and analytical published statement on the nature, extent, and consequences of racism is found in Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? pp. 79-119.
Alienation

King regarded the human situation as one in which men are alienated from each other in a variety of ways. They are alienated not only racially, but also economically, socially, nationally, and ideologically; and this for him was the comprehensive dehumanizing feature of the human situation.1 Alienation is not a new concept, either: it has characterized interpretations of man's situation from the classical philosophers to the modern existentialists. King is by no means original here, but he is distinctive in his use of the concept as a diagnosis based on the symptoms of racial injustice, poverty, and war.2

Alienation for King essentially means a lack of genuine community; and it occurs when persons fail to

1 The Trumpet of Conscience, pp. 68-70. Alienation as an academic idea appears in King's class notes, Boston Archive, XIV, 33; but it took on a more concrete meaning for him as he dealt with the human situation.

2 Here, as in other places, King does not go to any lengths to explicate the meanings of the terms he uses. His use of alienation seems most closely related to the way in which Marx employed it to refer to the condition of economic man and especially the consequent social alienation. See Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society, trans. and ed. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 295-7. For an interpretation of this concept in Marx, see Robert Tucker, Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1967), pp. 147-9.
recognize and appreciate the worth of each other, when they fail to relate to each other in ways that are mutually supportive and beneficial, and when they cease to participate in and feel a responsibility for their particular context.\textsuperscript{1}

Persons and groups lack community because they fear each other; they fear each other because they do not know each other; and they do not know each other because they fail to communicate with each other.\textsuperscript{2} Such alienation affects both parties adversely, for each is cut off from benefitting from the essential worth of the other.

This lack of community encourages the worst in man to come to expression. The fear it nurtures breeds a dormant hate that becomes active whenever attempts are made to bridge the established gaps of estrangement.\textsuperscript{3} More subtle, but just

\textsuperscript{1}King, \textit{The Trumpet of Conscience}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{2}King, "Advice for Living," \textit{Ebony}, May 1958, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{3}Boston Archive, VIII, 24. Hate was for King an expression of dehumanization at its worst. The hater denies not only the humanity of his object but his own as well. Hate is the destructive, irrational emotion that controls the man rather than being controlled by him. It never stops with the original object hated, but "ends up hating everything in its path." "Advice for Living," \textit{Ebony}, December 1958, p. 154. See also his speech to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 19 July 1962, from which excerpts are printed as "Hate Is Always Tragic; Martin Luther King's Challenge," \textit{Time}, 3 August 1962, p. 13. Full typescript is in Boston Archive, VI, 33, and will be cited hereafter as "National Press Club Speech."
as damaging in the long run, this alienation allows the appearance of justice, equality, and community without the corresponding realities. It is, in short, the problem that remains, even when preliminary solutions to the surface problems are successful.

The activity of the latter part of King's career found him speaking with increasing frequency to this underlying problem in the human situation. He would never deny that progress had been made by the striking down of overt and specific obstacles to genuine humanity; but he continually would remind his readers and hearers that genuine humanity depended not upon the formal structures by which men order their lives, but upon the spirit of mutuality that lends itself to cooperative effort in meeting the challenges that human society now faces. As he conceived it, the dehumanization that plagued man in every area of his life as a result of this alienation could be overcome by a genuine reconciliation and the realization of genuine human community. This was the goal toward which he intended that his concrete efforts be directed.
Concluding Observation

This chapter has been concerned with part of a suggestion that has grown out of a study under the aegis of the World Council of Churches. That suggestion in part makes a plea that contemporary Christian theology adopt a new approach to the human situation, take seriously the concrete features of that situation, and become actively involved in alleviating the particular problems of that situation. With this suggestion in mind, the chapter has given attention to the approach of Martin Luther King to the human situation, with the intent of demonstrating the suggestion that his work is an illustration in a particular context of this new focus for the theological task.

It is here suggested that the evidence from King's career and from his expressed thought verifies this assertion. Of primary importance is the fact that he took seriously his own group identity and applied himself to the real human problems that expressed themselves there. He brought the principles of the Christian Gospel directly to bear upon the concrete struggles of humanity in a particular context. And, he did so with a growing awareness of the place of that particular context in the overall quest for full humanity.
The three-part suggestion that has been derived from the conclusions of the Humanum Studies concerns not only a new approach for theology but also a new orientation for its content and purpose. The following two chapters will carry the above case further by considering King as a participant in the contribution of a new concept of the content of theology as well as a new concept of its purpose.
CHAPTER V

A CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF MAN

Suggested Centrality of the Doctrine

The previously noted emerging recognition of the complexity of what it means to be human and the breadth and depth of the problems that stand in the way of humanity has yielded for contemporary Christian theology not only the suggestion that it adopt a more direct and concrete approach to human problems but also the proposal that it reorient its interpretation of the faith around a new, and more concrete, understanding of man. It is suggested that the crucial question for contemporary theology is not "What is the nature of God and of revelation?" but rather "Who is man?" and especially "What does it mean to be a man in Christ?"

There appear to be two basic reasons, one negative and the other positive, for the suggestion of the centrality of the concept of man in contemporary theological thought. The first grows out of the specific observation that theology
and its institutions have participated together in the dehumanization of man by operating on what is essentially a false doctrine of man.¹ The particular problem for traditional theology and its doctrine of man does not lie so much in its content as in the assumptions behind its formulation. Specifically, there is an observed tendency for theologians to formulate a Christian doctrine of man that is appropriate for the dominant cultural situation (Europe, America, white middle class, etc.) and to assume that the culturally conditioned features of that formulated doctrine are normative for all men.² It is noted that this tendency, in effect, reflects and results in a kind of theological "imperialism" that can have a definite dehumanizing effect on certain segments of humanity. The assumptions that underlie and result from such a culturally conditioned doctrine of man can easily lead to the theological sanction of a variety of kinds of oppression, exploitation, and injustice—all in the interest of maintaining, not genuine humanity, but a particular understanding of what genuine

¹Jenkins, "Man's Inhumanity to Man," p. 5.

²Ibid., pp. 22-3. Again, this emphasis is illustrated in specific ways by the basic points of liberation theology and black theology.
humanity is and the institutions built upon that understanding.¹ A Christian doctrine of man to serve as a corrective to this misuse and misdirection of theological attention and ideas is suggested as a need for a constructive Christian theological response to the contemporary human situation.

The second reason for the need and centrality of a new doctrine of man emerges from the logical recognition that a theology which addresses itself directly and concretely to the dehumanizing features of the human situation in an effort to move that situation toward the realization of genuine humanity cannot do without an operative concept of what genuine humanity is as a guide for its efforts. If the pressing need for contemporary theology is that it affirm and work toward the realization of genuine humanity, then man, and, more specifically, concrete man, would seem to be a central area of theological concern.²

¹The theological approaches described in chapter II are clear examples of the way in which both the content and the assumptions of a given doctrine of man can be made to serve dehumanizing structures, practices, and attitudes.

²To suggest the centrality of the doctrine of man for contemporary theology is not to suggest that Christianity become humanism. The changing demands of the human situation
Therefore, a second feature of the suggestion for contemporary Christian theology that grows out of recent ecumenical attention to the nature of man and theology is that Christian theological effort contribute to the church and to society a doctrine of man that will guide rather than obstruct the quest for genuine humanity. The precise content of this needed doctrine is not set forth in the suggestion, but there is the implication that it contain at least these features: an understanding and appreciation of man as a concrete individual, regarding him as a person in his own right rather than as a mere segment of a superimposed category; an understanding and appreciation of the corporate-ness of man, recognizing him as a functioning member of a collective group whose activity might vary from that of its

and the responsibility of theology to relate to them in a concrete way suggest that theology needs to be ever ready to reorient its content and emphases around whatever the pressing demands of the human situation are at the particular time. Historically, for example, the Christological emphases of the early church, the soteriological and ecclesiological emphases of the Reformation and neo-orthodox periods, and the eschatological emphases that respond to the despair of an ancient or modern period are responses to the pressing needs of the church and society as perceived in their own periods. The point is this: the doctrinal emphases of theology that become focal take their cues from what the most pressing needs of the human situation seem to be, and to emphasize one doctrinal concern is by no means to deny the existence or importance of another.
individual members; and an understanding and demonstration of what "genuine man" is, i.e., what it means to be "Christian man" or the "new man in Christ."

This chapter will carry the case of the thesis a step further and suggest that a distinctive feature of King's theological response to the experience of black oppression in America is the concreteness of the understanding of man that is reflected in it. As such, his operative concept of man is illustrative of the kind needed for contemporary Christian theology. He demonstrates a recognition both of man's concrete individuality and of his collectiveness, and there is in his expressed thought a concept of what it means to be genuine man that is distinct in its concreteness from previous understandings. The following pages will consider these features of King's concept of man as an illustration of a Christian doctrine of man that is more the servant of the humanizing of man than of his dehumanization.¹

¹The term "humanizing" in this context is used to refer to that combination of processes by which genuine humanity is sought, as against those processes and structures which by discrimination and exploitation obstruct that quest.
Man in the Theology of Martin Luther King

In the particular kind of theology that the active and reflective work of King represents, the doctrine of man is a central area of theological concern. There are a few places in which King sets forth explicitly his interpretation of man, but for the most part the distinctive doctrine of

1 As noted previously, the centrality of the Christian understanding of man in King's theology is not a denial of the importance of other doctrines; but it is more a reflection of the problems created by influential misunderstandings of man and of the influence of the personalist perspective, for which an understanding of man is not only central but also the key to any subsequent inquiry. His concept of God, his christology, and his understanding of history and eschatology are consistent also with the personalist perspective, which served, as has been noted, the integrative function for King's eclectic thought. These features of his thought would indeed be worthy subjects for consideration, but the present concern will limit itself to that doctrinal emphasis which is most reflective of the suggested new focus for Christian theology.

2 Note, for example, Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), pp. 82-94, 106-13. The formal elements of his doctrine that emerge from such interpretations are these: (1) Man is a physical being with wants and needs that must be met. (2) Man is a spiritual being with the potential for freedom of decision within his given destiny. (3) Man is a sinner who misuses his potential to inflict evil upon himself and his fellow man. (4) Man, by virtue of God's grace, has the privilege of returning to his essential and proper orientation. An earlier undated student paper entitled "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man" reflects these same points in different words. Boston Archive, XVI, 3. An examination from a seminary course reflects a perceptive grasp of the nature of the human personality from the
man that is operative in his theology is the one that emerges indirectly from his encounters with man's inhumanity to man and in his reflections upon those encounters. The following sections will seek to set forth this concept of man according to the terms suggested above as the most appropriate features for a contemporary Christian understanding of man.

Man As He Is: Actual Man

In King's thought there is an implicit distinction between the actual historical condition of man and the condition that is his as a result of his approach toward genuine humanity—a distinction between man as he is and man as he can be. For the sake of analysis here, attention will be called first to the general qualities of the former condition and then to the features that illustrate the genuine dimension of life.

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psychological point of view. Boston Archive, XIV, 3. In explicit statement, King's Christian doctrine of man is quite traditional. The features of King's doctrine of man which will receive attention here are those which suggest its correspondence to the above mentioned suggestion for a Christian doctrine of man for the contemporary human situation.
Individual man

There is present in King a clear understanding of and appreciation for the individuality of man. For him, every human being, by virtue of being human, has an inherent worth as an individual; and no person, society, or system of thought has the right to subsume his individuality to make of him a programmed cog in the wheels of collective enterprise.¹ Individual man is a man of worth.²

The theological basis for this conception of individual worth is rooted in King's affirmation of the biblical

¹In spite of King's indebtedness to Marx's analysis of the dialectic of human society, he differed strongly with the implications of Marx's analysis that led to the emphases of Communism. He thought that Marx had not carried the dialectic far enough. His emphasis on the economic sphere was justified, and no one would deny the validity of his powerful passion for social justice. But King saw Marx as combining the materialism of Feuerbach with the dialectic of Hegel to create a dialectical materialism. "And working that out, he didn't see the spiritual undergirdings of reality. And so it led him to an ethical relativism. . . . The great weakness of Karl Marx is right here: that he did not recognize that means and ends must cohere." "Frogmore Speech," p. 14. King's basic objection to the practice of Communism was that it deprived man of his individuality in favor of the goals of the state. Strength to Love, p. 117. Earlier statements express the same point. Stride toward Freedom, p. 73, and Boston Archive, I, 32.

²Class notes, Boston Archive, XIV, 33. The point appears also emphatically on tests. Ibid., 71.
conception of man's being in the *imago dei* and therefore in all essential respects equal to every other man.¹ There is for him no theological basis at all for regarding western man as essentially superior to non-western man or for regarding the white man as superior to the black man. In terms of basic humanity, all are equal. Here, at least, King's concept of man appears to be avoiding the tendency of making one man, one group of men, one race, class, or nationality the norm for the expression of genuine humanity. Individual man is equal man.

King is not so naive, however, that he fails to temper his affirmation of the basic equality of individual

¹Consistent with the observation made previously, King does not present a thorough interpretation of the meaning of the "image of God." He affirms it, and on the basis of his affirmation he derives the applications pertinent to his case: "Deeply rooted in our religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Our Judeo-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term 'the image of God.' 'The image of God' is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of his creator. Every man must be respected because God loves him. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin, or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God." Where Do We Go from Here? p. 114. Again, this is essentially the same perspective he showed in his papers and studies as a student. Boston Archive, XIV, 75.
man with a realistic recognition of the effect of historical conditioning upon him. In spite of a basic and essential equality of worth and potential, existence under oppressive and unreinforcing conditions easily thwarts the realization of that potential and results in a pronounced inequality.\textsuperscript{1} The result is a situation in which there appears to be an inherent difference of worth among individual human beings. Historical experience can take the raw material of humanity and in one case fashion a complex and multipurpose human instrument and in another case fashion a blunt instrument of few uses. King saw this feature of historical experience to be one of the givens of human existence, and he would not deny the actual inequality that characterizes it. He would insist, though, that the inequality resulted from the process of historical conditioning and not from any inherent difference in the raw material. Since he saw this to be so, his position was that this pronounced inequality among men is not necessary; and there was for him sufficient reason to believe that as a human problem it could be overcome.\textsuperscript{2} A significant

\textsuperscript{1}The situation that has resulted from the experience of black oppression in America is a clear case in point and the one, of course, to which King was speaking.

\textsuperscript{2}A frequent theme in King's speaking and writing was attention to the rapid advance of technological capabilities
part of the problem of actual individual man is that he is entrapped by the circumstances that have made him who he is; but in King's thought individual man has the potential for escaping that kind of slavery. Individual man is conditioned man, but not absolutely.

Part of the reason for King's relative optimism about man's capacity to actualize his potential for fuller humanity is another feature of his concept of man. Derived from his affirmation of man's essential relatedness to God is his suggestion that there is a moral dimension to the life of individual man and that this moral dimension is essentially oriented toward goodness and justice, even though historical experiences frequently make it acquiescent to evil and injustice. When confronted with the truth about himself and his participation in the dehumanizing institutions of society, man would recognize that truth, embrace it, and reorient his

with the suggestion that if the ingenuity and commitment reflected in these developments were to be applied to the social and economic problems of the human situation, the same kind of progress would occur there, too. See, for example, "The Quest for Peace and Justice," pp. 246-7. The same point is expressed in an earlier (4 November 1956) sermon, "Paul's Letter to American Christians." Boston Archive, I, 21.
behavior and his thought in accordance with it.\textsuperscript{1} For King, individual man is moral man.

It is here suggested that King is illustrative of at least one feature of the doctrine of man suggested as the most appropriate for contemporary theology: a recognition of the concrete individual man as the basic datum for any theological consideration of humanity, a recognition of the integrity of that man's individuality and his potential, and a rejection of those circumstances, structures, processes, and ideas that would deprive that individuality of expression or that potential from development.

\textbf{Collective man}

King's answer to the question "Who is man?" includes not only his recognition of the dynamics of individual man, for there is present in his expressed thought a definite awareness of the existence and functions of collective man. As reflected in his fondness for quoting John Donne's "No Man Is an Island" as a poetic punctuation to addresses and comments upon the plurality of man, it was for him another

\textsuperscript{1}King, \textit{Strength to Love}, pp. 88, 111; \textit{Why We Can't Wait}, p. 39. This optimism is reflective of the persistent effect of his earlier grounding in the theology of liberalism.
of the givens of human existence that men group themselves into societies and institutions for the sake of self-preservation.¹

Man's corporateness is both his promise and his problem, as King sees it. The good that men can accomplish by cooperative effort exceeds that which can be done by an individual;² but at the same time he recognized that the evil that emerges from collective man is also greater than any individual could inflict.³ Collective man is thus a distinct dimension of humanity, which thinks and acts in ways that are

¹King, *Strength to Love*, p. 89; *Atlanta Archive*, I, 3.

²King was aware throughout his career that it was the involvement of the masses of persons that exerted the persuasive force that began to overcome the structures and the attitudes of the South and elsewhere. The whole rationale of the nonviolent demonstration was that the affirmation of a point by sheer numbers carried significantly more force than an individual statement of that point, no matter how eloquent. King used this recognition of man's collectiveness to good advantage in his efforts to remove from effective expression the various dehumanizing features of the human situation. *Boston Archive*, I, 30; *Atlanta Archive*, I, 5.

³*Atlanta Archive*, I, 5. King saw man's plurality as an operative cushion for the conscience of individual man, taking off the effective cutting edge of the moral feature noted above. Few individuals in King's estimation would consciously and directly deprive a child of needed food and clothing, but many individuals willingly participate in a society that does just that. Few individuals would deliberately take the life of another, but many individuals routinely assent to the taking of life in war.
not always the same as the mere sum of the individual elements that make it up.

Collective man is institutional man--socially, politically, and religiously; and King saw human institutions as the natural extensions of the human personality. The question for man is not whether to have institutions, but rather what kind of institutions he will have and what purpose they will serve. His view was that in itself there is no evil inherent in the institutional expression of life: man's institutions can become either the agents of humanization or the servants of dehumanization.¹ His counsel throughout his career was not to decry, lament, or reject human institutions, but to take responsible control of this given feature of human life and utilize legitimate governmental and religious institutions to further the quest for justice and peace.²

The actual condition of collective man, though, is that at least its major segment is characterized by a general

¹Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 112, 161. The obvious exceptions to this essential neutrality are those institutions, such as slavery and segregation, whose sole purpose is the preservation of a dehumanizing status quo.

²See, for example, ibid., p. 181; Why We Can't Wait, pp. 134ff.; and Stride toward Freedom, pp. 166ff.
lack of commitment toward either positive or negative causes. In his actual condition, he is more likely to be controlled by institutional forces than he is to take creative control of them. Apathy rather than malice is King's general assessment of the condition of collective man. The consequence of this condition and the implication of this suggestion is that the power of collective man can be manipulated by a committed minority to support a humanizing cause or by an equally committed minority to support a dehumanizing one.¹

Collective man, then, has the potential for being either an agent or an obstacle of the quest for genuine humanity. Like the individual dimension of life, man in his plural dimension is open to the possibility of approaching full or genuine humanity.

Man As He Can Be: Genuine Man

As basic as the above perceptions of man's individual and plural dimensions may be, King's most important

¹Where Do We Go from Here? p. 112. Again, this was the assumption that lay at the heart of the rationale for demonstration and nonviolent resistance. King's dependence upon both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr is evident in his understanding of the collective dynamics of human existence. See also King, "The Current Crisis in Race Relations," New South 13 (March 1958): 12; King, "Testament of Hope," Playboy, January 1969, p. 236.
contribution to a new understanding of man for Christian theology does not lie in his descriptive analysis of the nature of man as both individual and collective. Even though it has been suggested that the recognition of both is essential for theology done in the contemporary context and that theology ignores either at the peril of working under a false understanding of man, there is little claim for distinctiveness to this point. So far King has simply reflected that he is aware of a commonly accepted way of speaking of man. The contribution that is of greater importance begins to emerge when attention moves from the realm of describing actual man and into the realm of suggesting the characteristics or features of genuine man. Here both man's individuality and his collectiveness take on new dimensions and begin to function on a different plane. Individual man becomes free man and collective man becomes community man. Attention to these elements of King's concept of man will illustrate his understanding of genuine humanity.

1King would of course identify genuine man with the Christian man, although there was care not to claim too much for the historical expression of Christianity, especially to the point of denying the truth of other religions of the world. He spoke of Christianity as the "synthesis of the best in all religions." "Advice for Living," Ebony, September 1958, p. 68. King was exposed to and reflected an appreciation for the insights of other religions during his student days. Boston Archive, XII, 51.
Free man

In a context that was characterized by various forms of physical and psychological oppression—the subtle carryovers from the days of formal slavery—King interpreted the goal in man's quest for genuine humanity to be that of freedom.1 Freedom would be the natural corrective to the problem of oppression, wherever it is; and it is not surprising that King chose to use it as the goal toward which his concrete efforts were directed. Appealing to freedom in the American context enabled him to appeal to principles that lay at the heart of American life as a lever upon the conscience of the oppressor and as a rallying cry for the oppressed. If anything could be a clear antithesis of the freedom upon which the United States was supposed to be founded, the experience of black oppression in all its dimensions was such an antithesis. Concrete freedom in the context of a particular context of oppression was the goal he sought.

1King's earlier academic interpretations of freedom reflect a rather abstract and metaphysical concept. Boston Archive, XVI, 3. The concreteness of his understanding of freedom emerged from his later encounters with the concrete human situation.
There was more depth, though, to King's understanding of freedom than the absence of the obvious structures of oppression, even though it certainly included the removal of these. More than that, freedom for him was essentially a positive and dynamic concept; and it was the primary quality of the genuine individual man. In the terms of the previous description of the actual individual man, free man would be the one who affirms his worth as a person in the face of historical conditions that attempt to deny it. The free man would be the one who has exercised his potential for rising above the tyranny of historical circumstance and the physical and psychological bondage it imposes.

King's general understanding of freedom suggests that it involves the capacity to deliberate and weigh alternatives, the capacity to make decisions, and the responsibility of accepting the consequences of those decisions.¹ As he had been by recognizing the effect of historical conditioning upon the potential of man, so again he was careful in avoiding a too idealistic and unlimited concept of human freedom. His thought reflects the influence of Tillich's polarity of freedom and destiny in his understanding of the freedom of

¹Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 115-16.
man: the man's freedom is always limited by his destiny; for example, he is free to choose to be in either of two places, but he is not free to choose to be in both at the same time. There is an important feature, though, to King's recognition of the limitations of freedom; and it consists of the difference he sees between the limits imposed by one's destiny and those artificial limits imposed by another for exploitative purposes. There is no question that one is limited by his destiny; but the false and dehumanizing limitation appears when one person or group assumes control of another's destiny, as, for example, in the case of racial oppression in the American South.

The concrete freedom that is the characteristic of King's genuine man was seen by him to be both a need and a possibility for every man, regardless of his particular race, class, or any other of human classifications. Freedom is a need for every particular man, because the bondage of one's historical circumstances is a common human problem. Within the particular context of the experience of black oppression

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1 Cf. Tillich, Systematic Theology, 1:182ff.; and on the specific similarity, see especially p. 184.

2 Where Do We Go from Here? p. 116.
in America, King's view was that not only the oppressed but also the oppressor is in need of liberation. The former, to be sure, stands in need of liberation from those structures and practices previously described which deny him his full humanity; but the latter is also in bondage to a system of ideas, customs, and social structures which keep him from realizing his full humanity. King would not accept the interpretation that in an oppressive situation some men are free while others are not. Rather, his interpretation of freedom as a quality of genuine humanity suggests that an oppressive set of circumstances deprives the freedom and the genuine humanity of all who are part of it from being realized.¹ This recognition is one of the distinctive features of his response to the specific context.

Not only did he see freedom as a need for each person, but also he saw the realization of concrete freedom and genuine humanity to be a possibility for every particular man. This is so in part because freedom as King conceived it is more a perspective, attitude, or style of life than it is a condition, location, or station in life. This means that one can affirm his freedom and his genuine humanity regardless

¹See, for example, Stride toward Freedom, pp. 191-2.
of what his external circumstances happen to be. In the context of racial injustice this affirmation might take the form of refusal to yield a bus seat or the refusal to abide by dehumanizing racial expectations in the use of public facilities or the affirmation of one's right to vote by demonstrated protest. One might be bound in a formal way by certain regulations that prohibit his use of certain facilities, but he can assert his freedom even in this oppressive context by refusing to accept with complicity those restrictions. To affirm one's freedom is to act upon one's potential for genuine humanity and to affirm one's independence from artificially imposed, dehumanizing limitations.¹

This suggestion that freedom is a possibility for even the man in an oppressive context rests upon a distinction in King's concept of man between the inner and the outer man. As in other places, King is not precise in formulating the particular features of this distinction; but the outer man appears to be the tangible aspects of man's situation and behavior, while the inner man consists of the

¹This concept appears throughout King's interpretation of the civil rights struggle. See, for example, Stride toward Freedom, pp. 48-9, and Why We Can't Wait, p. 29.
values, ideas, and motivations that are within.\(^1\) Freedom, as he conceives it, is a feature of both dimensions.

Again, the context of the racial struggle illustrates how this distinction functions in King's interpretation of the quest for genuine humanity. The black man in the South, as a result of the discrimination, exploitation, and injustice described in the previous chapter, has been shackled not only physically by the deprivations of less than human conditions but also psychologically by the several-generation process of the removal of his self-image of worth.\(^2\) In the terms of the present consideration, the black man came to accept the doctrine of man that explicitly in some places and implicitly in others denied his fundamental worth as a person and deprived him of his full humanity. Both the outer and

\(^1\)This distinction appears in King's frequent references to the twofold task of the civil rights movement: (1) to remove the concrete and specific dehumanizing features of the human situation and to inact laws to limit the outer expressions of dehumanization; and (2) to bring about change in man's values and motivation so that injustice will not be an acceptable option. Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 117-18; Stride toward Freedom, p. 18; "National Press Club Speech," p. 5.

\(^2\)Why We Can't Wait, p. 27. An earlier statement of this recognition appears in an address entitled "A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations," 17 May 1956, Boston Archive, I, 32; see also XII, 61, and XIV, 72.
the inner man were enslaved to the system of oppression. When the black man began to stand up for his rights and to resist the various structures of oppression, there was liberation of the inner man even though the structures of oppression had not changed. What had been changed was the attitude of the man toward the structures.\(^1\) What had previously been resigned complicity to had become a concrete and deliberate affirmation of independence from the de-humanizing forces of an oppressive society, and there was freedom of the inner man if not yet for the outer.

It was suggested above that in King's interpretation the oppressor also is in need of the kind of concrete freedom that characterizes genuine humanity, and this distinction between the outer and the inner man clarifies that suggestion. The majority of whites in the South have enjoyed a freedom of the outer man. Opportunities and facilities have not been closed to them on the basis of racial identity, and the outer white man has been able to make his choices.

\(^1\)King saw much of the progress of the first ten years of the civil rights movement to be within rather than without: the black man "came out of his struggle integrated only slightly in the external society but powerfully integrated within. This was the victory that had to precede all other gains." Where Do We Go from Here? p. 18. See also "The Future of Integration," Boston Archive, I, 21; I, 11, A; and XII, 61.
and act upon them with much less restriction than could his black neighbor. But the inner man of the typical southern white has been in bondage to the ideas fostered by the same concept of man that denied the black man his full humanity. The inner man of the racist was not free from an oppressive way of thinking about man, even though his outer man enjoyed as much freedom as his particular social and economic context would allow.

Who the concrete free man is in the context of the experience of black oppression is thus a complex question. It is possible in King's interpretation that the jailed demonstrator for justice and humanity is more free than his racist jailer. The inner man of the one in the cell is free, though his outer man is in bondage; the inner man of the jailer is in bondage, though his outer man is free. While, as we have noted, King affirms the priority of the inner man in the quest for the freedom of genuine humanity, he affirms also the continuity of the inner and the outer man; and he would suggest that neither the jailed nor the jailer is in full possession of genuine freedom until both are liberated from their particular bondages. He would suggest also that the jailed holds the key for the liberation of the jailer's
inner man even as the jailer holds the key for the liberation of the jailed's outer man.¹

For King, genuine individual man is thus free man; and free man is the one who is able to affirm his individual worth and his independence from the dehumanizing features of his environment that have accompanied and influenced his development as an individual. The free man is the southern black who affirms his right to an equal share of his country's opportunities, but he is also the southern white who affirms his independence from the racist thought that is an integral part of the fabric of his society. The free man is anyone who breaks free from the concrete physical or mental chains of historical circumstance and affirms his essential place as a part of humanity.

Community man

King's recognition of the corporate nature of man suggests that he did not limit his understanding of genuine

¹King, "Testament of Hope," p. 231. He had reflected an awareness of this possibility earlier in response to what he had seen in India. Boston Archive, I, 5, 21. Note also the following statement from a recognition dinner address, Atlanta, 27 January 1965: "God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men, and brown men, and yellow men: God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society where every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality" (p. 11). Atlanta Archive, I, 3.
humanity to the freedom of the individual man. It follows that there would be a genuine quality for the plural dimension of life, and it is in this area of concern that King has made a distinctive contribution to a contemporary Christian doctrine of man. His interpretation of human freedom was not unlike previous interpretations, but the urgency of his demand for its concrete realization and his concept of the oppressor's bondage gave it a distinctive quality in his particular context. There was more, though, to King's understanding of genuine humanity than the freedom to make choices without unjust regulation; and it is in this added dimension that his understanding of genuine man as community man emerges.

The previous chapter has suggested that King's most comprehensive conception of the human problem was that of alienation—the disordering of relationships that opens the way to unjust discrimination, exploitation, and war. Given this interpretation of the overall problem, it is not surprising that the comprehensive concept and reality for genuine humanity turns out to be community. King's conception of genuine human community was the precise antithesis of the alienation which he saw to be the basic human problem. For him the quest for genuine humanity was of course a quest for freedom from directly oppressive structures; but, beyond that,
it was also a quest for the kind of community that would preclude oppression and maintain that freedom for all its members. If alienation consists of the lack of genuine human relationship, which in turn results in the kind of oppressive and dehumanizing expressions noted previously, then community as its opposite consists of those genuine human relationships that preclude not only the occurrence but also the occasion for injustice. The creation of such community is part of the same effort that seeks the removal of directly oppressive structures.¹

¹As noted in chapter III, King brought to his particular theological thought much of his exposure to personalistic philosophy. The continuum perspective noted there is operative in this emphasis on community, for genuine community is for him the natural extension for plural man of the freedom that is the characteristic of genuine individual man. It would be difficult to document comprehensively the indications of this concern for community, although representative statements can be seen in *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 126-52; *Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 186-7, 195ff.; *The Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 29; and the indications of the same concern in his earlier papers, *Boston Archive*, VII, 26, A; XIV, 46, 58. From his direct involvements in efforts to overcome the various dehumanizing features of his particular context, there emerged a persistent concern for creating and maintaining the kind of relationship of mutual respect, appreciation, and cooperation that would preclude their reappearance. It was not enough to remove the structures of oppression; it was necessary also to remove oppressive ideas and attitudes; and this could be done only through the establishment of genuine human community.
Genuine community for King was not a location or a particular group. Rather, it was, like freedom, an attitude or perspective. This attitude or perspective thus could express itself not only in the limitations of particular spatial and temporal contexts but also in relationships to unknown and unknowable segments of humanity on a worldwide basis. Community man, or genuine collective man, is therefore one who sees himself as a person who is involved, at least potentially, with all other human beings in a cooperative quest for realizing genuine humanity.¹ But the concreteness which has been observed as a distinctive characteristic of King's concept of man prevents this dimension of it from being universalistic. The concern remains in the area of concrete relationships as opposed to abstract universal categories.

The implications of this interpretation of genuine humanity suggest that the genuine man is not only free himself from the bondage of dehumanizing structures and the ideas that support them. In addition, he is responsible for and participates in the freedom of his fellow humans from

¹This understanding was one of the bases for King's broadening of the scope of his earlier efforts to include attention to injustice on a worldwide scale, as, for example, in the Vietnam conflict.
the forms of dehumanization that affect them. This means that no one can consider himself free or genuinely human until he is doing everything in his power to enable others to achieve their full humanity.\(^1\)

In the particular context of the civil rights struggle, this concern showed itself pointedly in the stated purpose of the method of nonviolent resistance. It was aimed not at overcoming the oppressor, but at overcoming the barriers that stood in the way of creating a relationship with him in which both oppressed and oppressor could be more fully human than present oppressive structures would allow.\(^2\) Conversely, violence is to be rejected on the basis of the same concern. A violent approach to an oppressive situation

\(^1\)It is possible to interpret King in another way at this point. In places he suggests that genuine humanity will not be realized until all have achieved freedom and community: "Freedom is one thing--you have it all, or you are not free." "National Press Club Speech," p. 14. But it is more consistent with King's thought to suggest that efforts in the direction of freedom and community are in themselves affirmations of genuine humanity. In an examination paper he proposed that the Kingdom of God was realized wherever efforts were being made to improve the social order. Boston Archive, XIV, 67.

\(^2\)The rationale and defense of the method of nonviolence appear throughout King's work, and the emphasis is upon the twofold purpose of attaining immediate results and of promoting long-range community. See Stride toward Freedom, pp. 83-8.
might well result in the redress of some of its wrongs, but it would not lead to or encourage the kind of community in which those wrongs would not be likely to recur. Instead, it would tend to perpetuate or increase the alienation that gave rise to the wrongs in the first place.\(^1\)

It is appropriate at this point to ask where, if anywhere, this genuine human community occurs— that is, how does it express itself concretely? It follows from the foregoing that King would locate its potential presence within any group of people who unite locally or internationally for the purpose of working to realize justice and peace against circumstances that are oppressive; and he would locate its potential presence among persons who have a genuine appreciation for each other's worth and who work for each other's welfare. Genuine human community occurs, in short, wherever a group of persons participate together in the quest for genuine humanity.

Theoretically, for King, the Christian church is an expression of such community; but, like other institutions, the actual church has drifted away from its theoretical base

\(^1\)King, Where Do We Go from Here? p. 72.
and has become a sanction of dehumanization. This failure of the church to be true to its basis in the area of race relations results in the disappointment that is seen by King to lie at the heart of such reactions as the black power movement and the separatist emphasis of such groups as the Black Muslims. The church in America has been more a part of the problem than an agent of its solution:

... no one observing the history of the church in America can deny the shameful fact that it has been an accomplice in structuring racism into the architecture of American society. The church, by and large, sanctioned slavery and surrounded it with the halo of moral respectability. It also cast the mantle of its sanctity over the system of segregation.

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1 King's classic critique of the actual church is his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in Why We Can't Wait, pp. 76-95. His criticism of the white church is not of the church itself but of the distortions in understanding that make the church serve order rather than justice, that make it distinguish comfortably between the Gospel and social concerns, and that drive the church to see its task as language ("pious irrelevances and sanctimonious trivialities") rather than creative action. Ibid., p. 90. Cf. "National Press Club Speech." The black church also has participated, according to King, in this dehumanization by refusing to confront oppression directly and by choosing instead to be so concerned with a "future good 'over yonder' that they condition their members to adjust to the present evils 'over here.'" Where Do We Go from Here? p. 147; cf. p. 42.

2 Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 41-2.

3 Ibid., p. 113. Cf. a sermon on the issue, Atlanta Archive, I, 3.
King tempered his criticism of the actual church with a recognition of the opportunity it has, because of its foundational principles, to take the lead in affirming the truth and calling attention to the distortions of truth which permit oppression. It can affirm the dignity of man and in doing so negate those forces that deny it—all by simply being true to itself. The church, for King, can be the locus and the paradigm of the community that is his concept of the realization of genuine humanity.¹

Concluding Observation

At the outset, this chapter made the suggestion that the doctrine of man that is reflected in King's work is illustrative of a distinctively new employment of this doctrine in the theological task. Now that attention has been given to the features of that doctrine, it remains for the concluding remarks of the chapter to suggest how this is so. Implied in the initial suggestion was the point, based on the observations of chapter II, that the concepts of man that have been operative in responses to the experience of

¹Where Do We Go from Here? p. 117; Boston Archive, V, 177, and XIV, 75.
black oppression have participated in the continued dehumanization of men within the context of that experience. The following comments will be addressed to the distinctive features of King's doctrine of man when seen in reference to this concrete context.

The primary point to make is that the distinctiveness of King's doctrine of man does not lie so much in the way the doctrine is formulated as it does in the way it is employed in the concrete situation. It has been suggested that a humanizing doctrine of man will be devoid of the assumption that one man is more human than another on the basis of any kind of cultural, economic, racial, national, or religious distinctions. King's concept of man appears to be consistent with this suggestion, for nowhere in the available records of King's thought has the present writer detected the tendency to ascribe exclusive normative status to any conception of man that reflects cultural particularity. Instead, the recurrent theme is an openness to concrete expressions of genuine humanity in any cultural or religious context and a willingness to describe them as such.

While in terms of the earlier suggestion this is a worthy characteristic, the distinctiveness of King's doctrine does not lie in this recognition; for as a theoretical
formulation it is quite similar to other concepts of man found in the perspectives of anthropology, psychology, sociology, and what has been called here "traditional" theology. There is nothing particularly new in the above idea. What is new in King in this regard appears when this idea encounters and finds expression in the concrete context of black oppression. As has been shown, it can happen that a theoretical and universalistic doctrine of man can yield in a concrete context to quite another operative doctrine. In the context of King's work, the dominant operative concept of man was a theologized version of the white-oriented structure of society, with the values of white middle-class man serving as the implicit criteria for genuine humanity. When seen in terms of this particular context and in terms of the present concern, King's primary distinctive contribution to a Christian doctrine of man was the concreteness of his operative concept of man and the consistency of that concrete expression with its theological bases.

Other features of King's doctrine of man are expressive of this distinctive quality. There is a clear recognition in his thought of the way that concrete men, especially in their collective dimension, can think and act in quite dehumanizing ways. The collective involvement of
men in the affairs of life and the distinctive features of that involvement, especially in the concrete context of black oppression, have been seen to have dehumanizing effects all their own. Even the church, which in principle would seem to be the most humanizing of institutions, draws King's straightforward criticism for its tendency in its concrete expressions to side with a dehumanizing status quo and against efforts to realize genuine humanity.

Further, in contrast to abstract formulations of the meaning of freedom and community, in the concreteness of King's understanding of free man and of community man as the two dimensions of genuine humanity there is a doctrine of man that does not allow for the sanction under any guise of the further or continued dehumanization in any concrete situation of any one person or group by any other person or group. The affirmation of the worth and the full humanity of every individual human being and the affirmation of the interdependence in a concrete situation of all its participants preclude the possibility of any justification for exploitation.

Finally, and in terms of the above observations, it is suggested here that the combination of concrete individuality and concrete relatedness in King's concept of genuine man, with the dimensions and qualities herein
described, can serve as an operative guide and goal for a
humanizing Christian theology in the contemporary context of
the American South. On the basis of this Christian doctrine
of man, or this concept of genuine humanity, it is appropriate
to turn attention now to the third part of the argument of
the thesis, which is that the theology of Martin Luther King's
response to the experience of black oppression is a theology
of reconciliation whose purpose is the shaping or moving of
the concrete human situation toward the realization of his
conception of genuine humanity.
CHAPTER VI

A HUMANIZING PURPOSE FOR THEOLOGY:

KING'S THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

The third dimension of the derived suggestion that is reflected in the thesis proposes that Christian theology in the contemporary period add to its more direct and concrete approach to the human situation and to its new emphasis upon the doctrine of man a new operative concept of its own purpose.1 Consistent with the previously considered overall concern, Christian theology is urged by this dimension of the suggestion to conceive for itself a purpose that will

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1It is important to note that this is not so much a third suggestion as it is a third dimension of the same suggestion, which has proposed that theology reinterpret and reorient itself in terms of its approach, its content, and its purpose. The assumptions which lie behind emphasis upon this dimension of the suggestion are these: first, that there is a close and influential relationship among the theological dimensions of approach, interpretation of content, and concept of purpose; second, that the operative purpose of a given theological effort will influence significantly both its general orientation and its effect upon the human situation.
most enable it to become an active participant in the quest for what we have called genuine humanity rather than a passive interpreter of that quest. As a means of doing this, the suggestion has been that theological self-understanding move in the direction of emphasizing action for the purpose of changing the human situation rather than limit itself to reflection for the purpose of understanding it. The implication of the overall suggestion, as we have seen, is that the theological effort that is most faithful to the Christian revelation is the theology which seeks to give expression to that revelation not only with abstract words and concepts but also with concrete action. Theology becomes the rendering of the Gospel not just into language but also into experienced reality.¹

¹This significant shift of focus for theological purpose is reflected not only in the previously noted findings of the Humanum Studies, but also in the emergence in recent years of various kinds of "theologies of action," for example, Michael Novak, A Theology for Radical Politics (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (1969) and A Black Theology of Liberation (1970); and Washington, The Politics of God (1967). Note a recent and clear statement of this emphasis: "If theological reflection does not vitalize the action of the Christian community in the world by making its commitment to charity fuller and more radical, if--more concretely--in Latin America [the author's own context] it does not lead the Church to be on the side of the oppressed classes and dominated peoples, clearly and without qualifications, then
This chapter will give attention to the function and effect of purpose in the general orientation and direction of theological effort. To do so, specific consideration will be given to the operative theological purpose that is reflected in the response of Martin Luther King to the experience of black oppression. The following pages will carry the case of the thesis to its final stage by suggesting and seeking to demonstrate that, when seen in terms of its conceived purpose, King's theology is a theology of reconciliation that is further illustrative of an emerging understanding of the theological task as a shaper rather than merely an interpreter of humanity in both its individual and collective dimensions. The argument of the chapter will concern itself with the centrality of the principle of reconciliation in the particular theology King represents. The sections which follow will address the issue by considering the particular meaning of reconciliation in King's thought, the presuppositions that underlie his choice of reconciliation as a goal for theological effort, the presence of that principle this theological reflection will have been of little value. Worse yet, it will have served only to justify half measures and ineffective approaches and to rationalize a departure from the Gospel." Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, p. 307.
in the methods he employed, and two particular "heresies" against which he clarified his purpose further.

The Meaning of Reconciliation in King's Thought

The theological concept of reconciliation has a legitimate place within any theological framework. It can be considered the normal corrective for the plight of man in any interpretation that regards that plight as a falling away from or perversion of some original or essential state or relationship. If man is separated from God, the overcoming of that separation and the restoration of the proper relationship is generally known as reconciliation. In what we have called traditional theology, it can be observed that the principle of reconciliation has had its primary meaning in this realm of the relationship of man to God, with its secondary meaning in the realm of human relationships recognized but usually not emphasized.\(^1\)

The suggestion of a more concrete anthropological focus for theology's efforts would imply that the function of such a principle as reconciliation within the realm of human relationships would take on new strength and power. Reconciliation in this new focus would thus redirect the priority of its concern and refer with greater frequency and intensity to the restoration or creation of relationships among men.

The meaning of reconciliation in the theology of King's thought and action reflects this implication. The principle of reconciliation that was operative in his work found its place in the realm of human relationships, even though, as will be suggested, he affirmed the necessary continuity of this kind of reconciliation with the previously emphasized reconciliation of man to God. His emphasis on reconciliation as the purpose of his effort was the logical extension of his previously noted analysis of the human problem and his conception of the nature of genuine humanity. If the basic problem is the alienation of men from each other, and if the most comprehensive feature of genuine humanity is genuine human community, then the theology that attempts to be a bridge between where man is and where he can be is, not illogically, a theology of reconciliation.
Reconciliation was for King the establishment of relationships that could and would be the components of genuine human community and the removal of the obstacles to the realization of that community.

To apply a comprehensively descriptive term to a particular theological effort is to suggest something about both the general character of that theology and the overall purpose to which it addresses itself. Thus, the labels "apologetic" theology, "political" theology, "liberation" theology, etc., suggest both the general orientation and the purpose served by each of these theological efforts. Similarly, to speak of King's theology as a theology of reconciliation is to suggest that the principle around which his efforts were oriented and the purpose they sought to serve was a reconciliation among men. His theology was an interpretation and an implementation of the Christian Gospel in a way that sought the reconciliation of the alienated parts of humanity into the kind of community that characterizes genuine man.

Beyond this general statement, the features of King's theology of reconciliation can be shown by giving attention to the presuppositional foundation that underlies his choice of this orientation and approach for his theological response to the experience of black oppression.
Chapter III noted the importance of the influence of the perspective of personalism on the developing thought of King; and that influence appears significantly in the foundation that underlies his theology of reconciliation. Noted there was the epistemological concept of the continuity of experienced reality with ultimate reality and the consequent suggestion that an encounter with and understanding of experienced reality is at least one of the keys to an encounter with and understanding of ultimate reality.¹ It is here suggested that this way of regarding the features of human existence as parts of a continuum of reality is one of the distinctive features of King's thought and that it is one of the basic presuppositions of his theology of reconciliation. The presence and function of this continuum concept and its contribution to the present concern can be illustrated by attention to some assumptions that both lie behind and are expressed in his particular kind of theology.²

¹Above, p. 94.

²The presence of this concept appears frequently in King's Boston class notes in systematic theology. Boston Archive, XIV, 36.
The Continuity of God and the Quest for Human Justice

There is in King's thought an unmistakable conviction that God and the universe are on the side of the quest for genuine humanity and against those forces which obstruct its realization:

Now the fact that this new age is emerging reveals something basic about the universe. It tells us something about the core and the heartbeat of the cosmos. It reminds us that the universe is on the side of justice. It says to those who struggle for justice, "You do not struggle alone, but God struggles with you." This belief that God is on the side of truth comes down to us from a long tradition of our Christian faith.¹

King was careful to note, however, that this involvement of God in the progress toward human betterment could serve as no legitimate justification for sitting down and

¹King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Phylon 18 (April 1957): 31. Cf. "Pilgrimage to Non-violence," Christian Century 77 (13 April 1960): 441: "I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship." Cf. Boston Archive, XIV, 72. This statement carries the implication that the progress of events has confirmed this belief, which can be observed earlier in his objection to the impersonal qualities of God in the thought of H. N. Wieman and Paul Tillich: "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1955), pp. 271-5. This is a presupposition that was rooted deeply in the development and the expression of his thought.
waiting for God to work out his purpose. The above noted conviction includes the implication that man participates in the creation of this new order; and, in the context of King's involvement, work for the implementation of social justice was the way to participate in God's work.¹ The continuity is expressed explicitly in a reference to the biblical events and characters of the Exodus: "This is a kind of opening chapter in a continuing story. The present struggle in the United States is a later chapter in that same unfolding story."²

Thus, a basic presupposition for King's theology of reconciliation is the continuity of human efforts to that purpose and the essential nature and orientation of the universe. His God is no impersonal god who remains aloof from the struggles of humanity; rather, his God is the involved power behind the quest for genuine humanity.³


²"The Quest for Peace and Justice," p. 248.

King conceived of love as the supreme good in the universe—"the summum bonum... the principle that stands at the center of the cosmos."¹ He was fond of interpreting love according to the New Testament Greek terms that are translated by the English word, choosing as the most pertinent meaning the Greek term agape.² No sentimentalized, emotional phenomenon, King's love was a principle that empowered and undergirded the quest for genuine humanity where a mutual concern for the well-being of every person would be a predominant feature.³

The concern in this consideration, however, is not the content of love as a quality to be expressed by persons who are affirming their freedom and their genuine humanity. Rather, the present concern has to do with the continuity of


³ "Agape means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate; it means understanding redeeming good will for all men, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men." "Non-violence and Racial Justice," p. 166.
this personal ideal with its community expression in the form of human justice. In the same way that genuine humanity for King expresses itself in both individual and collective dimensions, so does love express itself in the individual person and in the plural realm. For King, this plural expression of love is justice; and, whereas love is the perspective and attitude of genuine individual man--free man, justice is the perspective and attitude of community man.¹

The point to make here is that the continuum perspective in King's thought connects the perspective of the individual person with the condition or perspective of the society of which he is a part. Since justice is defined as the plural expression of love, it is neither to be sought by means nor is it expressive of qualities that are inconsistent with the principle of love.² Thus, the continuum perspective


²Two questions are raised by this point. One is the question of means and ends, which will be dealt with in the next subsection. The other concerns the relationship of justice to law and the tendency to define justice in terms of law and order. King's definition of justice suggests a higher criterion, love, to which legal justice is to adhere. A "just" law is one which "squares with" the moral law of
shows itself as a presupposition not only in the basis of King's theology, as the previous section suggested, but also in the criteria for that theology as suggested here; and, as the next two sections will suggest, it appears in the choice of the methods of that theology and in King's concept of its purpose.

The Continuity of Means and Ends

For the kind of theology of active social change that is reflected in King's work, the question of the relationship of means and ends is a crucial one. The continuum perspective would suggest that both the means and ends of a theology of concrete action must submit to the same criterion of consistency with humanizing justice, as King's response illustrates.

Alternative approaches to the experience of black oppression in America have offered often to seek worthy goals but have sought to do so by means of violence,

the universe, whose "summun bonum" is love, while an unjust law is the opposite, one created to serve the purposes of a particular group, race, or class. This distinction is the basis and the justification for the practice of civil disobedience in the quest for justice. See King, "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," New South 16 (December 1961): 7-8, and The Trumpet of Conscience, p. 15.
intimidation, and threats of force. King's response to these proposals is a statement of his position that the means to an end and the end itself are parts of the same element of human experience. Therefore, they cannot be conceived as discontinuous with each other; for the end is implicit in the means. ¹

This particular expression of the continuum perspective in King's theology of reconciliation lies directly behind his choice of methods for the concrete working out of his theology of action. Because of this continuity, the only method by which one could work toward justice and peace would be a method which is itself just and peaceful. Such a method, of course, was the method of nonviolence, to which attention will be given in the next section. Here it is sufficient to note that, while it was militant in the sense of its persistence and its courage, nonviolence as King conceived it did not resort to the dehumanizing tendency of

¹The emphasis on the continuity of means and ends is a recurrent theme in King's reflections upon the methods and purposes of the civil rights movement. See, for example, his critique of Communism on this point, "Froghmore Speech," p. 19; his critique of the black power movement in Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 27-77; and such general statements as "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," p. 4, and The Trumpet of Conscience, pp. 70-1.
rejecting the potential goodness of the adversary. The method was, for King, a continual affirmation of the good that is in the opponent and a negation of the evil that happens to be expressed by him.

The Continuity of Liberation and Reconciliation

That King's work reflects a theology of active involvement in the quest for genuine humanity has been considered already; but the emphasis upon the presence of a continuum in his thought suggests an added and distinct dimension to the purpose of his theology. That he was concerned with a theology of liberation there can be no question: the oppressive structures of the experience of being black in America were the constant target of his efforts. But, in a sense, King's theology was more than a theology of liberation; and it is in this qualification that the most significant feature of his theology begins to emerge. The same recognition of continuity that prevented King from considering the realm of human activity apart from the activity of God, or from considering love as a personal quality apart from justice in the plural realm, or from considering means apart from the ends they seek, prevents him
as well from allowing his theological thought and effort to stop with the liberation of man from the overt oppressive structures of the American racial situation. That kind of liberation, while necessary indeed in the quest for genuine humanity, is but a part of an overall process and not its end. For King's particular kind of theology, concern and effort must seek not only to gain liberation but also to validate and maintain it; and that operative purpose for him was reconciliation.¹

Even as unsystematic as King was in his reflected theological concepts, it is worth noting that a measure of organizational consistency appears in his employment of the ideas of liberation and reconciliation, especially when these

¹It is not the present intention to set King's implied theology of reconciliation over against the emphases of the various black theologies and theologies of liberation that have appeared recently, but one difference of emphasis is worth noting. These illustrate quite clearly the emerging focus for theology that takes the human situation seriously and speaks and acts directly to it, emphasizing the immediate need for identification with the oppressed and action on their behalf. King's theology does this also; but the point emphasized here is that more than some of the early expressions of these emphases—for example, that of Cone—King moves beyond the stage of liberation to the creative stage of building relationships that will prevent the recurrence of oppression. The point is reflected also in Gutiérrez by his recognition of the need to move beyond immediate liberation toward what he calls "fuller liberation," which will be characterized by brotherhood. A Theology of Liberation, p. 307.
are seen in terms of the previous chapter's suggestion of the features of genuine man in his individual and collective dimensions. Liberation is the process that humanizes individual man by removing him from the grasp of oppressive structures, ideas, and conditions. The process of liberation produces genuine man in his individual dimension--free man. Reconciliation is the process that humanizes plural man by overcoming the alienation that separates him by various criteria into groups that tend to justify dehumanizing practices and ideas. The process of reconciliation produces genuine man in his plural dimension--community man. Efforts at liberation, significant indeed as expressions of the Christian Gospel in an oppressive context, are steps in the direction of a reconciliation of oppressed and oppressor in a community that will not know oppression.¹

The presence of the continuum perspective at this level of King's thought substantiates further the suggestion that his is a theology of reconciliation--a theology whose purpose is participation in the shaping of the concrete human situation in the direction of genuine humanity by the

¹King, Where Do We Go from Here? p. 111.
liberation of men from oppressive structures and the reconciling of men into genuine community.

The Theology of Reconciliation

Attention will now be turned from the presuppositions that underlie and find expression in King's thought to the theology of reconciliation itself. This section will consider some of the methods King employed in the working out of his particular kind of theology, with the suggestion that they illustrate the presence and the priority of the principle of reconciliation as above described.

A basic question that needs to be asked of King's theology at this point questions an assumption that has gone unchallenged since the first chapter. It is the question of whether King was seeking in his work to give active expression to the theological principles that grew out of his participation in the Christian faith or whether he was a social reformer who found in the language and concepts of the Christian tradition a handy sanction for his programs of social reform. Implicit in the thesis of this dissertation

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1The latter conclusion was, of course, the position of much of the popular criticism of King. In addition, the
is the suggestion that the former is the case; for in
King's work there is reflected a priority of principle over
expedient. The case that is argued here is that his
involvement in the quest for genuine humanity in the context
of black oppression is a natural expression of his partici-
pation in the theological task of the Christian religion.
Further, it is suggested that every major aspect of his
involvement in the struggle for human justice was directed
toward the ultimate purpose of reconciling an alienated
humanity toward the genuine community that would be the
realization of both genuine humanity and the Christian Gospel.

question raises an issue that is basic to the relationship
of theology and its concrete expressions. The built-in
danger against which King's theology had to guard itself,
especially when contrasted to theological approaches that
tend to lift theological concern out of the morass of
controversial issues by espousing lofty norms, is that the
more concrete approach might err in the opposite direction,
making norms out of successful methodologies. Note, for
example, the criticism of King by James E. Sellers, "Love,
Justice, and the Non-violent Movement," Theology Today 28
(January 1962): 422-34.

1 This priority is reflected in such statements as this:
"Ultimately a genuine leader is not a searcher for concensus
but a molder of concensus. I said on one occasion, 'If every
Negro in the United States turns to violence, I will choose
to be that one lone voice preaching that this is the wrong
way.' . . . It was. . . . my way of saying that I would
rather be a man of conviction than a man of conformity."
Where Do We Go from Here? p. 73.
An instructive way to illustrate this priority of the principle of reconciliation over the expedient of immediate success is to give attention to three particular methodological approaches utilized by King in his quest for genuine humanity.

Nonviolent Demonstration of Protest

King's choice and employment of the method of nonviolence as a lever for effecting change in the direction of genuine humanity have been and will continue to be the subject of analytical studies that will consider its features, motives, and effectiveness. The present concern involves the way in which this method in both its theory and its operation illustrates the priority in King's thought of theologically based principles over the criterion of mere effectiveness. He states that early in his career of involvement in the struggle he became convinced that the method of nonviolence satisfied two criteria that made it suitable as a method of theological response to the experience of black oppression: first, it was morally sound in that it incorporated in itself principles that were inherent in the Christian faith; and, second, it had a proven
effectiveness in its previous employment by Gandhi. The suggestion here is that even if nonviolence were shown to be effective in getting results, King would not have found it suitable if it included injustice or exploitation in its application.

Specifically, the use of nonviolent demonstration as a method for King's theology illustrates the priority of the principle of reconciliation:

Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when they help us to see the enemy's

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1 *Stride toward Freedom*, p. 79. E. Franklin Frazier has questioned the usual suggestion that King's method of nonviolence was derived from the Gandhian tradition: "Gandhism as a philosophy and a way of life is completely alien to the Negro and has nothing in common with the social heritage of the Negro." *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 75. He suggests that the behavior of those in the civil rights movement is actually more akin to and derived from the religious heritage of the Negro than it is from Gandhi. While it is not the point to debate the question here, it can be observed that King was stimulated by the particular effectiveness of Gandhi's method in Gandhi's situation to give it concrete application in the American struggle for civil rights. And, its appeal and effectiveness there would seem to confirm Frazier's suggestion that as a way of life it is in many ways consistent with the religious heritage of those giving it application in an entirely different situation. King, in fact, suggests that nonviolence is "consistent with the deeply religious traditions of Negroes." *The Burning Truth in the South,* p. 9. *Boston Archive*, III, 10.

2 The above mentioned continuity of means and ends is operative here.
point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weakness of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition. ¹

It is true that nonviolent demonstration is calculated and aggressive, confronting not only the structures of oppression but also the ideas that support and sanction them. But, the important point to note in this context is that it is directed against the forces of evil themselves and not against those persons who happen to be caught up by those forces. Thus, while it is active and aggressive, it seeks not defeat, retaliation, or humiliation. Rather, it is guided by the quest for reconciliation, friendship, and understanding. ²

In response to popular criticism which pointed to the violence that occasionally followed nonviolent demonstrations, King observed that the violence that comes to the surface as a result of such encounters was already there in latent form;

¹ King, The Trumpet of Conscience, p. 29.

and the confrontations merely caused it to express itself openly. In forcing this latent violence out into the open, nonviolent demonstration rendered the dual purpose of lancing the festering sore of resentment and hostility as a step in the direction of healing, and of creating public concern by forcing into the light the evil that had long existed in the shadowy corners of society, "with the rest of the world looking on."¹ The method of nonviolent demonstration, in his view, was not responsible for the violence that expressed itself in response to it.

The point being made here, however, is that the choice and the use of the method of nonviolent resistance to the forces of oppression reflect a priority of principle over pragmatic success. That the method worked to accomplish the gains it sought was important, to be sure; but also important was the fact that it was itself ethically sound and that the goal it sought was not merely the righting of a wrong but

¹King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 37; cf. *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 107. The assumption persisted in King, though not without qualification, that if evil becomes obvious and is recognized for what it is, then it will not be tolerated. Also pertinent here is King's frequent emphasis on the redemptive quality of unmerited suffering as a persuasive witness to truth. *Boston Archive*, IV, 18; V, 177.
more the creation of the possibility of a relationship that would preclude that wrong. It reflected an open concern for both sides, and thus it served the quest for reconciliation.¹

Direct Political Pressure

King was persistent in holding on to the above noted qualified optimism which suggested that confrontation with the truth would bring about change in its direction; but the presence and the persistence of deep-seated evil in his context caused him early to recognize that something more than confrontation was needed. He found that two responses in particular were less than helpful in the quest for freedom and for genuine humanity. One was the naive optimism that believed freedom would be handed out freely; the other was the resigned pessimism that believed nothing could be done.² Against these two perspectives, King sought a way of realistically but hopefully working for the alleviation of oppressive conditions and for the establishment of a society characterized by genuine community. He was convinced that

¹King, "The Future of Integration," p. 12. See also Boston Archive, I, 11, A.

²"Advice for Living," Ebony, August 1958, p. 78.
progress toward the goal of freedom and community could not occur without considerable direct and active effort, but he continued to believe that such action would yield positive results.

This awareness brought about the suggestion of an additional dimension in the methodology of the quest for full humanity. The method of nonviolent demonstration was still valid and continued to be so for him to the end of his life; but the dynamics of human society and his own continuum

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1 This awareness developed early and persisted throughout King's career: "History is fit testimony to the fact that freedom is rarely gained without sacrifice and self-denial." "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," p. 32. In response to the voting question in Selma: "One of the difficult lessons we have learned is that you cannot depend upon American institutions to function without pressure. Any real change in the status quo depends upon creative action to sharpen the conscience of the nation and establish a climate in which even the most recalcitrant elements are forced to admit that change is necessary." "Civil Right No. 1--the Right to Vote," New York Times Magazine, 14 March 1965, p. 26. Also, "the Negro is now convinced that white America will never admit him to equal rights unless it is coerced into doing it." Where Do We Go from Here? p. 106.

2 King's "realistic optimism" here enabled him to avoid the tendency to expect instant and easy solutions, but it also enabled him to avoid allowing the difficulty to postpone beginning the search for solutions. Why We Can't Wait, pp. 126-30. This "realistic" perspective developed early in the active career, as reflected in a speech delivered 17 May 1956, "A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations," Boston Archive, I, 32.
perspective toward reality prompted him to suggest a further step in the same process. Basically, as noted in chapter IV, he saw the need for a change in the approach of the black to his problems from the independent non-involvement in the political structures that had characterized the "golden age" of the protest demonstrations to more active involvement in the political processes themselves. Of course, this would include the effective use of the vote; but, more than that, it would include also the action and the direct political pressure that bring about political results. For King, this represented a change of method corresponding to the change from the affirmation of freedom to the implementation of freedom; and to fail to move to the latter would in effect be a denial of the former:

Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of stagnation.  

In the coming period, they and many others must move into political life as candidates and infuse it with their humanity, their honesty, and their vision.

1Why We Can't Wait, p. 86.

2Ibid., p. 151. Not only was action needed from the bottom up, but also from the top down, as seen in an August 20, 1959, appeal for the president to go directly to the people in
In the terms of the present concern, it can be suggested that this active involvement in the political affairs of life is illustrative of a new concept of methods for doing Christian theology. Against the likely charge that the Christian church should not involve itself in such "non-spiritual" pursuits as politics, King would respond that even an institution founded on a theological basis becomes, in the midst of political institutions, a political institution itself; and its theology becomes a political theology as well. This is by no means for King a betrayal of its foundation on a biblical belief in the dignity of man under God. It is, rather, an appropriation of that foundation—a forthright stand for civil rights. A collection of miscellaneous documents illustrating the development of this emphasis in King's thought is Boston Archive, I, 11; see also III, 16 and XII, 61. In this respect, as in other places, King reflects his indebtedness to Reinhold Niebuhr by observing that the children of darkness are always shrewder than the children of light. They let time become their "fellow conspirator" by not only urging, "Wait, be patient, time will work things out"; but also by jumping on time and using it to exploit fear by the use of half-truths and even falsehood. If the children of light are not to be overcome, held King, they must also grasp time and use it creatively and constructively. Where Do We Go from Here? p. 151.

1 Note the advice in a November 19, 1958, letter from J. Pius Barbour: "Buckle down and preach and let reform alone for awhile." Boston Archive, III, 10, B.
in a context of political sensibilities in the language and forms that communicate to that context.¹

This proposal of direct involvement, then, suggests a method that is consistent and in continuity with the method of nonviolent demonstration, even though it is a further step. Both are consistent, in King's thought, with the biblical and historical bases of Christian theology and are expressions in the contemporary period of those same bases. Also, this suggests further the priority of principle over expedient in King's response to the experience of black oppression. The action he proposes is direct, aggressive, and militant in its commitment; but one looks in vain for any indication in King of an appeal to any feeling for retaliation and revenge. Rather, the appeal is to capitalize

¹King made some concrete proposals as to how this political involvement might express itself. Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 164-84. Among them are such suggestions as taking advantage of opportunities in trade unions, boycotts of discriminating businesses, positive economic programs such as Operation Breadbasket, seeking positions of power in the political parties, and the making of political alliances with other groups who would gain directly from the same kind of political action. The point here is not to enumerate, analyze, or evaluate these proposals, but to suggest that, in each of them, the criterion for its acceptability for King was whether or not it tended to move the human situation toward reconciliation rather than toward continued or further alienation. Earlier he had solicited the cooperative support of the labor movement with an appeal to their similar goals. Boston Archive, V, 9; VI, 119.
upon an obvious grievance and to use the experience of participating in it not as an excuse for retaliation but as a persuasive platform for calling for reconciliation and for the community that will benefit not only the oppressed group but the whole of society.

Compensatory Justice

Work for reconciliation, according to King, involves not only the nonviolent demonstration of the alienation that is its opposite and not only the calculated use of political structures that can bring about effective change within society's institutions; but also it involves the honest recognition of the effects of a long term of alienation upon those who are to be reconciled and a willingness to do something about it.

Among the many jobs to be done, the nation must not only radically readjust its attitude toward the Negro in the compelling present, but must incorporate in its planning some compensatory consideration for the handicaps he has inherited from the past. It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis?¹

¹Why We Can't Wait, p. 134. "When he seeks opportunity, he is told, in effect, to lift himself by his own
Again, liberation from the structures of oppression is seen as a necessary prerequisite to genuine humanity; but a realistic grasp of the human situation suggests that mere liberation is not all that is needed. In order for equality to become a reality, a considerable amount of unequal treatment will be necessary to compensate for the effects of another kind of unequal treatment in the past. Reconciliation involves thereby an amount of compensatory concern and activity in proportion to the effects of oppression and its underlying alienation.

There is an apparent similarity of this emphasis to the demand for compensation to "even the score" for what has been done in the past. Note, however, that the concern for King was not the getting of "blood money" for past oppression. Rather, it was to provide ways of enabling blacks in the present to become full participants in a society that would serve all its members. The priority of the principle of reconciliation toward genuine community is apparent here as it is in other places.

To suggest an answer now to the question that was raised at the beginning of this section, it is here proposed
that the methods employed by King in his particular work reflect a priority of the criteria proposed by the Christian faith rather than a priority of those criteria that might emerge from the immediate concerns of the context. The present conclusion to the above observations is that King's involvement in the quest for civil rights and human justice was a theological implementation of the principles of the Christian faith in the concrete circumstances of a particular human context, the purpose of which was the moving of that context in the direction of his Christian understanding of man as free man and community man.¹ His specific contribution

¹The problem of the relationship between theology and ethics is obvious at this point, and it raises the question of what is distinct theologically about King's bringing of the Gospel to bear upon the human situation. Specifically, in terms of traditional distinctions, in what respect would King's work be considered theology instead of Christian ethics? In response to this question three observations can be made. First, as noted previously (p. 29, n. 1), King's work does not reflect a concern for careful distinctions among the dimensions of theological endeavor. There is no claim in his work that it constitutes theology as distinct from ethics or vice-versa. Second, in the three major ingredients of King's developing theological perspective--Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and personalism--one finds emphasis upon and illustration of a close and in many respects overlapping relationship between theology and ethics. Note especially a recent explicit statement of King's former personalist professor, L. Harold DeWolf: "Systematic theology and Christian ethics deeply overlap and cannot be legitimately defined in such a way as to assign them separate fields of study." Responsible Freedom, p. 24. Third, and most
in this effort again centers on his emphasis upon the concrete particularity and mutuality of the human situation. Conversely, the present consideration rejects the suggestion that King was primarily a social reformer who found in the religious language and concepts of his heritage and context a handy and powerful support.

Heresies Which Threaten the Theology of Reconciliation

The characteristic features of Christian theology have often expressed themselves in clearest fashion in response to heresy, for the presence of heretical threats makes it necessary that theology articulate its elements and its implications as carefully as it can. Employing this assumption in the present consideration, this section will note two responses to the experience of black oppression that important for the present concern, the theological developments since King, the features of which the present thesis has suggested he illustrates, do not distinguish carefully between these two dimensions. In fact, these developments represent a breaking down of exclusive distinctions in their efforts to bring into closer relationship the theological functions of interpretation, reflection, deliberation, and application. Thus, King's work includes both theology and ethics; but the distinctive feature of his theology is that it is illustrative of a theological approach that is direct in its efforts to shape and to be shaped by the concrete circumstances and issues of its context.
function as heresies in the context of the quest for civil rights and genuine humanity and by doing so clarify further the features and emphases of King's theology of reconciliation. These perspectives are called heretical here not because they overtly oppose the alleviation of the plight of black oppression. In fact, they propose to be within that effort; and they suggest that they offer the best way for that alleviation to take place. Further, they contain many features and emphases whose value in themselves cannot be denied. The problem with heresy, though, is created more by its subtle differences, which appear innocent enough at the outset, but which, when carried to their logical conclusions, result in consequences quite different from the purposes they seem or pretend to serve.¹

King's theology of reconciliation had to deal directly with two such particular perspectives which threatened the quest for genuine humanity in the context of black oppression.

¹The difficulties in using the term "heresy" in this context are obvious enough. Properly speaking, heresy presupposes some sort of doctrinal orthodoxy to be departed from, which is not the primary issue in this case. The concept is used here in the terms of the kind of theology being considered to speak of methods and perspectives which appear to be serving the same purpose, but in reality represent the substitution of norms and criteria that have the effect of subverting the quest for genuine humanity.
These were not the opponents of the quest for civil rights but rather the appeals from within that quest with which the threat was more subtle, but nonetheless real.

Separatism

Among those who were committed to the cause of overcoming black oppression in all its forms were persons who suggested that the hope for the future lay in the determined but separated efforts of blacks and whites toward correcting the problems of black oppression. An extreme example of this separatist emphasis has been considered already,¹ but the concern here is to call attention to this appeal as an alternative to the main emphasis of King's theology of reconciliation.

An instructive way to describe and illustrate this alternative perspective is to point to the emphases of the black power movement as King understood it. Responding to this emphasis enabled him to articulate clearly the elements and rationale for his own perspective.² It is not surprising

¹Above, pp. 61ff.

²King's principal analysis and response to black power is found in Where Do We Go from Here? pp. 27-77. The present concern is directed more to King's response to this perspective than it is to a study of the perspective itself.
that one of King's principal objections to black power was in its advocacy of the use of violence in the quest for human rights for blacks. But in addition to that, he saw in its separatist emphasis an obstacle that would continue to stand in the way of the realization of genuine humanity. 1

The basic difference lay at the level of assumptions about contemporary society: for King, black power assumed that present American society "is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within." 2 King himself, though, as we have seen, while not denying the presence and the depth of evil in the American system, maintained hope that this evil could be confronted and dismantled without the use of violent means.

Violent responses to the experience of black oppression were interpreted by King as expressions of destructive despair and fear rather than of constructive hope. 3 There was for him no question that violence had been done to the black man; but, in the contemporary situation, acts of counter violence

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1 In a letter dated March 6, 1961, King applied the same critique to the Black Muslims. Boston Archive, I, 5; see also IV, 2.

2 Where Do We Go from Here? p. 51.

do not expose the injustice of violence. Instead, they reinforce it.\(^1\) He recognized that part of the work of reconciliation involves the stripping away of the reasons and excuses for alienation; but he saw in the emphases and implications of black power an effect that cuts at the power of reconciliation by providing a measure of justification for continued alienation.\(^2\)

A practical analysis of the conciliator/separatist question can recognize the realities on both sides of the issue. The conciliator asserts that genuine community and the removal of oppression will never occur when groups are set off against each other. This is true. The separatist asserts that conciliating attempts at cooperative effort are likely to result in further exploitation of the black. This is true, too. It becomes a question of which problem yields more easily to a solution. It was King's contention that the problems that were inherent in a cooperative effort could be dealt with more readily than those created by a separatist, and possibly violent, effort.

The present suggestion is that King's response to this perspectival and methodological option illustrates

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\(^1\) King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 32.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 36.
clearly the priority of the principle of reconciliation. As he sets it forth, the operation of this principle in his thought and work leads not just toward a kind of immediate liberation for the oppressed but a liberation for all—oppressed and oppressor—from the experience of black oppression and toward the establishment of genuine community where oppression would no longer exist.

Tokenism

King emerges from his response to black power as an advocate of moderation, but this classification is only half true. He suggested that there are two ways to regard moderation: one is as a wise and careful advance, and the other consists of stalling to preserve the status quo. The difference, obviously enough, lies in the end that is sought. Out of the recognition of this distinction comes his response to another tendency or appeal seemingly within the quest for human justice which in the present consideration represents a methodological heresy—tokenism.

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1 As early as 1958, King's approach was referred to as a "dolled up Uncle Tomism." Boston Archive, III, 16, B.

Tokenism is a more subtle, less severe, but nonetheless real obstacle in the path toward justice and genuine humanity.\(^1\) It is even among the most dangerous, because of its enticing promises and substitute accomplishments. Just as religious tokenism becomes a substitute for faith, so does social tokenism become a substitute for social justice.\(^2\) Tokenism creates the appearance of progress toward reconciliation, but only the appearance; for its goal is not seeking genuine progress but yielding just enough to pacify without disturbing any more than necessary of the status quo. In the present context King saw the presence of tokenism as a delaying tactic for the preservation of racial discrimination in the South.\(^3\)

He was well aware that progress toward reconciliation of an alienated humanity would be slow and that genuine humanity would not be ushered in on a whirlwind. When it comes, it will be the result of many short-term victories:

\(^1\)King, "National Press Club Speech," pp. 4ff.

\(^2\)King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 30.

To lightly dismiss a success because it does not usher in a complete order of justice is to fail to comprehend the process of achieving full victory. It underestimates the value of confrontation and dissolves the confidence born of partial victory by which new efforts are powered.¹

From this it can be observed that a significant part of the problem with tokenism is that it and a genuine theology of reconciliation might at any point seem to have the same effect: both affirm the importance of even the most meagre indication of progress. There is an essential difference, though, between the modest start toward reconciliation and the token movement: the latter is an end in itself while the former is only a step to be built upon. King observes also that he who sells the token reserves the right to revoke its worth.²

¹King, Where Do We Go from Here? p. 14; cf. p. 89, and an earlier statement (1960) to the same point, Boston Archive, III, 10; cf. IV, 4, A. A persistent element of routine responses to correspondence in the late fifties was the realistic recognition that the road was still uphill, but that there would be energy enough to climb it. Ibid., I, 50, A.

²Why We Can't Wait, p. 31. Tokenism is at its most basic level a paternalism which King sees as inconsistent with reconciliation toward genuine humanity; and he felt that the black man was not fooled by such halfhearted efforts: "The Negro felt that he recognized the same old bone that had been tossed to him in the past--only now it was being handed to him on a platter, with courtesy." Ibid., p. 20.
Thus, against the ever present threat of contentment with token progress, King was able to affirm and clarify further the meaning of his theology of reconciliation as an effort directed toward the full realization of genuine humanity. He was able to recognize, appreciate, and build upon partial progress wherever it occurred; but he was unwilling to accept any partial advance as the final goal of his effort. Here again, it is suggested, is reflected the priority of the principle of reconciliation in his thought and action; and the operation of that principle as a moderate but aggressive advance toward genuine human community is made clear.

Concluding Observation

This chapter has sought to accomplish three particular goals in its consideration of King's theology of reconciliation. First, it has attempted to set forth the theology implicit in King's response to the experience of black oppression as an illustration of an emerging understanding of the purpose of Christian theology that enables and encourages it to identify with the concrete human problems of its context and to work for their solution according to its interpretation of genuine humanity. King's understanding
of reconciliation and his incorporation of that understanding as a purpose for theological effort suggest that his work is such an illustration.

Second, the chapter has suggested and has sought to demonstrate that King's thought and work constitute a translation of theological principle into action rather than an application of theological concepts and language to a program of social action. The observed priority of the principle of reconciliation in the working out of his theology appears to support the conclusion that he was an active theologian rather than a theologizing activist.

In the third place, the attempt has been made to point to and illustrate the distinctive feature of the combination of concreteness and comprehensiveness in King's theology of reconciliation as it attempts to shape the human situation in the direction of a concept of genuine humanity as free man and community man. His response to two alternatives in the quest for genuine humanity clarifies this quality by suggesting that his own approach took into serious account not only the concrete contingencies that bear upon that quest but also the more comprehensive historical dimension of it as well.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The investigation that is the basis for this dissertation has been a study on two fronts. The initial subject of concern was the thought and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., with specific attention to the theological dimensions of his thought. It became apparent in the course of this investigation that in order to speak meaningfully of King's "theology," careful attention would have to be given not only to King and his context but also to the nature of theology, for in terms of traditional models of theologies King's work raised new questions. At this point the central question began to emerge: in what sense can King be considered a theologian? Here the initial direction of study yielded in process to a second area of concern, consisting of the focus, direction, and scope of contemporary theology. The result of the encounter of these two fronts has been the present study of the relationship between King's life and work and the emergence of certain features of contemporary theological
development, which point to the need for direct identification of the theological task with the concrete problems of human oppression.

The study has yielded the thesis that in King's work were present in preliminary fashion several of these features which have emerged as characteristic of contemporary theological effort. Specifically, it has been suggested that the features and focus of his thought and action illustrate the kind of praxiological and contextual thinking that has emerged in black theology and liberation theology. When seen in terms of the developments in theology since his death, King appears to have stood at the threshold of a transition from what has been called traditional theology and the

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1It is necessary to clarify here the use of the term "praxiological." Broadly defined as the theory of action, the meaning of the term in its present employment is similar to that set forth in Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Praxiology, trans. Olgierd Wojtasiewicz (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1965), pp. 1-13. There praxiology is defined in terms of its relationship to both the theoretical formulation of principles (the "theory of complex wholes") and the specific act. Praxiology is that discipline whose purpose is to keep these two together. Ibid., p. 10. Applied to theology, this kind of praxiological concern would lead to the working out of principles of action that would combine the effectiveness of efficient concrete action and the general principles of the Christian faith. Theology with a praxiological focus would thus be a theology which has as a conscious and basic purpose the providing of a framework not only for right thinking but also for right action.
theological developments of the past half-decade. Consequently, it has become apparent in the course of the study that the most fitting way to regard him as a theologian is to consider him not in the traditional category but as illustrative of a particular kind of theological thinking which he himself was helping to bring about. Along with its historical and personal contexts, King's response to the experience of black oppression has been considered in terms of the suggestions of this thesis; and it is appropriate to set forth now the conclusion of the study.

The basic conclusion is that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a transitional theologian whose thought and work reflect the beginnings of a praxiological theology for the particular context of the American South. The wording of this statement suggests the features in the terms of which this conclusion can be amplified and clarified. The following sections will attempt to underline the distinctive features of King's theology in a way that will illuminate both its strengths and its limitations.

1It is helpful to note that the intent has not been to argue the validity of these recent developments nor has it been to suggest an absolute dichotomy between "traditional" theology and "contemporary" theology. Rather, the purpose has been to examine King's approach as illustrative of what has been described as an emerging new focus for theology.
Transitional Theology

Granting the two "givens" of what we have called traditional theology or doctrinal formulation systems—as exemplified by Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and John Macquarrie—and of what we have described as an emerging focus for the theological task—as illustrated by the Humanum Studies, black theology, and liberation theology—King's work fits neatly into neither category. He was conversant with the names and ideas of the major theological voices of the modern period,¹ and one biographer has pointed to King's desire to be a theologian/philosopher in the academic sense.² From the other side, he reflected much of the concern expressed in the perspectives of black theology and liberation theology. But he was not a systematic interpreter of the Christian faith in abstract and universal terms,³ nor was he explicit in setting forth the precise theological themes that have emerged since his death. The consequent observation is

¹King's student papers from both Crozer and Boston reflect exposure to the historical development and the contemporary expression of Christian theology. Boston Archive, XII, 46-9; XIV, 38, 47-50, 54, 55, 57.

²Lewis, Biography, p. 44.

³Ibid. The capability question raised by Lewis is not the issue here.
that he was a transitional figure in the modification of theological thought from traditional patterns and approaches to those characteristic of the contemporary emphasis. He never completely broke free from traditional theological patterns, but his work opened up a way for a significant change by forging an historical stage on which a new theological approach to the human situation could take place. The point is this: while King saw himself and his work in traditional theological categories, his work dealt with the human situation in such a way that certain features of previous theological approaches were called into question. New questions were raised, the eventual answers to which began the formulation of a Christian theology with a new focus. The present suggestion is that King's contribution to this transition was more influential than would appear from surface observation.

It is instructive to ask why it was that King was in this transitional position. There were others in the South at that time--equally intelligent, equally well-trained and capable of leadership, equally committed to improving the lot of the oppressed in an unjust system. Why was King and not another the transitional theologian for the American
South? Two reasons stand out as answers to the question: one has to do with the context; the other, with the man.

Mention will be made in a later section of some of the peculiar features of the southern context of King's theology, with the suggestion as to the significance of that context in the emergence of King's particular theology; and mention has been made of the fact that King's career as a leading crusader in the civil rights struggle was launched and sustained in part by the accidents of time and place.¹

It is sufficient to say here that in the South of the fifties and sixties a combination of historical circumstances created a situation that was ripe for the kind of perspective he had to offer.

A second reason is found in King himself. The observations of chapter III have suggested that in King there was a combination of formative influences that enabled him at once to identify with but also to transcend the particular human situation. He brought together a philosophy of life derived from the Christian faith and the immediate concerns of a particular human context in a way that enabled them to hear each other, to keep in touch, and to work

¹Above, p. 29, n. 1; p. 103.
together in a functional relationship as had not been done before. From this point emerges King's distinctive methodological contribution: he provided a model of an expression of the Christian Gospel in the specific terms of a concrete context while avoiding the two extremes of allowing the expression of the Gospel to overwhelm and subsume the concrete concerns of the context or of allowing the particular circumstances of the context to define the content of the Gospel.

A clear way of illustrating the transitional character of King's theological approach is to call attention to the transition in the operative perspective on man represented by the emphases of black theology and liberation theology. More than just new emphasis on man, this transition is a distinct shift of theological focus with respect to man. Simply put, the new perspective looks at the concrete oppressed man and his concrete struggle for liberation as the paradigm of man under the power of God's liberating word.

These concrete struggles become the lens through which the message of the Christian faith is perceived, interpreted, and appropriated. Whereas earlier theology has approached man and theology through the categories of the Bible, philosophy, and psychology, this new focus comes at man and theology through the concrete features of the struggle of concrete oppressed men.¹

It has been noted that King draws heavily upon his orientation in traditional theological formulations, especially so in his understanding of man.² His utilization of traditional categories in his explicit statements about man reveals the abstract and universal conceptions that have characterized theology's treatment of man all along.³ But, King's involvement in the concrete struggles of a particular people to overcome particular forms of oppression brought about the beginnings of a reshaping of his primary focus on man and on theology. He did not reject or ignore the

¹Again, the concern here is not to be comprehensive in treating the characteristics of this new focus, but to indicate its distinctiveness when compared to previous approaches.

²Above, p. 143, n. 2.

³Note especially the student paper, "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man," Boston Archive, XVI, 3.
traditional categories that pertained to man, but he put them to work in such a way that the effect was the beginning of a process that would soon reorient theological thought around the focus of concrete human experience.

The point that is of pertinence to the present concern is this: King represents a key link in the above-mentioned modification. His overt expressions fit into traditional categories, but the nature and direction of his efforts illustrate the perspective that emerges explicitly later in post-Kingian theological formulations. Thus, his theology is transitional theology in the sense that it represents a significant step in the shift from a universal to a concrete orientation for the theological task.¹

**Praxiological Theology**

Throughout the study there has been an implicit distinction made between theology as language and theology as action. While caution has been exercised to avoid the

¹There is no indication in the available records of King's thought that he saw himself as a theological pioneer. The impression received is that he thought of himself as putting into practice what theologians had talked about for so long; but in the process of his work, what theologians had talked about for so long began to change.
suggestion of a dichotomy between these, the distinction has intended to suggest that here are two dimensions of the theological task. The point made by recent attention to the nature of theology is that there is a direct relationship between the redemptive and liberating word of the Gospel, the attempts to give that word interpretative formulation in meaningful language, and the attempts to give that word concrete expression in the complex arena of the human situation. Both dimensions of the theological task--interpretative formulation and concrete expression--are suggested as necessary for theology to be Christian. When either ignores the other, or attempts to function without the other, the effort ceases to be Christian theology.

It has been suggested and demonstrated that King's work falls into the category of active theology. The previous section observed that his work was informed by the interpretative formulations of the past, and it suggested that he consciously saw himself as putting those formulations into practice. There was more, however, to his theological activity than merely putting into practice what others had preached, for the direction and scope of his theologically informed action opened up issues and dimensions of the human situation that had not been the subjects of previous
interpretative formulation. His work illustrates the emergent suggestion that only after the stuff of human experience has been grappled with concretely can the features of that experience become the subject matter for reflective and systematic interpretation. His work, in effect, represents an orientation for theology that finds its methodological starting point in the concrete concerns of the human context.

It is for this reason that the particular phrase has been chosen to describe this feature of King's theology. His was a "praxiological" theology in that it was a theologically sensitive grappling with the concrete features of a particular human situation, and it was to those features that his theology was directed. The effect of his work was the opening up of the human situation of the American South and the exposure of its features to the light of the Gospel, which paved the way for an examination of previous ways of relating the Gospel to that situation.

Again, the point of pertinence is that the kind of theology King represents takes its particular features from its involvement in the concrete problems of the human situation, as contrasted to the theology which would determine the nature of its particular concrete involvements on the
basis of abstract formulations that have little relation to
the particular circumstances of the context. The distinctive
feature lies in the priority of the praxiological concern.¹
This part of the contribution, then, of King's work to the
ongoing theological task is that at this particular juncture
he did the spade work that provided the raw material for the
focus of theological interpretation and formulation that has
followed his death.²

Southern Theology

To conclude that King was a theologian for the
American South is to suggest several points of particular
pertinence for the present study. It affirms the earlier

¹As has been noted, King's modification of his own
perspective in the direction of praxiological priorities
was the result of the combination of particular early
experiences, particular academic perspectives and ideas,
and particular concrete encounters.

²Cone, as we have seen (above, pp. 9f.), credits
King with this kind of contribution to the development of
black theology. The issue remains whether to consider this
kind of involvement theology. Rather than belabor the point
needlessly, the present consideration describes King's work
as reflective of a praxiological quality that finds explicit
expression in later theology. Whether King himself would
have moved to the dimension of formulation in the same way
that Cone has done is a question that can be answered only
by speculation.
suggestion that he is illustrative of the proposal that contemporary theology become more consciously regional, working in terms of the circumstances of a particular context, moving from the concrete rather than from the universal. Chapter IV has demonstrated that King's approach to the human situation reflects this characteristic. Though he was prone even from his early efforts to point to the universal implications and significance of particular events, a primary feature to note for the present concern is that his theological context remained basically the structures and ideas of the American South. It will be helpful to clarify and amplify this point.

The experience of black oppression has had its most obvious expression in the culture of the southern United States. Especially, but not exclusively, in the South has one found both the ideas and the overt structures that preserve a system of oppression. And, most significantly for the present concern, the southern Christian church has tended to join in this support by providing a religious sanction which preserved oppression longer than would have been possible without it.¹

¹A pertinent analysis of the peculiar complexion of the American South is Samuel S. Hill, Jr., Religion in the Solid South (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), pp. 24-56. A perceptive treatment of the historical place of southern
There is a certain irony in the southern context of King's theology and in regarding his work as a theology for the American South. The irony rests in the fact that the southern consciousness, fostered significantly by the southern church, was both an obstacle and an ally for the kind of work King tried to do there. The structure and the persistent religious heritage of the South have wedded social structure and custom with religious thought in ways that have made proposals for change of social patterns appear to be an infringement upon religious belief. In those areas where the church has theologized prevailing social patterns, as, for example, in race relations, a formidable dimension has been added to the objection to social change. Thus, the theologized status quo represented by the white church (and in some respects by the black church as well) in the South was a basic obstacle for King in his attempts to implement


the Gospel against the structures of oppression there.\footnote{The religious orientation of objections to King's efforts is obvious in a collected file of adverse correspondence from the late fifties and early sixties (Boston Archive, I, 47, A). King's classic response to religiously based objections to efforts aimed at overcoming oppression is his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in \textit{Why We Can't Wait}, pp. 76-95.}

Against this obstacle, King's work had the effect of exposing the manner in which white theology in the American South had ignored the plight of the oppressed black, even while pretending to give attention to that plight. The consequence of this exposure has been the recognition that theology in the context of the South is in need of a significant change of orientation and focus.\footnote{On the question of a particular focus and form for Christian theology in the South along the lines suggested here, see Herzog, "The Burden of Southern Theology: a Response," pp. 54-9. The issue pressed there is not merely that theology needs to take with new seriousness the particular problems of oppression in the South, but even more that theology needs to reshape itself in terms of those problems.}

The other side of the irony is in the present suggestion that it was this same context of religious sensibilities that made possible the work that King did. Quite beyond the influential fact of his own orientation in the religion of the South, it was to the consciousness nurtured by this religious tradition that King directed his appeal.
A basic assumption about man that lay behind his approach to the human situation was that man is a being of conscience--moral man--who, when confronted with the truth about himself and his way of life, would change accordingly. King's work was aimed at persuasion, and it was persuasion along religious lines and categories. This kind of persuasion presupposes an orientation in a religious tradition that is strong enough to effect change in the person if it is moved to do so. King's approach in the South confronted white southerners with the problem in what they had accepted as an identity between their social patterns and their professed religious commitments. Some of them responded to this confrontation by distinguishing social patterns from religious conviction and by seeking to change the former in terms of the latter.¹

Thus, in a significant sense the peculiar religious orientation

¹A balancing and realistic recognition is that significant numbers also responded to this confrontation by becoming more entrenched in the identification of their Christian faith and the structures of oppression. See, for example, the above noted file of adverse correspondence (Boston Archive, I, 47, A); such published statements as the biography by Bales, The Martin Luther King Story; and F. S. Meyer, "Principles and Heresies," National Review 20 (16 January 1968): 36. Note also a recent statement by a high ranking political official in Georgia to the effect that King did more harm to this country than any other individual. (Lt. Gov. Lester Maddox commenting upon the proposed hanging of a portrait of King in the state capitol building, broadcast by CBS News, 19 January 1974.)
of the cultural situation in the South was an ally in King's quest for overcoming the dehumanizing effects of the experience of black oppression.

The suggestion that King's work was a distinctively southern theology is supported further by an historical observation. The concrete benefits of his theology were largely confined to the South and to those areas where southern characteristics had permeated. His points of emphasis were "at home" there, while they did not seem to fit as well elsewhere because the concrete circumstances were different.¹ It is an open question whether King's expansion of his efforts into the larger sphere was a case of overextended momentum or whether it was based on his genuine belief that the method and rationale of the southern campaigns against segregation would work in the larger arena of economics and international affairs. While it is the present opinion that the latter is the case, the present point rests on the fact that King's work did more to change the structures of oppression in the South in the direction of reconciliation than it was able to do elsewhere. While from a universalistic perspective the

¹Note the difficulties encountered when the movement turned northward to confront the problems of poverty and war. Above, pp. 125ff.
conclusion that King's thought and work represent a southern theology would seem to be a serious limitation, in the terms of the present consideration this conclusion suggests one of its primary values.

The Distinctive Focus of King's Theology

The prominent feature of King's theology has appeared in this study as concreteness, but as a final point the observation of the previous chapter needs to be reiterated. Along with a pronounced concern for concrete individuality in King's thought is an equally pronounced concern for concrete relatedness. The concrete anthropological focus of his theology contains both the individual and the collective dimensions of humanity. For him, concrete freedom is not Christian freedom unless it points toward community; and concrete efforts at liberation cannot be Christian theology unless they point toward a reconciliation of oppressed and oppressor, not of one to the other, but of both to their common humanity. It was part of King's unique contribution to this particular strain of theological development that he was concerned not only for what black oppression was doing to the oppressed but also for what it was doing to the oppressor—it was dehumanizing
them both. It may well be in the final analysis that the most significant feature of his theology is a concreteness that consciously avoids being exclusivistic.  

The significance of King’s contribution to the ongoing theological task can best be assessed when his work is seen as a crucial point in the transition from a universal-oriented understanding of theology to a concrete focus for the theological task, when it is seen as an active translation of the principles of the Christian faith into and in terms of the concrete realities of human experience, and when it is seen as a theology which claims no wider context than the one in terms of which it is done. A new focus has emerged in contemporary theology; and the conclusion of this study is that Martin Luther King was an early participant in the shaping of this new focus; and, like many of the founding figures in the development of any tradition, he is one from whom the tradition can continue to learn.

The content of both his published works and his unpublished papers reveals a King who was concerned about and involved with the black man and his concrete problems, but nowhere does one find any indication that he was concerned for only the black man. Note the representative statement: "One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory." "Love and Nonviolence and the Shame of Segregation," Jubilee 11 (July 1963): 23.
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BIOGRAPHY

John Colin Harris was born February 22, 1943, in Atlanta, Georgia. After receiving his elementary and high school education in Atlanta, he attended Mercer University where he graduated in 1965 with the Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. He received the Master of Divinity degree from the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1968, having been awarded that institution's R. T. Daniel Award in Old Testament Studies the previous year. In September, 1968, he began graduate study in the Department of Religion of Duke University on a University Scholarship. In 1970-71 he was a graduate assistant in systematic theology in the Duke Divinity School. From 1970-73 he was a member of the Department of Religion and Philosophy of Meredith College; and in August, 1973, he became Assistant Professor of Christian Education at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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