

The Early Years 1944-1951: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Search for True Religion

By Ron Large

With the publication of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., it is possible to trace the development of King's thought more fully than ever before. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project has given scholars and the general public the most complete access to King material than any previous publication. While I am aware of the issues of plagiarism and King's misuse of sources, my purpose in this essay is not to re-visit these matters since others have already examined them in depth. Rather, I want to approach the papers as a resource for offering insight into how King's ideas evolved. With a focus on volume 1, this essay will investigate King's quest for what he considered to be the essence of true religion. While Volume 1 of the Papers covers the years 1929-1951, this essay will examine the period from 1944-1951, which covers King's high school, college, and seminary education. The great majority of material in Volume 1 covers King's years at Crozer. In examining the period from 1944-1951, we can glimpse some of the ideas and concepts that shaped King's views both about religion and social change. Although necessarily in nascent form, we can begin to explore some of the themes King later develops more fully. Only 22 years old when he graduates from Crozer Theological Seminary, King is on the path that will guide him into what is then an unknown future.

While some key aspects of King's views are formed during this time, we cannot yet entertain any expectations of completeness in King's thought. We will need to set aside our recognition of King and the Civil Rights Movement to look through the lens of his and our own inchoate efforts of analysis. This essay will examine several of the main themes of King's early years: his critique of religion, his view of the impact of science on religious faith and understanding, his assertion that true religion is ethical in nature, and how this notion informs his understanding of God and Jesus.

Two quotes from the Introduction to Volume 1 help to set the dichotomy in King's approach to religion. The first quote refers to King's father in stating that "the elder King stressed the need for an educated, politically active ministry" (33). This contrasts with a second

passage in remarking that the younger “King was uncomfortable with the fervent emotionalism he sometimes observed in the church.” It seemed, perhaps to King, that an “educated, politically active ministry” could not easily combine with “fervent emotionalism” (34). This tension followed King for much of his life as he sought to balance the demands for critical, objective scholarship with an emphasis on reason on one hand with the experiential awareness of God’s presence in human history, both personally and socially, on the other. As King draws closer to Personalism as a way to understand God, experience does become more fundamental to his approach to religion. However, King never jettisons the call for reason as a counter to uninformed piety. He will need both reason and emotion for the task ahead even though they do not seem to be very complimentary at this point in his life.

In his essay entitled “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” (359-363) King reveals the trajectory of his beliefs and opens a window to some of the themes that shaped his early views of religion and society. Although technically a matter of hindsight, the essay does give King the opportunity to reflect on how his childhood experiences influenced his understanding of religion and its role in society. Living through the Depression for his first decade, King recalls that his family had the “basic necessities of life” and that, more generally, “no one in our community was in the extremely poor class” (360). Despite this apparently benign experience of the Depression, King moves beyond his own personal situation to recall seeing the breadlines and how this image contributed to his “present anti-capitalistic feelings” (359). These feelings will shape King’s critique of capitalism for its failure to deal adequately with those basic necessities for many others. It will become the role of religion, through the Social Gospel, to sustain this critique as King comes more and more to see the connection between civil rights and economic conditions. As a young child, however, King’s focus was on other matters in his religious development: the experience of his family life and that of his relationship to the church.

King writes fondly and nostalgically about his family and “that intimate relationship which existed between us in childhood” (359). Taking his parents’ relationship as a model of intimacy, King expands this pattern to include his siblings and maternal grandmother who also lived with his family. He recalls listening to her telling stories (359) as part of his “congenial home situation” (360). While King writes movingly of his grandmother, his father is the obvious center of the family. King senior was a “father who always put his family first,” a father who “has always been a real father” (360) with regard to caring for the wellbeing of the family.

Accordingly, King examines his father's sensibilities of frugality, responsibility, and simplicity as providing the hallmarks of his family life and setting an example for King to follow. The emphasis on his father's personal qualities may also partially explain King's own focus on the specific personal traits he felt that individuals needed in order to participate in the nonviolent movement. The effort to end segregation also required that people prepare personally to bear the responsibilities of freedom. Love, however, is the most important quality that defines King's assessment of his childhood and the one that most clearly influences his understanding of religion.

Love encapsulates King's sense of family and community; it provides the essential cohesion that binds together all of his childhood relationships. From his parents, to his grandmother, to his siblings, to his playmates, and to the community, it is love that most vividly describes King's interpretation of these collective associations and provides the basis for his views of religion and his own religious development. This conclusion is not very surprising given an earlier paper from 1949 in which King argues for the primacy of experience in seeking and knowing God (234). Thus one's experiences fundamentally shape one's notion of God. Although not completely deterministic and fixed, the past for King offers a key to the future. For this reason King concludes that his family experiences "were highly significant in determining my religious attitudes" (360) and that love formed these attitudes and the contours of his vision. Since love forms his experience, it also forms his view of God. King's own words state the matter clearly.

It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for me to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences. It is impossible to get at the roots of ones (sic) religious attitudes without taking into account the psychological and historical factors that play upon the individual. (360-361)

In what may foreshadow King's views that psychological and historical factors also trapped the supporters of segregation, he cannot separate his own self-understanding from his experiences. However, this connection does not imply that King felt that the trap was completely closed. Since he hoped and worked for significant changes, the possibility always existed that individuals and society could imagine a new way of being, through new experiences or a re-interpretation of old

ones. King was not naïve enough to assume that our lives are fixed. Even so, experience is crucial and it informs King's understanding of the church.

In his essay on religious development, King continues to examine the importance of the church in developing his religious ideas. Reflecting on his childhood experiences, King's relation to the church is almost dualistic. He writes of joining the church "not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister" (361) who had already joined. At the same time, King tells us that the "church has always been a second home for me" (361). From a more fundamentalist and literalist beginning where he "accepted the teachings as they were given to me" (361), King quickly progresses to offering a serious challenge to that literalist view of Christianity. He notes how "at the age of 13 I shocked my Sunday School class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus" (361). Perhaps, as King wonders, the remark of a precocious child? Maybe, but the challenge is still there. Yet, King is still very much a part of the ethos of the church. Working on a tobacco farm in Simsbury, Connecticut during the summer of 1944, King writes to his mother that he is the Sunday school leader and is "praying for the church" (112). King tells his father in a separate letter that he is "still thinking of the church and reading my bible" (115). However, doubts and questions persist. By the end of his first two years of college, King, in a fairly powerful image, recounts how "the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body" (363). Although perhaps implicit and not necessarily intended, the connection King establishes between fundamentalism and the shackles of slavery is hard to avoid. Just as slavery is a form of imprisonment, so too is fundamentalism. It is an effort to hold on to "old dogmatic ideas" (238) and is "essentially a reactionary protest" (240) against a modern and changing world. It is not the sort of church that King has in mind. In spite of his criticisms, King can still say, "the church has always been a second home for me" (361). Thus the key is not whether King will leave the church, but what sort of church he envisions. Religion and the church continue to be significant for King, but in a manner that blends his own experience of both the church and the modern world through the impact of science and reason.

Given King's criticisms of fundamentalism, along with his view that the church was too overly emotional, it is not surprising that he would look to science and reason to counter each of these. What is surprising is that King does not give up on the church. Instead, through the encounter with science, he offers a reformulation of the basic issues that Christians and the church must face. Essentially following his boyhood rejection of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, King

proposes a shift from a church concerned with doctrines to one that looks to the ethical and spiritual truths that the doctrines represent. King clearly wants the church to be part of the modern world; he has no interest in retreating to an earlier, pre-scientific understanding of religion and the church. As King uses science and religion to blunt fundamentalism's claims to the truth, he also does not want science or reason to become the sole sources of faith and arbiters of the truth. As much as King wants the church to move away from a pre and unscientific understanding of religion, he cannot let science overwhelm the basic truths that he sees within the Christian tradition. Consequently King seeks a balance between what he might refer to as a faithless reason and a reasonless faith. We can see this effort unfold through King's papers while a student at Crozer.

For a paper in his Old Testament course during his first term in the fall of 1948, King wants to show how the literature of the surrounding societies influenced the composition and writing of the Old Testament. In order to show this influence, and to truly understand the text itself, King argues that we must apply "the scientific method to the study of the old testament" and place the text under a "critical, unbiased, and scientific light" (180). The bible can no longer be the province of individualistic and nonacademic interpretations, for these will invariably be misinterpretations. Modern scholarship has a role in examining the bible just as it does with any other area human of reflection and investigation. To single out the bible for special treatment and remove it from the purview of rational inquiry denies the bible its power to be understood since that understanding comes only through rational inquiry.

King continues this argument in a paper written during the fall semester, 1949. The title gives the obvious focus: "How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction" (251-256), and the first sentence establishes the issue: "The question as to the use of the Bible in modern culture stands as a perplexing enigma troubling multitudes of minds" (251). It is perplexing as King notes, due to the contradictions between what the bible says and what we know from science. King lists several areas such as astronomy, biology, and medicine where the bible and science conflict. These conflicts can only be resolved to the detriment of the bible as long as the bible is taken literally (251-252). The practical problem is that the bible's unscientific elements cannot meet the challenges of the modern, empirical world. Consequently we need to bring a new interpretive focus to the biblical text that permits "an intelligible way of handling the Bible." For King this focus is one that is "both objective and disinterested" as measured by the demands of

“higher criticism” (253) rather than through an allegorical or literal interpretation of the text. These latter approaches belong to what King views as an earlier, unscientific time where knowledge of the biblical text was simply less developed than it is in the modern world. King is not willing to set aside the bible and remove it from critical study and research. If we are to know more about the bible then we cannot read the bible as if modern scholarship does not exist. Just as scholarly research has expanded human knowledge in almost every area through the application of science and reason; so, too, have science and reason permitted a greater understanding of the bible. Such a conclusion rests on the assertion that King “sees the Bible not as a textbook written with divine hands, but as a portrayal of the experiences of men written in particular historical situations” (253). Thus our knowledge of the bible, for King, depends upon understanding these situations, and this understanding requires the use of science and reason. Removing himself farther from the emotionalism of his childhood, King stresses that individual piety alone cannot bring the insight necessary to comprehend the text. We must rely on the investigative tools of science and the application of reason or else we will fail in our quest for understanding. Writing a book review in the fall semester of his last year at Crozer, King continues to affirm the significance of science and reason. He simply states that if “religion is to be meaningful to modern man it must be scientifically tenable and intellectually respectable” (355). If not, then religion becomes false; it remains little more than a quaint relic with little or no relevance to modern life. A false religion is one that refuses to recognize the contextual nature of human knowledge, even of God, and one that turns away from the demands of reason. Yet how is relevance to be determined and how does King keep God from becoming trapped in the situation and buried under the weight of science and reason? How does King move from a false to a true religion?

King’s solution, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, develops out of a critique of science and the modern world’s dependence on the results of science. As is typical in King’s thought, a movement exists between the literalism of the biblical text and the bald assertion that science provides all knowledge and meaning. Neither view is correct. King rejects the extreme end-points to craft a solution that keeps both science and the text. Consequently he cannot accept an either/or resolution to the question of the relationship of religion and science. He affirms both science and religion while denying that either holds the final and complete answer to human

questions. Having already examined King's critique of fundamentalism, we can turn to his cross-examination of science and reason.

King's statement that "The modern Christian should never lose faith in rationality as one of the supreme resources of man" (276) seems to imply that faith is subservient to reason, especially when viewed in combination with King's affirmation of higher criticism. Reason allows science to flourish and furnishes the knowledge that shapes and defines the world. Reason checks our "false thinking" (277); it allows us to "adjust to the changing conditions" of human existence (238). Reason and science push aside the veil of ignorance to reveal the facts hidden behind superstition or uncertainty. Or so it seems. Although King certainly approves of the use of reason and science, he is also aware of the temptation to absolutize the knowledge that science produces. Just as religion may make claims as to the eternal validity of certain beliefs or doctrines, science may also fall victim to the same tendency, making it in effect the new God. In his paper, "The Sources of Fundamentalism and Liberalism Considered Historically and Psychologically" (236-242), King traces the "rise of the scientific spirit in modern culture" (237) to show how science has challenged and altered many ideas that religion previously supported, ideas that are no longer tenable. Yet it is not King's intention to return to a pre-scientific world where religion held sway even if such a journey were possible. Instead King looks to the cultural impact of the scientific revolution and what he sees as a shift to a more anthropocentric perspective. He writes: "It seems that the renaissance deviated man's thinking from a theocentric world-view to an anthropocentric cosmology" (237). God is less important, but does this reduction imply a loss of the human need to have faith in something? For King the answer is no, and herein lies the problem. We have substituted one absolute for another and actually done so rather poorly. However, King's support of science and reason is not unquestioned. What he wants to avoid is having science supplant faith in God to become its own religion. This is the temptation that leads him to write that "Modern man turned away from metaphysical speculation and decided to worship at the shrine of empiricism" (237). False gods still exist, and science, if it assumes too much authority, can contribute to their rise. King hopes to prevent science's ascension to idolatry by placing it within the boundaries of limited knowledge and God's actions in history. Acting as bookends, these two concepts hold science within appropriate limits and, at the same time, allow science to function as a source of understanding.

Given King's criticism of fundamentalism for its claims to certainty and its rejection of change, it is difficult, if not impossible, for him to view knowledge in anything other than contextual terms. King's belief that "doctrines and creeds...grow out of the historical settings and the psychological moods of the individuals that set them forth" (226), also informs his view that time and circumstance influence scientific knowledge. If fundamentalism cannot claim certainty then neither can science; it too is subject to the limits of human understanding even as we try to extend these limits. For King, proclamations of certainty or absoluteness raise both theological and epistemological problems. Theologically the claim of certainty denies the role of God acting in human history and confuses a particular understanding of God for the actuality of God. The same holds true for general human knowledge. Even science and reason cannot claim the privilege of finality, for this would merely deny their very purpose in testing the limits of human wisdom. King would turn the claims of certainty upside down. Rather than expressing the foundation of human capability, they really represent the failure to see that ideas require challenge and questioning. We cannot claim absoluteness for the simple reason that we are not absolute. Thus King's position is that "Our knowledge of the absolute will always remain relative...that intellectual finality is unattainable in all fields; all human knowledge is relative, and all human ideas are caught in the whirlpool of relativity" (235). The temptation of relativity is to succumb to the view that if knowledge is not certain then the search is futile. Just as certainty stifles investigation; why go any farther? Relativity also hampers the quest; why go at all? "But," as King notes, "we cannot give up the search because of this limitation" (235). Relativity is good news for it implies that the search for God and true religion can continue in the present and into the future. Relativity, then, is a sign of hope, not defeat.

King subsumes the tentative nature of human inquiry and the incompleteness of human understanding under a broader conceptual framework that sees both scientific knowledge and knowledge of God as elements of an almost evolutionary process. Change governs King's approach to the accumulation of empirical and theological knowledge since it is change that defines human existence. Put simply, the more we investigate and study, the more we know, and the more we see how things change. Yet, this explanation is too simplistic. King wants to make the stronger claim that change and uncertainty are bound to the very fabric of human life, that they define who we are as human beings. King wants to move beyond both the fundamentalism that abjures change and the relativity that sees only change to a willingness to see that "truth

must be discovered from age to age” (239). Truth becomes an evolutionary process arising out of a humble, but critical assessment of the past in conjunction with new discoveries. There is no return to a static past where true religion stood fully revealed. For religion to have any meaning in the modern world, it is not a matter of keeping science and reason out of religion; it is a matter of knowing that true religion “must keep pace with the deepening insights of world thought and keep abreast with the modern problems of a changing culture” (355). If not, religion exists as little more than a quaint relic. However, King now faces an interesting predicament. In his youthful homage to science and the modern world, where does he find God? As science structures more and more of modern life, does it not also then define God as an extension of natural phenomena or remove God from human consideration altogether?

King cannot accept this conclusion as he tries to place God, science, and reason in a somewhat unified structure. He tries to shape this structure by defining God’s nature and by examining how God works in the world. King’s God has an “objective reality” (355); neither the natural world nor human consciousness can express the nature and truth of God. God exists outside the natural, human world. For all his efforts to connect religion to scientific progress and scholarly research, King leaves room for God’s reality to stand beyond their limitations. Writing a book review of A Functional Approach to Religious Education by Ernest Chave for a class in the Religious Development of Personality (354-356), King argues that religious educators must recognize the fact that “much of our religious education has failed miserably. We to (sic) often attempt to indoctrinate young people with outmoulded and unscientific ideas. The young person who goes to school today is taught to be analytical, objective, and scientific; he is taught not to swallow the whole apple, but to chew and digest” (355). Still, King does not want science to completely overwhelm God since nature is not a sufficient vessel in which to contain God’s existence. King comments on this later in the same review when he writes that “I guess I am a little more conservative theologically than I thought I was. Somehow I cannot stop with nature, far (sic) Christianity to me is a revelation of the nature of nature” (355). Revelation only makes sense if it comes from outside that which it reveals, and for King this place is God. King’s understanding of the nature of God, perhaps vague and even ill-defined, may not necessarily be his main point however. He wants to avoid participating in a religion that places its doctrines and beliefs beyond the pale of critical analysis at best and, at worst, where science contradicts these

tenants of faith. King designs his vision of how God works in the world to deal with this contradiction.

While God exists beyond the confines of nature and human life; it is also the case that God's revelation comes only in nature and human life for we can only receive God in the world in which we live. For King, God is a God of and in human history. Revelation arrives in a particular human context among the limitations of human knowledge and understanding. Revelation may bring insight, indeed King would see this as inherent to the nature of revelation, but the situation also circumscribes that awareness. Consequently, understanding the meaning of God's presence is not a simple given. It requires an engagement on many levels of human activity such as theology, philosophy, ethics, and empirical investigation all of which work to express a critical appropriation of faith. Here King tries to put aside the singular reliance on the emotional piety of his childhood as the full manifestation of God's presence. However, he does so only partially. The human experience of God, in whatever emotional context, is crucial to King's developing concept of God so much so that he feels inadequate and longs for his own religious experience (415-416). Yet critical reflection must temper and balance the experience. For King, the point is not to deny the validity of experience, but to understand it, however incomplete that understanding might be. Just as King views science as a process of discovering the truth "from age to age" (239), he places revelation within the process of "God working through history" (239). King even argues that the process of revelation allows the process of science to occur. God's presence and connection to human history extends beyond the boundaries of scripture; it also arises in the developing and changing dynamics of human knowledge.

King expresses this view of God in several papers written from 1949-1950 while at Crozer. In his paper on fundamentalism and liberalism (236-242), King evokes an historical God whose truth "is a drama of many acts continually appearing as the curtains of history continue to open" (239). The bible cannot fully contain the drama, for the bible is not "the only source of truth," which exists in "numerous other realms of life" (239). One of these realms for King is clearly that of scientific progress and the discoveries science makes possible. These discoveries are part of "an upward evolutionary movement" (239) of human understanding that also reveals God's presence in history. Humans can certainly get things wrong; sin does exist for King, but

error and sin are not permanent barriers to the God-Human relationship or to the increase of human understanding.

King's paper, "Six Talks in Outline," (242-251) offers a more detailed view of how God works. For King, "God works through his spirit in the world" (248) in an ongoing presence that continues God's relationship to humanity. Chastising the belief that God is somehow less present to humans today than "in the days of the apostles" (248), King holds that "we must believe that the living Spirit-that is, the present living God-is working through history" (248). In addition, human efforts to comprehend the world are also part of God's historical presence. Theological or religious concepts alone cannot fully express the reality of God's spirit in the world, and in trying to reduce God's role in history "we do injustice to God and render our faith ineffective" (248). A limited God implies a limited faith for King. Thus he connects our increasing knowledge of the physical world through science to God's presence. King writes that "All these advances have come about because of the constant work of God's spirit in the life of man and in the world" (248). God's spirit so fully envelops the physical, natural world that King goes on to claim that "Even the scientists who do not recognize God are guided by his spirit" (248). Whether such scientists would accept King's judgment or not is an open question. His main point is that we cannot sever God from history, nor can we restrict God's presence to faith alone. The gift of creation also includes the ability to understand that creation.

King's essay "How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction" (251-256) continues his examination of how God works in the world. While predominately an effort to reconcile the bible with science, the paper, by extension, shows King's view of God. Understanding scripture requires the application of modern scholarship and biblical criticism each of which exists through the rise of science and the progress of human knowledge. For King, reason and science invigorate and even permit a greater understanding of the biblical text, by offering standards of investigation and interpretation. In his assessment, we have moved from a more superficial and possibly false understanding of the text to one that, while incomplete and imperfect, shows more fully the meaning and purpose of scripture. Here again we see King's reliance on an evolving conceptualization of knowledge that also structures scripture itself. Consequently he states "This means that we can trace the great ideas of the Scripture from their elementary form to their point of maturity" (254). As our critical capabilities grow so too does our understanding of the bible, and it is God's spirit in the world that sustains these capabilities.

However in seeking to align the bible and science as part of God's historical presence, King comes perilously close to, if not inside, the circle of Christian triumphalism. His use of the term "progressive revelation" (256) to describe how modern biblical scholarship informs an understanding of the text makes it difficult to separate this greater knowledge from Christian faith. Indeed, King's own words elicit this connection. "We can start with the major ideas of the scripture and follow them as they develop from the acorns of immaturity to the oaks of maturity, and see them as they reach their culmination in Christ and his Gospel" (256). Although it may not be appropriate to accuse King of supersessionism, his words do obscure his main point that "God reveals himself progressively through human history" (254) in light of our increasing knowledge.

King's search for God while at Crozer culminates in his examination answers for a course he took the first semester of his last year entitled: "Christian Theology for Today" (289-294). In his answers, King tries to reconcile God with science, to explain God's nature, and to show how God is present in the world. King holds to the views of his earlier papers in trying to overturn the assertion that God and science are incompatible, that in "the emergence of the theory of evolution many thought that the basic Christian view of creation was totally destroyed" (290). The more we have of science, the less we have of God. King's solution is to transform the supposed antagonism of God and science into a partnership between evolution and creation. God creates, but that creation lives and develops through evolution. In order to keep both God and science, King asks: "Is it not possible for God to be working through the evolutionary process?" (290). Our understanding of creation cannot contradict the means by which that understanding arises; that is, if science explains the means and process of creation as evolution then religion or Christianity in particular cannot deny that explanation without also denying God's role in the human intelligence that produces this understanding. Science is not God, but the concepts that define and express God cannot be irrational or unscientific either. King employs the term "emergent evolution" as a way to structure the partnership between God and science (290). Evolution explains the world, and God is present as "an intelligent conscious mind working out its purpose through the evolutionary process," a process that King sees as an expression of God's creativity (290). True religion, for King, accepts and embraces the accumulation of knowledge about the world that science offers even if that knowledge is subject to change and re-evaluation for that increase in knowledge is also how God works in the world.

Science alone, however, cannot account for the fullness of God's reality. In completing his exam, King shows a God more deeply involved in the world as both immanent and historically active. For all of his efforts to integrate God and science, perhaps to counter his view of an overly emotional and undereducated Christianity, King also notes an element of sterility in the relationship. God and science co-exist, but, as noted above, they are not the same thing; science depends on the emergent evolution that King assigns to God's presence. God is prior to and foundational for human reason and the science it engenders. As *a priori*, God underlies the physicality of creation and, more importantly for King, the possibility of human experience. Taken together both these concepts frame King's definition of God as "a personal spirit immanent in nature and in the value structure of the universe" (290). While transcendence characterizes God's nature in so far as it allows God to be God (291), King relies on immanence to establish the fundamental relationship between God and humanity. God's presence to human beings is personal, which King connects to the essence of religious experience. Not wanting to lose this essence to the advance of scientific knowledge, King writes that it "is only a personal God who can confront man in a religious experience" (290). At the same time, not wanting to lose the personal immanence of God and its accompanying experience to individual emotionalism, King fuses together transcendence and immanence through his synthesis of creation and evolution. True religion, then, holds God's creation on the path of evolution just as evolution expresses God's creativity. From King's perspective his solution "still insists on a creative God and at the same time remains in the orbits of recent scientific findings" (291).

The final section of King's exam deals with the concept of miracles. As the editors point out, the questions for the exam do not exist (289). However, it may be the case that Professor Davis, perhaps recognizing the irony, deliberately chose a question on miracles to establish a contrast for the students with the modern, scientific world. King's brief answer, at least, tries to weave the miraculous and the modern together in an effort to explain how true religion can also contain miracles. King makes four points that reflect his view of God in the world (294). First, miracles are not so much violations of the laws of nature, if they are that at all; rather they testify to a God who is "living and active" and "who is continually working with his children" (294). Second, miracles are the expressions of God's true presence in the world doing "new and unpredictable things" that show God as "immanent in the process of history" (294). Third, miracles for King acquire a revelatory character as they express the ongoing presence of God in

the world and in human experience. Fourth, the miracle is God's presence, a God who for King "is alive today and will be forever more" (294). Yet King needs to say more. He is not content to leave God and the true religion that follows solely in the circle of science, reason, and evolution however much that circle must be drawn.

Given King's emphasis on modern knowledge and his acceptance of science as an essential constituent of God's creative activity, it is tempting to conclude that science incorporates all that we really need to know; the rest is window dressing. This conclusion is misplaced for, as the above analysis shows, God's historical immanence and personal presence in human experience envelops King's views on science and reason. As important as they are, science and reason cannot fully express all that is God. Their main function for King is to bring religion into the modern world, a necessary, but insufficient step to attain the summit of true religion. For the next step, King tries to establish a partnership between the modern world and religious tradition by using a series of connections that seek to hold each element of the partnership in place without negating the other. In what becomes his standard, dialectical approach to many issues, King cannot let science supplant faith nor can he allow faith to exist in a scientific vacuum. The head and the heart meet in a single voice even as they each struggle to be heard. King wants to ameliorate the struggle and turn what often appears as a contrast between science and faith into an expression of unity. The connections that King uses to cement this unity flow from his dialectical method into the specific structures of truth/true, myth/fact, and internal/external. Rather than viewing the pairs as incompatible opposites, King sees them as complimentary ends of a single whole, a whole that blends the ancient and modern worlds in a dialogue of meaning.

In a paper written during his first semester at Crozer in the fall of 1948 entitled "Light on the Old Testament from the Ancient Near East," King tries to construct the dialogue (162-180). The paper examines the contributions of modern archaeology in understanding the Old Testament, especially the recognition of the similarities between the biblical narratives and the stories of other neighboring cultural traditions. The question then arises as to how to interpret these similarities. King notes one possible conclusion in that "many would argue that these archaeological findings have proven to be very pernicious to modern religion. They argue that archaeologists have robbed the Old Testament of any claim to uniqueness" (180). Secondarily is King's assertion that as a result of modern scholarship "we must conclude that many of the

things which we have accepted as true historical happenings are merely mythological” (180). These two points delineate the fundamental problem facing King as he attempts to define true religion. It seems that scripture cannot hold to any special nature or if it tries then that uniqueness is only a mythical fantasy of little use. King’s response is to alter the focus of meaning from a literal interpretation and shift to what he sees as a more balanced approach. The uniqueness of the Old Testament lies in the scholar or scientist’s ability “to give a better understanding of the contents of the Bible,” which “will serve to justify the position of the church in modern culture” (180). The relevance of the church lies in the ability to render its message intelligible in the modern world, a world that new ideas and discoveries have shaped. Thus uniqueness for King is a function of increasing knowledge, not a matter of isolating or hiding the text from the gaze of critical analysis. If new knowledge reveals the mostly mythological nature of biblical events then that is the reality that believers must face. However, King does not want to denigrate the faith; rather, he views the mythical contours of scripture as a liberating realization.

King’s use of the phrase “merely mythological” is not meant to belittle the text or to eviscerate its meaning. Instead King employs the phrase as a means to express the deeper significance of the text. Consequently he differentiates between myth and fact, between what is true and what is the truth. The fact only forms the surface of an event indicating that something happened, but without necessarily conveying meaning. True religion entails the meaning or purpose behind the fact, which King sees as having a mythical content that transcends the fact itself. Myth propels us toward the quest for understanding. Thus King writes “One needs only to know that a myth serves the purpose of getting over an idea that is in the mind of the author. Therefore it becomes just as valuable as the factual” (180). Similarly King separates true and truth. To say that something is true reflects a factual or descriptive assertion that an event took place or that *that* something is empirically verifiable. Truth, on the other hand, elicits the questions of meaning and significance; it expresses the human longing for understanding. A lengthy quote from the end of King’s paper on the Old Testament and Ancient Religion shows this distinction.

If we accept the Old Testament as being “true” we will find it full of errors, contradictions, and obvious impossibilities—as that the Pentateuch was written by Moses. But if we accept it as “truth” we will find it to be one of the most logical

vehicles of mankind's deepest devotional thoughts and aspirations, couched in language which still retains its original vigor and its moral intensity. (180)

King's God of history lives in the facts of human life, but the God of history is most fully present in the original vigor and moral intensity that grounds the human search for meaning and purpose. Except for its awkward phrasing, the term "truth religion" rather than "true religion" best captures what King seeks. Truth religion searches for the "deeper meaning" (226) of faith, for the foundations of faith that lie behind the words of the doctrines and creeds. Truth religion is King's way of holding onto modern, scientific insights as well as the human expressions of belief. Each is essential for human existence and understanding. However, he still wants these beliefs to make sense in the modern world, and his way of doing this is to reference the truth that underlies the expression of belief. In his paper "The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope" (268-273), King bluntly affirms that Christians cannot accept old, unscientific beliefs such as a physical, second coming of Jesus (269), the resurrection of all in a day of judgment (270), a physical heaven (271), and earlier ideas about the kingdom of God (272). These were developed, through no fault of their creators, in unscientific times, which is why "such beliefs are unscientific, impossible, and even bizarre" (268). Yet these beliefs have a purpose, and this purpose needs to be translated into the truth that frames the beliefs. "Therefore," King writes, "it is our job as Christians to seek the spiritual pertinence of these beliefs, which taken literally are quite absurd" (268). To make this task possible, King utilizes a distinction between internal and external religion.

External religion represents the outer, institutional manifestation of religious belief organized around ritual and the structure of worship. Although important, ritual and formal worship are not the central elements of King's notion of true religion; they only partially express the full depths of religious meaning. In one of the few existing papers from his undergraduate years at Morehouse College, King examines the sacred and secular dimensions of ritual (127-142). He traces the psychological impact of ritual through its formulation of group identity and power over the individual (137-138), which leads to his three-point conclusion that ritual entails a precise form of observation, exerts a powerful degree of control, and evokes a measure of solemnity in the participants (140-141). King's main criticism is that these elements of ritualistic activity have become "the be-all and end-all of all social occasions" missing the true nature of ritual to move participants beyond the activity itself (140-141). One of King's early papers from

Crozer, “The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought,” (181-195) also embraces the distinction of internal and external. Using language very similar to that of the Morehouse paper, King’s Jeremiah “deals with a problem that is a danger of all religions. It states the important truth that ritual is never to be used as an end within itself, but only as a means to an end” (187). Thus King places Jeremiah in a position to criticize the “empty formalism” and “organized hypocrisy” of external religion, what King calls “unreal worship” (186). It is unreal because it “failed to see that religion is not something which can be organized, rather it is a spontaneous outflow from men’s contact with a divine spirit” (187). King characterizes this outflow of the relationship with the divine as true religion. It arises out of the experience of the divine and its essence is the internal transformation that derives from the experience. While not wanting to denigrate the external and formal structures of religion, King clearly sees them as secondary to the experiential and personal aspects of religion in which God’s presence shapes the individual. Thus, for King, “the response of the heart to the voice of God” (193) defines true religion. It is a recognition of and “a trust in the unerring righteousness of God” (191), a righteousness that engenders and sustains the moral transformation of individuals and societies. True religion rises with the hope that “the law written on the heart will become an inseparable part of man’s moral being” (185).

King employs four key concepts to explain the moral focus of true religion: Jesus, the Kingdom of God, moral character, and a prophetic relation to the world. Each lies behind the moral transformation that accompanies King’s vision of true religion. If, as King writes, God is “immanent in human history” (294) then there needs to be some normative expression of immanence that clearly reveals God’s historical presence and that also serves as a basis for judging the correspondence between God’s presence and human activity. Jesus fulfills this role for King since it is “through Jesus [that] the character of God is revealed to man” (287). Jesus shows us “the character of God” (247) and so unveils the fullness of God’s historical reality. Jesus stands as the criterion of judgment for human existence and certainly for those who call themselves Christian. King’s discussion of Jesus occurs mostly in three separate papers: “Six Talks in Outline” (242-251, see esp. 245-248); “The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus” (257-262); and “The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope” (268-273, see esp. 269-272). Perhaps indulging in some hyperbole, the first paper refers to Jesus as “the most persistent, inescapable, and influential figure that ever entered human history” (246). King, then, clothes Jesus in a

multi-colored fabric of qualities and characteristics. Jesus is the faithful Jew (245), the teacher (246), and the forceful personality (246) who seeks the deeper, spiritual meaning of his relationship with God. King's vision of Jesus' quest allows him to mold these elements into a cohesive image of an individual fully committed to God. This commitment most dramatically influences King's understanding of Jesus. Commenting on Jesus' character King writes, "Here we find a man who, through the process of struggle, so submitted his will to God's will that God used him to reveal his divine plan to man" (246). In essence, King views the manner of Jesus' life and death as the embodiment of God's plan. Jesus not only teaches what God wants, Jesus, through realizing "unity with God and with the human race" (247) is what God wants. He shows God to humanity and, at the same time, "shows us what we are and what we ought to be" (247), fallen yet still capable of goodness and love and made for reconciliation with God and one another. King sets God's plan in a moral rather than doctrinal world, which grounds his depiction of true religion.

King continues his examination of Jesus in his second paper, "The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus" (257-262), offering a fuller treatment of his views. King accepts the humanity and divinity of Jesus, but, given his rejection or, at least, skepticism regarding some of the major doctrinal formulations of Jesus' divinity, King turns his gaze toward the ethical as an expression of divinity. The moral focus allows King to retain the concept of divinity without having to accept what he views as its unscientific formulations (see again "The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope" 268-273). It is probably correct to say that the humanity of Jesus is more important for King than his divinity, that Jesus' humanity explains or substantiates his divinity. King proffers two apparently contradictory statements about Jesus. First, to affirm the humanity of Jesus, King writes that "there is not a limitation that humanity shares that Jesus did not fall heir" (258). However, to attest to Jesus' particularity, King notes that "no corrupt stain existed in his nature to which temptation could appeal" (258). The first statement forms King's belief in the full and actual humanity of Jesus. Jesus is nothing if not a real person enmeshed in the patterns of human existence. The second assertion, given the use of the term nature, seems to imply that a divine element independent or separate from Jesus' humanity protects him from corruption or sin. Thus Jesus' divinity stands against temptation and keeps him holy while his humanity faces temptation. However, King does not intend this conclusion. The nature that resists temptation is Jesus' own humanity. King rejects any semblance of an ontological or inherent divinity in Jesus,

which he regards as “harmful and detrimental” (262) due to its abandonment of Jesus’ humanity. Jesus challenges temptation through his humanity not in spite of it. Consequently King’s Jesus “overcame his temptations not by reliance on some inherent divine dimension, but by the constancy of his will” (260). Jesus’ humanity stands center stage for King. Yet he must still explain how Jesus “transcends the human” (260).

King views the divinity of Jesus as a fact, but not a given in the sense of an inherent divine nature in Jesus (261). Placing his Christology within the context of modern science and theological liberalism, King cannot accept Jesus as the “Pre-existent Logos” (261). He states that “most of us are not willing to see the union of human and divine in a metaphysical incarnation;” yet, “we must come to some view of the divinity of Jesus” (261). Where does this leave transcendence? How does it have meaning if not in an incarnational sense? King’s moral focus again surfaces as the connective tissue that binds Jesus’ humanity to a transcendent divinity. Jesus’ life, completely dependent on God, sustains its own divine transcendence through this very dependence. Thus for King, “we may find the divinity of Christ not in his unity with God, but in his filial consciousness and in his unique dependence upon God” (261). How Jesus lives in the fullness of his relationship with God establishes his divinity more than any inherent divine nature. It is possible to argue that King’s treatment of Jesus’ divinity is too superficial and incomplete. While not necessarily an incorrect conclusion, it also misses the essential point of King’s understanding of Jesus. His interest in Jesus is more moral than theological; King wants a Jesus that we can follow even if we do not achieve the same “uniqueness in the spiritual life” (260) as Jesus. Thus while King asserts divinity as an almost extreme form of humanity, it is a form of divinity that Jesus shares with the rest of humanity. “Christ was to be only the prototype of one among many brothers” (262). King’s notion of divinity reverses the singularity of Jesus’ divine-human nature and extends it, at least partially, to the moral actions of others. Thus human beings participate, however partially, in the actions of Jesus achieving some measure of their own divinity. King’s conclusion implies this point. “This divine quality of this unity with God was not something thrust upon Jesus from above, but it was a definite achievement through the process of moral struggle and self-abnegation” (262). In King’s view of true religion, moral action and discipleship matter more than doctrine. Thus his understanding of Jesus revolves around the effort to comprehend the nature of Jesus’ actions and to prepare oneself to follow that

same path. Doing so establishes the connection with Jesus and places the individual within the embrace of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God represents another element in King's analysis of true religion; it is a central part of his theology and the foundation for his understanding of human community and the moral demands necessary for its creation. Understanding the Kingdom provides the entry point for understanding what King will later call the Beloved Community, the fulfillment of his dream. In keeping with his modern perspective, King cannot accept a totally heavenly or extra-worldly construction of the Kingdom of God separate from any historical or social context. King proclaims that "a physical heaven and hell are inconceivable in a Copernican universe" (271). Instead the Kingdom resides in King's correlation of God's reality and Jesus' presence. If God works in history "through his spirit in the world" (248) and if Jesus reveals the "character of God" (247, 287) then the work of God in Jesus manifests the visible, practical reality of the Kingdom of God, a reality King views as reconciliation and unity. Reconciliation and unity form the basis of God's work as they characterize Jesus' efforts to live out of and in God's presence. "The coming of the Kingdom in the world" (283, see also 250) expresses God's hope for the reconciliation of humanity to one another and to God in the world. King does not deny the notion of a heavenly Kingdom, but his core belief centers on the Kingdom of God as essentially the social consequence of God's reconciling work that occurs in the life of Jesus, which leads to "a regenerated human society which will include all mankind in a common fellowship of well-ordered living" (250). However imperfectly realized, King places the presence of the Kingdom of God squarely in the midst of the world where the power of God's love forms the Kingdom in the midst of humanity.

Given King's identification of God's work with Jesus' life and death in describing the Kingdom, love becomes the core value and primary evidence for the reality of the Kingdom. If morality rather than doctrine characterizes King's view of true religion then it should not be surprising that the morality of the Kingdom of God is more important than a theological or doctrinal referent. Thus King defines the Kingdom of God through God's love for creation in general and through the love that King identifies with Jesus in particular. The cross is not a punishment for human sin; rather it is "the eternal sacrificial love of God" (267), the fullest expression of agape. As creator God imprints his nature on the process of creation and in the quality of existence that human beings share with one another. If "the motive of God in the

universe is holy love” (244) then love must also serve as the basis for human activities and relationships and stand as the means by which to judge those same activities and relationships. Love’s absence signifies the human failure to understand the true nature of God’s kingdom; its presence testifies to the realization that the Kingdom of God engenders a transformation of individuals and social structures leading to “a society governed by the law of love” (273). For King, the Kingdom of God and, therefore, true religion represents a new, moral configuration of human existence where love rather than hate governs people’s lives together. The Kingdom arrives as a new world, as “a place in which God is preparing his children for membership in a society in which all the relationships of life will be controlled by love” (283). In the short essay “The Purpose of Education,” written during his undergraduate years at Morehouse, King argues that education must provide a “moral foundation in society” (122). That foundation comes through the presence of the Kingdom of God and its practical manifestation in love leading to the Beloved Community that anchors King’s social thought. The function, then, of true religion is to facilitate the transformation into the Kingdom. Here is the true revelation of God in human history. What remains is to say something as to how this movement occurs.

While seeing Jesus and the Kingdom of God as the theoretical components of true religion, King proffers two practical elements through his emphasis on moral character and prophetic consciousness. These two features stand as the visible expression of true religion. Drawing on his distinction between internal and external religion, King looks to personal, inner transformation as one of the main characteristics of what true religion accomplishes. If we are to become like Jesus and live the Kingdom then the kinds of persons we are, the lives that we lead serve as the evidence for the transformation King seeks. This focus on moral character expresses the deeper meaning and the spiritual significance that King associates with true religion in contrast with the external, institutional forms of religion. Following Jesus implies, for King, a self-transformation that the individual undergoes in meeting the challenge that Jesus’ life represents to those who claim to follow him. Discipleship requires an examination of the qualities that we employ to define our moral lives. If these qualities conflict with the agapaic presence of Jesus then we must recognize the fundamental need to change who we are. King’s point here is not to establish a superficial perfectionism; rather, he presents discipleship as a both a process and a goal, a means as well as an end. It is not something that we fully attain as King’s

own life shows. Yet we can not follow Jesus without making the effort in what King calls “the cultivation of virtue” (285).

It is perhaps delicately ironic that King should focus on moral character as a central aspect of true religion given Crozer’s Field Work Department’s assessment of his work. While generally positive, the evaluation comments on King’s “attitude of aloofness, disdain, and possible snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of ordinary people. Also a smugness that refuses to adapt itself to the demands of ministering effectively to the average Negro congregation” (381). Possibly a consequence of King’s attempt to distance himself from the emotionalism of his own experience of church and to establish himself as more scientific and academic, these words represent only one facet of the dialectic that King constructs. He clearly wants to be academically credible; hence what may seem aloofness. Yet King also writes of “an inner urge calling me to serve humanity” (363), which demands another approach more conducive to personal relationships and connections that the emphasis on moral character makes possible.

For King, character is how true religion molds and defines the individual through the realization that God’s presence and the experience of that presence work to “produce internal change” (187). Moral transformation is the direct evidence of the experience of God as the individual rethinks and reshapes his or her life in light of that experience. King examines this change through his distinction between internal and external. Since the internal referent is more important for King, he places character in the context of inner change where the individual personally appropriates the law of God. In his paper on Jeremiah, King writes that “the law written on the heart will become an inseparable part of man’s moral being” (185), implying a “complete trust and harmony with God” (191). This inner law and personal change does have a specific content for King, not any sort of change or interpretation of God’s law will suffice. The combination of virtue and King’s emphasis on Jesus both animates and validates the union with God. Again the ethical rather than the doctrinal dominates King’s analysis. King’s paper “The Ethics of Late Judaism as Evidenced in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs” (195-209) offers a compendium of virtues that he associates with moral character such as love, temperance, simplicity, compassion, and forgiveness. Each revolves around “a conscious will to self-discipline” (202) and “a desire for high ethical character” (203). The personal nature of King’s understanding of the experience of God necessitates a personal, moral change in the life of the

believer through the acquisition of virtues or qualities that King associates with the nature of God. King's comment in the Jeremiah paper puts the matter clearly, "all this states one central truth, the inwardness of true religion" (185). Yet the inwardness is not without a normative measure. If Jesus reveals God's character (247,287) then Jesus also becomes the norm for any claim of moral transformation. For King, the second coming refers to the moral present of following Jesus' demands rather than any future, eschatological event as such. Moral character conforms to Jesus so that "we are celebrating the Second Advent every time we open our hearts to Jesus, every time we turn our backs to the low road and accept the high road, every time we say no to self that we may say yes to Jesus Christ, every time a man or woman turns from ugliness to beauty and is able to forgive even their enemies" (269). For King, Jesus pushes moral character into its true calling, the prophetic challenge to a world too often shaped by violence and injustice. The prophetic call to re-imagine the world as existing within the boundaries of the Kingdom of God grounds the practical dimension of King's vision of true religion and provides the relevance for faith in the modern age.

Although accepting the scientific worldview with its critique and even correction of religious doctrines, King cannot let science supplant religion. Religion, for King, is "an experience of value" that upholds a "faith in the friendliness of the universe" (409). The prophetic challenge arises from God's "objective validity" (356) that the reality of Jesus and the Kingdom express. The moral and religious task is to live out this validity in the world. King's paper on Jeremiah offers, again, a clue as to how he understands this task. King locates Jeremiah's significance in the prophet's "inner experiences" of God and his "deep love for his own people" (182). Possibly as a precursor to King's own sense of the coming time for civil rights, these factors combine with Jeremiah's presence in "a time which was ripe for a mighty appeal to the masses and to take advantage of a new spirit of the time that had taken hold of Judah" (181-182) to offer the message of "complete trust and harmony with God" (191). God is so present for Jeremiah that, in King's view, "the prophet had literally nothing left but God" (190). This nothing, however, contains the seeds of the demise of national religion and projects the rise of religion as a focal point for social critique. This insight guides King's belief that true religion always represents a prophetic challenge to a world that survives on the margins of the Kingdom of God. King's basic point stands clearly expressed. "Again Jeremiah is a shining example of the truth that religion should never sanction the status quo. This more than anything

else should be inculcated into the minds of modern religionists, for the worst disservice that we as individuals or churches can do to Christianity is to become sponsors and supporters of the status quo” (194). One consequence of King’s prophetic vision and its critical function is his comment from 1951 that “capitalism has outlived its usefulness” in that “it has failed to meet the needs of the masses” (436). While perhaps naïve in asserting capitalism’s decline, King’s main concern is to show how religion becomes true religion by remembering that the prophetic critique of the status quo offers the hope of living in the Kingdom of God.

The years 1944-1951 find King grappling with the meaning of religion in the modern age. From his own temperament and intellectual development, King seeks a way to reconcile science and reason with the essential truths of Christianity by emphasizing the moral and transformative nature of Christian beliefs, which he regards as more significant than doctrinal statements. King’s configuration of true religion delves beneath what he sees as the surface level of institutional religion to focus on the personal and experiential presence of God. Yet this presence also has a structure; it is not just a matter of individual expression. The Kingdom of God, Jesus, and the prophetic vision guide King’s image of true religion and, especially, its ethical dimension. At its heart, true religion contains both a personal and social critique that will eventually evolve into King’s theory of nonviolent social change.

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