COSMIC COMPANIONSHIP: THE PLACE OF GOD IN THE MORAL REASONING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of God was a central element in the moral reasoning of Martin Luther King, Jr. Originally shaped by his black religious heritage and developed further in his doctoral studies, the concept of God, his nature and his attributes frequently appeared as themes during King's leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. This essay examines the place of the concept of God in King's thought, concentrating on the last period of his life, when King took some of his most radical stands on social issues. This examination focuses on four elements in King's understanding of God: God as moral, God as powerful and able, God as loving, and fellowship with God in the struggle for justice as "cosmic companionship."

INTRODUCTION

As a child of the black church, in fact as the son, grandson, and great grandson of black preachers, and as the holder of a Ph.D. degree in systematic theology, Martin Luther King, Jr. was keenly attuned to the subtle nuances of God language and imagery in the culture of his people. It is not surprising that, as a doctoral candidate, he elected to write a dissertation on the concept of God in the writings of two contemporary theologians, Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. Nor is it surprising that, during his nearly 13 years of leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, King frequently analyzed social conditions in the light of his understanding of the attributes of God.

I have argued elsewhere (Mikelson, 1988), and others have argued (e.g., Cone, 1984, 1986; Garber, 1974–75), that King's understanding of God was influenced first and foremost by his black religious heritage. Later, as he mastered the language and rules of Euro-American theologies in seminary and graduate school, he simultaneously maintained a perspective from which he was critical of the God images which those theologies produced. The principal themes of his perspective were ones that had been popular in the preaching and writing of many black religious leaders in the genera-

tions before him. Their God was omnipotent, moral, loving, personal, and active in history. King remained faithful to and enlarged upon those attributes of God in his own thinking and they in turn became the tools he used for critical analysis of other theological positions and for interpreting the deeper meanings of social injustices. (See further Mikelson, 1988; Chapter 3.)

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how King drew upon his understanding of God as a resource for moral reasoning. I will focus on the last period of his life, a period in which King took some of his most radical stands on social issues. King's understanding of God during that final period of his life was similar to his understanding of God in earlier years. In fact, that very conception of God, along with his waxing discernment of the ethical imperatives implicit in it, informed his growing social radicalism and provided the ethical framework within which he interpreted it to others.

In the year or slightly more prior to his death, King's thought and leadership shifted noticeably from a specific focus upon race to broader issues concerning the interrelatedness of race, economic injustice, and U.S. foreign policy, especially the role of the United States in the Vietnam War. Those who were close to King during those months noticed that his rhetoric was becoming more radical and that his moods, while still sometimes buoyant and jocular as in earlier years, were more frequently depressed and discouraged. Those changes may have begun earlier, but, from the beginning of 1967 until his death, the changes were more pronounced and noticeable.

Since the beginning of his leadership role in the civil rights movement, there had been a close correspondence in King's thought between his understanding of God and his interpretation of social justice. As his social thought became more radical, it was natural to wonder whether his understanding of God also was changing. King's essential understanding of God was not changing, but the moral and ethical implications of his understanding of God were becoming more radical. King's interpreters rightly have called attention to the growing radicalism of King's social criticism, but they have not noted the important underlying continuity of his understanding of God. (See Garrow, 1986: last two chapters; Harding, 1986; Fairclough, 1983; Lincoln, 1970: 228–42).

Several things had changed significantly in the civil rights movement and in King's leadership during the last period of his life. Many blacks and whites were alienated by King's opposition to the United States' role in the Vietnam War and by his view of the United States as an oppressor in Third World Countries. There was discouragement within the civil rights movement over the crippled campaigns in Chicago and Cleveland, where the focus was as much economic as racial. (See further Anderson and Pickering, 1986.) The Black Power movement, by 1967, had become powerful

nationally and had eroded the cohesion of civil rights efforts which had existed earlier in Montgomery and Birmingham. King's leadership was being challenged within the movement, and the attitude of official America (federal government, major media, and liberal civil rights activists) was becoming more hostile toward him as his social views became more radical.

During 1966, King had led S.C.L.C. workers into the North for a campaign in Chicago. The Chicago campaign had been difficult and frustrating, and it was continuing to bring widespread criticism upon King from within the movement and from without. The social injustices of northern ghettoes seemed even more complex and intractable than the racism of the deep South, and the entrenched political system of Chicago seemed less permeable even than the politics of Georgia and Alabama. Militant local black leaders in Chicago accused King of selling out by reaching accords with city leaders, accords which were empty and useless for ghetto dwellers. The summer riots of 1965 and 1966 in Los Angeles, Newark, and Detroit forced King to reconsider the depth and intransigence of racism in American life, especially in northern urban areas. As 1967 began, therefore, he was forced to recognize that racism in the United States was deeper than he had imagined before.

King, discouraged and with increasingly radical views about the depth of racism in American society, began to see also that there were "hard-core economic issues" underlying racism which would require a "restructuring of the architecture of American society" (Garrow, 1986: 539–40). Those problems had an impact on all the poor, black and white alike. He referred to American ghettoes as "hell for the poor" and poverty as cruel. Riots were understandable; they were caused by unemployment and poverty in the ghettoes. Such economic problems, he held, were fundamental to any social change and the problems were international in scope (King, 1967b: 5, 6, 11; 1967i: 5; 1968a: 9, 55, 59, 60, 62; 1967a: 178–80).

At the same time, in the beginning of 1967, King's public opposition to the United States' role in the Vietnam War was becoming abruptly more militant. He had been opposed to the war earlier, and many of his close associates, who also were public opponents of the war, had urged him to join them in public resistance; but, until 1967, King had not made the war an issue in his leadership. In early 1967, he suddenly changed. In February, March, and April, he made widely-publicized, militant speeches against the United States' conduct of the war. His own government, King said in a speech in Riverside Church in New York, was the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" (Garrow, 1986:552–53). The country, he said, was "sick with militarism" (King 1967b: 6, 12; 1967f: 6–8; 1967i: 4–5; 1968a: 21–36. Cf. Garrow, 1986: 542–63).

At the same time, King saw more clearly the interrelatedness of racism, economic injustice, and militarism. "We must see the evils of racism,

economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together" (King, 1967d: 9). His questions about capitalism became more aggressive and he moved toward a democratic socialism in his political philosophy. The fundamentals of a socialist orientation were not new to King; for years, he had argued for economic equality, and he had noted in his speeches and writings parallels between the freedom struggles of American blacks and freedom struggles in the third world (Fairclough, 1983: 230–31). For several years, King had expressed an ambivalence about capitalism and some qualified appreciation of socialism. King was not alone in the black community on those points; socialist views were hardly new in Afro-American circles (Mays, 1968: 237–39). Still, until 1967, King had clung to his faith that capitalism could lift the poor, including black people, out of their poverty. In 1967 and 1968, his doubts about capitalism grew.

In 1967, King's vision shifted from non-violent reform of society to non-violent revolution at the deepest level of values (Garrow, 1986: 562 and Chapters 10, 11).

> After Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution. I think we must see the great distinction between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement. (King, 1967d: 8)

He began to envision and to advocate massive and disruptive nonviolent civil disobedience on a national and international scale. The U.S., he said, was on the "wrong side of a world-wide revolution." There needed to be an end to "colonialism" and "imperialism." The future lay neither with capitalism nor communism, but with "socially conscious democracy" (King, 1967a: 52–66, 85, 169, 170, 187; 1967: 55, 60, 62).

As King's moral vision became more comprehensive, his rhetoric became radical. He spoke of a needed revolution in this country and in the world, and of a needed spiritual rebirth for humanity. He spoke of a need for radical questions and for new values and priorities (King, 1968a: 60, 62; 1967a: 52–66, 85, 133, 170, 178; 1968i: 5; 1967b: 12–14). Responses to King's radical, new initiatives against the war in Vietnam and against economic imperialism were immediate and overwhelmingly negative, both from within the civil rights movement and from without. Throughout the period, his explanations of his changing moral vision rested on the premises of his understanding of God.

GOD AS MORAL
"I have faith in the final morality of the universe."

In the last year of his life, King made frequent references, in his speeches and writings, to God as a moral God, and to the moral order of

the universe. He had emphasized those themes throughout his public career with little shift of nuance. God, he had maintained, is moral, and the law of the universe ultimately is moral. The moral order of the universe, in spite of any and all appearances to the contrary, bends ultimately toward justice; one can trust in that. The basis of human hope in the "morality of the universe" is the "eternality of God." There was, he believed, an "eternal companionship" or a "cosmic companionship" in the struggles of moral living. In a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in April of 1967, a sermon in opposition to the Vietnam War, King said,

> I have not lost faith, I am not in despair because I know that there is a moral order. I have not lost faith because the arch [sic] of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. (King, 1967b: 17).[1]

In the fall of that year, again in a sermon at Ebenezer Church, King said,

> One with God is a majority. . . . And God has a way of transforming a minority into a majority. . . . Tell the world you are going with the truth. You are going with justice. . . . You are going with goodness. And you will have an eternal companionship. (King, 1967h:11)

In December, as King's friends noted with concern his deepening depressions, he preached to his congregation at Ebenezer on the theme of hope. "Hope," he said, "is necessary for creativity and spirituality."

> When you hope, you are really saying that you have faith in something. When you hope, you are really saying that you have faith in the ultimate meaning of life in history. . . . You are saying that you have faith in the fact that all reality hinges on moral foundations. . . . And there is a law of love in the universe. Try to break it if you will. It will break you. . . . When you really have hope, you have faith in the morality of the universe. . . . And I have faith in the final morality of the universe. It hinges on moral foundations. (King, 1967i:10–11)

Then, in a Christmas Sermon preached at Ebenezer Church, a sermon which was broadcast over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as part of the Massey Lectures, King again stressed the same theme.

If there is to be peace on earth and goodwill toward men, we

> must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. (King, 1968a:75)

King had stressed those themes throughout his career; but rarely, if ever, had he spoken or written them in a context of such negative public attitudes toward his leadership and such personal discouragement and

depression about the condition of the civil rights movement and the gloomy prospect for social transformation.

On the night before his death, King spoke to an audience in Memphis, Tennessee. Both his discouragement and his faith were prominent in his address, but so also was his perennial trust in the moral outcome of history.

> The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. . . . But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the Twentieth Century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding. . . . The masses of the people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today . . . the cry is a always the same, "We want to be free." (King, 1968b:2)

That same trust in the moral outcome of history, which had been present in King's thought throughout his career, also linked his thought with a similar emphasis in Afro-American thought. As Benjamin Mays had written about Afro-American religious thought in his book of 1938, "God is on the side of the righteous and the oppressed; and God will eventually bring to judgement those who contrive to violate his laws" (Mays, 1968: 126).

There had been an emphasis on God's government of the world in the writings of some of King's white theological mentors, but their concern was different from King's. Their concern was more philosophical and abstract; they were trying to understand how to harmonize God's government of the world with the fixed laws of nature. Their concern was more intellectual than social.[2] King accepted God's moral government of the world as a fundamental theological starting point. It is feasible to suggest, given the frequency of this theme in earlier Afro-American literature, that King's thought on this point was indebted chiefly to Afro-American thought.

GOD AS POWERFUL AND ABLE
"Dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows"

Throughout his career, King had linked God's moral purposes with God's power to accomplish God's ends. It was no different in the final year of his life; God still could "make a way out of no way" and "transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows" (King, 1967i:18).

King maintained that his faith in God's power had been the source of his courage and power to face frequent fears during the civil rights movement. In the last months of his life, there were constant rumors that he would be assassinated. On the night before his death, in Memphis, Tennessee, again there were death threats and King said, in his speech before a mass rally,

> I don't know what will happen now. . . . And I don't mind. . . . Like anybody, I would like to live a long life . . . But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. (King, 1968b:11)

God possesses the power, King said (1968b:11), so that even if he did not see the "promised land" for which he had been working, his people, nevertheless, would "get to the Promised Land."

In Afro-American religious thought, there had been little trace of a God with qualified power. The omnipotence of God had been predominant in the spirituals and in the black religious literature of all earlier periods. God sided with the righteous and fought their battles. (Mays, 1968:79). God was believed to be "on the side of the righteous and the oppressed; and God will eventually bring to judgment those who continue to violate his laws (Mays, 1968: 126). The similarity of emphasis between this and King's thought is quite striking and suggests the probable source of his emphasis.

PERSONALITY AS THE KEY
"Our personalities are here because that power was here first"

For King, personality—the capacity to know, to choose, and to act—was the mark of the divine in a human person. Human lives are sacred, he maintained, because they bear the stamp of the creator. Therefore, anything which desecrates the image of God in a person is a sin against God. King followed that line of reasoning in his arguments against the evils of segregation and used it also to legitimate his disobedience of unjust laws, i.e., laws which violate human personality. (Cf. Mikelson, 1988: Chapter 5.) If a law desecrates human personality, he maintained, and one cannot alter the law by other ethically acceptable means, there is a moral obligation to disobey human law in obedience to a higher law.

In the last year of his life, King still held to his conviction that the sacred image of God in human personality is a basis of moral reasoning. In a sermon against the Vietnam War, in April of 1967, he said, "All men are made in the image of God," a concept stemming from the "Judeo-Christian heritage." Therefore, said King, he was speaking as "a child of God" and as "a brother to the suffering poor in Vietnam" (King, 1967b:11, 16). In another sermon at Ebenezer Church, a few weeks later, King said (1967e:8) that there is in all people something "that is God-like" and, therefore, we do not judge them but love them. In the same period, King said (1967d:10) in a speech at an S.C.L.C. staff retreat,

> Somebody must say to America, America if you have a contempt for life, if you exploit human beings by seeing them as less than human, if you will treat human beings as a means to an end, you thingify those human beings.

In another sermon at Ebenezer in the same time period, in a rather lengthy paragraph on the meaning of God, King said (1967g:7–8),

> There is a power in the universe. . . . And we are here because that power was here first. Our personalities are here because that power was here first.

In each of his two books written in 1967, King stressed the image of God in human personality. In *Where Do We Go From Here,* there is some of the most carefully crafted, though brief, theological argumentation found anywhere in his later published writings. In a chapter entitled, "Racism and the White Backlash," King carefully spelled out the theological reasons for his condemnation of segregation and discrimination. They desecrate the image of God in human personality.

> Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. Every man must be respected because God loves him. . . . Human worth lies in relatedness to God. (King, 1967a:97)

That stamp of the creator, he wrote (1967a:99), is human freedom, the capacity of the human personality to "deliberate, decide, and respond." Nothing is more "diabolical," he added, "than to damage or withhold from a person that "something which constitutes his true essence." We must affirm, he wrote, "that every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in man."

> Deeply woven into the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God, and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men go hungry, to see men victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them. (King, 1967a:180)

In his brief book, *The Trumpet of Conscience,* the Massey lectures of November and December of 1967, King wrote (1968a:72),

> "Every man is somebody because he is a child of God . . . Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such."

With that as his theological conviction, he was speaking, he said (1968a:31), "as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam."

In earlier years, King had used those arguments to emphasize the equal worth of black people and white people; in 1967–68, he used them to underscore the equal worth of Americans and Asians in the eyes of God. The theme of God's image in human personality persisted in his thought throughout the final year of his life. What did change, however, was King's ramification of that theme in his social ethic. Earlier, he had appealed to

the divine image to ground his argument for the moral evil of racism and the moral rightness of civil disobedience; laws which desecrate the image of God in human personality, he had argued, should not be obeyed. In the final year of his life, he used the same theme to ground his assertion that racism, international poverty, and militarism are, in a fundamental sense, similar; each, in its own way, is a blatant desecration of God's image in human personality.

King could not distinguish, in essence, between oppressed black persons in this country and oppressed persons in other countries; all bore the same stamp of the creator, and all were equally sacred as persons. If God's image exists in everyone, King thought, then God loves everyone and loves them equally. The logic of those premises, for King, could no longer be confined to the single issue of race; it extended inevitably also to other issues. If his own government oppressed black persons in this country, the poor in Vietnam, and lower classes in Latin America and Africa through a foreign policy of colonial imperialism, then obedience to God implied resistance to his government. Such exploitations were of different kinds, to be sure, but the underlying violations of the image of God in human personality constituted a common moral denominator. The theological starting point of King's later social critique was the same as that of his earlier critique; however, as he understood with increasing clarity the depth and interrelatedness of racism, poverty, and militarism, the ethical ramifications of the image of God in human personality became more militant in his thinking.

The notion that God is personal, that human beings bear the image of God in their personality, and therefore that human personality is sacred and is the basis for inalienable rights, was not new among Afro-Americans. It was a theme in the earlier thought of figures such as Kelly Miller and Robert Russa Moton, and it occurred frequently in Afro-American preaching. Any attempt to understand King's proclivity toward the idea of God as personal must confront first the prominence of that theme in Afro-American religious thought. The personalist philosophical orientation of his mentors at Boston University led them to some of the same conclusions about the personalness of God, and King many times acknowledged their influence upon him. Even so, King was predisposed by his early religious background toward the theological formulations of personalism on this point, and one must see his religious background as the seedbed for personalist themes in his later theological thought.

GOD AS LOVING

"Agape . . . the love of God operating in the human heart"

King throughout his career represented God as a God of love, a God who loves unconditionally and who desires humans to love in the same

way. He had spoken and written about God's love by utilizing the Greek concept of agape. He continued the same emphasis during the last year of his life with little alteration. In his deepening discouragement and periodic depressions, it would not have been surprising to discover that King's thinking about God had become more questioning, more tentative, or more doubtful, in the spirit of earlier Afro-American writers such as W.E.B. DuBois or Langston Hughes; but it did not.

In his sermon at Ebenezer Church against the war in Vietnam, in April of 1967, King spoke about "loyalties" that must be "ecumenical rather than sectional." The emphasis must be upon "mankind as a whole," he said. There must be a "world-wide fellowship," a "neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation," an "all embracing unconditional love for all men (King, 1967:14). That kind of love, he continued, is not something "sentimental and weak." On the contrary, it is

> that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leds [sic] to ultimate reality. This Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first Epistle of John: "Let us love one another, for God is love." (King, 1967b:14)

That precise formulation was not new to King. He had used almost exactly those words in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December of 1964.

In May of 1967, King preached at Ebenezer Church a sermon entitled "Levels of Love." In that sermon, King asserted (1967c: 2) "Love is always unconditional." Then he launched into his familiar exegesis of different kinds of love—philia, eros, humanitarian love, and agape—an analysis that he had used many times over the years. There were two differences in his discussion on that occasion; his commentary contained more homiletical, illustrative material to interpret the abstract principles, and it included the category of humanitarian love which King had not mentioned before. Humanitarian love, he explained, is love which loves humanity in the abstract but is either unable or unwilling to love specifically and concretely; the point added little to the familiar substance of his earlier arguments.

The highest form of love, he concluded, is found "in the meaning of the Cross . . , an eternal symbol of the love of God, operating in time." That kind of love loves for the sake of the other. "It is a spontaneous overflowing love that seeks nothing in return." That is God's love, he said, which loves "in spite of." That is "the door to ultimate reality" (King, 1967c:7-8).

Also in May, at the S.C.L.C. staff retreat in Frogmore, North Carolina, King (1967d:8, 27) spoke forcefully about the power and the demand of love. Love is not "reckless," he said, and love is not "meekness, without muscle." "Love means going to any length to restore broken community."

In a sermon at Ebenezer Church in early June of 1967, King preached on "Standing by the Best in an Evil Time." He stressed, for Jesus, "other preservation is the first law of life." As an illustration, he (1967f:2) interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan in such a way as to show that by "other preservation" he meant love in its highest sense, agape love.

Near the end of his book, *Where Do We Go From Here?,* King again wrote about "other preservation" as the "first law of life." Things go awry, he wrote, if we are not diligent in our "cultivation of the other regarding dimension. 'I' cannot reach fulfillment without 'thou.' " The "other regarding way," he wrote, is founded upon the conviction that

> men are made in the image of God, and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them. (King, 1967a:180)

In his final book, *The Trumpet of Conscience,* King wrote again about the centrality of agape love. Agape, he wrote is

> understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill toward all men. Agape is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. (King, 1968a:73)

Those were familiar words to King, words which he had used at least from the time of his graduate school years. His presentation of the love of God changed very little from then until the end of his life.

In Afro-American religious thought, the idea that God is love, and loves all persons, was so significant that it was used during the era of slavery to exhort slaves to love even their owners, an idea which translates easily into King's thought in two ways: 1) that black people are loved by God and, therefore, that segregation is immoral; and 2) that the way to overcome segregation is through love, even love of the segregationist.

The understanding that God's love is universal, not just for black people but for all persons, had been a preeminent theme in earlier Afro-American religious thought, especially in the generation following World War I. That emphasis, which had been only occasional in the literature of earlier periods, became in this period a major theme. In this literature, God came to be understood as "wholly impartial," a God who "from one blood created all races and nations" (W.E.B. DuBois). God set no geographical boundaries or racial limitations, the rights of humanity were divinely given, and all were considered as God's creatures (Kelly Miller). Kelly Miller wrote: "The rights of humanity are inalienable, of which no human creature can be divested by reason of race, color, condition, creed, or clime." God mad no widely different races (William Pickens). God was

impartial (Archibald Grimke, Willis J. King). All humans were neighbors (Willis J. King). In the thought of those writers, God was universal and the welfare of Afro-Americans was seen in the context of God's universal activity. (Quotations from Mays, 1968:165–66.)

King's familiar emphasis upon God's universal love, even in the late period of his life when his social views were becoming more radical, was in the main stream of Afro-American religion. Even his references to love as an inclusive Buddhist-Christian-Hindu-Jewish principle of ultimate reality were not unheard of in earlier Afro-American thought. The poet Walter Everett Hawkins had used essentially the same idea and extended its implication by placing Christ on a par with the founding figures of other world religions: "Islam and Buddha and Christ, all but tend Toward the same goal,—these but means toward an end" (Hawkins, 1920:45). There is not much in King's emphasis on God's universality that cannot be found in earlier Afro-American literature.

COSMIC COMPANIONSHIP

"You will have an eternal companionship."

In the final year of his life, as in earlier years, King (1968a:75) still made reference to a "cosmic companionship" in the struggle for "peace on earth and goodwill toward men." At the S.C.L.C. staff retreat in Frogmore, in May of 1967, as the criticism of his stand against the war in Vietnam continued to widen, King said to his associates,

> So I am not lonesome these days. I have companionship. Some that used to be with me have left me, but I have companionship. Somebody who used to support me may cut it off, but I have companionship. And I may not be in an earthly United States majority, but for a long time I have learned that one with God is a majority. And I am going on with that faith (King, 1967d:33)

In a sermon preached at Ebenezer Church in November of 1967, King said (1967h:11) "Tell the world that you are going with truth. You are going with justice. . . . You are going with goodness. And you will have an eternal companionship." That same theme is found, expressed in different ways, in many of the writings from King's final year.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that, during the last months of King's life, his outlook on the major problems of society was becoming more radical while the primary themes in his discourse about God were much the same as they

had been throughout his career. There is little doubt that his social analysis, at the end of his life, was becoming noticeably sharper and more critical. He had discovered that racism was more stubborn than he earlier had supposed; he came to see the interrelatedness of racism and poverty; and he saw in American foreign policy a colonial imperialism which deepened his objections to American capitalism. During his final months, he shifted his attention from social problems such as racism in isolation; he became convinced that the entire society needed a revolution of values, a profound reordering of priorities.

Side by side with King's shifting social analysis during the late period of his life, there was a continuity in his God imagery. His repeated emphasis upon the power of God, the morality of God, the lovingness of God, the activity of God in history, the personalness of God, and God's cosmic companionship with those who work for justice, was reminiscent of his thinking in each of the earlier periods of his career. King's view of God had changed little throughout his career; the ethical ramifications of his understanding of God, on the other hand, had become more radical during the final period of his life.

King, with a Ph.D. degree in systematic theology, was an active minister throughout his entire career as a civil rights leader. He interpreted the movement, over and over again, in the light of images of God by which he had been nurtured in his early life. His thinking about God, as I have shown, while it unquestionably reflected the refinement of his seminary and doctoral training, also reveals a convincing continuity, in his choice of themes and even of phrasing, with the discourse of earlier Afro-American theological thought. That understanding of God—as omnipotent, moral, loving, personal, and active in history—was, as Benjamin Mays has argued, rooted in the social experience of Afro-Americans, and was the focal element in a theology of social transformation.

NOTES

1. I have inserted a "sic" after the word "arch" because King nearly always used the word "arc," not "arch," when making this reference. This irregularity may be King's; more likely, it can be ascribed to a typist or later editor. The existing manuscript was made from a sound track.

2. I am referring especially to the efforts of the personalists to solve the intellectual problem of evil. How is it that God can be both powerful and good? Knudson, Brightman, and DeWolf had all struggled with that question, and King treated the issue in his dissertation. See further Mikelson, 1988: Chapter 3, Section 9.

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