THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE THOUGHT OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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By

DUANE EUGENE HIX, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Duane Eugene Hix, B.A. (Parsons College)

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

This thesis is written primarily to show the strong foundation which King's religious thought gives to his social activism and his nonviolent resistance. To do so the thesis first shows how King's religious thought can be most fully seen within the context of the religious concept of the Kingdom of God. As the outline of King's religious thought develops, it will be seen that he emphasizes the themes of God's sovereignty, Christ's immanence, and the Kingdom of God both present and future. After an exposition of the basic tenets of King's nonviolent resistance, these religious themes are shown to be the basis upon which the nonviolent resistance rests.

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It is appropriate that I acknowledge at this time the aid given to me in the writing of this thesis by two men who have greatly furthered my academic career, Dr. G. P. Grant and Mr. E.B. Heaven. Their reassuring comments and helpful criticisms were and are invaluable. I also acknowledge the kind interest shown in this topic by my fellow graduate students at McMaster University. Finally, the aid in collecting material about Dr. King which was given to me by The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Social Change was much appreciated, as was the confidence shown in me by the director of the Center in his asking for a copy of this thesis for the Center library.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing questions regarding the foundations of moral and ethical theory is whether there can be any genuine morality without the presupposition of an immortal being. That is, if there is nothing higher than humanity, can there be any moral principles which are more than expedient measures taken for personal gain? Surely the final answer to this question is far beyond the scope of this M.A. thesis, but it does have an important connection, for Martin Luther King, Jr. is one who has answered this question by speaking and acting in such a way that the morality which he practiced, through his nonviolent resistance, was shown to be dependent upon his belief in a loving, immortal, Being.

It is not without good reason that King is remembered because of his actions which brought concrete gains to the civil-rights movement and because of a martyr-like death which tragically accentuated his total commitment to a more just society. It is equally important, however, that King be remembered for the religious ideas and ideals which strengthened him and gave purpose to his life.

What this thesis does is to make more evident and t more understandable the relationship between King's religious beliefs and his practiced moral actions. It does

this by postulating and examining the central religious concept in King's thought, viz. the Kingdom of God, and then by showing how his teaching on nonviolence, that was the basis for the significant moral actions in King's public life, must be seen within its religious context for its ultimate, powerful, meaning to be fully understood.

In accordance with this general purpose, the thesis will be comprised of three sections. The first section will address the question: "What is the precise conception of the Kingdom of God in the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.?" Involved in this will be an extended statment as to the main tenets of King's religious beliefs and an explanation of how these tenets are most readily understood in terms of the concept of the Kingdom of God. The second section will be devoted to a concise summary and explanation of the primary tenets of King's teachings on nonviolent resistance. The final section will first show how the concept of the Kingdom of God in King's religious thought provides a limited framework within which nonviolence should operate, and secondly, how King's teachings on nonviolence stem from and complement many of the chief principles in his religious belief.

I

THE MEANING OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN KING'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

The Centrality of the Kingdom in King's Religious Thought

It is the contention of this thesis that the Kingdom of God is the unifying concept in Martin Luther King's religious belief, and that this religious belief is in turn the foundation for King's teachings on nonviolent resistance. Thus it is necessary to make clear what is meant by the concept "Kingdom of God", and in so doing, to show how King's religious belief is best seen within the framework that the Kingdom of God provides.

To understand the heart of King's religious faith it is helpful to see his place within the tradition of American Protestantism, for his background as minister of the Baptist church placed him squarely within the Protestant tradition, and his life as a black American added a dimension of religious influences unfamiliar to European Protestantism.

One important account of American Protestantism, that of H.R. Niebuhr in the book The Kingdom of God in America, has shown the key principle around which this

Protestantism is centered to be the concept of the Kingdom of God.[1] Through the use of the framework given to the Kingdom of God in Niebuhr's account it will become evident in this thesis why King's religious thought, rooted in the American Protestant tradition, is best understood within the context of the Kingdom of God.[2]

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (Chicago, 1937).

[2] An explanatory note is relevant at this time in regard to the method that has been used in systematizing King's religious beliefs. I am discomfited by the fear that through the precise ordering of King's religious beliefs I am making him into something which he simply was not, namely a systematic theologian. He truly was something much more than an orderly thinker - for he apprehended the heart of the Christian message in such a way that he lived his life as fully as was possible in accord with that message.

King was given the opportunity to examine and apply the methods of systematic theology during his academic career, especially during his Ph'd. study at Boston University under Edgar Brightman and Harold DeWolf. King's Ph'd. thesis was written specifically within the sphere of systematic theology, the topic of the thesis being "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman". This training helped King to realize the need for a coherent and well-founded system of thought, but it is a fact that King did not write out his own thought within the framework of a similar system. The practical activity of his life made this impossible.

But although King did not make this systematic attempt to set down his thoughts, he was heir to a general ordering principle - given to him by his religious tradition - within which his particular beliefs became understandable. The concept of the Kingdom of God is that ordering principle. In organizing the tenets of King's religious thought in terms of the concept of the Kingdom of God, I attempt to make evident only an overall implicit but unstated framework for his religious thought. This is not to over-systematize a pattern of thought which is

This schema of Niebuhr's which is to be employed is subject to a primary division into three parts. Niebuhr uses the phrases "sovereignty of God", "kingdom of

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non-systematic, but to attempt to view King's religious thought as explicitly as he himself saw it. In other words, although King did not often speak explicitly of the Kingdom of God, he did invariably speak in terms of the Kingdom of God. In this way the Kingdom becomes an organizing principle which integrates and gives a coherence to King's religious thought that other accounts of King's ideas have failed to recognize [as, for example, Herbert W. Richardson, "Martin Luther King - Unsung Theologian", Commonweal, LXXXVIII (May 3, 1968), 201-203; and Hanes Walton, Jr., The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Westport, Conn., 1971)].

H.R. Niebuhr's account of the Kingdom of God, which is being used in this thesis, is of course only one of many alternative accounts of the Kingdom of God that could have been used as the framework for King's religious thought. And although Niebuhr's account is a very good one, whether or not it is the best of all the alternatives is an open question. But that question must remain open, at least for the purposes of this thesis, for a final answer to it would require an extensive knowledge of the many different aspects of Christian thought from the Reformation to the present day, as well as an expert familiarity with how the theme of the Kingdom of God is handled in Scripture. An investigation of the Kingdom of God in these proportions would of course take us far afield. It is important, however, to note briefly why Niebuhr's account is particularly relevant to King's theology. Niebuhr first of all deals specifically with the American conception of the Kingdom of God, and this certainly chooses from the range of alternative conceptions one to which King is well suited. Secondly, Niebuhr deals only with Protestant conceptions, again presenting a context within which King's Baptist training fits. And finally, most importantly, Niebuhr's division of the Kingdom into three parts - the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the coming kingdom - provides an excellent instrument with which to expound the different facets of King's thought separately while at the same time showing that all these different facets of his thought are held together within an overall general framework. Thus by using Niebuhr's framework it is possible to make evident the im-

Christ", and "the coming kingdom" to make more explicit the different dimensions which are parts of the overall concept of the Kingdom of God. Each of the three parts has an identity uniquely its own, pertaining to a particular time during the growth of American Protestantism, and each emphasizes definite qualities that have gone to make up the total meaning of the Kingdom of God as it particularly pertains to America. Yet the uniqueness of each of the three dimensions should not be overemphasized. Each affirms one particular idea at the expense of the dominant idea of the other two dimensions, but all are included within the same whole. Niebuhr affirms the importance of seeing this unity: "The three notes of faith in the sovereignty, the experiences of the love of Christ and the hope of ultimate redemption are inseparable."[3] Each of the three basic emphases of the Kingdom of God shall be treated in turn, and shall be related to the relevant primary ideas in King's religious thought.

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plicit general systematic principle of the tradition out of which King's non-systematic thought arose.

In establishing the centrality and meaning of the Kingdom of God in King's thought, his writings in the form of sermons will be heavily relied upon. These are collected in the volume Strength to Love (New York, 1963). One other important statement made by King is entitled "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence", which can be found both in Strength to Love and in King's first book Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (New York, 1958). The sermons, written during King's leadership of the Montgomery crusade, can be relied upon to be faithful to the basic principles of his vision of Christianity.

The Sovereignty of God and King's Religious Thought

The most prominent and lasting of the three key ideas which Niebuhr's account combines to form the complete meaning of the Kingdom of God in American Protestantism is also the idea which was historically the first. The earliest Protestant settlements brought with them the idea so prominent in the Reformation, viz. God's transcendent claim upon man, or more specifically, His sovereignty over man.[4] These early American Protestant believers understood the Kingdom of God not as a golden society founded on good will and peace, but rather as a trusting confidence in a sovereign God who, however hidden, still had the workings of the world well within rein.

It followed from the belief in the grand sovereignty of God that man's own human capacities for goodness were downplayed or even thought to be practically nonexistent, as Niebuhr relates:

> Since God is the source of all power and value, his nature and his will rather than human nature and human desires or ideals need to be consulted in all human actions. Furthermore, if God is really the beginning, his character and intention need to be learned from himself and not prescribed to him by means of ideas of his will gained from human nature.[5]

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[3] H.R. Niebuhr, p. 127.

[4] Ibid., p. 45.

[5] Ibid., p. 59.

Since God alone is sovereign, it follows that man, with a captive will and even a captive understanding, is limited in the exercise of his freedom. It is this emphasis on a sovereign God, then, and the distance between Him and fallen man, that is the focal point of this first conception of the Kingdom of God in American Protestantism.

A significant part of King's own theology is markedly similar to the importance attributed to a sovereign God by the earliest American Protestants. In the context of a sermon entitled "Our God is Able" King identifies himself with the traditional Christian belief in the sovereignty of God, saying that:

> At the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and in history.... The God whom we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigantic waves of opposition and to bring low prodigious mountains of evil. The ringing testimony of the Christian faith is that God is able.[6]

It is possible to recognize how much God's sovereignty is important to King by noting the extent to which such sovereignty affected his understanding of the nature of man. In fact, the complete meaning of his theology and its relationship to the concept of the Kingdom of God is highly dependent upon King's understanding of the nature

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[6]King, Strength to Love, p. 124.

of man. Insofar as King held to a belief in the possibility of the Kingdom of God becoming manifest on earth, he did so because of his recognition of the potential for redemption lodged at the core of human nature. Insofar as King believed that the Kingdom would always remain outside of time, outside of the capacity of man to realize or recognize it, he did so because of his belief in the corruption and evilness in human nature and the place of such fallenness in the total plan of a sovereign God. These two positions, one favoring a more optimistic picture of man's potential for goodness, the other holding to a more pessimistic picture which regards man's nature as fully depraved, stand at opposite ends of a spectrum. Yet, as will be shown, King's solution to this familiar problem was to embrace fully neither of the two extremes but instead to recognize the partial truth of both and to hold them together in creative tension.

This question as to the ultimate nature of man is in many ways a foremost distinguishing factor between liberal Protestant theology and a more orthodox position. Thus it is important to trace it in King's intellectual development, for as his writing "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" shows, his religious belief is characterized by the struggle to integrate certain parts of liberalism with orthodoxy.[7] The more orthodox influences will be examined here

in relationship to the sovereignty of God with the liberal influences examined in a subsequent section.

Of the few accounts of King's theology that have been attempted by others, most have failed to recognize strongly enough the black Baptist heritage of which King was a part. Previous accounts tend to place the real formulation of King's theological position during his questioning years of college, seminary, and graduate school.[8]

There is no doubt that King's most complete expression of his theological stance came after his scholastic encounters with the thinkers he was exposed to in his academic years. But it is equally beyond doubt that the original position from which he began his intellectual formulation of a religious stance was a deeply ingrained near-fundamentalism characteristic of a black Baptist tradition handed down by way of King's father and grandfather, both of whom were preachers like himself. The difficulty with the influence of this Baptist tradition for King, however, was that although this tradition grasped a par-

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[7]See "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" in King, Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 90-107, especially the sections regarding Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr.

[8]Both John W. Rathbun, "Martin Luther King: The Theology of Social Action", American Quarterly, (Spring 1968), pp. 38-53, and H.W. Richardson, "M.L.K. - Unsung Theologian", though helpful in many ways, do fail to recognize the importance of the black Baptist tradition to King and thus point to his specific academic career as the most formative factor.

tial truth about the nature of man, it held that partial truth too "dogmatically" for a questioning mind. As shall be seen when attention is directed to those aspects of King's thought which hold a more optimistic view of human nature, King soon moved from this more fundamentalist Baptist position to a nearly complete liberal stand. And he did so, he makes known, primarily because liberalism gave him a critical eye and "... knocked me out of my dogmatic slumber."[9]

The course of King's religious development as it pertained to his understanding of man's nature thus moved from an original fundamentalist position to a more liberal stance. But the critical eye developed in his contact with the liberal tradition inevitable led King away from parts of that liberal stance and back to a more appreciative recognition of the partial truth he began with, namely that in many ways man's nature is degenerate and corrupt.

This full circle of development would probably not have occurred, however, unless King had come into contact with the ideas of certain neo-orthodox thinkers, particularly Reinhold Niebuhr. King chose to follow the thought of Niebuhr rather than the neo-orthodoxy of the Barthian school[10] primarily because Reinhold Niebuhr was

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[9]King, Strength to Love, p. 165.

[10]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 99.

able to place limits upon man's human capacities for goodness, including his ability to think rationally, without falling into a complete anti-rationalist account of human ability.[11] The liberalism against which Niebuhr reacted (as did King also, owing to Niebuhr's influence) held that the rational use of man's God-given capacities is one very crucial key to a better life. But reason, argued Niebuhr, is darkened and perverted by sinful man. Reason is subject to human whims and prejudice. Reason is dominated oftentimes by the irrationality so much a part of the human character. To the tradition of which King was a part, all these statements about the limitations on man's capacity for goodness had been shown to be correct ones. Certainly a black Baptist tradition which had lived through nearly two and one-half centuries of physical slavery and a full century more of a psychological slavery equally as debilitating would be prone to recognize the truth in Niebuhr's assertion about the depths to which man could sink.

Reinhold Niebuhr's writings contain these warnings

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[11]The section noting the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr which follows is deemed necessary because of the immense influence which Niebuhr had on the development of King's ideas. At one point (Stride Toward Freedom, p. 97) King says: "The prophetic and realistic elements in Niebuhr's passionate style and profound thought were appealing to me, and I became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote." Thus the section given to Niebuhr's ideas allows an insight into one of the alternative patterns of thought to which King was greatly attracted and by which he was much affected but which he ultimately found inadequate.

against a false optimism time and again, especially warnings that man places too much hope in the power of unaided reason. But his disapprobation of a too-strong belief in the power of man's rational capacity to make a better life did not lead him to the extreme of rejecting reason altogether as a source of veracity. Niebuhr agreed that reason could not create the unselfishness in man that can put the welfare of others before one's own. But if grace had given man charity and selflessness, then reason could help perpetuate and broaden that charity. Niebuhr recognized the inability of reason to do away with greed and the desire for power, but he did hold that it may limit these tendencies by providing for a worthy set of checks and balances. Reason alone might not be able to abolish violence, but it could, within Niebuhr's realistic assessment of man's capacities, help keep violence to a minimum.[12]

Yet the usefulness of reason within the limits he sets down should not be emphasized to the point of mistaking Niebuhr's central message. He quite explicitly says that man's essential nature is one of selfishness and greed and godlessness. In one of his writings, he quotes as support for his stand Jeremy Bentham, who, disillusioned at the end of his life, stated: "Now for

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[12]Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), pp. 164ff.

some years past all inconsistencies, all surprises have vanished.... A clue to the interior of the labyrinth has been found. It is the principle of self-preference. Man, from the very constitution of his nature, prefers his own happiness to that of all other sentient beings put together."[13]

It was in the doctrine of man as fallen creature that King was in closest affinity with Niebuhr, thus King shared Niebuhr's caution that the rational capacities of man are too highly thought of. The scepticism regarding human potential for goodness led King to question his own pacifist tendencies and ultimately led him to disagree with any kind of radical pacifism which too readily believed in the natural goodness of man.[14] In a statement on the meaning of the crucifixion King precisely expresses thoughts that reflect the realistic position he arrived at with the aid of Niebuhr's insights: "As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but of man at his worst."[15]

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[13]Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 46.

[14]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 99.

[15]King, Strength to Love, p. 40.

King refused, however, as will be seen, to believe that this corrupted state of man was an absolute corruption, and although he maintained at all times a cautionary and sceptical approach, King did not fall into a pessimism as a result of his observations on man's corruption. Instead, King called this "Christian realism", and drew from the fact of man's sinful fallenness the corollary that man is now and always will be in need of the forgiving, replenishing grace of a sovereign God.[16]

Out of King's understanding of man in relation to a sovereign God grew two very important consequences. One of these was his distrust of humanism. In his emphasis upon the sovereignty of God and the accompanying fallenness of man were the roots of King's distrust, because the humanist position proposed to bring about a perfect state of human affairs without any appeal for divine guidance. King thus regarded humanism with scepticism because it placed its faith in a wrongly conceived overly-optimistic conception of human nature and because it disregarded the need for subservience to a sovereign God.

The humanism which King confronted most pointedly was influenced by what he came to call the "nineteenth century doctrine of inevitable progress".[17] The Enligh-

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[16] King, Strength to Love, p. 111.

[17] Ibid., pp. 146-147.

tenment thinkers of the centuries before, and their followers of the nineteenth century, who emphasized man's original goodness and coupled this with his new scientific genius, were those who King saw as his special opponents. It was their writings, he held, that had reaffirmed the humanist traditions of the past and turned man away from a faith in God's sovereignty and toward a faith in man's innate capacities. The fallaciousness of such humanism King exposes in this lengthy quotation:

> Men have usually pursued two paths to eliminate evil and thereby save the world. The first calls upon man to remove evil through his own power and ingenuity in the strange conviction that by thinking, inventing, he will at last conquer the nagging forces of evil. Give people a fair chance and a decent education, and they will save themselves. This idea, sweeping across the modern world like a plague, has ushered God out and escorted man in and has substituted human ingenuity for divine guidance.
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> But in spite of these astounding new scientific developments. the old evils continue and the age of reason has been transformed into an age of terror. Selfishness and hatred have not vanished with an enlargement of our educational system and an extension of our legislative policies.[18]

Belief in a sovereign God who far transcends man's sinful state was important to King not only in this opposition to the humanism of the Enlightenment, but also because it afforded the grounds for his belief in the

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[18] King, Strength to Love, pp. 146-147.

ultimate and final sovereignty of good over evil.

To answer the question of what the final sovereignty of good over evil meant to King, it can be said first that this was not a short-sighted faith in the soon-to-be triumph of good, i.e. it was not a faith which held that the establishment of a just earthly state was in the immediate future. King's belief in the sovereignty of good over evil is thus to be separated completely from a more apocalyptically oriented faith which would hold to a belief in the triumph of good because of the hope that Christ would soon return to earth, establish His Kingdom, and vanquish the wicked. Instead, King's faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil was of a less dramatic type. It was characterized by a confidence that through the slow but inexorable process of man's growth and - which is essential - through man's constant seeking for divine guidance, the wrong that is done will be overcome by the good that is done.

An intrinsic part of this belief that there is a final sovereignty of good was King's belief that good, once done by a kind and loving God through man as a willing instrument, would be firmly held in the structure of the universe, whereas evil, on the other hand, "... carries the seed of its own destruction."[19] Repeatedly King

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[19]King, Strength to Love, p. 77.

quoted two passages from other writers which expressed this belief he held that, though the wrong in the world may now have the upper hand, it is the good which will ultimately triumph. The first of these, a line from William Cullen Bryant's "The Battle Field", states that "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." The second, from Thomas Carlyle's study The French Revolution, says: "No lie you can speak or act but it will come, after longer or shorter circulation, like a bill drawn on Nature's Reality, and be presented there for payment, - with the answer, No effects."[20] The most telling statement of King's belief in the final sovereignty of good over evil, however, is drawn from his account of the Exodus story, in which he reiterates the lesson to be learned from the escape of the Israelites from a stubborn Pharaoh:

> The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a vivid reminder that something in the very nature of the universe asserts goodness in its perennial struggle with evil. The New Testament rightly declares: 'No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness.' 21

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[20] Both of these passages are quoted by King in the context of a sermon "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore", Strength to Love, p. 72.

[21] Ibid., p. 73.

As God was to King a sovereign God, far transcending all human effort, then to King that God had the power to bring good out of evil and to establish the final sovereignty of good.

The Kingdom of Christ and King's Conception of the Kingdom of God as Now at Work in Christian Lives

It is in the emphasis placed on the sovereignty of God, in the reminder of the depravity of man, in the neo-orthodox influence of Niebuhr, and in the black Baptist background from which he came that the foundation stones upon which King built the whole of his theological thought are found. But it is in the assurance that Christ is at work in our lives right now, in the hope for a possible redemption of man on earth, and in the forthright emphasis on freedom and justice made in liberal Protestantism that the vitality and depth of King's commitment to his religious beliefs are found. To supplement the groundwork laid in the first section, then, it is important to look in detail at the second part of King's religious stance. This can best be done by stating what is meant in speaking of the Kingdom of God as the Kingdom of Christ, and then by relating the pertinent parts of King's belief to this second component of the complete meaning of the Kingdom of God in American Protestantism.

Out of the earliest Protestant period of belief,

in which fear and awe before a transcendent God were the prominent religious emotions, grew the second period of American Protestantism, in which the experience of grace and the joy of rebirth replaced that fear and awe. Here the sovereignty and absoluteness of God was eclipsed by a surging necessity to recognize the reign of Christ. This was the era of awakening, of revival, of evangelicalism, of the call to Christ. In the awakening was the recognition that the grace of Christ was the truest meaning of God's Kingdom, and that only through death to one's own selfishness and rebirth in the spirit of the Savior would one attain the new covenant Christ promised to all. H.R. Niebuhr captures the spirit of this era with these words:

> The common conviction was that whereas before the revolution of Jesus Christ men, with some exceptions, had to be kept in order and had to keep themselves in order by fear and restraint and were without hope, they now had experienced or could experience the 'expulsive power of a new affection' which made a life of freedom possible. The new relation to God established by Jesus Christ meant that an order of liberty and love had been substituted for the order of regimentation and fear. 22

The movement from the feeling of fear and awe to the feeling of grace was a significant step, for it meant that the possibility of reconciliation with a sover-

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[22] H.R. Niebuhr, p. 90.

eign God was seen as more possible than before. The emphasis on the call to Christ in the Kingdom of God meant that the believers had come to recognize that "God has willed to reconcile men to his will, to write his law upon their hearts, and he has done this by means of Jesus Christ. He who has become a citizen of the true kingdom of Christ, or of the invisible church, is free."[23] Rebirth into the Kingdom of Christ is thus the second component in the complete meaning of the Kingdom of God.

Directly parallel to the emphasis in the Kingdom of Christ on the need for rebirth is the insistence within King's own theological belief that to become a new being man must be born again, that he must undergo spiritual transformation in Christ. His belief that little good could come to man's corrupted nature if it were unaided by God's grace through Christ was often expressed, as he at one point states:

> If you do not have a deep and patient faith in God, you will be powerless to face the delays, disappointments, and vicissitudes that inevitably come. Without God, all our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without him, life is a meaningless drama in which the decisive scenes are missing.
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> Where do we find this God...? Where else except in Jesus Christ, the Lord of our lives? By knowing him we know God. Christ is not

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[23] H.R. Niebuhr, p. 95.

> only Godlike but God is Christlike.... By committing ourselves absolutely to Christ and his way, we will participate in that marvelous act of faith that will bring us to the true knowledge of God. 24

The failure of modern man to recognize the necessity of acceptance of Christ was seen by King to be one of the primary dangers to modern society. He perceived an external realm and an internal realm in human affairs. The internal realm involves the spiritual expressions of morality and religion. The external realm consists of the techniques and mechanisms which surround man in his everyday life. The danger exists because humanity has allowed the external realm to become so dominant that the internal realm is now insignificant. If this continues, the despair and hopelessness of man will multiply. Thus it was King's belief that only when man returns to the realization that the external mechanisms and techniques must be brought under the dominion of the internal realm of Christ's spirit, will man be capable of erasing the trend toward ruin.[25]

With the acceptance of the Kingdom of Christ as the reigning element in their lives, men make the Kingdom

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[24] King, Strength to Love, pp. 92&93.

[25] See King, Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (2nd ed.; New York, 1968), pp. 200-202, for a full treatment of this theme.

of God a present reality on earth, at work now in the individual lives of believers. Even with his recognition of man's fallen state, King does express confidence that the Kingdom of Christ is at work now, on earth, within history, and that it can and does have a lasting, positive effect on human affairs:

> Even though all progress is precarious, within limits real social progress may be made. Although man's moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth, his never-ceasing strivings may bring him ever closer to the city of righteousness. And though the Kingdom of God may remain not yet as a universal reality in history, in the present it may exist in such isolated forms as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life. 'The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.' 26

If it was his understanding of man as a sinful creature who is now and forever in need of redeeming grace that gave King a stark realism in his desire for positive, constructive action among men, it was likewise his understanding of man as also a spiritual being capable of responding to the good that gave King hope in that desire for constructive action among men.

King expresses his hope for the possibility of human actions that are free from the sinfulness which is so much a part of man's nature by expressing his own belief that there is within man still something redeemable:

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[26]King, Strength to Love, p. 78.

"Man is a being of spirit. He moves up 'the stairs of his concepts' into a wonderworld of thought. Conscience speaks to him, and he is reminded of things divine."[27] What is meant by this is not, of course, that man is actually a good creature who has simply been encumbered by social institutions, for King's clear affirmation of man's base fallenness has already been shown. What this does mean, however, is that despite his fallen state man is capable of responding to a divine call, to a call from something outside of and higher than the fallen human condition. The paradox exists that man is both fallen yet capable of knowing the good. In King's words, man "... is in nature, yet above nature; he is in space and time, yet above them."[28] This ability to recognize good despite man's fallenness, King feels, is explained by the concept of the imago dei of Genesis. "This is what the Bible means when it affirms that man is made in the image of God."[29]

One of the most telling passages in which King holds together these two sides of his understanding of man comes within the context of his speaking about how

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[27]King, Strength to Love, p. 109.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., p. 110.

one can become able to love one's enemies. Here not only is the baseness of evil deeds strongly made known, but also the hope that this is not all there is to man is shown:

> When we look beneath the surface, beneath the compulsive evil deed, we see within our enemy-neighbor a measure of goodness and know that the viciousness and evilness of his acts are not quite representative of all that he is. We see him in a new light. We recognize that his hate grows out of fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, but in spite of this, we know God's image is ineffably etched in his being. [30]

Part of the hope and belief that man's nature is capable of being "reminded of things divine" which King held within his theology can be traced to his encounter with the liberal tradition, and specifically to the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and others. Early in his theological journey King encountered the works of Rauschenbusch, specifically Christianity and the Social Crisis.[31]

Central to the influence which Rauschenbusch had on King was the theme that Christianity was a social re-

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[30] King, Strength to Love, p. 43.

[31] The influence upon King by the writings of Rauschenbusch was nearly as significant as the influence made by Reinhold Niebuhr's writings. In his essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" (Stride Toward Freedom, p. 91) King makes specific reference to Christianity and the Social Crisis, making the point that the book "left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had grown up in me as a result of my early experiences."

ligion as well as one related to the individual. It was from the influence of Rauschenbusch that King recognized the importance of the prophetic tradition of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc., and of the need to carry on that prophecy in the modern world. Equally important to the Social Gospel was a special focus on the social teachings of Christ and the Apostles. Rauschenbusch's chief contention was that Christianity must concern itself with the whole man, with the material and physical environment of man as well as the spiritual and moral environment. King came to a full acceptance of this tenet of Rauschenbusch's thought, saying: "It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."[32]

The theology of the Social Gospel was a theology with which King, concerned since his youth with a commitment to social justice, could identify, for it was a theological framework that gave approval to intense action in the social sphere. But Rauschenbusch and the "Social Gospelers" had grave faults, too, and King before long

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[32]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 91.

recognized them:

> I felt that he [Rauschenbusch - d.h.] had fallen victim to the nineteenth-century 'cult of inevitable progress' which led him to a superficial optimism concerning man's nature. Moreover, he came periously close to identifying the Kingdom of God with a particular social and economic system - a tendency which should never befall the church.[33]

These sentiments, and doubts about other aspects of the Social Gospel, soon led King to a more critical view of liberal Christianity and to the beginning of his return to certain truths which the more orthodox tradition held. But there were many truths of liberalism that had made such a lasting impression on King that he was to hold on to them forever. Not the least of these was the critical intellectual reasoning which King believed liberalism employed. This was the critical analysis and investigative spirit which had first knocked him out of his "dogmatic slumber", and King was not to discard this critical approach. Out of the many other principles which Rauschenbusch and other liberal theologians had introduced to King, there were four ideas in particular which he retained.[34]

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[33] King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 91.

[34] The statements made about the following four concepts are elaboration upon themes made evident in the most helpful article by John W. Rathbun entitled "Martin Luther King: The Theology of Social Action" mentioned earlier, p. 39.

Because of his continuing struggle against the institution of segregation and the related systematized exploitation of the poor and the black, King readily received and retained from the Social Gospel movement the belief that institutions and institutionalized systems share and perpetuate the guilt of any individuals that make such dehumanizing systems prosper. From this King drew the conclusion that any person participating in an evil system is doubly guilty: guilty first because of individual actions that concretize the system's injustice into specific injustices, and guilty secondly for an implicit acceptance of an unjust institution. Acceptance of convenience from an institutionalized practice that exploits others King saw as just as wrong as explicit participation in such a practice.

Arising closely out of this belief in the collective, continuing guilt of institutions was the second tenet of liberalism which King retained, viz. that God's divine judgment is a judgment which appraises and considers the merits and demerits of public, governmental actions as well as the merits and demerits of individuals. In following this belief King carried his pleas and warnings for a just settlement of the racial question to the highest tribunals and offices of the land. It was not only the private moral actions of a governor or legislator

which King believed would be called to account by a divine judgment, but also the public policies advocated by those individuals.

The third idea of liberalism and specifically of the Social Gospel which was incorporated into the thought of King comes from his esteem for the Hebrew prophetic tradition. This is the idea that a deeply religious life will in turn be a prophetic life. King was convinced that any individual who experienced the presence of God in a profound and lasting way would be moved to proclaim the word of God to those about him, rather than separating himself from the world permanently in order to foster his spiritual growth. And, if the proclamation of God's word entailed defying the authority of a temporal power, as it often did, King saw no alternative but to disobey the temporal power. Surely, he held, being intimately touched by God meant being called upon to preach the good news and stand forth against unrighteousness.

The fourth point is a much more general point than the preceding three, and will be developed at length later in the thesis. It states that an all-embracing love is the primary means by which an individual is renewed and redirected away from the evil he or she had done. This is held in place of a more orthodox posture which would press for a more firm emphasis on restraint, or on justice

which corrects through coercion.

These four convictions, coupled with the critical intellectual eye which King saw liberal thinkers applying to traditional dogma, are the secondary influences of the liberal tradition on King. They are to a significant extent logical continuations of his belief that there is within the depraved nature of man an image of God which enables man to retain his sense of moral obligation toward the good.

In a general sense it can be said that it was the impact of liberal Protestantism, with its insistence that Christ is at work now in the social as well as the individual affairs of men, which brought to King his sense of immediacy and the urgent need for reconciliation which so much characterized his work in the sphere of social problems. The Kingdom of God, seen as the Kingdom of Christ, was itself an urgent, motivating, and redemptive force which was present "now", at work in the present moment. As a result of this understanding of Christ as He who enables man to respond to divine commands and to implement those commands in the present and in the social sphere of the world around him, two important principles became part of King's theology. These were his beliefs that theology must contain an active religious principle and that his active principle must allow for human effort

in the eradication of social ills.

Within the discussion concerning the more orthodox theological influences on King, mention was made of the importance of the black Baptist tradition from which he came. The fact of his being a member of a black minority was brought home to King in more ways than just his black Baptist tradition, however. King's opposition to segregation, which began even as a young boy, had great effect on the final religious principles he came to accept. Lerone Bennett relates an incident in a biography of King in which a high-shcool-aged King had been forced to sit behind a curtain in a segregated railway dining car. Bennett quotes King as feeling as though "'... the curtain had been dropped on my selfhood.'"[35]

What it is important to gather from this emphasis on King's hope to do away with the injustice of segregation is the fact that King's willingness to promote the Kingdom of Christ on earth was strong because it was founded not only on his theological convictions but also on many unjust personal, everyday experiences. One commentator on King observes the relationship between his theory and the practical occurrences of his early life in this way:

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[35]Lerone Bennett, What Manner of Man (New York, 1964), p. 20.

> King's... was primarily a deductive mind, proceeding from moral speculations on the nature of man, his proper condition on earth, and his purpose in life, to finding a tangible means in organized public action which would give his world view practical political focus. But his speculations on the nature of man had themselves grown out of the stuff of daily observation and awareness, from the feelings and reactions of his early life. 36

This observation on the way in which the formulation of King's thought integrated the urgency of concern about everyday occurences with underlying moral and religious principles affirms this fact: King was too much a Christian, too much committed to a deeply religious way of life, to permit the adoption of anything but the genuine religious principles of the sovereignty of God and the Kingdom of Christ to be the guideposts of his life; but at the same time, King was also too much a black man aware of the prominent dehumanization in segregation to accept any Christian stance which would not allow for an active commitment to the eradication of social injustice.

Not only should the theological stance which he embraced allow for an active commitment to the correction of social injustice, but also, thought King, such a principle must recognize the importance of human effort. What King was reacting against in stressing that human effort

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[36]Walton, p. 40.

is important was what he termed a "lopsided Reformation theology"[37] which turned Calvin's theology into a belief that any effort of man was unimportant and doomed to failure because human corruption was total. In holding to an understanding of man which emphasized the possibility for men to recognize and respond to the good as well as realistically noting their fallen state, King maintained a groundwork for believing that human action by individuals and some groups of committed individuals could have genuinely beneficial effects when guided by God. This belief is further exemplified by King's position on the place of prayer in a person's life.

As a Christian minister, King was committed to the efficacy of supplicatory prayer in helping solve the injustices surrounding man. But the offering of prayer to God was not, King believed, to be relied upon to the point of excluding human effort in other concrete ways. This lengthy quotation by King on man's place in the casting out of evil precisely explains the point he wished to make:

> I am certain we need to pray for God's help and guidance in this integration struggle, but we are gravely misled if we think the struggle will be won only by prayer. God, who gave us the minds for thinking and bodies for working, would defeat his purpose if he

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37 This phrase of King's is quoted by Rathbun, p. 44.

> permitted us to obtain through prayer what may come through work and intelligence. Prayer is a marvelous and necessary supplement to our feeble efforts, but it is a dangerous substitute. When Moses strove to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, God made it clear that he would not do for them what they could do for themselves. 'And the Lord God said to Moses, wherefore criest thou unto me. speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward.' 38

The belief of King's that prayer is not to be callously misused to the point of disallowing intellectual and physical action shows that he believed that committed human participation in a program of religious action in the social sphere could and should be one of the direct consequences of the inner spiritual transformation which the Kingdom of Christ calls men to.

The Coming Kingdom and King's Conception of the Kingdom of God as "Not Yet"

In the conception of the Kingdom of God that is found in the thoughts of American Protestants, a third idea became prominent - more prominent, in fact, than either the recognition of the sovereignty of God or the hope in the Kingdom of Christ. This was the idea of the coming Kingdom, the Kingdom as a future event which promises final redemption. The emphasis on the coming King-

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[38] King, Strength to Love, pp. 149-150.

dom, in which God will reign in glory, is very much a logical extension of the other two emphases in the Kingdom of God in American Protestantism. H.R. Niebuhr makes the point that the coming Kingdom is "... the consequence of faith in God's sovereignty."[39] and also where the Kingdom of Christ "... finds its fulfillment and its meaning in the manifestation of divine justice and love at the end of all things."[40]

To understand what is meant by the coming Kingdom entails recognizing that this concept held out to believers a genuine hope in the manifestation on earth of God's absolute power. The hope in the coming Kingdom was the hope that the world would be redeemed, righteousness established, and believers justified. The church prepared believers for the cataclysmic event which would mark the coming of the Kingdom "... by proclaiming to them the gospel of repentance and faith...."[41] In considering their fallenness and the need for repentance in the face of the coming Kingdom, men "... became intensely conscious of the great gap which exists between human performance and divine demand...."[42] With the judgment of

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[39] H.R. Niebuhr, p. 127.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., p. 149.

[42] Ibid., pp. 135-136.

the coming Kingdom at hand, men were both fearful at their own inadequacy and hopeful in the final redemption of the world.

And yet, as much as the coming Kingdom was seen as being at hand, it is also important to make the point that the coming Kingdom was seen as an event of the future, always coming, always an event yet to be experienced. The fact remains, of course, that the millenial hope of those nineteenth century prophets and their predecessors who proclaimed the coming Kingdom to be at hand was a groundless hope, for the millenium did not appear soon, as they expected it would. But this did not erase the roots of the idea of a future coming Kingdom in the minds of American Protestants. Instead, believers accepted their disappointments and readjusted their sights to a still more distant date in the future.

Remarks by King regarding the Kingdom of God lead to the conclusion that he also considered the Kingdom of God to have a future dimension as well as a present one. Within the context of a sermon entitled "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore", he makes known his belief that there must continue to be a dimension to the Kingdom which remains in the future, which remains outside of man's present earthly experience: "All progress is precarious, and the solution of one problem brings us face

to face with another problem. The Kingdom of God as a universal reality is not yet. Because sin exists on every level of man's existence, the death of one tyranny is followed by the emergence of another tyranny."[43]

It is the idea of the continuing future dimension to the Kingdom, the constant "not yet", which King holds as an important limit on his hopes that genuine progress can be made by man toward a perfect manifestation of the Kingdom on earth. This recognition that there will always be a future dimension to the Kingdom thus acts as the warning which finally leads King to concede that "... man's moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth."[44]

What King specifically meant by the statement that "The Kingdom of God as a universal reality is not yet." is difficult to ascertain,[45] but some factors in King's religious thought do enable certain elements in the meaning

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[43] King, Strength to Love, p. 78.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Whether, for instance, it would be more proper to refer to King as a premillenialist or as a postmillenialist is impossible to tell from the few times he makes reference to the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it is even difficult to determine from his writings whether King held strongly to any specific belief that there would be an end of time or a second coming of Christ. All that can be said with certainty is that he did recognize the necessity of there being a dimension to the Kingdom which transcends the present.

to be made clear. One of these factors is the stance which King took on the meaning of freedom.

Because of his background as a member of an oppressed minority, it is to be expected that few ideas meant as much to King as did the idea of civil freedom. The fact that King chose to title one of his books Why We Can't Wait shows very clearly how much his writings are filled with beckonings to his people to assert their rights and demand their liberty in a nonviolent way. The depth of his desire for civil freedom cannot be overemphasized. Yet, in regard to freedom in an absolute sense, freedom as autonomy, King's desire was much more moderate. His Christian belief was complete enough so that he was aware that there must be limits to man's freedom. To King, freedom must exist within the bounds of purpose. King speaks of the purpose within which man's freedom operates as man's destiny. In his words: "Freedom always operates within the limits of an already determined structure.... Freedom is always within destiny. It is the chosen fulfillment of our destined nature. We are always both free and destined."[46] This freedom within destiny, freedom within purpose, is thus a limited freedom,

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[46]This important section on what specifically King meant by freedom and its limits is found in Where Do We Go from Here..., pp. 114-116.

a finite freedom. Man may exercise his freedom through the deliberating and weighing of alternatives, the expressing of a decision, and acceptance of responsibility for that decision, but in so doing, man must recognize that his freedom to decide and act is finite, not absolute.[47]

Out of the knowledge that man's freedom is finite King could come to realize the importance of maintaining a belief in a future dimension of the Kingdom. The concept of finite freedom, and the concept of the Kingdom as "not yet", taken together, remind men and women that their actions of the past and present time are not the only determining factor in human development. Humanity realizes its limitedness in the face of something beyond the present, something transcendent. The Christian is reminded that even though the Kingdom of Christ is at work within man now, as a present reality, still the Kingdom on earth is only a part of all that the Kingdom represents.

Besides his recognition of man's finite freedom, there was also a second reason why King clung to the belief that there would continue to be a future dimension to the Kingdom of God. This second reason is the idea

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[47]King, Where Do We Go from Here..., pp. 114-116.

of judgment, the justification of those who had tried to uphold the message of Christ in the face of great opposition from earthly foes. It seemed nonsensical to King that God would call the Christian to live under the guidance of certain moral principles and then have the Christian never be justified or rewarded for his actions: "Would not this be a strangly irrational universe if God did not ultimately join virtue and fulfillment...?"[48]

The reasoning which led King to believe in the need for a future judgment at which time there would be this ultimate joining of virtue and fulfillment was in great part influenced by his recognition of the immorality of groups. King was enough aware of the fallen state of man to know that even when an individual became capable of reaching a point at which he or she inflicted very little suffering upon others, the same level of unselfishness could only very rarely be achieved by a group. The recognition that this collective injustice would continue is attested to by these words of King: "Man's sinfulness sinks to such devastating depths in his collective life that Reinhold Niebuhr could write a book titled Moral Man and Immoral Society. Man collectivized in the group, the tribe, the race, and the nation often

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[48]King, Strength to Love, p. 104.

sinks to levels of barbarity unthinkable even among lower animals."[49] Few persons, even of utmost virtue, could carry out a life of justice without almost unsurpassable opposition from a society filled with man's depravity multiplied through collectivity. If, then, there were no dimension to the Kingdom of God other than the present, how were virtuous individuals to be justified for the harm they suffered at the hands of a violent society? Surely, thought King, there must be a dimension to the Kingdom of God which holds within it a time of judgment, for without it, sin would often go unpunished and righteousness unrewarded.

King spoke of this future dimension to the Kingdom in two different ways. On the one hand he made the encouraging point to the men and women of the nonviolent movement that there would come a future day, within man's earthly experience, when historians would look back and proclaim the righteousness of those who suffered nonviolently for the causes of peace and desegregation.[50] Implied in statements of this sort is a belief that the future judgment will be at least partially made within the

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[49] King, Strength to Love, p. 111.

[50] This is notably expressed in King's acceptance speech at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies in Oslo, Norway in 1964. A text of the speech is found in Bennett's What Manner of Man, pp. 140-145.

course of man's development in history. In other words, it holds that future generations will be certain of what was good and what bad about the actions of those now living, and will vindicate those who suffered for just causes. Such a belief in the more perfect morality of a future age, so that persons in the future time will be able to look back upon past ages and judge correctly what was good and what was bad about the past, is dependent upon the assumption that the movement of history assures progress, i.e., that the present is better than the past and the future will be better than the present. Indeed, King comes dangerously close here to subscribing to the "doctrine of inevitable progress" which he accused others of. And, were this the only way in which King conceived the future dimension of the Kingdom, he would in fact have accepted for himself this doctrine which he criticized others for.

On the other hand, however, King often speaks as though the only true justification and redemption of man's virtuous actions in an unvirtuous world will come after death, outside of man's earthly experience. Speaking of how the Christian must learn to cope with shattered dreams, King expressed his faith that:

> However dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstance, we know we are not

> alone, for God dwells with us in life's most confining and oppressive cells. And even if we die there without having received the earthly promise, he shall lead us down that mysterious road called death and at last to that indescribable city he has prepared for us. His creative power is not exhausted by this earthly life, nor is his majestic love locked within the limited walls of time and space. 51

As well as a partial judgment within the course of history, then, King also held to a belief in justification and judgment after death. Both of these ways of viewing this justification and judgment of virtuous action, as well as King's conception of finite freedom, show that the idea of the Kingdom of God as future event, as the coming Kingdom, was very much a part of King's theological position.

The Creative Tension in King's Religious Thought

The perception of the whole of King's religious thought through the framework of the Kingdom of God in American Protestantism, according to the three different dimensions of that framework, has provided a helpful principle for the ordering of the basic strands in his religious thought. Just as the three separate elements in the Kingdom of God - God's sovereignty, the Kingdom of Christ, and the coming Kingdom - complement and interweave

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[51] King, Strength to Love, p. 104.

with each other in a unified whole, so do the separate elements in King's theology finally work together to form a generally unified schema.

However, though there is this overall sense of orderedness which can be given to King's religious thought, it would be a mistake to extend that orderedness into anything more than a general framework. There are many concepts in King's thought which are in opposition, creating a tension amongst themselves - a tension which no systematic framework can or should explain away. The reasons for this tension found in King's thought are many. No doubt a great many of these reasons stem from his not turning the systematic method upon his own thought. Another important reason is certainly the exigencies of the practical, public life which demanded thought and action suited to particular, varied, circumstances. But as well as these considerations, another important reason for the tension between aspects of King's thought is that he believed there is great value in holding oneself between two concepts which pull in opposing directions. King quotes with approval the statement: "'No man is strong unless he bears within his character antitheses strongly marked.'" He then furthers this thought with his own words, saying that "The strong man holds in a living blend strongly marked opposites."[52]

Certainly one set of concepts in King's thought which exhibits this tension is his belief that the Kingdom of God is both at work on earth now and is also in the future as a coming event, either an event after death or an event within history. To say that the Kingdom is both present and future appears contradictory. But to say that the Kingdom is only one or the other would be to deny the full meaning of the Kingdom. In affirming the present dimension of the Kingdom, with its emphasis on the need for a spiritual transformation and its stress on the need for an active religious principle to work in the world, King is recalling to man that God responds as an immanent, concerned, fatherly God to the prayers and hopes of man. God speaks to man in the earthly realm with heavenly words, through the perfect example of Christ now at work in the lives of those who have accepted him. But, at the same time, King affirms the future dimension of the Kingdom, with its emphasis on the limits of freedom and the need for a judgment that is "not yet". In doing this King reminds man of that which will always be beyond man's grasp and of that which will always hold his actions and the actions of others in stern judgment.

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[52]Both statements are found in Strength to Love, p. 1.

Alongside of the tension between the Kingdom as present and the Kingdom as future can be placed a second set of concepts in tension. This is King's holding to the belief that man is a depraved and corrupt creature while simultaneously holding to the hope in man's capacity for goodness. To hold both concepts again appears to make King contradict himself, but it is also again the case that King believed that to hold only one of the two concepts would not allow a full expression of all that man is. The two beliefs must be held together, though there will be a continuing tension between them.

Because of the continuing tension within his beliefs, the final scope and ultimate limit of how much he believed he and other transformed Christians could further the Kingdom of God on earth remains unclear in his writings. Thus, what he specifically meant by the "dream", of which he spoke in the much-noted "I Have a Dream" speech, is difficult to discern.[53] King does indeed speak of how he will not be satisfied, like the prophet Amos, until "... justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."[54] This, and his

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[53]Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream", in "Unwise and Untimely"? (Nyack, New York, 1963).

[54]Ibid.

further hope that "... one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."[55] lead to the opinion that King accepted the liberal Protestant assumption that the people of God, by accepting Christ's transforming spirit, can someday bring about the full embodiment of the Kingdom of God on earth, in human society. But on the other hand King's realistic assessment of humanity's corrupted state, his warnings regarding the limits of man's freedom, and his overall belief that there will always remain a future dimension to the Kingdom, speak for a more orthodox interpretation, one which sets very definite limits as to how much of the Kingdom even transformed Christians can relaize on earth. It is therefore wrong at this point to categorize King's conception of the Kingdom of God strictly as either a liberal or as an orthodox Protestant view. It is better to accept that there were elements of both in his stance and to see how the holding together of two usually opposing standpoints resulted within King's life in a creative tension. The optimism provided for King a compelling impetus toward the eradication of injustice for the sake of man's future, and the realism refined and

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[55]King, "I Have a Dream", "Unwise and Untimely"?.

tempered that impetus with a hard look at the very real depth of the problem.

A brief summary of the points made in this first chapter is in order now. It has most importantly been shown that there is a unifying, central, concept to the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., and that that concept is the Kingdom of God. King's religious statements were then viewed within the context of the three fundamental dimensions to the Kingdom of God concept.

First, steps were taken to show why the Kingdom of God in its meaning of the sovereignty of God provided the theme around which the more orthodox influences on King could be grouped, including King's understanding of man as a fallen creature. Notice was also made of King's belief in the final sovereignty of good, and of his disagreement with any humanist interpretation of man and man's potential.

The next two sections characterized much of King's religious thought in terms of the Kingdom of Christ and of the coming Kingdom, emphasizing on the one hand King's understanding of the Kingdom now at work in the lives of Christians and on the other hand King's insistence that the Kingdom would always retain a future dimension - either as a future judgment within history, or as an event outside of time, after death. The final section stressed

the importance of recognizing the creative tension in King's religious thought. Through these steps, the original question asked at the beginning of this chapter, as to what the Kingdom of God is and how it is exemplified in the thought of Martin Luther King, has been answered.

II

THE PRINCIPAL TENETS OF KING'S TEACHINGS ON NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

The purpose of the first chapter was to show how the Kingdom of God acts as a unifying factor in the religious thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. In that investigation it was shown that King considers it the duty of Christians to take an active part in alleviating the injustice and suffering in the temporal world. It was also shown that King was so committed to Christianity that he would not choose any method to alleviate that injustice and suffering unless that method coincided with what he believed was the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nonviolent resistance, or as King interchangeably referred to it, nonviolence, is the method King came to adopt in his struggle to relieve the unjust oppression of himself and his people. Thus it is to a close examination of King's teachings on nonviolence that this thesis now is directed. After an explanation of how and why nonviolence became actually more to King than just a method to be adopted out of expediency, the thesis will proceed to an exposition of the six basic tenets that are

the constituents of King's teaching on nonviolent resistance.[1]

Nonviolent Resistance as More than a Method

Certain biographical incidents which King relates in his essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence"[2] make it clear that King's decision to adopt nonviolent resistance, as the route his opposition to injustice would follow, was formed after extensive thought on the subject. The beginning of King's contact with the idea of nonviolent resistance and all that it entails came as early as his freshman year at Atlanta's Morehouse College when, in his desire to combat racial and economic injustice, he discovered the classic writing by Thoreau called Essay on Civil Disobedience. Here began serious thought about the possibility of nonviolently refusing to cooperate with an unjust institution. During his subsequent years

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[1]The information that forms the foundation of this second chapter has been largely gleaned from two helpful sources. Most important was a speech given by King on the topic: "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" at Inter-American University in Puerto Rico, February 14, 1962. The address was made after a number of nonviolent campaigns had already been conducted by King, thus the thought in the address had benefited from the trials of actual practice as well as from reflection and scholastic investigation. The other source, King's essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence", has already been alluded to in the first chapter. Both are most helpful in laying down the six fundamental points involved in King's teachings on nonviolence and in adequately explaining their meaning.

[2]See Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 99-101 for this.

in college and seminary he continued to examine the position of nonviolence, moving closer toward a nonviolent stand insofar as individual relations were concerned, but still hesitating to embrace nonviolence in group or in international conflicts. The definite beginnings of his acceptance of the validity of the nonviolent approach in groups and in international affairs, King relates, began when he heard of the work of Mahatma Gandhi and of Gandhi's doctrine of Satyagraha:

> Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The 'turn the other cheek' philosophy and the 'love your enemies' philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. [3]

In this nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi, King found a stance which reinforced and focused his earlier positive encounters with nonviolent resistance. He "... came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."[4] King's further development in academic thought, including his encounter with the neo-orthodoxy of Reinhold Niebuhr, only served to strengthen his commitment

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[3] King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 97.

[4] Ibid.

to a Gandhian-like stance, for such a stance, unlike many pacifist positions, could nonviolently but actively oppose the evil in the world that Niebuhr warned of.

The most telling factor in King's acceptance of the nonviolent position, however, was not an intellectual one. It was instead the course of events in the Montgomery bus boycott which King was chosen to lead. In the essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" is also this statement in which King tells of how his final commitment to nonviolence was effected:

> When the protest began, my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount, with its sublime teachings on love, and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. As the days unfolded, I came to see the power of nonviolence more and more. Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many of the things that I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action. 5

Thus his scholastic study of the theory underlying nonviolence and, above all, his crucial decision to use nonviolence in the bus boycott, took King beyond an insubstantial indentification with nonviolence and into a realm of total commitment. Nonviolence became more than a method, it became a way of life. For this reason it

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[5] King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 101.

is only partially correct to say that King chose the method of nonviolent resistance as the means whereby he would conduct his campaign against racial injustice. In truth, it was not so much an act of choosing an external method as it was allowing a way of life he had accepted for himself to become manifest in the actions of the campaigns he was conducting.

The acceptance of nonviolence as a way of life meant three specific things to King, all of them important for this study of his teachings on nonviolence. It meant, in the first place, that even if nonviolent tactics did not succeed in attaining the desired objectives within the projected period of time, they still were to be adhered to. In other words, nonviolence remains an imperative even if it does not appear to work. This was certainly the dividing point between King and many of his more militant followers, who were willing to use nonviolent tactics only as long as such tactics proved effective. King opposed this use of nonviolence as purely and simply a method, because he knew only too well that "The tactics of nonviolence without the spirit of nonviolence may become a new kind of violence."[6]

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[6]As quoted in Kenneth Slack's biography: Martin Luther King (London, 1970), p. 67.

Similarly, nonviolence as a total way of life meant to King that reconciliation is inherently bound up within the way of nonviolent resistance. The constant reminder by King to the nonviolent resisters was that the goal of the protest and demonstrations was infinitely greater than the simple attaining of victory over the opposing faction. The true goal of the movement was not victory but justice and reconciliation. King reminded the protesters that "... nonviolent resistance does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding."[7]

The third result of King's acceptance of nonviolence as a way of life rather than simply as a method is the fact that he was capable of laying down a theology of nonviolence which gave foundation and greater depth of meaning to the individual tactical practices. Had King been concerned with nonviolence only as a method, as a means to be discarded at the first sign of its ineffectiveness, then the impetus for providing a more complete explanation of it for others would have been greatly lessened.

Although it has now been made clear that the way of nonviolence was more than a method to King, it remains

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[7]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", Christian Century, (Feb. 6, 1957), p. 166.

to show the situations in which he was not willing to apply a strict nonviolent attitude. It is a known fact that King voiced great opposition to the Vietnam war, and that he did so from a solid Christian standpoint:

> I... have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. 8

But it is uncertain whether there can be drawn from his opposition to the Vietnam war the further conclusion that King opposed all war. King does say that at one point in his career he "... felt that while war could never be a positive or absolute good, it could serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force."[9] But this belief was held at a point in his life before he came fully in contact with the Gandhian thought which fostered his belief that nonviolence could be effective on the plane of international relations. The influence by Gandhian thought would likely have led King to an opposition of all war.

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[8]Martin Luther King, Jr., The Trumpet of Conscience (New York, 1967), p. 25.

[9]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 95.

But, though he often spoke against the misuse of military power, King did not explicitly state that all military power should be abolished.

The problem of knowing the extent to which King opposed international war is further clouded by the fact that King did not oppose the use of police force within a nation. For King to have held a completely pacifist stance would have meant that he would have had to disagree with the use of police force. And, as can be seen from accounts of many of the demonstrations conducted and led by King, he not only tolerated but also often welcomed the protection of federal marshals for himself and others.[10]

From this it should be understood that King's nonviolence should not be construed as a thoroughgoing pacifism. Nonviolence was for King certainly much more than a simple method to be used when expedient. But he would also have held that in such areas as police protection or the punishment of criminals[11] nonviolence should be used more as a moderating agent rather than as the exclusive means of upholding order.

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[10] One particular example of what is alluded to here is related in King's Why We Can't Wait, pp. 106-107.

[11] This is certainly not to say, however, that King agreed with capital punishment. In Strength to Love, p. 33, he speaks of capital punishment as "... society's final assertion that it will not forgive."

The Six Basic Tenets of Nonviolent Resistance

At this stage it becomes necessary to know more specifically what points are included in King's theology of nonviolent resistance. There are six basic tenets which comprise this teaching. They are: the coherence of ends and means; the refusal of the resister to inflict spiritual, mental, or bodily injury; the redemptive value of self-suffering; the belief that there is a potential for goodness in everyman; the necessity of civil disobedience; and the belief that there is a cosmic companionship to justice. An explanation of each of these six basic tenets follows.

The Coherence of Ends and Means

In the particular campaigns with which King involved himself he made great effort to purify the means and tactics being used so that they would be as true and as just as the end, the goal to which they were directed. King states in the address given on "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" that "... the philosophy of nonviolence contends that means and ends must cohere. In other words, in any struggle the means must be as pure as the ends.... This is the first and basic point in any philosophy of nonviolence."[12] By adhering to this belief that the ends

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[12]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", address given at Inter-American University, San

and means of a campaign must cohere, King repudiates the Machiavellian notion that a just order can be brought about by duplicity and force rather than by openness and conciliatory actions. In other words, to King the end can never justify the use of unjust means. And this is so because the means are simply the end in-the-making, and conversely, the end is nothing more than an extension of the means. King uses an analogy from nature in further explaining what he means by the coherence, the compatibility, of ends and means, when he says "... ultimately you can't reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree."[13] The fruit borne as the end product is determined by the seed sown in the very beginning. The fruit is pre-existent in the seed, and likewise the end is pre-existent in the means.

The influence on King by Gandhi is evidenced in this statement that the ends and means must cohere, for the necessary compatibility of ends and means is one of the most fundamental aspects of Gandhian Satyagraha. The roots of Gandhi's insistence on ends-means compatibility are to be found in the monistic Hindu religious tradition

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German, Puerto Rico, (Feb. 14, 1962), taped copy.

[13] King, The Trumpet of Conscience, p. 71.

of which he was a part. But the concept is not totally foreign to the religious and philosophical tradition of the West, either. One modern western thinker, Aldous Huxley, proposes the need for applying the concept of the coherence of ends and means to a western context. He provides past examples of this concept in use and comments on ways it can be applied in the future.[14]

To King, what the compatibility of ends and means signified in terms of a particular situation was that if one wished a nonviolent, reconciled, community as the end result of a campaign designed to redress greivances, then one must not use any tactic within that campaign that would be anything less that nonviolent and ultimately reconciling. An example of this was when the slogan "black power" arose, bringing with it the implicit and explicit violence and hatred that "black power" stood for in the minds of many of the black demonstrators. King refused to allow the slogan to be a part of the campaigns he conducted. Even though the slogan would have been a means of instilling increased spirit and cohesion among the black demonstrators, it in the long run would distort and destroy the end pursued by the demonstrators and would lead to a hardening of hearts and a lessening of

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[14]Aldous Huxley, Ends and Means (New York, 1937).

understanding in the white community. King's position on the issue of black power was only a logical result of his previous decision which he spoke of in these words: "We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself."[15] The first basic tenet of King's teachings on nonviolence, then, is that the ends and means of a nonviolent campaign must cohere, must be coexistent in one another.

Refusal to Inflict Injury

At the core of any teaching on nonviolence is, of course, the conscious decision not to inflict injury upon the opponent. In this, King's teachings are certainly no exception. King repeatedly stated the necessity of the refusal to do injury to another human being. In the context of speaking about qualities required of demonstrators in campaigns under his guidance, he said: "There is always this emphasis; that if you are hit you do not hit back, that if you are the victim of violence you do not return violence."[16] What, though, did it mean to King to refuse to do violence to another person? How did he specifically conceive of a way of resisting an

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[15] King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 216.

[16] King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

unjust practice without in some way - spiritually, psychologically, or physically - doing injury to another person? In order to answer the question of how King could hold that it is in fact possible to oppose injustice without doing injury or violence to another it is necessary to understand further what he meant by the terms "violence" and "nonviolence".

Certainly the first stipulation relevant to King's meaning of violence is that its definition must not be restricted to the purely physical sphere. Psychological and spiritual violence can be as harmful to the overall well-being of an individual as can the external violence which injures the body. King stated this frankly and forcefully, again acquainting the would-be participants of the qualities required of them, when he reminded them that "... you must not only refuse to shoot the opponent, you must refuse to hate the opponent. You avoid not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit."[17] The contemplation of doing injury to the opponent, which hatred so readily entails, must be purged from the nonviolent resister's mind as thoroughly as open, defiant, retaliation is to be purged from his bodily actions.

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[17]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

Ousting entrenched evil from the minds of antagonists as well as from the institutions of society, however, requires confrontation. It therefore also requires the coercion - be it physical, mental, or spiritual - which any confrontation necessarily involves. King certainly did openly confront entrenched evil; that was the precise purpose of the nonviolent demonstrations. It could logically be charged, then, that King was only deluding himself in believing that he, or anyone, could totally eliminate violence of body and spirit from open confrontation, because confrontation is built precisely upon coercion, and coercion is at the heart of violence.

In explaining King's response to this it is helpful to introduce a second stipulation relevant to his meaning of violence and nonviolence. This is his insistence that the coercion involved in a nonviolent direct action movement must be focused not on the person doing the evil but on the evil force itself. Thus when King states that nonviolence works against evil forces alone "... rather than against persons who are caught in these forces."[18] he is affirming that nonviolence is still possible even in a direct confrontation situation involving necessary coercion. Coercion only becomes violence when

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[18]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", Christian Century, p. 166.

it is directed toward human beings. As long as the coercion is directed entirely toward the evil force, it may operate in direct confrontation to uproot evil without manifesting itself as violence toward the opponent. The nonviolent resister places himself in the unfamiliar situation of loving the evildoer while opposing and eradicating the evil force which dominates the evildoer's deeds.[19]

The separation between evil deed and evil doer in the mind of the nonviolent demonstrator not only keeps him from harming the opponent through violence. It also, more importantly, frees the demonstrator from the threat

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[19]One of the difficulties in King's nonviolent teachings is his failure to address himself specifically to the objection known as the third party argument, which is raised against most nonviolent positions. The objection hypothesizes a situation in which the nonviolent resister must choose between restraining an attacker or allowing a third party, who is being attacked, to continue suffering the harm being inflicted upon him. Either way the nonviolent resister is in effect acquiesing to a violent act.

As stated, King does not specifically address this question. But it would not be inconsistent with the whole of his nonviolent teachings if he were to call for physical restraint of the attacker, as long as that restraint did not harm the attacker. Above all, it would be important to King for the nonviolent resister to direct whatever coercion might be necessary at the actions of the attacker only, and not at the person of the attacker himself. The nonviolent resister must maintain the situation of loving the evil-doer while opposing the evil actions themselves.

of being himself consumed by the eroding force of his own hatred. Violence, certainly, is a two-edged sword. Of this King was well aware, as he shows in his affirmation that "The Negro turned his back on force not only because he knew he could not win his freedom through physical force but also because he believed that through physical force he could lose his soul."[20]

A combination of these two chief aspects of the terms "violence" and "nonviolence" now makes possible a more concise statement of what King meant by the terms. Violence is coercive hatred, whether physical, mental, or spiritual, that is directed toward any human being, including oneself. Nonviolence, correspondingly, is the conscious refusal to allow coercive hatred to be directed toward any human being, again including oneself.

To define nonviolence in this way, however, is most emphatically not to say that this is all nonviolence is, for the definition speaks of nonviolence in terms of a negativeness, a refusal to do something, when actually a true nonviolent attitude is a very positive force. By saying "no" to coercive hatred, nonviolence is able to say "yes" to love. Love is the highest and most important principle involved in any nonviolent attitude.

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[20]King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 35.

It may even be wrong to speak of love as an attribute of nonviolence, because nonviolence is in fact, to King, only an expression of genuine love. Nonviolence is indeed compatible with love. It keeps open the channel for love to flow between opponents by its refusal to do harm. But nonviolence in itself, without the creative and reconciling power of love to work within it, is impotent; it has no power to build a new relationship between oppressed and oppressor. In committing himself to the total way of life of nonviolence, King was taking upon himself the burden of being a constant channel of love. For him, nonviolence was the best way for love to manifest itself. It is lasting and effective, as he made known in saying "... the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available..."[21]

But the love that King believed to be channeled so creatively through nonviolent resistance is in no way a sentimental, feeble brand of love. It is not a love that can be spoken of casually or flippantly. The love of which King spoke is a love exceedingly difficult for man to comprehend and practice fully.

King chose words from the Greek New Testament to

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[21]King, Strength to Love, p. 169.

spell out more specifically what he meant by love. A three-fold division in the meaning of the term was made by distinguishing eros, philia, and agapē.[22] As King described it, eros is more of an aesthetic love, a yearning of the soul. It can be a desire of man to become one with the divine, or an intense longing of a romantic love between two persons. It can be a poetic, elevating love of beauty between a lover or nature and the glory of the natural world in which he exists, or the masterly devotion of a writer, a sculptor, a painter, to the artistic ideas that are consuming his mind and soul. Always in love that is the nature of eros there is a feeling of specialness, of intenseness. Love of this sort is felt by a human being for only a small number of other humans in his entire life.

Philia is the second type of love King refers to. Philia chiefly involves what could simply be termed friendship. Philia implies intimacy, but not intimacy as intense or poetic as in eros. Instead, philia is a reciprocal love, a companionable affection between school friends or business associates or fellow workers in a

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[22]This distinction is made by King in numerous places. See specifically, among others, Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 104-107, and his "Christmas Sermon on Peace" reprinted in The Trumpet of Conscience, pp. 67-78.

nonviolent campaign. Always in love that is the nature of philia there is a sense of sharing, of returned affection. To love another in the manner of philia is exceedingly difficult unless the other responds and through some gesture expresses his willingness to become friends. Philia also entails a notion of humaneness, of kindliness, as is exemplified in the words philanthropy or philadelphia.

Yet when King spoke of the love that is to be channeled through nonviolent actions he spoke neither of eros nor of philia, for though each have their rightful place in the total sphere of man's existence, neither is suitably fitted for nonviolent demonstrations. Instead King spoke of a third dimension of love, the love of agapē. Agapē is more than a romantic, aesthetic type of love. It is more than a love of friendship that must rely on similar friendship being returned. "Agapē is understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill toward all men."[23] Agapē is less a spontaneous good feeling toward others, as eros and philia are, and more a decisive, conscious affirmation of willingness to extend good will. Agapistic love for another human being presupposes that the giver of the love will be active, outgoing in his

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[23]King, The Trumpet of Conscience, p. 73.

desire to show his love through his deeds.

Agapē is at the center of King's teaching on nonviolence. Without the possibility of agapē working within the structure of nonviolence, King's hopes for a peaceable settlement of the racial unrest would have been impossible to realize. The concept of agapistic love thus merits examination in greater depth.

What first may be said of agapē is that it is certainly not a maudlin or indecisive love, or one that is subject to the whim of undisciplined human emotion. The power of agapē is the backbone of the courageous and powerful spirit which the nonviolent resister must embody. King considered agapistic love and power not as antitheses, but as uniquely compatible, uniting to form justice. He states:

> One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love.... What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. 24

The second thing that must be said about agapē is that it is an all-encompassing love. Agapē is in no

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[24] King, Where Do We Go from Here..., p. 45.

way dependent, as is philia, upon the love being returned. In the context of his Ph'd thesis King remarks on the nature of agapē: "All love, except agape, is dependent on contingent characteristics which change and are partial such as repulsion and attraction, passion and sympathy. Agape is independent of these states. It affirms the other unconditionally. It is agape that suffers and forgives. It seeks the personal fulfillment of the other."[25] Agapē, then, is not thwarted when it is not returned. An agapistic person loves without any idea of reward from the recipient of the love. Neither merit, nor attractiveness, nor friendship, nor any special characteristic of worth on the recipient's part is the criterion by which agapē is given to another. The agapistic person loves others because he knows God loves them. The unjust opponent is loved because he is a child of God, because he was created by God and is loved by Him as deeply as any other man would be.[26]

The final aspect of agapē is intrinsically related to this fact that one is to love all others agapistically because all men are loved by God. Because

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[25]Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" (Ph'd. dissertation, Boston University, 1955), p. 149. Microfilmed copy.

[26]King, Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 104-105.

all men are created by God they are brothers, interrelated through a common father who cares for each and all equally. Thus it is that the third and final aspect of the meaning of agapē is, as King puts it: "... a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process...."[27] Hatred and violence perpetrated on one member of the interrelated community of man can only act to destroy community and eventually harm the one who initiated the harmful act. Because all men are brothers, hating another is hurting oneself; the interrelated structure of reality makes this so.

The nonviolence of which King speaks, with its basis in agapistic love, helps put an end to the cycle of destruction that is the result of hatred and violence transferred within the circle of human community. The refusal to inflict injury on another, even though one may have been the subject of unwarranted violence previously, acts as what one commentator has called an "asymmetric" response to violence.[28] In reacting oppositely (asymmetrically) from the continual chain of violent acts, the nonviolent demonstrator makes himself the stopping

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[27] King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 106.

[28] Richardson, p. 202.

point of the injurious process and makes himself the starting point of the beneficial process of agapistic love. Were the demonstrator to act similarly (symmetrically) to the persistent chain of injury by passing on violent acts, he would continue the cycle and eventually again be the victim of exacerbated violence himself. Violence can never end conflict; it can only suppress it, push it into the background or, more likely, into the underground. And violence can continue the suppression of violence only as long as violence remains heavily concentrated in the hands of the vanquisher. Only the agapistic love that comes from God and operates, as King believed, through nonviolent channels, can ever end conflict and establish true reconciliation and true community.

In summary, King believed that the nonviolent resister must refuse to inflict injury of any kind on any person, that the ability to live in a nonviolent way is totally dependent upon the God-given gift of agapē, and that through agapistic love man can help to sever the destructive cycle of violence which has continually broken the human community.

The Redemptive Power of Self-Suffering

The tenet of nonviolence which holds that the resister must refuse to inflict injury upon any person

remains only partially understandable until it is coupled with the next basic tenet of nonviolence, viz. the belief that there is a beneficial, redemptive effect created by the acceptance of suffering on the part of the nonviolent resister. The idea of self-suffering helps to explain further the reasons why the nonviolent resister is able to choose to refrain from passing on the violence that has been inflicted on him. It also points the way to a comprehension of how and why nonviolent resistance is often efficacious in its dealings with opponents of social and racial justice.

Few of the themes of King's teachings on nonviolence were as much his constant thought and perpetual consideration as was the theme of the necessity for self-suffering and its redemptive value. It would not be an overstatement to say that each of his rallying speeches to the nonviolent demonstrators in the midst of a campaign contained words similar to these:

> Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you.... But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we'll win our freedom.' 29

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[29] King, The Trumpet of Conscience, pp. 74&75.

Had King not considered the practice of self-suffering to be theoretically and theologically sound, he would doubtless have refused to use it. The underlying reasons allowing for the redemptive qualities of self-suffering will be dealt with directly. It is a happy fact, however, that besides being a redemptive quality, and one theoretically compatible with his ideals, the practice of self-suffering was also an effective tool for use in King's nonviolent demonstrations. It aids the nonviolent resister in a way which Richard Gregg has described as "moral jiu-jitsu" in his important book The Power of Nonviolence[30] (a book which affected King extensively and for which he wrote a preface to the second edition).

In confrontation between a nonviolent resister and an opponent who uses violent methods, self-suffering functions as a disturbing, unsettling force upon the conscience of the violent opponent. If a violent man were to assault another person, and that person were to respond with a similar act of violence, then there would be a reassurance given to the original aggressor. The attacker would see that the violent way of settling disputes which he instigated is accepted by the victim of

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[30]Richard Gregg, The Power of Non-Violence (London, 1936), p. 26.

violence as the proper way of settling disputes. Violent reaction shows to the original offender that the moral values of his victim are really not superior to his own. Violence in response to violence greatly weakens the validity of any rightful claim to innocence which the victim might otherwise have had. The clarity of guilt and guiltless is destroyed, and both parties are dragged down to a level of unjustified self-righteous defence.

King recognized the importance of maintaining the distinction between aggressor and victim, for because of this distinction nonviolent self-suffering "... has a way of disarming the opponent. It exposes his moral defenses, it weakens his morale, and at the same time it works on his conscience."[31] In large scale conflicts, self-suffering robs the aggressor of the moral conceit through which he believes that his own actions are really the ones that should be identified with righteous action. In one-to-one confrontations, or in small group situations, the aggressor is taken aback when those attacked don't respond violently. The aggressor loses, as it were, his moral balance. As it applied to the racial situation that King worked within, the power of nonviolent self-

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[31]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

suffering was described by him in this way:

> When, for decades, you have been able to make a man compromise his manhood by threatening him with a cruel and unjust punishment, and when suddenly he turns upon you and says: 'Punish me. I do not deserve it. But because I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong', you hardly know what to do. You feel defeated and secretly ashamed. You know that this man is as good a man as you are; that from some mysterious source he has found the courage and the conviction to meet physical force with soul force. 32

Whatever psychologically safe distance that had been maintained through pre-conceived notions and rationalizations is broken down, and the aggressor is put in the existential situation of having to come to grips with the fact that his policies, his beliefs, his actions, are directly hurting another person. His conscience is appealed to, as are the consciences of spectators to the incident, and persuasion is then used to try to remedy the situation.

By accepting the suffering upon himself, the nonviolent resister also removes the physical threat to the aggressor, and to all others, that the suffering might be inflicted on them. The removal of this physical threat is a positive factor. It allows the attacker to recon-

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[32]King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 30.

sider his aggressive actions, without fear of retaliation from the one attacked. It increases social solidarity between resister and aggressor, among resister and aggressor and concerned onlookers. Communication is a more real possibility. Persuasion becomes feasible now where it might not have been before.

At first blush, the tenet of acceptance of suffering seems to breach the earlier condition of nonviolence that says that no violence may be inflicted upon any party, including oneself. If the nonviolent resister accepts suffering, i.e. if he allows violence to be directed toward himself, is he not still a part of a violent act, even though indeed the violence may come to him rather than from him? This question may be answered favorably to the nonviolent resister by recalling that in King's definition violence consists of coercive hatred that is directed toward any human being. The nature of coercion is such that it implies an act of making another do something contrary to his wishes. To coerce is to force into existence a resisted state of affairs. Because the nonviolent resister willingly takes upon himself the suffering involved in an act of violence by another, then he is not coercing himself or being coerced by another. It is not coercion but rather ready acceptance.

Yet self-suffering could become coercive, and unless it were practiced in the proper spirit it could degenerate into a weapon of hatred rather than an expression of the quest for justice. Because self-suffering appeals strongly to the weight of public opinion and social pressure upon the opponent it could be applied to achieve a particular goal even if the one applying it knew that the goal was unjust. The success of self-suffering, on a short term anyway, often depends not on whether the goal is actually just or unjust, but on whether the pressuring public believes it to be just. It is to prohibit this misuse that there must be a more fundamental and lasting principle underlying the practice of self-suffering than simply the principle of practicality.

Not only did King realize that self-suffering was effective, he also made the realization that self-suffering was redemptive.[33] If suffering is senselessly accepted without anything but the dimension of effectiveness to guide it, it can arouse scorn and even contempt. King's belief that self-suffering is redemptive guards against such misuse, because if indeed self-suffering is to have any redemptive qualities it must be invoked carefully, meaningfully, and truthfully. This is so because

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[33]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 103.

all meaning, all truth, and all redemptive possibility is given to self-suffering because it represents a willingness to suffer rather than to deny or distort the truth. As has been shown, King believed that violence returned for violence distorts the truth, clouds the issues, and destroys the distinction between innocent and guilty. Self-suffering accepted in place of violence keeps the truth ever in front of all parties involved.

Self-suffering also promotes truth because it casts out fear. Because fear is always a fear of suffering,[34] a frank realization that one will accept suffering when it comes prepares man for suffering and lessens his fear. The fear which often warps facts by distorting them into preconceived notions is dimished and truth emerges more intact.

King states that the Negro chose to undergo nonviolent suffering not only because he found it helpful in achieving his liberation, but also because he found it "... consistent with his religious precepts...."[35] Hereunto self-suffering has been spoken of as rather a passive act, as a submission to injury. But with this assertion of King's that the Negro was living out his religious

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[34]See William R. Miller, Nonviolence: A Christian Interpretation (New York, 1966), p. 171.

[35]King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 38.

precepts, and with the idea that self-suffering promotes a clear affirmation of the truth, it can be seen that self-suffering, like the refusal to inflict injury, is really an active force. Kenneth Slack, in an excellent biography of King, speaks of King's nonviolent suffering in these affirmative terms: "Nonviolence was not only a positive conviction rather than a negative rejection; it was essentially active, not passive. Just as Jesus of Nazareth did not see his Cross as something men did to him, but something in which he was active, so non-violence, with its acceptance of redemptive suffering, was seen as love in action."[36] This active force of redemptive suffering, by revealing to the user that it is grounded in the promotion of truth, does not stand open to misuse by those seeking to achieve unjust goals. Instead, it forwards a genuine appraisal of oneself by the resister and leads to an affirmation of confidence in himself. The results are contagious, as King shows in speaking of nonviolent suffering in this way: "I am convinced that the courage and discipline with which Negro thousands accepted nonviolence healed the internal wounds of Negro millions who did not themselves march in the streets or sit in the jails of the South."[37]

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[36]Slack, p. 111.

[37]King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 40.

The Potential for Goodness in Every Man

For King to have believed that agapē was a power that could transform the life of any person, and for him to have believed that self-suffering could effectively appeal to the consciences both of the opponent and of the onlooking public, it was necessary for him to have believed that there must be within each person some dimension of goodness, however small, which could be touched and appealed to. In the address "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" King speaks plainly to this belief in saying: "... there is within human nature real potential for goodness." In the same breath he quickly adds, however, consistent with his disapproval of liberal theology in this respect, that "This is not to say at all that there are not evil dimensions."[38] As has been shown, King was not the victim of too great an optimism about human nature. But, just as the dimension of goodness in humanity must not be overrated, so, King believed, must it not be forgotten.

In the context of a tension-filled conflict, estrangement and alienation between parties often reach the point at which the stereotyped images of opponents for

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[38]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

one another have become so powerful that any action either of the parties makes is distorted to fit the prejudged notion. Even deeds that are genuine attempts at reconciliation are then rejected as impure. If the nonviolent resister retains within himself the lingering belief that there still exists in any man some possibility for goodness, then he can make the most of the genuine efforts at reconciliation. The resister affirms that the possibility for good action still exists in the opponent even though the evidence of the opponent's present action points in the opposite direction. This hidden potential for good is the conscience, which self-suffering seeks to arouse. It is the core of a person's being, which the love of agapē seeks to enlarge. King notes his affinity with this, saying "... there are those potentialities for goodness, and these can be aroused in human nature."[39]

The evil actions of the opponent remind the resister that the willingness to respond affirmatively to the opponent's gestures is a risk, a risk not to be taken without consideration of the persistence of evil in the world. But unless the risk of attributing a potential for goodness to the opponent is taken, then the possi-

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[39] King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

bility of appeal to the conscience of the opponent and the possibility of agapē entering in with reconciling strength are forsaken.

The fourth tenet of King's teachings on nonviolence, then, is that amid the violence and darkness of humanity there still exists an element of goodness which fosters in all men the capacity for responding in a humane way to kind, nonviolent treatment.

The Necessity of Civil Disobedience

Since his early encounter with Thoreau's classic Essay on Civil Disobedience, King had directed his attention and thought toward the idea of refusing to cooperate with unfair laws and practices. His ideas on this subject of civil disobedience were soon given numerous opportunities for application in the course of his leadership of nonviolent racial campaigns. In time King came to write his own essay on the nature and right of civil disobedience. Titled "Letter from Brimingham Jail", the essay follows the thought of Thoreau and Gandhi, takes premises from the foremost Christian saints, and then weaves a simple but powerful statement on the sovereignty of God's rule, the conscience of the Christian resister, and the nature of just and unjust laws. The essay is regarded by some contemporary thinkers as a

classic discourse in its own right, paralleling Thoreau's in conviction and insight.[40]

Civil disobedience inevitably did become a part of most of the campaigns against racial injustice which King directed, but King's decisions to implement civil disobedience didn't come until after all other less inflammatory avenues of dissent had been attempted. It was a guiding rule in the racial movement that "In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action."[41] No step was to be used unless the previous ones, applied thoughtfully and diligently, had failed. In describing the functional principles of one of the most recent areas of black action for racial equality, Operation Breadbasket (which is directed toward combatting economic exploitation), King spoke not only of the three steps before direct action which have just been noted. He also made the point that perfectly lawful tactics such as boycott and picketing were to be employed, as further attempts to solve the conflict without disobedience.[42]

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[40]This essay of King's is included in numerous recent collections of ethical writings, among them Harold Titus and Morris Keeton, eds., The Range of Ethics (New York, 1966), pp. 288-296.

[41]King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 78

But finally, if all these manners of opposition had been attempted and failed, civil disobedience was invoked. What this hesitancy to resort to the breaking of a law shows, among other things, is that King regarded the respect for law as a vital factor in the cohesion of any society. He was too well aware of the fragility of a basically good system of laws to allow civil disobedience to be used without the utmost caution and previous consideration of the consequences.

But although King's respect for the statutory laws of a nation (especially, for King, a nation with freedom for fair elections) was strong enough to prohibit any too-easy use of civil disobedience, still, in the final analysis, if a man-made law was an unjust law King would disobey it. Nowhere did King express this more positively and forcefully than in the address on "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" in which he says: "... if a man-made law does not square with the moral law of the universe then the individual has a moral responsibility to revolt against that man-made law."[43] The moral responsibility to disobey an unjust law of man is an obligation not solely to the remainder of the human

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[42] King, Where Do We Go from Here..., pp. 169-172.

[43] King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

community who are being harmed by the law. It is also an obligation to the God of the universe who, as St. Peter recalls, commands us to "... obey God rather than man." (Acts 5; 29). King saw that acts of civil disobedience had been practiced throughout the course of the Judaeo-Christian tradition:

> ... there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman empire. 44

King also stated his agreement with Augustine's pronouncement that "An unjust law is no law at all."[45] In making these assertions King affirmed the belief that, although the state may in fact possess the power to coerce men into obeying man-made laws which are morally unjust, it does not have the right to do so. The right of the individual conscience must inevitably be left intact to obey divine commands.

This belief that there are eternal commands that speak to man was expanded by King into an insistence that

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[44]Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail", reprinted in "Unwise and Untimely"?, p. 9.

[45]King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 82.

absolute moral principles can be found at the core of all existence, and that man's task is to discover and obey those principles. While speaking of the nature of the Christian doctrine and its incompatibility with Communism, King asserts that "In contrast to the ethical relativism of Communism, Christianity sets forth a system of absolute moral values and affirms that God has placed within the very structure of this universe certain moral principles that are fixed and immutable."[46] Because the world is designed and guided by this set of immutable, eternal, moral principles, there is a criterion by which the social and cultural rules and laws of man can be judged. If these timeless principles were not to exist, then the only standard for judging man-made laws as good or bad would be the principle of effectiveness, or, to put it less cordially, the principle of expediency.

But the principle of the eternal moral law is not without serious difficulty, either. It may very well be true that there is a law of God inscribed intrinsically within the created world, but it is another thing entirely to say that any man with his partial knowledge of the universe can ever know what the message of that

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[46]King, Strength to Love, p. 116.

eternal moral law is. And it can be even one further step toward arrogance for one lone dissenter to disagree with the overwhelming opinion of others about the message of that eternal moral law. If it is impossible for man to know the eternal moral law, then the practical result is the same as if the eternal moral law did not exist at all.[47]

There are, however, two root ideas in King's teachings on nonviolent resistance and in his theological stance as a whole that help to explain why King believed man could know the eternal moral law, at least in part. There is first the fact that King's basic philosophic position was the position termed Personalism. In the "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" essay King describes the

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[47]It is important at this point to make known the fact that King does not explicitly distinguish between divine law and natural law. One of the ways in which King comes to know the message of the eternal law, viz. his personalist philosophy, depends upon revelation more than upon reason, and thus is more closely aligned with divine law. On the other hand, the second way King comes to know the message of the eternal law, viz. the Greek tradition carried on in Aquinas and Augustine, depends upon reason much more heavily, and thus falls more within the context of natural law. King's statements thus seek to include both revelation and reason as means by which one can discover and know the eternal law. Because King does not make an adequate statement on what are the differences between natural and divine law, I have chosen to not identify King with either the natural law approach or the divine law approach. I have instead used a more neutral phrase, the "eternal moral law" in order to relate what he means on this topic.

meaning and effects of Personalism: "Personalism's insistence that only personality - finite and infinite - is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for dignity and worth in all human personality."[48]

What this means in regard to the question of the eternal moral law is that the God who is the giver of eternal law is a personal God, capable of being understood, at least partially, through revelation from a higher personality to a lower personality, and is capable of being responded to by man. Personalism implies that just as the God of the universe is able to be partially understood, so are the laws that God lays down.

This idea that King's belief in the eternal moral law rests partially upon his Personalist philosophy is suggested in the insightful article by John Rathbun that has been previously mentioned. The second pillar of King's belief in the eternal moral law and its knowability is also mentioned by Rathbun, and is suggested to him by King's frequent references to the Catholic thought of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine.[49] The strength which

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[48]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 100.

[49]Rathbun, pp. 45-47.

this Catholic tradition adds to King's stance on the eternal moral law is its insistence on a rational, orderly, universe. Rathbun states that because King holds to this traditional belief that the universe is rational, he can then:

> ... reason that rational inquiry and criticism of experience give a ground for objective, regulative moral laws as they apply to justice, to beauty, to love, or whatever. And since these moral laws constitute rational truths, they cannot be abrogated or changed by custom or convention. Being universal precisely because they are rational, they provide the logical consistency by which man may evaluate his actions.... 50

That is, man may also understand the eternal moral law to a great degree because it is rationally founded and man is a rational animal.

These two factors, then, King's Personalist position and his reliance on the Catholic tradition of Aquinas and Augustine, help make his belief in the eternal moral law more understandable. But as well as relying on the strength of these two philosophic traditions, King also offered his own more personal ideas on what is the nature of just and unjust laws. After having stated, in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail", that a man-made law must square with this eternal moral law of God in order for

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50 Rathbun, p. 47.

it to be a just law, King then proceeded to give more concrete examples of what an unjust law might be, especially as it applies to a minority situation. One of the criteria is that of unequal privilege: "An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding upon itself. This is difference made legal."[51] Similar to this first criterion, because of its appeal to the sense of civil equality, is the second factor King offers by way of determining what laws are just and what are unjust:

> A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters.... Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured? 52

These two criteria from the political sphere, coupled with his understanding of the eternal moral law, provided the basis upon which King determined what laws were unjust and therefore open to disobedience.

But again, in conclusion, it must be strongly

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[51] King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 83.

[52] Ibid.

stated that these decisions to disobey particular unjust laws were not undertaken without extreme caution, nor were they made through lack of respect for the statutory laws of a country. The fact that respect for a binding set of man-made laws provides men with a satisfying and steadying sense of physical and moral community was not at all overlooked. This is best shown in the willingness of King and those under his guidance to accept without protest the punishment which their disobedience to any law necessarily prompted. Instead of breaking a law and then going to any and all lengths to avoid being punished for their deed, as would a person with little respect for the law, the nonviolent resisters allowed their ranks to fill the jails, going voluntarily to face the hardship of jail or worse. King expressed the sentiment underlying such voluntary submission to punishment in this phrase: "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."[53]

Man-made law was indeed held in esteem by King. But as stated before, in the case of pressing conflict

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[53]King, Why We Can't Wait, pp. 83&84.

between man-made law and God's eternal law of morality, he surely held that the moral law of God must always be the one which the nonviolent resister is to follow.

Presence of a Cosmic Companionship to Justice

The sixth and final tenet of nonviolent resistance which King laid down in his address "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" is perhaps the most difficult to fully articulate. It is not a principle which can be adequately shown to be morally beneficial or philosophically sound, for to be able to do this would require a full understanding of faith itself. This final tenet of King's nonviolent resistance is the conviction, in his words, that "... the universe is on the side of justice."[54]

Without the belief that there is purpose to the universe, and that that purposefulness is in the long run going to make good out of evil and justice from an unjust situation, King could not have urged his followers to sacrifice so much of themselves to the nonviolent movement. Little more than this can be said. It is best to allow King himself the final word which explains his commitment to a totally nonviolent way: "There is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he

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[54]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", Christian Century, p. 166.

is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world."[55]

In summary to this second chapter it must be reiterated that King's commitment to nonviolence was a commitment to a total way of life rather than to a simple method of overcoming particular injustices. Each of the six primary tenets - the coherence of ends and means, the refusal to inflict injury, the redemptive value of self-suffering, the belief in the potential for goodness in every man, the necessity of civil disobedience, and the acceptance of the assumption that there is a cosmic companionship to justice - each of these works both individually and jointly with all the other tenets to help transform the whole life of every nonviolent resister, just as they worked to transform the whole life of King.

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[55]King, Strength to Love, p. 152.

III

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KING'S NONVIOLENCE AND HIS RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Whereas the first and second parts of this thesis have set forth in precise frameworks the many aspects of Martin Luther King's religious thought and his teachings on nonviolent resistance, this third part serves a somewhat dissimilar purpose. It seeks not to delineate any further ideas of King's, but rather to show the relationships among the ideas that have thus far already been laid out. This will be accomplished by making known two important relations: first, that King's teachings on nonviolence should be seen within the context of the more limited, i.e. the present, dimension of the Kingdom of God; and second, that there are themes in King's nonviolent resistance which are derived from and complementary to themes in his general religious principles. Through the establishment of these relations it will become clear that King's teachings on nonviolent resistance are afforded a more complete understanding when they are seen as direct extensions of his religious beliefs.

It is important to note that the ideas incorporated in this attempt to show how an understanding of King's

teachings on nonviolent resistance is dependent upon his religious beliefs are by and large original with this writer. Certain other commentators on King's thought have made intimations in this direction, but none has strongly posited the force of this positive correlation.[1] It is a fact, of course, that King was a Baptist pastor, and few commentators on King have failed to point this out. But none has taken this fact and drawn from it the deep meaning which is there. None has adequately shown how fully King's religious faith permeated all his other thought, especially his teachings on nonviolent resistance. To show this close relationship is the purpose of this third chapter.

The Limited Scope of Nonviolent Resistance

Prominent in the interpretation of King's religious thought within the concept of the Kingdom of God was the distinction made between the Kingdom perceived

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[1]See especially Alex Willingham, "The Religious Basis for Action in the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr." (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Iowa, 1965), and Walton, pp. 38-76. Both of these commentators on King have made the point that King's political philosophy is indebted to his religious belief. But in both cases the author does not go much further than noting the fact that King's religious beliefs chronologically preceded his political thought. Neither takes a particular political theme and adequately follows it to its source in King's religious thought.

as the coming Kingdom, i.e. as a future dimension, and the Kingdom perceived as the Kingdom of Christ, i.e. as a present dimension.[2] This distinction allowed certain limits to be imposed upon the human possibility of experiencing the totality of the Kingdom as a present reality on earth. King's recognition that man's finite freedom always operates within an already established framework of destiny was one such limit. Another was his belief that there will always remain a future judgment.[3] Both of these are reasons why the Kingdom of God concept in King's religious thought always retained a dimension of "not yet", a dimension always outside of the present experience of man.

King's nonviolent resistance acts within these limits of finite freedom and future judgment. It accepts these restrictions placed upon man's ability to experience the totality of the Kingdom as a present reality. In accepting such restrictions, King's nonviolence becomes different from the view held by many pacifists that nonviolence is a method with no restrictions, i.e. that non-

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[2]See especially pp. 19-21 and pp. 34-36.

[3]See pp. 41-43 for what King precisely meant by the future judgment of the Kingdom. This includes his insistence that the future dimension contains both the judgment by other men, in the historical future, and the judgment by God, after death.

violence is capable of bringing about a fully perfect state of affairs. To be sure, King did emphasize to a great extent the efficacy of nonviolence, and he did believe that it could make definite changes in individual and collective moral attitudes. But, as he states in the following passage, he did not view his nonviolence as a faultless instrument capable of attaining some utopian state, as many thorough-going pacifists would be prone to do: "... I never joined a pacifist organization.... I came to see the pacifist position not as sinless but as the lesser evil in the circumstances. I felt then, and I feel now, that the pacifist would have a greater appeal if he did not claim to be free from the moral dilemmas that the Christian nonpacifist confronts."[4] Nonviolence is therefore not faultless; neither is it ultimately limitless. Its efficacy is restricted by man's finite freedom and the depravity of the human condition. As described in terms of the division made between the two dimensions of the Kingdom of God, nonviolence operates not to bring about the complete and final reality of a utopian future Kingdom on earth, but to bring about a realization of the present Kingdom that is now at work in Christian lives. King's nonviolence, then, is not a

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[4]King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 99.

separate and idealistic system unconnected with the limiting principles of the present dimension of the Kingdom. It operates within limits and within a larger system. This same truth, that nonviolence operates according to principles within the limits of the concept of the Kingdom of God, will be reinforced through the presentation of the bulk of the material in this third chapter.

Themes Common to King's Religious Thought and His Nonviolent Resistance

It has been previously argued[5] that in a general sense King's nonviolent resistance should be seen as having developed from his religious principles. It remains, therefore, to substantiate and further explain that general sense of development by showing specifically how the tenets of King's nonviolence exhibit externally his inner spiritual beliefs. This can be accomplished through a selection of some of the important themes in King's religious belief and a comparison of the meaning of these themes with the meaning of corresponding themes in King's nonviolent resistance. The themes that lend

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[5]This is found both in the first chapter during the discussion of why the Kingdom of God was central in King's thought, and in the second chapter during the discussion that nonviolence was more than just a method to King.

themselves most readily to this relationship between nonviolence and religious belief are: a) King's belief that there is a cosmic companionship to justice and his corresponding religious sentiment regarding the sovereignty of good; b) The tenet of his nonviolent resistance which affirms that there is a potential for goodness in every man and its relationship to King's religious statement of confidence in an image of God still being firmly etched in even the most depraved man; c) King's belief in redemptive suffering and its correspondence with his religious idea of Christian realism; and d) His insistence that ends and means must cohere in a nonviolent campaign and its correspondence with the bond that unifies the two dimensions of the Kingdom of God. The contention of this thesis will be substantiated by showing that in each of these four important sets of themes the nonviolent tenet is an extension and manifestation of the religious belief. Thus King's religious faith, which is most accurately characterized in terms of the Kingdom of God, will be shown to be the foundation of his teachings on nonviolent resistance.

The Sovereignty of Good and the Cosmic Companionship to Justice

One crucial tenet of King's teaching on nonvio-

lent resistance was his belief that there exists a purposefulness to the universe which, in the long run, assures the triumph of justice over injustice, of good over evil. In his address "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", King reiterates this belief, saying "... there is a vital feeling that when one is engaged in a nonviolent struggle, that he has cosmic companionship, so to speak - that somehow the arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice."[6] This assertion of the ultimate triumph of justice can correctly be seen only as a furtherance of King's more specificically theological conviction that the traditional Christian belief in God's omnipotence and His complete goodness is true.[7] If King had rejected either part of this belief, then he could not have had faith that in the long run those engaged in nonviolent resistance for just causes are aided by this cosmic companionship. For if he did not believe God were good he could not maintain that it would necessarily be the good which would ultimately triumph. And if he did not believe God were omnipotent, he could not assert that good would not possibly be overcome by the forces of evil. King expli-

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[6]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", taped address.

[7]As noted on pp. 16-19.

citly noted the dependence of this particular tenet of nonviolence on his more fundamental religious principles in stating that "This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith."[8]

Because King's hope that good can ultimately emerge victorious was based on a lasting faith in an omnipotent God, the creator of both the good and the evil, his hope is not open to the interpretation that it is man's own powers that will inevitably ensure the establishment of what is good. The fact that King rejected the humanist alternative in his theological thought supports this[9], thus furthering the assertion that his belief in a cosmic companionship to justice is only fully understandable when seen as an extension of his basic religious principle that an omnipotent God ensures final sovereignty of good.

The Spirituality of Man and the Potential for Goodness in Every Man

It now becomes important to show that King's nonviolent tenet expressing confidence in the potential for

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[8]King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", Christian Century, p. 167.

[9]See. pp. 15&16.

goodness in every man is an extension of his theological belief in the spirituality of man. It has been shown that for self-suffering and agapē to be effectively employed in a nonviolent campaign there must be a potential for goodness within every individual.[10] Indeed, King affirmed his belief in that capacity for goodness, saying "... we love our enemies by realizing that they are not totally bad and that they are not beyond the reach of God's redemptive love."[11] This statement receives its fullest meaning when it is seen in terms of King's more fundamental conviction that man is created in the image of God and always retains within himself at least a tarnished image of that original spiritual creation. That is, even if the opponent in a nonviolent campaign be a thoroughly immoral and hateful person by human standards, King can still affirm that because this man was also created in the image of God, he can be appealed to and won over because of the original image of goodness still to be found at the core of his being. The reason there is a potential for goodness in every man is because man is created in the image of God. This means, since there is within all men an image of the divine, that no man must be vio-

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[10] See pp. 81-83.

[11] King, Strength to Love, p. 43.

lated. For to violate man is to violate that image of God within man, and to violate that image of God within man is to violate God Himself.

The formulation of King's definition of violence[12] stated that violence is coercive hatred, whether spiritual, physical, or mental, that is directed toward any person, including oneself. Bound up in this is the idea of violation. In fact, the term violence is etymologically traceable to the Latin word violare, which means violation.[13] By refusing to employ violence against another person the nonviolent resister is refusing to violate the divine image within man. His refusal to use violence indicates the resister's respect for the essence of the personality and the moral integrity of the assailant. Nonviolence, then, is non-violation, it is the willingness to refrain from infringing upon the inner core of another man.

The recognition by a nonviolent resister that

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[12] See. p. 65.

[13] Many nonviolent positions, including that of Gandhi, extend the idea of violation to include not only human life, but also any kind of animal life. What this implies, of course, is that if King were to have followed the Gandhian idea of violation in its extended sense, then he also would have had to follow the Gandhian practice of vegetarianism. The idea of violation which is found in King's definition of violence, however, comes less from Gandhian roots and more from the Christian belief in the image of God in everyman, thus the practice of vegetarianism need not follow.

there is a potential for goodness in every man not only prohibits him from doing violence to another, it also prohibits him from taking a too-easy stance that he is totally right and the opponent totally wrong. King recognized this valuable benefit of nonviolence, speaking of it favorably in The Trumpet of Conscience:

> Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when they help us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition. 14

With this recognition of the image of God in everyman, King established a further basis for solidarity between the resister and the opponent. In the willingness to remain open to the possibility that there may be some truth in the opponent's position, and in the warning against self-righteousness on the part of the nonviolent resister, greater communication is fostered. The communication engenders a realization by both parties that the final solution to the conflict consists not so much in one party getting its way at the expense of the other, but in a genuine reconciliation of people and the issues they represent.

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[14] King, The Trumpet of Conscience, p. 29.

Christian Realism and the Need for Redemptive Suffering

Along with his belief that man was created in the image of God and therefore maintains a potential for goodness, it is also necessary to recall King's realization that man has greatly corrupted this original nature and now exists in the sordid state of disobedience to God. King termed this recognition of human sinfulness "Christian realism",[15] and because of these human sinful tendencies, he realized man would continue to bring suffering and hardships on other people. King's Christian realism shows that he knew very well the entrenched position which suffering occupies in the life of every individual.

This recognition of the pervasive nature of suffering in the world is a fundamental undergirding to King's nonviolent teaching that unearned suffering is redemptive. He was of the opinion that both violence and nonviolence recognize the pervasiveness of suffering, and that both depend upon suffering as a tremendous force in social change. But he believed that only by being nonviolent can one make creative use of this suffering. To do this one must take an active part in acceptance of suffering

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[15] See p. 15.

upon oneself. In other words, instead of making the suffering of others the powerful force which brings about change, the nonviolent person effects the change through a process which channels the suffering upon himself. Thus King's Christian realism, pragmatically recognizing that suffering is a permanent part of human conflict, provides the realism which prompts the nonviolent resister to recognize the necessity of willingly taking the inevitable hardships upon himself. In a lengthy exposition of his own decision to undergo unmerited suffering, King further explains this principle:

> My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my suffering mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity of suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. 16

To restate King's attitude toward suffering, then, he held first that suffering is highly expected to result when issues dear to opposing parties come into conflict,

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16 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Suffering and Faith", Christian Century, (April 27, 1960), p. 510.

and secondly, that the suffering must be taken upon oneself rather than imposed upon others.

There is implicitly related to King's theological concept of Christian realism and the concomitant nonviolent teaching on self-suffering the further idea of "positive peace", as compared to "negative peace". King explains what is meant by these terms in speaking of his disappointment in the white moderate who would stop short of true commitment to the cause of equality for blacks which King so strongly advocated. The white moderate was one "... who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."[17] But the nonviolent resister, unlike the white moderate, is grounded in the Christian realism King described. Thus he understands that conflict between human ideas, desires, and wills is unavoidable. He is therefore less likely to confuse a genuine "positive peace" with an absence of tension, a "negative peace". One instance which helps to clarify this distinction follows.

It can rightly be said that there existed an air of tranquility before the civil rights campaigns which seemed, on the surface at least, to evidence a harmony

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[17]King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail", "Unwise and Untimely"?, p. 9.

between Negro and white. In the face of this, there also existed a certain tendency to believe the common charges made against King that he was not a peaceable man but rather an agitator from outside who created conflict rather than solving it. Such charges were made, for instance, in the case of King's leadership of the Birmingham campaign.[18] But what had existed in the South before the tension brought about by such demonstrations as those in Birmingham was only a subdued tranquility. It was not a positive peace. And, as Kenneth Slack's biography of King points out,[19] there is a powerful difference between being a peaceable man and being a peacemaker. King's belief was that the New Testament calls man to be the latter as well as the former.

The surface tranquility, the "negative peace", may be little more than a silent acquiescence by overpowered groups to the undesired will of the more powerful. It is not, by any means, the presence of justice. To King, the

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[18]Note the letter sent to King by Birmingham clergy. It was in answer to these men that King drafted his "Letter from Birmingham Jail". The letter sent to King made the charge that he was an "outsider", and that he advocated actions that "... incite to hatred and violence...." This letter is also reprinted in "Unwise and Untimely"?, p. 2.

[19]Slack, p. 81.

covert, spiritual violence of segregation existed not only alongside of, but probably as a direct result of, the overt tranquility. The nonviolent resisters opposing such segregation, then, aware of King's theological concept of Christian realism, recognized that positive peace can come in the midst of conflict just as often as it can be found in a situation lacking tension. They recognized that positive peace often requires a price to be paid. And, as Richard Gregg aptly puts it, the nonviolent resister "... does not ask others to pay the price before he pays it. He steps forward and pays the first instalment of the price himself, and continues to pay until others are constrained to share in the expense by force of example."[20] King's Christian realism, allowing the nonviolent resister to recognize the difference between "negative peace" and "positive peace", distinguishes the frameworks within which the redemptive power of self-suffering can most constructively operate. In this way also is King's teaching on nonviolence dependent upon his theological beliefs.

Ends-Means and the Unity of the Two Dimensions of the Kingdom

King's reliance in his nonviolent teachings on

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[20]Gregg, p. 172.

the concept of the coherence of ends with the means is one of the most important parts of his whole nonviolent teaching. It is a distinctive concept also, standing against the commonly accepted idea that violent means can bring about a peaceful settlement. Because of this, King's statement that the ends and the means must cohere is a radical step - in the true sense of the word "radical" - for it cuts at the very roots of a notion which is generally doubted very little. Because it is a radical step, it must be defended by a fundamental understanding of the place ends and means were given in King's theological framework.[21]

In King's thought the key to the compatible, underlying, theological understanding of the status of ends and means lies in the earlier stated distinction between the Kingdom of God as a present reality and the Kingdom of God as a future possibility. What this final section shows is that, according to King, God brings together the

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[21]Certainly one method to determine the truth of whether violent means have really effected peaceful ends is to study past situations and derive from this information a conclusion. This is a worthy task, but one outside of the scope of this thesis. To perform this effectively would require extensive scholarship in the field of history. The underlying theological prehension which King has of this problem is equally as important as the historical look at situations, however, and is better able to be examined within this thesis.

two dimensions of the Kingdom in Christ. In doing this, God shows that man must make his ends compatible with his means. This statement, of course, requires further elaboration and support.

King taught that the Kingdom as a present reality is established in Christ and in His workings in the world.[22] Christ, in fact, is the Kingdom as a present reality. At the same time, King held that there would continue to be a future dimension to the Kingdom which remains transcendent, outside of the present experience of man.[23] In these statements King notes the difference between the two dimensions of the Kingdom. Yet it would be wrong to emphasize the differences King saw in these two dimensions of the Kingdom without at the same time emphasizing the fact that he did combine both dimensions within the overall framework of his Christian belief. The differences are there, creating a tension within King's thought, but at a more fundamental level the two dimensions are woven together in King's thought by the fact that they are but two perspectives on the same central meaning of what Christ represents. King expressed his belief that Christ joins together these two dimensions in saying "Christ is

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[22] See p. 19ff.

[23] See pp. 36&37.

not only Godlike but God is Christlike. Christ is the word made flesh. He is the language of eternity translated in the words of time."[24]

Christ binds together the dimension of the present Kingdom with that of the future Kingdom because He is at the same time the embodiment of the present Kingdom and the promise of the future Kingdom. What this means is that Christ, in His Incarnation, brings the Kingdom as a present reality to the lives of men. By accepting Christ, a Christian accepts the Kingdom in its present form. Yet Christ is at the same time exactly what is promised to the Christian in the future Kingdom. The presence of Christ on earth as the present Kingdom in Christian lives is, with St. Paul in Ephesians 1: 11-14, an "earnest" of the full inheritance promised in the future Kingdom to those who believe in Christ. This is so because "... an 'earnest' is a sample of goods which guarantees the main consignment to be of the same kind and quality."[25] To repeat, then, Christ brings together the dimension of the present Kingdom with that of the future Kingdom because He is both the embodiment of the Kingdom which is

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[24] King, Strength to Love, p. 93.

[25] G.H.C. Macgregor, The Relevance of an Impossible Ideal (New York, 1954), p. 143.

now, as a transforming power presently at work in the world, and the promise of the Kingdom which remains outside of a person's earthly experience, which is "not yet".

Coupled with this realization that Christ is both the present reality of the earthly Kingdom and the promise of the future Kingdom is the truth that only through the acceptance of Christ as a present reality within his earthly life can an individual experience the promise of the future Kingdom. King affirmed this in his continual assertions that man must undergo a genuine spiritual transformation before he is capable at all of rising above his corrupt state.[26]

Thus only through Christ can man truly experience Christ. Christ is both the goal and the source of the strength that enables man to reach that goal; Christ is both the end and the means. This is the underlying principle in the religious basis of King's insistence that the ends and the means must cohere. God, in binding together the present Kingdom and the future Kingdom in Christ, binds together the ends and the means and shows that the end is but the complete and fulfilled extension of the means. Jacques Ellul concisely states what has been here expressed in this excerpt from The Presence of

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[26]See p. 21ff.

the Kingdom:

> The first truth which must be remembered, is that for Christians there is no dissociation between the end and the means.... The point from which we ought to start is that in the work of God the end and the means are identical. Thus when Jesus Christ is present the Kingdom has 'come upon' us. This formula expresses very precisely the relation between the end and the means. Jesus Christ in his Incarnation appears as God's means, for the salvation of man and for the establishment of the Kingdom of God, but where Jesus Christ is, there also is this salvation and this Kingdom. 27

The intent of this final chapter has been to give greater depth and a firmer footing to King's teachings on nonviolence by showing how many of the concepts involved in that teaching depend upon King's more basic religious beliefs. Such a reliance of King's nonviolent teaching on these more fundamental religious principles is a reminder once again that nonviolence was for him much more than simply a method to be adopted when expedient. It was his total way of life, and this total way of life of nonviolence was rooted in the principles of his Christian faith. The nonviolence King taught would have been a hollow tool without the healing power of agapistic love at its center, and, as King makes known time and again, "... every genuine expression of love grows out

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27 Jacques Ellul, The Presence of the Kingdom (New York, 1967), p. 79.

of a consistent and total surrender to God."[28]

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[28]King, Strength to Love, p. 42.

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