

## Martin Luther King Jr.: The Crozer Seminary Years

*As an undergraduate at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King Jr. was never a strong student. He preferred to party and use his college years to hone his oratorical skills. But when he arrived at Crozer Theological Seminary, King quickly got down to work. By the time he reached his last year at Crozer Seminary, King was a straight-A student.*

by Clayborne Carson

*Editor's Note: In the Spring issue of JBHE we presented the first of a two-part series on the higher education of Martin Luther King Jr. The first installment detailed King's years at Morehouse College in Atlanta. Here Clayborne Carson continues the story with King's years at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.*

IN 1948, AS HE approached the end of his undergraduate years at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King Jr. applied to several northern, theologically liberal seminaries, including Crozer Theological Seminary. His father, who already admired his son's qualities as a preacher ("His voice, his delivery, the structure and design of his sermons all set him apart from anyone I'd ever heard in my life"), was disappointed that King Jr. would not become copastor at Ebenezer but reluctantly agreed to support his son's education. King Sr. feared his son might not return to the segregated South, but he also recognized that King Jr. would be able to "broaden his knowledge tremendously" at a northern seminary. He secured letters from his father and several family friends, but the comments of those who knew King well were restrained in their assessments of his intellectual ability, often focusing on King's family background and social skills. Morehouse religion professor Lucius M. Tobin, who had not taught King, could report only that he came from "a fine family" and was "a little above average in scholarship." Morehouse president Benjamin E. Mays similarly recommended King, along with another student, but conceded that King was "not brilliant," only a person capable of "B work" or, "with good competition," perhaps "even better." Religion professor George D. Kelsey described King's Morehouse record as "short of what may be called 'good'" but contended that King was an underachiever who had come "to realize the value of scholarship late in his college

career." Brailsford R. Brazeal similarly saw evidence of academic growth and sought to explain King's average grades by referring to his "comparatively weak high school background." Even King Sr.'s positive letter was vague, referring to the fact that King was only 15 when he entered college and was "above his age in thought."

When he began his seminary studies in the fall of 1948, 19-year-old King was younger than most of his Crozer classmates. He probably realized that he would have to become more diligent in his studies if he were to succeed at

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the small Baptist institution in Chester, Pennsylvania, a small town southwest of Philadelphia. As one of 11 black students (6 of them in King's

class) in a student body numbering more than 90, King was self-consciously aware that he represented his race and was determined to do well in his studies. King's only extant letter from his Crozer years, written to his mother during his first term, mentions the social distractions of a Temple student he had once dated and another "fine chick" in Philadelphia, but King also insists that he never went "anywhere much but in these books" and did not think about girls because he was "[too] busy studying." King, evidently wishing to break with the relaxed attitude he had had toward his Morehouse studies, quickly immersed himself in Crozer's intellectual environment. He later recalled struggling to avoid confirming racial stereotypes: "If I were a minute late to class, I was almost morbidly conscious of it and sure that everyone noticed it. Rather than be thought of as always laughing, I'm afraid I was grimly serious for a time. I had a tendency to overdress, to keep my room spotless, my shoes perfectly shined, and my clothes immaculately pressed."

The Crozer environment encouraged King's increasing intellectual seriousness. Nearly all students lived in private dormitory rooms on campus, situated on a bucolic hillside.

Students found that most of their daily needs were satisfied by the seminary's facilities, which included a library, dining rooms, tennis courts, and other amenities. The letter King received from Crozer's dean before the start of the term emphasized the school's academic quality — it was a fully accredited theological seminary with an "excellent faculty of consecrated Christian teachers" — and its informality, made possible by extensive personal contacts between students and full-time faculty, all of whom lived on campus. King's transition was eased when former Morehouse classmate Walter McCall joined him at Crozer after the first term. In addition, King often had dinner at the nearby home of the Reverend J. Pius Barbour, a King family acquaintance who had left Morehouse to become Crozer's first black graduate and who was then pastor of Chester's Calvary Baptist Church. "He is full of fun, and he has one of the best minds of anybody I have ever met," King informed his mother.

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King immersed himself in his studies and in the European-American theological readings assigned by his Crozer professors. He enrolled in six courses during his first term at Crozer, the most important of which was James Bennett Pritchard's Introduction to the Old Testament — a demanding required course that constituted 8 of King's 13 credit hours for the term. Pritchard was a noted biblical scholar who had earned his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania and had taught at Crozer since 1942. King quickly demonstrated his willingness to accept Pritchard's biblical interpretations based on historical and archaeological research. In one of his first papers for Pritchard, King eagerly expressed his independence from religious fundamentalism. "No logical thinker can doubt the fact that . . . archaeological findings are now [indispensable] to all concrete study of Hebrew-Christian religion," King commented in discussing the application of the "scientific method" to Old Testament study. Yet, King concluded, while such findings might reveal that biblical stories have mythological roots, they did not necessarily undermine the essential truths of the Old Testament, which remained "one of the most logical

vehicles of mankind's deepest devotional thoughts and aspirations, couched in language which still retains its original vigour and its moral intensity."

King's preference for politically engaged religion was also evident in another paper discussing scholarship on Jeremiah. King argued that despite his failure to affect the social order of his time, Jeremiah's insistence on a personal relationship with God was ultimately a valuable contribution to Christianity. The prophet, King insisted, demonstrated that Christians should never "become sponsors and supporters of the status quo. How often has religion gone down, chained to a status quo it allied itself with." In refuting the cynical notion that religion was "simply the reflection of the State's opinion of itself foisted upon the divine," Jeremiah taught that religion could be a vehicle of social progress: "Religion, in a sense, through men like Jeremiah, provides for its own advancement, and carries within it the promise of progress and renewed power."

King gained further exposure to historical biblical scholarship during his second term, in Morton Scott Enslin's History and Literature of the New Testament. A sometimes intimidating Harvard-trained expert in the history of early Christianity, Enslin had taught at Crozer since 1924 and edited the *Crozer Quarterly* since 1941. Like Pritchard, Enslin was known to give few high grades, and he returned King's papers with numerous critical comments and corrections written in almost illegible, miniature script. King's papers for Enslin, in which he acknowledged Christianity's indebtedness to earlier religious traditions, were, like those for Pritchard, competent but unimaginative and derivative. In them he continued to affirm the value of biblical scholarship while also insisting that such scholarship did not undermine essential Christian values.

King began to forge his own theological perspective during the fall term of his second year, when he enrolled in George Washington Davis' two-term course, Christian Theology for Today. Davis, who attended Colgate-Rochester Divinity School and received a doctorate from Yale before joining Crozer's faculty in 1938, was a northern Baptist influenced by the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. He emphasized the social implications of Christianity, reinforcing the social reform motivations that had led to King's decision to become a minister. Although King had already been exposed to the social-gospel teachings of Mays and Kelsey, Davis expanded King's understanding of the philo-

**Martin Luther King Jr.'s Grades at Crozer Theological Seminary:  
From Average Performer to Straight-A Student**

1948-1949		1949-1950		1950-1951	
Course	Grade	Course	Grade	Course	Grade
Introduction to the Old Testament	B-	Public worship	B+	American Christianity — colonial period	A
Preaching ministry of the church	B+	Greek religion	B	Religious development of personality	A
Orientation for juniors	C-	Christian theology for today	B+	The minister's use of the radio	A
Public speaking	P	The development of Christian ideas	A	Philosophy of religion	A
Choir	P	Christian theology for today	A	Theological integration	A
Church music	C+	Preaching problems	B+	Advanced philosophy of religion	A
History and literature of the New Testament	B	Conduct of church services	B	Christian social philosophy II	A
Great theologians	A-	Outline history of Christianity	B+	Christianity and society	A-
Preparation of the sermon	A	The history of living religions	B+		
Public speaking	C+				
The gospels	B+	<b>Note:</b> During the 1949-1950 academic year King also audited a course on pastoral counseling. During the 1950-1951 academic year, King also took two courses at the University of Pennsylvania. One course was on the philosophy of Kant and the other was on the problems of esthetics.			
Christian mysticism	B+				
Practice preaching	A-				
Public speaking	C				

sophical underpinnings of modern Christian liberalism, particularly the notion that God's reality was revealed through the historical unfolding of his moral law. Davis' impact on his 20-year-old student was immediate. King's essays for Davis displayed a greater degree of intellectual engagement than had the historical essays written for Pritchard and Enslin. So theologically compatible were King and Davis that King took a total of seven courses from him. Under Davis' tutelage, King began to see theology as a storehouse of ideas that could reinforce the religious beliefs derived from his formative experiences.

Although King's essays for Davis were more reflective than those he had written during his first year, they were still flawed by unacknowledged textual appropriations from theologians King consulted. His bibliography or notes nearly always identified his sources, but the lack of adequate citations and quotation marks obscured the extent to which King relied upon the work of others. The available documentary evidence does not provide a definite answer to the question whether King deliberately violated the standards that applied to him as a student, yet his academic papers do contain passages that meet a strict definition of plagiarism — that is, *any* unacknowledged appropriation of words or ideas. At the same time, his essays also contain views consistent with those King

expressed in other papers and exams written at the time; thus, even though King's writings were often derivative, they remain reliable expressions of his theological opinions.

King, in his papers for Davis, reaffirmed his acceptance of critical biblical scholarship while leaving room in his perspective for some traditional Christian beliefs that could not be reconciled with scholarly findings. He agreed with the liberal view of the Bible as "a portrayal of the experiences of men written in particular historical situations" and as a progressive revelation of the divine, rather than as the literal word of God. Although he saw Jesus as human, he affirmed "an element in his life which transcends the human," a divine quality that was "not

something thrust upon Jesus from above, but . . . a definite achievement through the process of moral struggle and self-abnegation." He rejected literal interpretations of Christian beliefs that contradicted "the laws of modern science," insisting instead that such beliefs — the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the second coming, and the bodily resurrection — should be understood metaphorically. The true meaning of the kingdom of God, in short, involved the creation of "a society in which all men and women will be controlled by the eternal love of God." Christians who probed "into the deeper meaning of these doctrines" would find, he stated, "that they are based on a profound founda-

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tion." Contrasting liberalism with fundamentalism, King portrayed fundamentalists as "willing to preserve certain ancient ideas even though they are contrary to science."

In another paper, King declared that biblical scholars did not destroy religious belief; instead they served "to prepare the ground for constructive building." The Bible is subject to historical analysis, King explained: "This advance has revealed to us that God reveals himself progressively through human history, and that the final significance of the Scripture lies in the outcome of the process."

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While King remained hostile to fundamentalist Christianity, he increasingly acknowledged the limitations of liberal theology and even of the theological enterprise itself. Still accepting a broad framework of theological understanding based on biblical criticism and the social gospel, he increasingly referred to his personal experiences to explain his gradual move toward greater orthodoxy. In an essay for Davis entitled "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man," he argued that liberals too "easily cast aside the term sin, failing to realize that many of our present ills result from the sins of men." King admitted that his conception of man was "going through a state of transition. At one time I find myself leaning toward a mild neo-orthodox view of man, and at other times I find myself leaning toward a liberal view of man. The former leaning may root back to certain experiences that I had in the South with a vicious race problem. Some of the experiences that I encountered there made it very difficult for me to believe in the essential goodness of man. On the other hand part of my liberal leaning has its source in another branch of the same root. [In] noticing the gradual improvements of this same race problem I came to see some noble possibilities in human nature. Also my liberal leaning may root back to the great imprint that many liberal theologians have left upon me and to my ever present desire to be optimistic about human nature."



He had, he acknowledged, become "a victim of eclecticism," seeking to "synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology." Discarding "one-sided generalizations about man," he concluded that "we shall be closest to the authentic Christian interpretation of man if we avoid both of these extremes."

As King became more critical of liberal theology, he also focused on the theological issue that he considered most crucial: the nature of divinity. Never having experienced God's presence directly through an abrupt experience of conversion, he sought ideas that would provide a conception of God consistent with his own experiences. Although King indicated in the middle of his second year "that the most valid conception of God is that of theism," which he defined as the notion that God was "a personal spirit immanent in nature and in the value structure of the universe," he would continue to struggle with this difficult issue long afterward. King's acceptance of personalist theology resulted from his desire to view religious experience, rather than philosophical rigor, as a necessary foundation for religious rectitude. In another paper for Davis, King concluded that the "ultimate solution" to the vexing problem of the sources of evil in a God-created universe was "not intellectual but spiritual. After we have climbed to the top of the speculative ladder we must leap out into the darkness of faith."

King's increasing tendency to acknowledge the validity of some neo-orthodox criticisms of Christian liberalism may have been related to events in his personal life that contradicted Crozer's ethos of interracial harmony. Most accounts of King's experiences at Crozer suggest that he actively sought out social contacts with white students and faculty members. His immersion in the social and intellectual life of a predominantly white, northern seminary may have had psychological costs, however, for King learned that he could not insulate himself from the realities of antiblack prejudice. On one occasion a white southern student pulled a gun on King, in the mistaken belief that King had victimized him as a prank. During the summer after his second year at Crozer, King was involved in another incident of harassment that reminded him of his vulnerability to racial discrimination when he ventured off campus. Not only were he and three friends refused service at a tavern, but the owner became abusive and picked up a gun, which he took outside and fired into the air. (He later claimed that, fearing a robbery,

he wanted to alert his watchdog.) Almanina Barbour, daughter of J. Pius Barbour, urged the outraged King to sue the establishment. Although the Camden branch of the NAACP agreed to handle the case as a violation of New Jersey's 1945 legislation prohibiting racial discrimination in public facilities, the matter was dropped when several witnesses refused to testify.

In addition to these reminders that he had not left racism behind in the South, King confronted the realization that he would have to tailor his academic training to fit his needs as a pastor of a black congregation. The unenthusiastic evaluation he received as a participant in Crozer's fieldwork program suggests King's difficulty in reconciling what he was learning at seminary with the ingrained religious beliefs he had brought from black Atlanta. Designed to aid students in their development as clergymen, fieldwork in King's case involved training at black churches in the area. Although King had refined his preaching while at Crozer, listeners' accounts suggest that his practice sermons were designed to engage the mind, not the emotions. King was an experienced preacher, of course, having assisted his father at Ebenezer during the previous three summers; the final evaluation written by the Reverend William E. Gardner suggests, however, that King may have become somewhat estranged from his Ebenezer roots. While Gardner saw King as superior in judgment, decisiveness, neatness, poise, and self-confidence, he also noted an "attitude of aloofness, disdain & possible snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of ordinary people," as well as "a smugness that refuses to adapt itself to the demands of ministering effectively to the average Negro congregation."

Despite this evaluation, King's buoyancy and self-assurance were evident in the most extended biographical statement he would write during his college career. While enrolled in Davis' course *The Religious Development of Personality* in Late 1950, King insisted in a paper, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," that his basic religious and social views were decisively shaped not by his academic training but by his formative experiences. His

father's "noble" example, he said, and the influences of his childhood had led him to enter the ministry. Despite periods of doubt and a continuing antipathy toward religious emotionalism, King considered his early years and his intense, daily involvement in church life as the bedrock of his religious faith: "At present I still feel the [effects] of the noble moral and ethical ideas that I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me, and even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away from them.

Even though I have never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to life. In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life."

As King became absorbed in the concerns of philosophical or systematic theology, he did not abandon his interest in Christian ethics and the social role of the Christian church.

During King's last months at Crozer, he took two courses with Kenneth L. Smith, a strong advocate of social-gospel thought. The courses — *Christianity and Society*, and *Christian Social Philosophy* — served as a forum for discussion of modern social issues, including the problems associated

with capitalism and the appropriations of Marxian solutions to those problems. Unsigned student papers from this class suggest that students examined a wide range of issues — church-state relations, the American economy, and cold war foreign policy, for example — and challenged their own and one another's political beliefs. One unsigned paper entitled "War and Pacifism," often attributed to King, probably accurately expressed King's changing position on the issue during this period. "Though I cannot accept an absolute pacifist position," the author began, "I am as anxious as any to see wars end and have no desire to take part in one." Challenging the views of American pacifist leader A.J. Muste, who had spoken at Crozer during November of King's second year, the paper argued that absolute pacifism would lead to anarchy. Not only did such a position allow no grounds for maintaining even a police force, since there is no real difference in kind between war and police action, but it also isolated "war from other ethical problems and [ignored] the fact that war is actually a symptom of deeper



Martin Luther King Jr.  
as a graduate student at Boston University

trouble." The conclusion was probably consistent with King's beliefs at the time:

"Since man is so often sinful there must be some coercion to keep one man from injuring his fellows. This is just as true between nations as it is between individuals. If one nation oppresses another a Christian nation must, in order to express love of neighbor, help protect the oppressed. This does not relieve us of our obligation to the enemy nation. We are obligated to treat them in such a way as to reclaim them to a useful place in the world community after they have been prevented from oppressing another. We must not seek revenge."

Although this paper reflects the neo-orthodox ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr, Smith recalled that King remained a fervent advocate of the social-gospel Christianity he had derived from both his childhood experiences and his study of Walter Rauschenbusch. Smith later recounted his arguments with King "about the relative merits of the social ethics of Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr," with King arguing against Niebuhr. King's later account of his Crozer years, in *Stride Toward Freedom*, probably overstates the extent of his intellectual engagement with the ideas of Niebuhr, for this is not confirmed by the documentary record. While King, like many other liberal theological students of the early 1950s, was undoubtedly influenced by Niebuhr's ideas, few of his papers mention Niebuhr's writings. Rather, King's increasing awareness of the neo-orthodox critique of liberalism derived from a variety of sources in addition to Niebuhr.

Aware of the intellectual deficiencies of social-gospel Christianity, King sought a theological framework that combined scholarly rigor with an emphasis on personal experience of God's imminence. Such a theology would allow him to reconcile his emotional roots in the nurturing, sustaining environment of Ebenezer with the sense of intellectual rectitude he had sought in graduate study. King's search led him to the personalism of Boston University's Edgar S. Brightman. As early as his second year at Crozer, he had made favorable comments about Brightman's writings, and during the second term of his last year he again encountered Brightman in Davis' course on the philosophy of religion. Assessing Brightman's book *A Philosophy of Religion*, he conceded that Brightman's personalism left

him "quite confused as to which definition [of God] was the most adequate." In general, however, he was persuaded by Brightman's inclusive notion of "essential" beliefs that underlay particular religious practices and concepts of God. Rejecting atheism as "philosophically unsound and practically disadvantageous," King affirmed religion "that gives meaning to life" and provides "the greatest incentive for the good life." He expressed his enthusiasm for a philosophical perspective that offers a rationale for the emotionally rich religious life he had known as a child: "How I long now for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book,"

King concluded. "It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless." The third-year seminarian reflected on his struggle to achieve a sense of religious contentment: "I do

remember moments that I have been awe awakened; there have been times that I have been carried out of myself by something greater than myself and to that something I gave myself. Has this great something been God? Maybe after all I have been religious for a number of years, and am now only becoming aware of it."

By the time of his graduation, King's intellectual confidence was reinforced by the experience of having successfully competed with white students during his Crozer years. He was elected student body president, became the class valedictorian, and was the recipient of the Pearl Plafker award for scholarship. He was also accepted for doctoral study at Boston University's School of Theology, where he would be able to work directly with the personalist theologians he had come to admire. He had convinced his teachers that he was destined for further success as a minister and leader, perhaps even as a scholar. Davis' confidential assessment of King's abilities was that he would "make an excellent minister or teacher. He has the mind for the latter." Enslin considered him a "very able man. All is grist that comes to his mill. Hard working, fertile minded, rarely misses anything which he can subsequently use." He added a prediction: "He will probably become a big strong man among his people." □♦♦♦♦□

*Clayborne Carson is a professor of history at Stanford University. This article is adapted from the introduction to The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Volume I: Called to Serve, Clayborne Carson et al., eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press). Reprinted with permission.*

