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The Georgia Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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GEORGIA ROOTS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was nineteen years old when he left Atlanta in 1948 for his first extended stay away from his parents’ home. As a child King had lived in the Auburn Avenue house where he was born. In 1941, he moved with his family to a nearby larger home on Boulevard Street, where he remained through his undergraduate years at Morehouse College. With the exception of the summers of 1944 and 1947, when he worked on a Connecticut tobacco farm, King came of age while only rarely venturing from his childhood surroundings. By the time he left Atlanta to attend Crozer Theological Seminary near Philadelphia, King was already an ordained minister and a proponent of liberal Christian ideas regarding social reform. Most King scholars, particularly those concerned with his intellectual development, have not devoted much attention to these early years of King’s life. They have instead emphasized the importance of his three years at Crozer and the following three years at Boston University, where he studied for his doctorate. King himself said little in his published writings about his childhood experiences and pointed to his graduate school training and readings as the sources of his most important beliefs. He once wrote that he did not begin “a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil” until he entered Crozer.¹

We should exercise caution, however, before attributing too much importance to King’s academic training outside the South in explaining the abilities and attitudes he brought to the southern black struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Although his exposure to the writings of white theologians and his acquisition of a doctoral degree in systematic theology set him
apart from other southern grassroots leaders and contributed to his rapid emergence as the preeminent national spokesperson, King's basic values and beliefs were established at an early age. A comparison of his social and religious attitudes during his pre-adult years with those from his years as a public figure reveal a remarkable consistency. Notwithstanding King's later tendency to portray himself (and that of scholars to depict him) as the intellectual product of his academic training, his philosophical readings, or his acquaintance with Gandhian ideas, King never lost touch with his Atlanta roots.

King deepened his theological understanding as a result of his divinity and graduate school training, but careful examination of documents from King's early years suggests that his teachers at Crozer and Boston provided new intellectual rationales for his ingrained attitudes. His academic training should be seen not as a transformative experience but as a refinement of pre-existing beliefs. Rather than assuming that his most important ideas derived from his academic training, we should recognize the extent to which his attitudes derived from his involvement in the African-American urban political and religious culture of Atlanta. King's most significant leadership attributes were related to his immersion in and his contribution to the intellectual ferment that has always been an essential part of African-American movements and institutional development. He understood, as only an insider can, the Atlanta black community, its institutional resources, its leadership networks, and its political traditions.

In the only extended autobiographical statement King wrote before beginning his life as a public figure, he emphasized the continuity of his basic religious beliefs. Although this paper, prepared for a 1950 course at Crozer Seminary, should be examined with due attention to the academic requirements that led to its writing, King's "Autobiography of Religious Development" is the most revealing account we have of his early formative experiences. Students of autobiography as a literary genre have noted that it combines memory and invention, but King's paper, which was not intended for public dis-
semination, contains enough revelatory details—many of which are confirmed by other sources—to suggest that he saw the assignment as an opportunity for both honest self-examination and self-justification. This manuscript and other autobiographical references scattered among the published and unpublished writings to be included in the King Papers Project’s documentary edition provide a wealth of biographical information. These sources reinforce the need for scholars to recognize the importance of King’s pre-adult experiences, and, more generally, to recognize the centrality of black community institutions—family, church, and voluntary organizations—in the shaping of King’s attitudes.

Although King would at times mention the theological differences that separated him from his father, his religious liberalism emerged within supportive home and church environments that offered ample sustenance for his dissenting views. His lifelong search for ways to reconcile conflicting theological and ideological alternatives began with his effort to find a middle ground between his father’s religious beliefs, which he labeled “fundamentalist,” and the Christian liberalism toward which he moved as a teenager. His graduate training did not result in a break with his family and racial roots. King’s rebellion against religious orthodoxy and parental authority was instead tempered by a desire to transform rather than abandon the Baptist beliefs and practices of his father’s generation.

The strength of King’s loyalties to mainstream black community institutions during his formative years were in striking contrast to the social marginality that characterized the early life of his most significant black nationalist critic, Malcolm X. While a closely-knit family provided King with a dependable source of nurturance, the death of Malcolm’s father and the mental instability of his mother left him with no consistent adult guidance during childhood. As a teenager, King saw in his father, a major religious and political leader in black Atlanta, the appealing role model that Malcolm found only later in life in Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. King emerged from childhood with a strong sense of racial identity
and racial destiny and took for granted many of the positive racial attitudes that Malcolm would acquire only as an adult. King sought to transform existing black religious institutions into instruments of black advancement; Malcolm believed that such institutions should be supplanted if blacks were to advance. Although King would later criticize Malcolm's black nationalism, he was, far more than Malcolm, rooted in African-American cultural traditions.3

In contrast to the geographical and occupational mobility that characterized Malcolm's family and, indeed, most Americans, King's roots were unusually deep. During his youth he lived in a stable social environment and encountered constant reminders of the depth of his family's ties to black Atlanta institutions. At least four generations of his ancestors lived in the region of Georgia near Atlanta. His maternal great-grandfather Willis Williams, his grandfather A. D. Williams, and father Martin Luther King, Sr. were all Baptist ministers. His grandfather and father pastored at Ebenezer Church on Auburn Avenue, where King, Jr. would later preach. They were politically-engaged ministers—King's grandfather was a founder of the Atlanta NAACP, and his father was also an NAACP leader. Before King himself graduated from Morehouse College, his grandfather and father had been "Morehouse men," with all the expectations of achievements and community service the phrase implied; his sister would join his mother and grandmother as "Spelman women."

During childhood, King's emerging personality combined aspects of both his father's domineering will and the emotional sustenance drawn from his mother's and grandmother's effusive, unconditional love. Although Daddy King was an important religious role model for him, King, Jr., also recognized the considerable influence the two women exerted within Ebenezer Church. As the church's "First Lady," Alberta Williams played a crucial role in convincing Ebenezer's deacons to accept her son-in-law as successor to her husband.4 Possessing alternative models of parental and social authority, King, Jr. developed distinctive leadership abilities
that combined attributes of the adults in his household. His “Autobiography” depicted a happy childhood spent “in a very congenial home situation,” with parents who “always lived together very intimately.” Hidden from view were his parents’ negotiations to reconcile, on the one hand, the compassionate nurturing of his mother and grandmother and, on the other hand, his father’s belief that strict discipline was necessary to prepare his children to enter an often cruel world. Although there is evidence of father-son conflicts in King’s childhood, King’s “Autobiography,” written from the perspective of adulthood, suggests that his later belief in the power of love to reconcile human differences had its origins in observations of his parents’ relationship.

It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for me to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences.

Outside their household, the principal formative environment for the King children was their father’s church. “The church has always been a second home for me,” King, Jr. later reminisced. “As far back as I can remember I was in church every Sunday.” Nearly all his initial friendships developed there—“My best friends were in Sunday School, and it was the Sunday School that helped me to build the capacity for getting along with people.” The center of his social life, Ebenezer was also the setting in which he experienced the first important successes of his childhood. When he was four, he received acclaim singing numbers such as “I Want to Be More and More Like Jesus,” with his mother accompanying him on piano. Performing initially for the Ebenezer congregation, he and his
mother were also booked at other churches and at religious conventions.5

Given the centrality of Ebenezer church in his life, it is hardly surprising that, as a teenager, King, Jr. would begin to define his individual identity in religious terms. His initial awareness of an estrangement from his father's religious convictions occurred unexpectedly and suddenly during an event that probably occurred at the age of seven, although King recalled that it happened when he was five. At an Ebenezer revival meeting, a guest evangelist from Virginia came to recruit new church members. When King's sister, Christine, came forward to join, he decided that he would not let his sibling "get ahead" of him. Having grown up in the church, King had never given much thought to joining it formally, but the emotion of the revival prompted an impulsive decision.

I had never given this matter a thought, and even at the time of [my] baptisms I was unaware of what was taking place. From this it seems quite clear that I joined the church not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister.

Although King's recognition that he did not feel the religious emotions of other family members might have been emotionally devastating, his inalienable sense of belonging to the church prevented him from feeling alienated from it. Aware of the extent to which he felt removed from the kind of fundamentalist faith that placed great importance on emotionality and the conversion experience, he never considered completely abandoning the faith of his fathers. Nor did his festeriing doubts interfere with his intense involvement in church life or his fascination with the art of preaching. His father noted his son's "feeling for ceremonies and ritual," his "passionate love of Baptist music," and his early mastery of skills—"a great speaker ... and he sang, too, in a fine, clear voice"—that would prepare him for a preaching career.6 His
pre-teenage letters written to his parents reveal an intimate knowledge of the details of Baptist church life—congregational governance, ward meetings, church finances, and continual social events.

King’s early childhood experiences not only shaped his religious beliefs, but also became the basis of an enduring egalitarian worldview. He inculcated his father’s dislike of social pretensions and snobbish behavior. At an early age, the younger King evinced sympathy for poor people and those less fortunate than his own family. He dated his birth “on the verge of the great depression which was to spread its disastrous arms into every corner of this nation for over a decade.” He recalled questioning his parents “about the numerous people standing in bread lines when I was about five years of age.” He saw this early experience as being the source of the “anti-capitalist feelings” he had acquired by the end of his undergraduate years. Identifying with the anti-elitist, frugal values his parents articulated, he became a lifelong critic of the profligate lifestyle he associated with the black middle class. Looking back on his childhood years, he later expressed admiration for his father “who always put his family first” and was “a real father.” Understating his family’s relative affluence during his childhood, he insisted that his father “had never made more that an ordinary salary, but the secret is that he knows that the art of saving and budgeting.” King distanced himself and his neighbors from more affluent blacks who lived in other parts of Atlanta, seeing his childhood acquaintances as “quite ordinary in terms of social status ... a wholesome community, notwithstanding the fact that none of us were ever considered members of the ‘upper upper class.’”

King’s parents also shaped his evolving views regarding the white world, with which he had little direct contact during his formative years. King, Sr. did not allow his children to accommodate themselves to the Jim Crow system, refusing, for example, to allow family members to go to the Fox Theater, which allowed blacks to sit only in the balcony, or to ride segregated public transportation.” When the father of a white, boyhood
playmate told his son that he could no longer play with King, Kings’ parents made him aware, for the first time, “of the existence of a race problem.” They told him of the “tragedies” that had resulted from the problem “and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it. I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person.” King’s account reveals that his father’s parents sought to moderate his youthful antipathy toward whites by telling him “that it was my duty as a Christian to love (the white man).” He was not entirely satisfied by his parents’ explanations—“The question arose in my mind, how could I love a race of people who hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best childhood friends?” Nevertheless, his father’s careful balancing of militancy and forgiveness in relations with whites provided an attractive model for King, Jr.*

King’s father and grandfather also served as models for his subsequent career as a politically-engaged minister. The Williams family had been associated with black educational advancement movements in Atlanta for many years. During the 1920s, A. D. Williams led a campaign that resulted in the establishment of a black high school, Booker T. Washington, which King later attended. The elder King’s determined opposition to the southern Jim Crow system demonstrated that, at least in the black Baptist church, fundamentalist religious beliefs did not preclude acceptance of the Social Gospel. Early in 1935, Daddy King, who had long been a registered voter, organized meetings to encourage blacks to register to vote. Despite resistance from more cautious clergymen and lay leaders, he organized a march to City Hall. A year later King, Sr. became chairman of the Committee on the Equalization of Teachers’ Salaries, organized to protest against discriminatory policies that paid higher salaries to white teachers than to blacks with equivalent qualifications and experience. Despite receiving threatening hate letters, he played a leading role in the sustained struggle for pay equity.* The elder King’s firm insistence that the Christian church should become politically
active set him apart from the conservative political stances of most scriptural fundamentalists.

Although the King children were too young to understand fully the concerns that motivated their father's activism, they were aware of the risks their father took in order to speak out on racial issues. King, Jr. later wrote that he and his siblings wondered how their father avoided being attacked during the “tension-packed atmosphere” of their childhood years. Dinner discussions in the King household often touched on political matters. King, Sr. did not hide his fiercely-held views about “the ridiculous nature of segregation in the South.” King, Jr. later remembered riding in the family car when a policeman pulled up and asked to see his father's license.

My father replied indignantly, ‘I'm no boy.’ Then, pointed to me, ‘This is a boy. I'm a man, and until you call me one, I will not listen to you.”

The policeman was so shocked that he wrote the ticket up nervously, and left the scene as quickly as possible.

On another occasion during the time of the 1935 voting rights campaign, King, Jr. again witnessed his father's determination to protest against racial discrimination when the youngster asked for a pair of shoes at a store outside the black community. When the white clerk told the two that they must go to the back of the store for service, King, Sr. refused and left the store when the clerk persisted. Years later the youngster remembered his father's vow never to accept the Jim Crow system.

The documentary evidence concerning King's childhood makes clear his considerable admiration for his father's courageous stands against the Jim Crow system, but his feelings toward his father were not uncritical. Rather than simply rejecting his father's values, the younger King broadened his awareness of the range of options his black world offered him. His family's diverse acquaintances included well-educated religious
liberals, such as C.D. Hubert, who gave seminars for Georgia preachers who had little formal education; Howard Thurman, a theologian at Howard University who had previously taught at Morehouse; Melvin Watson, another Morehouse professor and a member of Ebenezer; and Benjamin Mays, who became president of Morehouse in 1938 and later appointed King, Sr. to the college’s board of trustees. George Kelsey, a Morehouse professor who directed an Annual Institute for the Training and Improvement of Baptist Ministers, combined elements of religious liberalism and traditional religious practices. King, Sr. saw him as a teacher who “saw the pulpit as a place both for drama, in the old-fashioned, country Baptist sense, and for the articulation of philosophies that address the problems of society.” Kelsey remembered King, Jr. as an earnest student who took seriously the subject matter of his course. “I made it my business to present lectures on the most strenuous teaching of Jesus,” Kelsey recalled. “it was precisely at this time that Martin’s eyes lit up most and his face was graced with a smile.” Shortly after teaching King, Kelsey would publish an article arguing that “the problem of race is indeed America’s greatest moral dilemma,” giving King a phrase that he would years later use in his first book, Stride Toward Freedom.

Initially leaning toward a career in law or medicine, the teenage King observed numerous ministerial role models who possessed the intellectual respectability that his father lacked. One such model was the Reverend William Holmes Borders, who served as pastor at nearby Wheat Street Baptist Church. A graduate of a northern white seminary, holder of a master’s degree, and a former teacher at Morehouse, Borders demonstrated the effectiveness of cerebral rather than emotional religious leadership. According to Taylor Branch, King, along with two Morehouse friends, would study “Borders’ mannerisms, his organizational style, and above all the high-toned sermons in which he aroused his congregation without merely repeating the homilies of eternal life.”

Although King resisted religious emotionalism, his immersion in African-American religious culture strengthened his
belief in a loving, ever-present, omnipotent God who intervened in history and was a source of comfort in times of adversity. During his first year at Atlanta University's Laboratory High, a traumatic experience provided an opportunity for his parents to lay a foundation for his enduring religious beliefs. In May 1941, his grandmother suffered a fatal heart attack while preparing to speak at Mt. Olive Baptist Church. King learned about the death of "Mama" after returning from a parade he had attended without his parents’ permission. Remorseful about the death and about his transgression, King jumped from a second-floor window. Shaken up but not seriously injured, King, Jr., according to his father's account, "cried off and on for several days afterward, and was unable to sleep at night." The elder King spent an afternoon explaining that death "was a part of life that was difficult to get used to" and that God had "His own plan and His own way, and we cannot change or interfere with the time He chooses to call any of us back to him." The younger King's "Autobiography" presents the event as a major formative experience:

It was after this incident for the first time that I talked at any length on the doctrine of immortality. My parents attempted to explain it to me and I was assured that somehow my grandmother still lived. I guess this is why today I am such a strong believer in personal immortality.

Although King would ultimately accept the notion of God as a source of emotional support, his grandmother's death occurred during, and may have provoked, a period of religious skepticism. King later wrote that he had unthinkingly accepted his father's fundamentalist beliefs until he was twelve. But such an uncritical attitude "could not last long," King asserted.

for it was contrary to the very nature of my being. I had always been the questioning and precocious type. At
the age of 13 I shocked my Sunday School class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. From the age of thirteen on doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly.

These proto-theological doubts remained within the confines of a resilient religious identity. The Baptist religious beliefs King absorbed during his youth had derived mainly from daily contact with Ebenezer congregation rather than from theological reflection. Born a Baptist, he did not feel the need to become one formally or to affirm all the tenets of the denomination. In his “Autobiography,” he explained that he had never experienced a ‘crisis moment,’ an abrupt conversion experience. Instead, religion had been something he “grew up in. Conversion for me has been the gradual intaking of the noble ideals set forth in my family and my environment, and I must admit that this intaking has been largely unconscious.”

His religious faith derived from countless sermons conveying the practical social ethics of Christianity. King’s religion was closely knit to his life. “In fact the two cannot be separated,” he later wrote; “religion for me is life.” Observing the religious practices of his father and his father’s progressive associates, King absorbed the Christian ethics that would shape his ministry and his political activism.

After completing eleventh grade at Washington High School and gaining early admission to Morehouse College, King had another important formative experience when he joined about one hundred other students participating in a summer work program at a tobacco farm near Simsbury, Connecticut. The trip to Connecticut was itself an enlightening experience. King’s descriptions convey the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a youngster traveling a long distance alone for the first time. Observing racial practices in the North, he became more critical of the southern Jim Crow system. In the context of King’s long-term effort to resolve his ambivalence regarding the not always subtle pressures steering him toward the ministry, the most significant aspect of King’s summer in Connecticut was his leadership of Sunday evening student
religious meetings. Four years later, he would mention the
summer of 1944 as the time when he first felt called to the
ministry.

After arriving at Morehouse, King was by no means a cam-
pus leader, but he participated in the political and intellectual
ferment that characterized Morehouse, particularly during his
final two years. More than would have been the case at most
predominantly white colleges during the late 1940s, King was
exposed to unconventional political and religious ideas. At
Morehouse, King was “deeply moved” by his reading of
Thoreau’s *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, which he later
described as his “first intellectual contact with the theory of
nonviolent resistance.” He joined in informal outside-of-the-
classroom discussions with teachers and students and attended
lectures by noted black scholars, including W. E. B. Dubois
and E. Franklin Frazier. King’s advisor, sociologist Walter
Chivers, introduced him to the view “that money was the root
not only of evil but also of race (discrimination).” Probably the
most important influence on King during his years at More-
house was President Benjamin Mays, who used his Tuesday
morning talks to the student body as occasions to express his
commitment to the Social Gospel. By the time King entered
college, Mays had become one of the growing number of
black disciples of Mahatma Gandhi. He challenged Morehouse
students to struggle against segregation rather than accommo-
dating themselves to it.

King’s emerging political convictions were revealed in a
1947 *Maroon Tiger* article that sharply criticized students who
had a “misconception of the purpose of education” because
they believed “that education should equip them with the
proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever
trample over the masses.” King also criticized students who
thought “that education should furnish them with noble ends
rather than means to an end.” He derided the tendency to let
“mental life become invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices,
and propaganda.” To save men from “the morass of propa-
ganda” was “one of the chief aims of education,” according to
King. "The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." He noted, in an interesting commentary on the limited value of his academic training, that a man "gifted with reason, but with no morals" was the "most dangerous criminal." He cited the example of Eugene Talmadge, the Georgia political leader who possessed a Phi Beta Kappa key yet still insisted that blacks were racially inferior.

We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living.

King’s undergraduate years increased his exposure to secular ideas, but the Morehouse environment also brought a new understanding of the possibilities of liberal Christianity. Although his religious liberalism separated him from his father’s more orthodox views, it also made him more open to his father’s suggestions that he should become a Baptist minister. The elder King had always wanted both of his sons to follow his career choice and eventually, perhaps, serve as pastor for the Ebenezer congregation. He usually listened to his wife’s entreaties on the need for the children to make their own career choices while also hoping that his sons would make use of his connections among Baptists—“family ties, school and fraternal relationships, the so-called hometown connections that kept phones ringing and letters moving in consideration of help requested and granted, favors offered and accepted. The world is too tough for anyone to think of challenging it alone.” Despite their awareness of their father’s wishes, however, King, Jr. and his younger brother, A. D., were reluctant to conform to paternal expectations. The latter
would drop out of Morehouse before deciding on a ministerial career, and the former spent his first three undergraduate years determined to become first a physician and then a lawyer—not a minister like his father. Determined to assert his independence from his father and questioning aspects of his father’s beliefs, King, Jr. nevertheless received a strong impetus to become a preacher from the ever-present role models around him.

He later remembered his college days as “very exciting ones,” especially the first two years when “the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body.” A classmate recalled King’s negative opinions regarding Baptist preachers: “He saw them as anti-intellectual and prone to establish or maintain emotionalism as the chief sign of salvation.” King recalled that during his undergraduate years “accumulated doubts” about his religious beliefs caused him to resist the urge to become a minister, but his break with fundamentalism left him more accepting of the religious liberalism of Mays and Kelsey. A crucial period in his career decision making came during the summer of 1947 when he returned to the Connecticut tobacco farm and again led the religious services for his fellow students. Even before leaving Atlanta, he had received his preaching license, and, more than was the case during his previous stay in Simsbury, he welcomed the opportunity to lead the weekly religious gatherings at the farm. After several weeks of deliberation, he telephoned his mother from Simsbury to tell her of his intention to become a minister. After returning to Atlanta at summer's end, he talked to his father about the possibility. By the time he returned to Morehouse for his final year, he had pushed previous doubts out of his mind. The decision was the culmination of his experiences. “My call to the ministry was neither dramatic nor spectacular,” he later wrote in his application to seminary.

It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light experience on the road of life. Moreover, it was a response to an inner urge that
gradually came upon me. This urge expressed itself in a desire to serve God and humanity, and the feeling that my talent and my commitment could best be expressed through the ministry.... During my senior year in college I finally decided to accept the challenge to enter the ministry. I came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon my shoulders and the more I tried to escape it the more frustrated I would become.20

When King left for graduate school, he brought with him beliefs about Christianity and the Christian ministry that were profoundly shaped by his experiences in Atlanta. The significance of his subsequent intellectual development should not be underestimated, but King's graduate school education should be seen within the context of his childhood search for a synthesis of his father's religious faith and his own skepticism. Seen from this perspective, King's experiences at Crozer and Boston must be viewed not as a pilgrimage toward the Social Gospel views of his Crozer professors or the personalism of those at Boston. Instead, King eclectically drew upon the writings of academic theologians in ways that moved him away from uncritical Christian liberalism toward a theological perspective that incorporated a conception of God as a source of emotional support in times of personal need. Rather than becoming more liberal in seminary and graduate school, he became increasingly skeptical of the intellectualized religious liberalism that had been his point of departure from his religious legacy.

Although King sometimes contrasted the religious emotionalism of his father's religion with the intellectual sophistication he saw in the writings of white academic theologians, he referred to his father in explaining his decision to entered the ministry: "my admiration for him was the great moving factor; He set forth a noble example that I didn't mind following. Today I differ a great deal with my father theologically, but that admiration for a real father still remains."
King's graduate school experience, to summarize, did not alter his basic beliefs. Seen in the context of King's pre-adult experiences, those years were a period that enabled him to acquire academic credentials rather than a new set of religious beliefs. Although he wanted to ground his religious attitudes on intellectual foundations, he left Boston as a preacher rather than as a scholar. In his preaching at Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and in his speeches as a leader of the bus boycott movement in Montgomery, he would often draw upon the white intellectual sources to which he was exposed in college, but he also returned to traditional African-American conceptions of God as a source of support in times of crisis. David Garrow has drawn attention to the crucial "kitchen experience" during the Montgomery boycott as a turning point in King's evolution as a protest leader. The incident can also be seen as signalling King's turning away from academic theology toward a conception of God that did not require the overlay of intellectualism. After receiving a threatening call that brought him to "the saturation point," when his "courage had all but gone," King decided:

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go.21

Later during his career as a movement leader, King would reflect that he had "been battered by the storms of persecution" and sometimes felt that he would "retreat to a more quiet and serene life." During such moments of doubt, King recognized that he was strengthened by a conception of a personal God that was rooted more in African-American religious traditions that in Euro-American liberal theology. "True, I have always believe(d) in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical
category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life.” Implicitly contrasting his new understanding of God with the theological insights he had acquired in graduate school, King later remarked: “God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, ‘Lo, I will be with you.’”

Despite the tendency of King and many of his biographers to locate the sources of his religious faith in his theological training, we are more likely to find these sources in experiences that connected him to African-American religious traditions. King himself may not have consistently acknowledged his ancestral legacy and often consciously overstated the degree to which his ideas were rooted in canonical, philosophical and theological texts. The considerable opposition to civil rights reforms at the time of King’s emergence as a national black spokesperson required the creation of a public image that was appealing to white America. King cultivated such an image in his public statements and published writings, which made effective use of literary verities familiar to white Americans. King’s image as a singular, highly-educated charismatic leader of faceless, tractable black followers increased the likelihood that whites would see the black protest movement as undifferentiated and as bringing about the realization of ideals that Gunnar Myrdal called the “American Creed.” Yet, even while acknowledging the extent of his departure from religious orthodoxies, King occasionally affirmed his personal conviction that his identity as a scholar with a Ph. D. was less significant than his enduring identity as fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher. The Church is my life and I have given my life to the church....
Recent scholarship has correctly noted that King was only one of many significant leaders of the southern black freedom struggle, for sustained movements resulted from the mobilization of black community institutions. He was more a product than an initiator of black movements, for they arose in communities where he was not active. But scholars have only begun to recognize the impact of these black community institutions on the formation of King's beliefs and leadership qualities. King may have been born with rare potential, but his most significant leadership attributes did not derive from his academic training, his philosophical readings, or even his acquaintance with Gandhian ideas. Instead, his influence on the black struggle benefitted most from his immersion in, and contribution to, the intellectual ferment that has always been an essential part of African-American life and freedom struggles. King's carefully-cultivated image as the modern black struggle's indispensable leader should be supplanted with an understanding of the Atlanta social environment in which he developed and first displayed his leadership qualities.

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Autobiography of Religious Development" paper written at Crozer Theological Seminary for course on Religious Development of Personality taught by George Washington Davis, November 1950, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers, Mugar Library, Boston University. Unless otherwise indicated, King's autobiographical statements used in this paper are from the "Autobiography."


6 King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, Daddy King, p. 127.

7 Christine King remembered: "He always said, 'I am not going to let you pay for segregation.' Our father never rode public transportation, because it was segregated, and he encouraged us to take private transportation or walk whenever possible." "Christine King Farris," by Jacob Wortham, USA Weekend, January 17-19, 1986. King, Jr., wrote during the 1950s: "Having the usual growing boy's pleasure in movies, I had yet gone to a downtown theater in Atlanta only once. The experience of having to enter a rear door and sit in a filthy peanut gallery was so obnoxious that I could not enjoy the picture." King, Jr., Stride toward Freedom, p. 6.

8 King, Jr., "Autobiography," See also King, Jr., Stride toward Freedom, pp. 4-5. King's father provides a somewhat different account of this incident, in Daddy King (p. 130):

One day the two young sons of a local grocery-store owner told M. L. they couldn't play with him anymore. When he asked why, they said it was because they were white and he wasn't....Bunch was hardly able to console him. His heart, he said, was broken. How could anybody refuse to be a friend with somebody else because they were not the same color? 'Why?' he asked his
mother. ‘Why don’t white people like us, Mother dear?’

Bunch sat and talked with him for hours. He was a curious younger who really did wonder constantly about this peculiar world he saw all around him.

‘Don’t you be impressed by any of this prejudice you see,’ she told him. ‘And never think, son, that there is anything that makes a person better than you are, especially the color of his skin.’

9 King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King*, pp. 104-106.

10 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom*, p. 6.

11 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom*, p. 5.


15 L. D. Reddick, *Crusader without Violence*, pp. 60-61. Reddick states that King “seems to have attempted suicide” on another occasion: “Once A. D., while playfully sliding down the banister from upstairs in the home, accidentally knocked his grandmother down and unconscious. Martin thought that she was dead. He was so distraught and disorganized that he went to a second-story window and jumped out, falling some twelve feet below. Fortunately, he did not injure himself” [p. 60]. No documentary evidence has been found to confirm these suicide attempts; they are not mentioned in King’s autobiographical statements or in published recollections of family members.


17 Bennett, a classmate of King’s, recalled that “a campus strike and boycott of the dining room raised tensions to a record high.” Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man*, p. 27.

18 Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man*, p. 28; King, *Stride toward Freedom*, p. 73.

20 Martin Luther King, Jr., 7 August 1959, statement written in response to a request by Joan Thatcher, Publicity Director of the Board of Education and Publication of the American Baptist Convention, Division of Christian Higher Education, 30 July 1959, Martin Luther King Collection, Mugar Library, Boston University; quoted in Mervyn Alonza Warren, Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1966, pp. 35-36.

