AN EXPERIMENT IN LOVE: Martin Luther King and the Re-imagining of American Democracy

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University of Virginia May, 2015 We must love one another or die. W.H. Auden, 1939

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Introduction

"From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of these expressions was mentioned: the phrase most often heard was 'Christian love.' It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love." Martin Luther King, 1958

The Burdens of Love

The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff once told me that one ought to wait until the age of fifty-five to write a book on love. Now, barely forty and looking back on what I have written, I fear that he may have been right. In the time between hearing Nick's words and completing this manuscript, I have sought some consolation in the fact that my goal is to articulate Martin Luther King's view of love rather than my own. But this consolation is thin. In truth, it is the varied burdens of my own questions, every bit as much as King's, that have pressed this work into being.

My basic question is this: *How can people with deep differences live together in peace?* By "peace" I mean not the mere cessation of war, nor the attainment of uneasy coexistence, but something along the lines of the Hebrew Bible's concept of *shalom*, which I take to mean, "justice, wholeness, flourishing, and joy."¹ Understood in this way, my basic question takes on a more robust form: What sort of social imagination and what sort of

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, pg. 69.

social ethic will be required of us if we, in the midst of deep differences of every conceivable kind, are to live together in a way that nurtures the experience of shalom?

At one level, this question is deeply *personal*. Like billions of people around the world, I grew up in a community marked by intractable difference. My own version was a medium-sized city deep in the American South that, like so many other Southern cities in the last half of the twentieth century, struggled—often tragically—to negotiate the travails of difference. My awareness of these travails began as a young child with my first friendship with an African American. He and I shared a table in school and, as events would have it, we also shared a first name. Out of this shared space, shared name, (and, it should be confessed, shared disposition for mischief) a friendship grew. Indeed for much of that year we were simply known as "the two Greg's."

In truth, however, we lived in different worlds. I realized this when, during class one morning, he and I were caught—not for the first time—collaborating in some sort of disruption. In response we both—not for the first time time—received our teacher's legendary glare. And yet for some reason, on this occasion the glare struck my friend as funny. Struggling mightily, he let out an unwilled, but uncontrollable snort. Our teacher's reaction was both instantaneous and devastating: within moments the other Greg had been jerked up by his shirt, thrown and held against the blackboard, where—in front of our entire class—our teacher told him to "wipe that nigger smile off" his face. I have never forgotten the shame on his face. Nor have I forgotten my shame, as I sat in horrified but unharmed—physically, at least—silence. At recess later that morning, I found my friend sitting alone on one of the dusty corners of the school ball field. I slid to the ground

beside him and watched as his tears spattered the dirt. Against our wills a rift had opened between us, and we sat in helpless silence as it filled with grief.

Over the years I saw situations like this played out time and again—in schools, in locker rooms, in neighborhoods, and in churches. And on those occasions I found myself, not for the first time, confused and ashamed by my own failures to live with those different than I am in a way that even approximates shalom. It was in the context of experiences such as these, and the confusion and shame that followed them, that the first clouds of my question—of how people with deep differences might live together in peace—began to form. Seen from this perspective, this work is an attempt for me to explore—both for myself and for my friends—the possibility of our life together.

At another level, this question is *pastoral*. I am a pastor of a church and much of my time is spent trying to nurture a congregation in their lives with God, one another, and their neighbors. Over the course of the past twenty years with them, I have been humbled by the strength and beauty with which many of them answer that call. But it is not easy for any of us. Part of this, of course, is due to the intrinsic difficulty of life together; the burdens of our minds, the wounds of our hearts, the frailties of our bodies, and the complexities of our histories mean that the common life of shalom is ever a work in progress. Part of this is due to the fact that, for all of its real and many goods, the larger denominational home in which we live—the Presbyterian Church in America—has a deeply tragic history with respect to matters of "difference"—especially with respect to

matters of race and gender. And while many wonderful men and women are seeking to overcome the effects of this history, its legacies continue.²

But these internal and historical difficulties notwithstanding, the largest difficulty my congregation faces as it seeks to negotiate difference is, perhaps, cultural. The deeply polarized cultural context in which my congregation makes a life with one another and with their neighbors, namely the fragmented age that is late modernity,³ has largely failed to help them understand this life on terms other than those established by the bitter contests of the American culture wars.⁴ Because of this, rather than seeing one another and their neighbors—first in terms of their common share in the image of God, their common affliction with the reality of sin, and their common need for the coming of God, they have been taught to understand and to respond to one another in the largely ideological and zero-sum terms of contemporary cultural conflict.⁵

Indeed, as I write these words, it is now broadly acknowledged that the social expression of much of American Christianity not only maps directly onto the cultural fault lines of late modernity, but also derives its personal mission and cultural significance (and not a small amount of its funding) from the work of policing these lines rather than bridging them. And not only this, this religiously-sanctioned cultural polarization has helped to create an environment in which religious convictions and communities that

² On this legacy see especially Peter Slade, Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship. New York: Oxford, 2010 and Steven R. Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour, The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation, New York: Oxford, 2012.

³ For an overview of some of the features of this age see esp. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2007, and *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992.

⁴ On this see, James Davison Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

⁵ On this, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

sustain them are viewed not as aids but as threats to the peaceful negotiation of difference. This development seems to me to be fundamentally tragic, both for the church and for its neighbors. Because of this, the question of how people with deep differences can live together in peace has become for me not simply autobiographical, but also ecclesial. Seen from this vantage, this work is an attempt to explore for the church— or for any other type of "particularist" community—an alternative vision for the life in the midst of difference.

At the broadest level however, this question is *public*. In my view, the greatest intellectual, moral, and civic challenge of our time is the now nearly universal fact of *pluralism*—the growing reality of profound and deeply contested differences between neighbors.⁶ In one respect the challenge of pluralism is experiential. Every day, in nearly every part of the world, even the most ordinary dimensions of individual human experience—what we eat, where we pray, whom we love, how we form our children—are lived out in the midst of "difference" and, as such, a fraught with the anxiety of contest.

The social implications of these contests—especially in aggregate—means that pluralism is also an inescapably political challenge. This is because the negotiation of difference—especially on its now globalized scale—inevitably entails a reliance on structures of regulatory governance and the application of coercive force. In this respect, the challenges of contemporary pluralism—especially in a nuclear age—bear not simply on matters of individual experience but also on matters of our social existence.

In the broadest respect, however, the negotiation of pluralism is a moral challenge. This is because negotiating pluralism necessarily entails making individual and

⁶ On this see William E. Connolly, A World of Becoming, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

collective judgments about objects of both affirmation and resistance, about which persons, perspectives, and practices are to find a place in our common life, and which are not. And pluralism—by the nature of the case—provides no broadly accessible evaluative framework by which such judgments can be collectively made.

As I have wrestled with the various challenges that pluralism entails—to personal identity, social coherence, and moral obligation—and looked to various personal, ecclesial, political proposals as to how we may negotiate them with anything like a hope of peace, I have found them, with a few very important exceptions,⁷ uninspiring. Some, in the name of peace, diminish the reality of substantive difference by subordinating it to the regulatory control of some form of ideological or procedural monism.⁸ Others, in the name of difference, essentialize particularity in a way that, while guarding our respective identities, also guarantees our mutual incomprehension, if not our mortal estrangement.⁹

For each of these reasons then—personal, pastoral, public—I set out with the question that animates this work: *How can people with deep differences live together in peace?* In time, this question led me to Martin Luther King Jr. In retrospect this is hardly

⁷ Chief among these exceptions are Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Theology of Democratic Citizenship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2005; and Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, and *Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. More on these below.

⁸ This is my basic concern with the procedural liberalism of Rawls, the theological bravado of Radical Orthodoxy, and the anti-foundationalist pragmatism of Rorty: they all seem to imagine a world in which the other—or at least those qualities which makes him or her most obnoxiously "other"—could be managed, conquered, or bemusedly scorned into social insignificance. For echoes of this concern vis Rawls see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998 and Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism, Beyond Tolerance and Difference*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2010. For echoes of this concern vis Radical Orthodoxy see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy & Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton

⁹ Likewise, this is my basic concern with what feels like an irreducible particularism found in certain "identity-based" (eg. race, class, gender, confessional) accounts of social life.

surprising: King devoted his brief life—personally, pastorally, and publicly—to both the problem of difference and the possibility of peace. But in another respect, it has been a surprise. This is because having reflected on King's life and work for the past decade, I have become convinced that King struggled to offer a distinctive answer—for himself, his church, and his nation—to the question of how people with deep differences can live together in peace.

The Argument in Brief

My basic thesis is that Martin Luther King's public ministry is best understood as an act of public theology in which he sought to re-imagine American democracy on the basis of a Christian theology of love. Embedded in this thesis are three distinct but related—and also contested—claims.

The first concerns King's ministry as public theology. This is a claim—or, two claims—about the *source* of King's ministry. Happily, the *theological* part of this claim is increasingly uncontroversial. This is largely due to the fact that over the past ten years a number of scholars—Charles Marsh, Richard Lischer, Rufus Burrow, and Lewis Baldwin among them—have taken great pains to illustrate the fundamentally theological character not only of Martin Luther King's ministry, but of the larger civil rights movement of which he was a part.

But such was not always the case. In the work of other King scholars, the specifically theological character of King's work is profoundly under-theorized. Consider an important example: In his otherwise very helpful book, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion*

and the Death of Jim Crow, ¹⁰ David Chappell goes to great (and in my judgment, effective) lengths to locate King firmly in the "prophetic" tradition of American life. But even as he does so, Chappell conceives of this prophetic ministry in largely performative and decidedly *a-theological* terms. The notion that King's public ministry was religious not simply in style but in substance—that he actually meant to make theological claims—seems almost beyond the boundaries of consideration. Because of this, Chappell's account (and he is just one example) gives the impression that King's public ministry arises not from the application of Christian theology to the social order, and certainly not from anything as immodest as an in-breaking of "the word of the LORD," but from prophetic energies alleged to be inherent in democracy itself.¹¹ Thus King becomes not a theological prophet speaking to a democratic order, but a democratic prophet speaking with a theological accent. And while, to be fair, there are reasons for this account that emerge from King himself, I believe that this de-mythologized vision of King's prophetic ministry is deeply mistaken, and that the implications of this mistake for public life are profound. Because of this, I seek to build upon the work of the scholars above by providing a reading of King that highlights the deeply theological character of his work.

The *public* part of this claim, however, is less straightforward. At the most basic level to speak of King's theology as "public" is simply a claim about its *character*. But by this I mean more than that it was theology oriented toward matters of public concern. Because there is no such thing as "public" per se—there are only specific "publics"—and

¹⁰ David L. Chappell, A Stone of Hope. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

¹¹ For an important critique of this "demythologized" account of King see especially Charles Marsh, review of David Chappell, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion in an Age of Jim Crow, Political Theology* 6, no. 2, 2005; and Charles Marsh, "The Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama." *Modern Theology*, 18, 2002.

because King's specific public was mid-twentieth century America, I read King's theology not simply as a product of his engagement with "public life" as such, but as a product of his engagement with specific individuals, ideas, and institutions in twentieth-century America. In this sense, mine is a deeply American reading of King; and as such, a case for viewing King as a profoundly important and distinctively American theological figure.

In another respect however, to describe King's theology as public this is to make a claim about its *method*. To say that King's ministry was public theology could mean, for example, that I take King to be simply applying a theological framework to public issues—public theology as *application*. Indeed, some scholars seem to take it to mean just that, and attempt to show how King used the sources of his theological education to address public life.¹² But while it is certainly true that King applied his theological framework to public life, my claim is different. In my view, King's public theology was not essentially application but *improvisation*. He didn't just *apply* his theological framework to public life, he actually *created* his theological framework through his encounter with public life. This is King's true theological genius—not the iterative application of theology to a particular context, but the improvisational construction of theology in the act of prophetic encounter. Because of this, I have come to believe that the tendency to emphasize King's "sources" distorts the profoundly immediate nature of his theological work. To truly understand King's theology then is not simply to understand the sources of his theological ideas, but finally to understand the shape his theological ideas took in his prophetic encounters with public life.

¹² So, Lewis V. Baldwin, There Is a Balm In Gilead: the Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 and Rufus Burrow, Extremist for Love: Martin Luther King Jr., Man of Ideas and Nonviolent Social Action. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

This leads to my second formal claim, that King—in his public theology—sought to re-imagine American democracy. This is a claim about the *scope* of King's ministry. One of the challenges of King scholarship is that he is often (and plausibly) interpreted in terms of a particular aspect of American democratic life—as fundamentally a race figure, an economic figure, a foreign policy figure, and so on. This is not without cause; his contributions to each of these areas (and more) were many indeed. My concern, however, is that to understand King primarily as an actor in any of these spheres is to obscure something more fundamental about his work: that he was not simply seeking to redirect one or more of the particular aspects of American democratic life, but to re-imagine American democratic life itself.

This is not to suggest that King had some sort of *a priori* systematic account of democratic life; my convictions about the improvisational nature of his method preclude such a claim. However, it is to say that over the course of his life, King consistently and demonstrably gave himself to the work of systematically (so to speak) re-imagining the fundamental elements of American democracy—the meaning of citizenship, the character of political action, the nature of democratic possibility—on theological grounds. Thus, in my view, King is best understood not simply as offering a new vision for American racial or economic or governmental practices, but a new vision of American democracy itself.

But what was the basis of this account? This leads me to my third and perhaps most important claim. I argue that when Martin Luther King, Jr. set out to theologically re-imagine American democracy, he did so specifically and unwaveringly in terms of an unapologetically Christian theology of love. This is a claim about the *substance* of King's ministry. In one respect this is hardly controversial. Indeed, that King's public ministry

was deeply inflected with the language of love is widely acknowledged. Even so, I have come to the conclusion that though King's use of love is broadly recognized, both the actual *meaning* of love and the *role* that it played in shaping his social vision are not yet clearly understood. I say this with caution. I am well aware of the many helpful treatments of King—particularly of his commitment to non-violence—that make reference to his language of love.¹³ But even so, I am also aware of the tendency of these same works either to understand love as a synonym for non-violence, or to view love as simply a product of King's larger project of non-violence. In my view, this tendency gets the matter precisely backwards. I will argue that love was neither simply a synonym nor a source for King's project of non-violent resistance: love *was* the larger project and non-violent resistance was simply one of its applications.

But more than this, it also seems to me that some of the most important studies of the animating ideational forces of the civil rights movement, love plays, at best, a passing role.¹⁴ Given that King himself repeatedly described his work in the civil rights movement as "an experiment in love," and defined this love in terms of the New Testament language of *agape*, this scholarly neglect of the role of love in King's work seems a curious omission. The important consequence of this omission is that, with a few important exceptions, the substantive theological and specifically *agapic* character of King's social vision is either broadly misunderstood or ignored altogether. Because of this, I seek to show that a theologically thick notion of love stood at the center of King's

¹³ So, Greg Moses, Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King and the Philosophy of Nonviolence, Minneapolis: Guilford Press, 1998, John J. Ansbro, Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change, Madison: Madison Books, 2000, and Burrow, Extremist.

¹⁴ So, Richard King's Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, and Chappell, Stone.

democratic vision and that this vision cannot be properly understood, faithfully embodied, or credibly appropriated apart from it.

These three claims—that King's ministry was an act of public theology in which he sought to re-imagine American democracy on the basis of a Christian theology of love—are the heart of my argument. Thus the title: *An Experiment in Love: Martin Luther King and the Re-Imagining of American Democracy.* What follows, therefore, is simply an elaboration of this view.

The Project in Outline

In *Chapter One*, "Love and Democratic Imagination," I seek to provide a general overview of the development of King's democratic imagination. To that end, I seek to do two things: First, I seek to situate King's democratic imagination within the larger tradition of the African-American democratic struggle. The reason for this is that, in my judgment, studies of King too frequently characterize him as a lone prodigy of American democracy—as a sort of Jeffersonian meteorite that blazed into the world and, for a brief moment, illumined us all. In recent years, however, more deliberate attention has been given to the work of situating King in his African-American familial, ecclesial, intellectual, and cultural milieu.¹⁵ I hope to add still more texture to this trend by narrating him first as an inheritor of the long and wonderful story of African-American democratic imagination.

¹⁵ On this see Baldwin, Balm, and Burrow, Extremist.

Secondly, I seek to provide an account of the way in which King not only received this inheritance, but also consciously and deliberately sought to improvise upon it by means of a Christian theology of love. In this respect I seek to provide a preliminary account of both the sources that informed King's theology of love and, more importantly, of the shape that his theology of love took in the world. And while I elaborate on both the sources and the shape of King's theology of love in each of the subsequent chapters, it is my hope that this particular section will be of use to those seeking to make sense of the fragmentary and largely unsystematic accounts of love that King left behind.

In *Chapter Two*, "Love and Democratic Identity," I seek to provide a particular account of how King's theology of love led him to re-imagine the meaning of his fellow citizens. To that end, I seek to do two things. First, I suggest that, historically speaking, American democracy is fundamentally an anthropology, and that because of this, questions of identity are—as indeed they were for King—a matter of primary concern. Secondly, I seek to show how King's theology of love enabled him to conceive of the identity of his fellow citizens in a way that deliberately and self-consciously challenged the most important anthropological frameworks operating in American democracy during the civil rights movement: the identities of racial supremacy and liberal equality. To that end, I show how, rather than conceiving of human beings fundamentally in the inherently conflictual terms of *racial supremacy* or in the unstable terms of *liberal equality*, King's theology of love allowed him to view his fellow citizens as children of the Almighty God.

In *Chapter Three*, "Love and Democratic Action," I seek to provide an account of how King's theology of love led him to re-imagine both the shape and direction of democratic action; that is, action carried out in the interest of shaping the larger

democratic order.¹⁶ To that end, I seek to do two things. First, I suggest that one of the defining features of democratic life is its inherently dynamic and activist character; it is a polity driven by the ceaseless action of its citizens. Secondly, I seek to give an account of the two dominant traditions of democratic action; what I refer to as the *radicalist* and *gradualist* traditions. Finally, I seek to show how King's public theology of love gave him a vision of democratic engagement that, while preserving the wisdom of each of these, ultimately sought to overcome the limitations common to both.

In *Chapter Four*, "Love and Democratic Possibility," I seek to provide an account of how King's theology of love enabled him to re-imagine the degrees of perfection that could—and could not—be reasonably expected from a social order. To that end, I again seek to do two things. First, I suggest that democracy—especially in its American exceptionalist form—is inescapably *eschatological*, that is, it bears within its very essence an enduring question as to what, finally, is possible both for itself and the world. Secondly, I suggest that King's theology of love allowed him to resist the various forms of utopian *perfectionism* and cynical *protectionism* that characterized mid-twentieth century accounts of America's democratic future. Finally, I seek to show how King's theology of love provided an alternative vision of democratic possibility that was, I believe, simultaneously more modest and more hopeful that these.

In each of these respects then—the nature of democratic identity, the character of democratic action, and the scope of democratic possibilities—I suggest that King's public

¹⁶ On this see Charles T. Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

theology of love offered a new paradigm for both understanding and inhabiting American democratic life.

Future Trajectories

When I began this work I intended to conclude it with a chapter exploring the application of King's public theology of love to our own democratic moment. This intention was born of three convictions. The first of these is that every generation labors under the weight of its own civic travails, that democratic life is profoundly dynamic, and requires constant improvisation. This is the burden—and privilege—of democratic life.

The second is that throughout its history, American democratic life has relied upon inherited paradigms for negotiating its own complexity. The most fundamental of these is, of course, the paradigm of constitutional government. But all along there have been supplemental paradigms for bringing at least a modicum of unity—real or imagined—to an unwieldy populace: *ideological* paradigms that anchored unity in a set of established civic ideals, *moral* paradigms that sought unity in a given moral or religious framework, *martial* paradigms that sought unity in warding off the threat of a common foe, and so on. And though each of these paradigms has been contested along the way, each offered at least a basic promise of democratic stability.

And yet the third conviction, as I argue in *Chapter One*, is that there are moments in democratic life in which these paradigms falter, crises in which the promise of *unum* is overwhelmed by the reality of the *pluribus*. And while these moments express themselves in many ways—in calls for political change, in currents of civic unrest, in the misery of civil war—at heart they are *crises of imagination*, driven not by a dissatisfaction with the work of a particular political actor, or the implications of a given public policy, but with inefficacy of inherited paradigms for negotiating the volatile complexities of democracy itself.¹⁷ One of the subsidiary burdens of this work is that American democracy currently faces just such a crisis, and that we are—now—in desperate need of a new democratic imagination.

To that end, I originally hoped—though in a very preliminary fashion—to bring King's theology of love to bear on our own contemporary struggles over the meaning of democratic identity, the responsibilities of democratic action, and the nature of democratic possibility. But as this project unfolded I realized that a proper reflection on the application of King's theology of love would require a much longer work than the one I here present. Because of this, I view this current work as simply a theoretical and analytic foundation for a future study of what King's theology of love meant not only for his democratic moment, but of what it might come to mean in ours.

A Word on Scope, Structure, and Style

Many times throughout the writing of this work, I have wrestled with the problem of scope. Indeed, more than once I was on the verge of determining that the way of wisdom would be to reduce this work to a more modest scope by focusing on a more substantive treatment of just one of the topics I have struggled to address. And yet on

¹⁷ For an interesting study of one such moment, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, Cambridge: Harvard, 2011.

each of these occasions, I—for good or for ill—chose not to do so. This is largely due to my sense that King scholarship, as a general tendency, inclines toward a reductive account of King's ministry. That is to say, it interprets King's ministry in narrowly racial, economic, or juridical terms. The benefit of this narrow focus is obvious: done well, it allows for a much more detailed account of a particular aspect of King's thought than I myself have produced.

But even so, there are weaknesses. The chief of these is that in focusing on a particular aspect of King's work we run the risk of misunderstanding the scope—and power—of the whole. It is this misunderstanding that I seek to address in this current work. And while I fully recognize that each section of my account could—and perhaps should—be enriched by greater direct engagement with these more focused and nuanced accounts, it is my hope that broadening the scope of my account will allow us to see both the scope and the significance of King in new ways. I do hope that this is not special pleading.

With respect to structure, the shape of this work is heavily indebted to and reflective of my methodological claim above: that King's ministry is best understood as a form of public theology that grew out of his encounter with and attempt to re-imagine American democratic life. At the most general level, the structural implication of this claim is that each chapter considers a discrete element of democratic life and suggests the shape of King's theological engagement with it. But this methodological claim has shaped the structure of each individual chapter as well. Each chapter begins with a narrative section in which I seek to show the context in which King's particular questions began to emerge. From there, I plunge headlong into a cultural-historical account of what King took to be the dominant American traditions of reflection upon those questions. Thirdly, I show how King, in light of both his question and these traditions of reflection upon it, tried to forge an alternative account—of identity, action, and possibility, respectively based on a Christian theology of love. While this movement from biography to intellectual history to constructive theology has, I hope, the effect of making this work an interesting read, it is important to understand that writing in this way was not first an aesthetic decision, but a methodological one. Through it I seek not simply to illumine King's ideas, but also the process through which he arrived at them.

Finally, the chapters are, generally speaking, structured chronologically. The reason for this is that, as I hope to show, while King largely struggled with the same questions throughout his life, there is also a discernible shift of emphasis over time. That shift is, I believe, from an early concern with questions of democratic identity, to a mid-career attention to questions of democratic action, and finally to the question of democratic possibility. And while in taking up these respective questions King regularly drew from his familiar theological themes, in each he arranged and emphasized those themes with particular care. In this respect, this work seeks to illumine—not only in substance, but in structure—the context, method, and development of King's public theology.

With respect to style, I offer something of an apology. A cursory glance at the outline of this project will reveal what, to some, may seem a tedious degree of attention to symmetry. Indeed, it has at times seemed tedious even to me. The reason I have persisted in this format is because, quite simply, it reflects King's own sermonic mode. The opening narratives are resonant with his own narrative style. The binaries are

reflections of—they are in fact explicit appropriations of—his own binary approach. Indeed the style of the work as a whole—from my own autobiographical account in this introduction, on through each of the points, unto their evocative application in the Afterword—is, in a word, *sermonic*. As a preacher myself, I am all too aware of the liabilities of this approach. But as a scholar seeking to inhabit—as fully as I am able—the theological imagination of a man whose written legacy consists largely of homiletic material, it seemed worth the risk. But this, of course, is every preacher's wager.

Thus, what follows is an attempt to articulate just one person's—Martin Luther King's—response to the question of how people with deep differences may live together in peace; one person's attempt to articulate the moral foundations for flourishing in the midst of difference. In this respect it is marked, as all things are, by the inherent limitations of particularity. But it is offered in the hope that it may, in some small way, contribute to the ongoing work of re-imagining how the fragments of our own common life might come to be fashioned into a community of love.

The Beloved Community

One cannot write meaningfully about life together without acknowledging those with whom one lives, and so I want—not as an addendum, but as a necessary part of this project—to express my very deep thanks to a few of the many people with whom I have the privilege of living in community.

First, I would like to thank my community of teachers. Over the past decade I have had the privilege of sitting in lecture halls and living rooms and learning from an

array of extraordinary men and women. Of these, I wish to thank those who have deeply influenced the shape of this present work: Nicholas Adams, Robert Jensen, Paul Jones, Charles Marsh, Chuck Mathewes, Heather Warren, Robert Louis Wilken, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. I wish especially to thank James Davison Hunter. James, among the many things you have given to me—attentive instruction, a community of scholars, financial support, and a home at the *Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture*—the most important are these: a model for what I am trying to do, the confidence that I just might be able to pull it off, and a faithful friendship along the way. Thank you.

Secondly, I would like to thank the various churches that have supported me along the way. At different moments in my life, the people of Mitchell Road Presbyterian Church of Greenville, South Carolina, First Presbyterian Church of Florence, South Carolina, and Old Orchard Church in St. Louis, Missouri have welcomed me as their own. Reformed University Ministries, the Campus Ministry of the Presbyterian Church in America, supported the early stages of my doctoral work with a generous grant. Finally, I wish to thank the people of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia who—ten years ago—called a young graduate student to be their Senior Pastor. Over these years they have listened to me, spoken words of wisdom in return, opened up their homes, loved my family, and—week after week—undertaken the ordinary work of love. I especially wish to thank the following: Alva and Ida Whitehead and Arnold and Esther Pent who generously offered their farms as a place to write and their food as strength for the writing, and Frank and Brenda Cox, Carlton and Beth Dixon, and Wendell and Lynn Winn who have simply loved me and my family with unyielding devotion.

Thirdly, I would like to thank my extraordinary community of friends. Much of what I have learned about the possibilities of love I have learned from my most enduring friendships with Matt Brown, John Cochran, Jeff Dryden, Mike Farley, Griff Gatewood, John Haralson, K. Laing Harris, Giorgio Hiatt, Clay Holland, Jeremy Jones, Ewan Kennedy, Ed Killeen, Bart Moseman, Scott Murphy, Ned O'Gorman, Alva Whitehead, and Wes Zell. In addition to these friends scattered around the country, I have the incredible privilege of daily friendship with Wade Bradshaw, Kendall Cox, John Cunningham, Dennis Doran, Andrew Field, Emily Gum, Michael Hall, Stephen Hitchcock, John Inazu, Tim Jones, Philip Lorish, Trenton Merricks, David Mills, James Mumford, Louis Nelson, Bill Porter, Matthew Rose, Jim Seneff, Drew Trotter, David Turner, Isaac Wardell, Chad Wellmon, and Josh Yates. I wish especially to thank Joyce Field and Sam Speers, who have brought patience, wisdom, insight, and encouragement to this work, and have made it much better than it would otherwise have been.

Finally, I wish to thank a few members of my family. The Edmondson, Jenkins, Malone, Marechal, McLean, and Ludlam families have been unfailing in their generosity and encouragement throughout this process. My father, Bruce Thompson, has—through comedy, encouragement, and not a small amount of loving antagonism—faithfully supported me in my efforts to become, as he puts it, "one of those doctors that can't do you no good." I wish also to say thank you to my children: Caroline, Margaret, Annie Mac, and Hal. For the past few years you have borne the burden of this work, living (more than you would like) with Martin Luther King Jr., and (more than I would like) without me. And yet, in ways that you cannot yet know, it was our love for one another that sustained created this work: it was my love for you that drove me out into these questions, and your love for me that brought me home. I hope that you will be proud of what our love has made.

Lastly, to my beloved Courtney. How much I could say about the wisdom of your mind, the courage of your heart, the graces of your body, the warmth of your friendship, the faithfulness of your labors. How much. But, knowing your embarrassment should I venture to do so in print, I will have to content myself with this: If I have learned even one thing about the possibilities of love in this world, I have learned it from the gift life with you. You are the best thing in my life. This is for you.

WGT Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2015

Chapter One A More Excellent Way: Love and Democratic Imagination

I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are Christian people. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus ... We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist ... And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to Earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie, love has no meaning. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream ... I want to stress this, in all of our doings, in all of our deliberations here this evening and all of the week and while—whatever we do—we must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our actions. But I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love. Love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love. Martin Luther King, 1955

A. "I Knows Something is Wrong:" The Crisis of Democratic Imagination

On Monday evening of January 30th, 1956 as Martin Luther King stepped to the pulpit of Montgomery's historic First Baptist Church, he was weary. And as he laid his hands on its wooden sides and looked at the congregation filling every pew, aisle, stairwell, and window ledge, he knew that he was not alone in his weariness. The strain of the now two-month-old bus boycott showed on nearly everyone. The daily foot travel, the constant threat of job loss, the petty harassment, the frustrated negotiations with city leaders, and the growing threat of violence—all with little to show in return—had begun to fray the hope that had marked this community just weeks before.

In response to this weariness, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) had just that morning taken the momentous step of agreeing to proceed with a federal

lawsuit challenging the constitutional legality of segregation. Thus far, the MIA's bus boycott demands had been framed within the boundaries of segregation: courtesy to Negro passengers, a greater number of Negro seats, and an increase in the number of Negro drivers. But even these demands had proved too much for the leaders of Montgomery. Attempts at negotiation consistently faltered under the weight of accusation and defensiveness, leaving the city locked in a stalemate from which neither side seemed able either to retreat or advance. In the minds of the MIA's Executive Committee, the time had come for more decisive action: On the one hand, they would continue to boycott in accord with their original demands—equality within the context of segregation—but on the other, they would, in Federal Court, challenge the system of segregation itself.

As the President of the MIA, the task of presenting this decision to the boycott community fell to 27-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. This was no surprise, of course. In the early days of the boycott, his words had lifted the Negro community in a way that seemed almost miraculous, conveying not only the rightness of their cause, but also the beauty of it. And for nearly every night of the past seven weeks, they had come to him again that they might hear their ordinary sufferings rendered in the elevated language of the kingdom of God. On this particular night nearly 2,000 of them had come. Word had spread quickly of the MIA's intention to escalate the conflict by challenging not only the Montgomery Bus Lines, but also the very culture of Montgomery. They were all crossing a threshold and they knew it.

And yet on this particular night, King's words seemed uninspired. His explanation of the rationale and implications of the coming federal court case lacked his typically

soaring rhetoric. To the contrary, his manner was notably professorial, even tedious. But more notable than his manner was his mood. He seemed agitated, weary, and discouraged. The various burdens on his shoulders—a young family, a suffering congregation, a civic leadership role, a life shadowed by the constant threat of violence, and now a federal court case that brought him into direct conflict with the culture of his entire region—were bending him low before the congregation's eyes.

As he concluded and walked down from the podium, Mother Pollard (ca. 1882– ca. 1963)—a now legendary figure in the boycott—stood and made her way to the front of the church. She called the young pastor to her side. "Come here, son," she said, and King walked to stand beside her. "Something is wrong with you," she said, "You didn't talk strong tonight." King protested, "Oh no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever." Mother Pollard was not so easily put off. She said, "Now you can't fool me. I *knows* something is wrong. Is it that we ain't doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?" Before King could respond she said—loudly enough for the whole congregation to hear—"I done *told* you that we is with you all the way. But even if we *ain't* with you, *God's* gonna take care of you." As she made her way to her seat, with the crowd cheering and King in tears, she had said more than she knew. For in those very moments, just a few blocks away, the young pastor's home—with his wife and young child inside—had been destroyed by a bomb.

King's first sense that something was wrong came a few minutes later, during the offering. A young messenger entered the building and hurried to the side of King's friend and fellow pastor Ralph Abernathy (1926–1990). Abernathy, pastor of the First Baptist Church, hurried out of the room and returned minutes later with a look of sick worry on

his face. As more messengers arrived and more faces took on the shape of Abernathy's fear, King, who was standing in the front of the church, gestured to Abernathy to come and tell him what was happening. Abernathy, not yet knowing the fate of King's wife Coretta and his ten-week-old daughter Yolanda, wanted to avoid the conversation but could not. "Martin, your house has been bombed," he said. King asked about Coretta and the baby, but Abernathy had no information. Turning aside, King stepped to the pulpit and asked for the congregation's attention. Then, with a calm way that was to become his trademark, King told them what had happened, asked them to go to their homes in peace, and exited abruptly from the church's side door.

The crowd did not go home in peace. As King left the sanctuary, the shocked cries and angry shouts he left behind suggested that the frustration of the past weeks the past years—had begun to boil. Before King even arrived at his home, a Negro crowd of several hundred—some armed with sticks, knives, and guns—had descended on the front lawn. Outside the home, the angry crowd encountered a barricade of white policemen. This did not improve their mood. Just weeks earlier the Montgomery City Commissioner in charge of the police, Clyde Sellers, had publicly joined the White Citizens Council; a move that had, in the words of the *Montgomery Advertiser* editor Grover Hall, effectively turned the Montgomery police force into an "arm of the White Citizens' Council." In the minds of many in the crowd, the policemen behind the barricades were themselves the perpetrators of the crime. Some stared at the barricade in silence, others shouted angrily at the police, and still others began to agitate for violent confrontation.

The small bomb, which had been thrown on the front porch, had destroyed the front of the home. The porch steps and much of the supporting brickwork were gone.

The white-painted wood of the ceiling and walls hung down in broken shards, and the black frame of the front door gaped awkwardly. As King made his way through the crowd and inside the home he found several reporters, the fire chief, and Commissioner Sellers gathered in the wreckage of the front room. They gestured towards a back room where he, at last, found Coretta and baby Yoki—shaken but mercifully unhurt—surrounded by members of his own Dexter Avenue Baptist church. They greeted one another in relief, checked one another over tenderly, and offered a brief prayer of thanks in midst of the ruins.

But the moment could not last. The scene outside grew increasingly volatile as the crowd, now growing in strength, would neither leave nor permit anyone inside the home to leave until they knew the condition of the King family. For some, the news that Sellers himself was in the home of their pastor came as a galling affront. As the reality of violent racial conflict grew imminent, Sellers asked King if he would speak to the crowd and try to calm things down. King agreed. He stepped out into the night and stood on the shattered porch in front of them all. He raised his hands to speak. "Everything is all right," he said. "Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky. Don't get your weapons. If you have weapons take them home. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what Jesus said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love."

¹ For this account cf. King, Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, pp. 125-129 and Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963, pp. 162-167. King, Papers, 3:115

What was happening in that moment, when the young black minister stepped out onto the ruins of his white home, faced a volatile crowd, and asked them to love? In one sense, it was an act of pastoral care for his people. As King looked out over their aggrieved faces, he knew they were in danger—not only from the dark violence gathered around them, but also from the white-hot anger growing within them. He sensed that they were sinking under the weight of it all and, in an act of pastoral care he used this moment to lift them up. In another sense, it was an act of personal intercession on behalf of his enemies. The Southern social order was, in many respects, predicated upon African-American docility. And though whites and blacks deeply resented one another, direct confrontation between them was extremely rare. Both communities concealed their anger through elaborate and carefully choreographed rituals of dissembling. But as Clyde Sellers and the other officers peered out into the growing crowd, these rituals-the foundation of white social control—were nowhere to be seen. Instead they beheld the sight most feared by Southern whites—un-cowed and indignant black humanity. King saw this too, and knew instinctively that white Montgomery was in danger as well. Because of this, in a gesture both deeply ironic given the pretensions of white power and fundamentally paradigmatic for his future ministry, King—by right the most indignant of them all—instead stepped forward to intercede on behalf of his enemies.

Both of these renderings of this moment yield insight for understanding King and his work. But there is another, perhaps more important rendering of this moment—and of King's ministry generally—that needs to be more fully explored: When Martin Luther King stepped out onto the porch and began to speak, he did so not simply as an act of

pastoral intervention on behalf of his people or of personal intercession on behalf of his enemies, but as *an act of public imagination on behalf of his nation*.

American democracy is at heart an improvisational polity. It is, of course, rooted in foundational convictions regarding individual liberty, self-governance, and the rule of law. But the moral energies that fund those convictions and the social shape those convictions take have an unavoidably dynamic character. Though democratic convictions endure, democratic constituencies—and the institutions they create and inhabit—do not. Democratic polity is therefore inescapably marked by a perpetual inner struggle to reimagine its own possibilities. There may be moments when the need for re-imagination seems fairly modest—moments of relative civic stability, economic fruitfulness, and international peace. And though these moments are highly perspectival—their tranquility contested from within—they can give the impression that the fundamental task of democratic life is that of *refinement*: small adjustments the shape of the current order.

But invariably, whether due to domestic conflict or international change, these moments of democratic stasis do not endure; in time, the inherited paradigms for negotiating democratic life simply break down. When this happens democratic society enters into crisis, into a tumultuous struggle to reinvent and rearticulate the meaning of its own life. And in these moments of crisis, the work of public leadership is no longer the work of mere refinement, but of *re-imagination*—the work of re-envisioning the very foundation of democratic life. The American civil rights movement was such a moment of democratic crisis. It was, domestically speaking, *the* democratic crisis of the twentieth century. It is of course true that the cultural, racial, and economic tensions at the heart of the movement had been a feature of American democratic conflict from the beginning. But since the Civil War (the greatest of democratic crises) these tensions had been managed through a series of broadly employed strategies: the conciliatory policies of the post-Jackson-era federal government, the isolationist posture of the Jim Crow American South, and a broadly embraced white supremacist framework that lubricated the uneasy relationship between them. But in the middle of the twentieth century—due to economic shifts in the post-war American South, demographic shifts from the post-war American baby boom, and ideological shifts from post-war Europe—these strategies for managing America's long-standing democratic tensions began to fail. The moment for re-imagining American democracy had come.

This was the moment into which Martin Luther King emerged when he stepped out into the dark that January evening—a moment of democratic re-imagination. Because of this, his steps are best understood not simply as a movement into the grief of his people or the fear of his enemies, but into the crisis of his nation, whose dubious strategies for civic peace had finally been blown apart by their own intrinsic volatility. His raised hands were not simply a demonstration of his personal safety or an indication of his desire to speak, but an intervention in his nation's dissolution. And his spoken words were not simply an act of pious oration offered in the service of the status quo, but of public imagination in search of a new social order. Of the many things happening in that moment, this was perhaps the most important: Martin Luther King stepped out onto the battered threshold of American democracy to offer it an alternative vision of itself: a vision no longer governed by the malignant strategies of false conciliation, but by a Christian theology of love.

In what follows, I offer a preliminary account of the structure of King's democratic imagination. Rightly understanding this imagination requires us to consider it in terms of its two distinct, but related, foundational dimensions: The African-American democratic struggle that was his inheritance, and the Christian theology of love with which he improvised upon that inheritance and made it fully his own.

B. "Upon the Backs of these Black Men:" King's Democratic Inheritance

In even the best of circumstances, historical generalizations are blunt tools, often obscuring as much as they illumine. It cannot but be so: the personal, intellectual, emotional, relational, and institutional complexities of even a single moment—who can gather them up? This is all the more the case when such generalizations are made about minority communities, whose stories are often so deliberately obscured, misnamed, and reviled by the majority communities that surround them. But even so, voices can be heard, stories may be learned, and patterns may be seen. As I have struggled to listen, to learn, and to see, I have become convinced of three things: First, that one of the most important themes of the African-American story is its struggle toward a social order in which people of difference might live together in peace. Secondly, that it is overwhelmingly the case that African Americans have understood the social order toward which they struggled fundamentally in the terms of *democracy*. And finally, that understanding this particular aspect of African-American history is absolutely fundamental for rightly understanding the work of Martin Luther King Jr. It was, in some
regards, his most important inheritance and the foundation of his own democratic struggle.

The Colonial Origins

Though the African story traces back to the reaches of history itself, the uniquely African-American story begins in the fifteenth century.² Driven together by the nascent Enlightenment currents of religion, economics, politics, and science, Portuguese explorers and African tribal leaders first beheld one another on the shores of West Africa. While neither the sailors nor the Africans who greeted them could have imagined the meaning of this encounter, the struggle for life together in the midst of difference had begun. Over the next century, as the forces of modernity began to take shape in the New World, this life together took many forms. But by the middle of the seventeenth century, its most enduring form—the racially codified debasement of African-Americans in the New World —had become the settled norm. Among the earliest written records of Africans in the New World is Captain John Smith's 1624 Generall Historie of Virginia. In his work, concerned largely with the story of the early founding of the Jamestown colony, Smith refers to a 1619 letter from one John Rolfe that includes these momentous words: "About the last of August came in a dutch man of warre that sold us twenty Negars."³ While little is known or, alas, can be known about these twenty Africans sold into slavery, what

² For more on the colonial origins of African-American life, see Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Philip D. Currtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1972); Anne Caroline Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston: Beacon, 2005); and James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska, 2005).

³ Thomas Holt, Children of Fire: a History of African Americans (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 3.

we do know is that the early community of African Americans they presaged began almost immediately to imagine strategies for negotiating life in the midst of difference.

In the early decades of the African-American story, these strategies took different forms according to particularities of personality and circumstance. Some, understandably, resorted to retaliation, meeting violence with violence. Others, finding themselves in settings with comparatively large numbers of other Africans, began to work together to re-create the rudiments of village lives they had known. This re-creation constituted a form of non-violent provisional separation through maintaining a distinctly African identity, albeit in a more generalized form, in the midst of an alien culture. Others, for a host of reasons, submitted to the inevitable process of *creolization* in which the elements of their native culture began to merge with elements of their host culture, and in time, created a new culture altogether. But by the end of the 18th century, due in part to the confluence of the revolutionary movements and religious awakenings sweeping Europe and the Americas, African-American leaders began to arrive at something of a consensus on a paradigm for negotiating life in the midst of difference: the paradigm of *theologically*funded democracy. This was, in many respects, completely natural: the preaching of Christian revivals persuaded African Americans that they were children of God, made in His image, and the rhetoric of the revolution persuaded them that as such, they ought to be free. Thus, by the middle to late 18th century, the seeds of these two convictions took root in the colonial African-American imagination. As the African-American poet Phyllis Wheatley (1753–1784) wrote in a 1774 letter, "In every human Breast, God had implanted a Principle which we call love of freedom, it is impatient of Oppression, and

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pants for Deliverance; and by the leave of our modern Egyptians, I will assert, that the same principle lives in us."⁴

These sentiments found more than poetic form, however. Out of them grew strong public partnerships between abolitionist groups, largely founded by American Quakers and African-American leaders such as James Forten and Richard Allen. The explicit foundation of these partnerships was a strong theological vision of African-American dignity rooted in the image of God, and a strong democratic vision of the rights of African Americans as members of colonial society. And the explicit aim of these partnerships was to construct a democratic space for African Americans in the New World.⁵ Though admittedly far from the mainstream of (white) colonial American culture, these voices were not without effect. By the early days of the 19th century, every state had passed laws limiting the international slave trade, most states north of the Mason-Dixon line had abolished slavery altogether, and voluntary manumissions were being granted to a historically unprecedented (if comparatively small) degree. And while this period consisted of both advances and reversals in the fortunes of African Americans, one could sympathize with those who believed that a future—in which African

⁴ Qtd. in Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1988).

⁵ "During the last year of his life [Allen] called together the aspiring leaders of northern free black communities to meet and organize for the long resistance he knew lay before them. It was already clear that that resistance must now take a very different path than the violent overthrow of slavery attempted by Gabriel and soon by Nat Turner. The meeting in 1830 was the first of a series of "Negro Conventions" in which blacks would meet, debate, organize, and sometimes fight among themselves. Members of these gatherings were united, however, in their conviction that the truth claims that had justified the formation of the American nation should apply with even greater force to the conditions and aspirations of American slaves and their descendants.... They seized upon the contradictions of a slaveholding republic to argue the necessity of destroying and accepting former slaves as 'citizens and friends."" Holt, *Children*, 131.

Americans were both viewed as full humans and treated as full citizens—was a real, if distant, possibility. ⁶

THE SECTIONAL CRISIS

But these new realities were never uncontested. In response to them, slaveholders in the American South began to develop a multi-faceted resistance movement of their own. At times this resistance expressed itself as an ideological—even theological insistence on the natural inferiority of African Americans. From this perspective, slavery was understood to be the "natural" condition for African Americans, and any attempt to order society apart from this was seen to be fraught with calamity.⁷ In other times this resistance was political in nature. From the assumption of African-American inferiority, in a way that presaged the Jim Crow era of the next century, arose a juridical apparatus that codified that inferiority in the social order.⁸ Still at other times, Southern resistance to African-American democratic aspiration took economic form. While a slave-based

⁶ On pre-war abolition movements, see Douglas A. Blackmon's Pulitzer Prize-winner, *Slavery by Another Name*, (London: Icon, 2012). See also Michael Angelo Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: the Transformation of African Identities In the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); James J. Gigantino II, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey*, 1775–1865 (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennyslvania, 2012); and Stephen V. Ash, *The Black Experience in the Civil War South* (Santa Barbara: ABC–CLIO, 2010).

⁷ For leading public justifications for African-American inferiority, cf. John C. Calhoun, "Slavery a Positive Good," speech to U.S. Senate, 1837, http://caho-test.cc.columbia.edu/ps/10157.html; James Henry Hammon, "The Mudsill Theory," speech to U.S. Senate, March 4, 1858,

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3439t.html>. On scientific justifications for black inferiority, see Louis Menand's chapter on polygenism and Louis Agassiz in *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2001), Ch. 5; cf. also "A Pint of Ink" in Christoph Irmscher, *Louis Agassiz: Creator of American Science* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 219-269.

⁸ The most striking and far-reaching being the *Dredd Scott v. Sanford* decision of 1857. This case, putatively about the status of slaves living in free territory, inevitably became about black personhood itself. Thus the infamous words of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney who stated that, in the view of the constitutional framers, blacks were "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, *19 How.* 393 (1857)

economy had always been a part of colonial life, the expansion of the European textile market after the revolution, the mass availability of the cotton gin in the 1790s, and the possibility of extending slavery into the new Southern and Western territories gave the leaders of the American South profound economic incentive for resisting any democratic vision that held out the possibility of African-American citizenship. By virtue of these ideological, political, and economic convictions, Southern society became a direct counterpoint to the nascent democratic aspirations of African Americans in the north. Thus by the middle of the 19th century, the blight of a sectional crisis had fallen on the fragile landscape of American democracy.

This crisis of civil war was, in truth, an expression of multiple tensions in American life: political tensions born of the long-standing debates between federalists and anti-federalists, economic tensions born of the simultaneous acceleration of both urban and agrarian societies, and regional tensions born of deep cultural differences between the north and South, and increasingly the west. And yet—though it was studiously denied by both northern politicians seeking re-election in moderate districts and Southern leaders who wished to frame their cause not in terms of slavery, but of states' rights—African-American and abolitionist leaders intuitively understood that embedded in each of these tensions stood the even more enduring tension over the status of African Americans in the larger structure of American life.

This intuition found validation in a number of ways. One of these, interestingly, came from some unintended consequences of the *Fugitive Slave Act of 1850*. This act, an expression of negotiations between northern and Southern political leaders, required that all runaway slaves be returned to their masters. As incentive for enforcement, the act

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stipulated rewards for those who complied and punishment for those who failed to do so. While the intention of this act was to stave off sectional conflict by assuring the South that the north was not seeking to undermine its economy, it had the unforeseen effect of requiring unwilling northern citizens and institutions to be enforcers of slavery. As the war began to unfold, northern military and political leaders began to defy the act on the grounds of the war itself. Most often this defiance was grounded in frankly instrumental rationales, but African-American and abolitionist leaders understood that even these incomplete measures entailed a tacit affirmation of a form of black equality, and presaged a profound alteration of the status of Southern slaves.

This intuition was further validated in the debates surrounding the status of northern African-American soldiers. As with the revolutionary war, the presence of African-American soldiers in the Civil War foregrounded the irony of the fact that while African Americans defended democracy in war, they enjoyed virtually none of its benefits in peace. In the early days of the Civil War, northern political leaders, in part due to the fear of the secession of the border-states, were reticent to admit African Americans to the army. But by 1862, things had changed. In July of that year, Congress passed the *Second Confiscation Act*, which freed the slaves of rebellious Southerners and, by virtue of attending militia legislation, allowed them to join the United States Army—though with responsibilities, provisions, and pay unequal to those of white soldiers. The implications of this were profound: Over the course of the conflict, nearly 38,000 African-American soldiers would die in the war, and by 1864 they were receiving equal pay.⁹ And once again, although these movements were broadly understood merely as temporary military

⁹ Catherine Reef, African Americans in the Military (New York: Infobase, 2010), xii, 117.

necessities, African-American leaders such as Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) saw that embedded in them was the larger question of the long-term status of African Americans in American life. As Douglass said in a 1861 speech, "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."¹⁰

In the days after the war, Douglass' words seemed even more prescient than anyone could have imagined. The Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States, was passed in 1865 and ratified by the necessary 3/4th majority of states within a year. *The Civil Rights Act of 1866*, though severely limited with respect to its political provisions for African Americans, established some of their basic legal rights. Two years later the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) established African Americans as full democratic citizens in a way that directly repudiated the Dred Scott decision of ten years earlier. And finally, with the Reconstruction Acts of the late 1860s—to a degree that would have been almost unimaginable to their parents and grandparents—emancipation-era African Americans *in the South* began to step into an array of important public leadership roles in the newly emerging American society.

In government, the changes were extraordinary. While the mid-1860s saw no African Americans in public office in the American South, by the early 1870s, due in part

¹⁰ "The moral-psychological impact of mobilizing black soldiers as the slave empire collapsed had been profound and unanticipated. One by one, the efforts to define black soldiers as something other than warriors for their own liberation—restricting them to labor battalions on and off the battle field, paying them 'nigger' wages, denying them commissions as officer—had collapsed. The lowly chattel, as Douglass had once put it to Garrison, was now a man." Holt, *Children*, 163.

to the Fifteenth Amendment's prohibition of race-based suffrage discrimination, that number had climbed to nearly 15 percent.¹¹ In education, the change was even more pronounced. African-American leaders, in partnership with white patrons, began to found an astounding number of institutions of higher learning (Howard, Tuskegee, and Morehouse were all founded at this time). African-American partnerships with Republican political leaders began the first system of public education for African-American children across the South. Similar changes were seen in the areas of commerce, scholarship, criminal justice, and the arts.¹² While in truth these gains were modest with respect to the size, talent, and inalienable rights of the African-American community—and were contested at every point by their white neighbors—these changes suggested to some that the time had finally come for African Americans to inhabit a democratic role apart from the structures of white rule.¹³

But in time, these days were shown to be the exception that proved that rule. By the mid-1870s, the early rise of African-American Republican leaders began to give way to a new administration of white Southern Democrats.¹⁴ Once in power, these "Redeemer Governments" began a slow, systematic, and virtually unchecked process of legally and

¹¹ James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19.

¹² Cf. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Reprint, Piscataway, NJ: First Transaction, 2013); see also, Eric Foner, *Reconstruction : America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial Library, 1988). ¹³ "Within two years, the Republicans who had come to power on a platform opposing only the expansion of slavery, would be committed to full citizenship and equal rights for African Americans. A nation whose highest court had declared black men incapable of citizenship just a decade earlier would soon welcome them to seats in the congress and the senate. For a brief moment, former slaves and freeborn African Americans could reasonably anticipate "a glorious future" in a more perfect union." Holt, *Children*, 159. Cf. also Dray, Philip. *Capitol Men: the Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008); Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory In the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

¹⁴ For more on the failure of Reconstruction in the South, cf. Edmund L. Drago, *Black Politicians and Reconstruction In Georgia : a Splendid Failure* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

violently establishing a wholly segregated social order.¹⁵ By the 1890s, thanks in part to the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of the United States Supreme Court, a proliferation of Southern segregation statues known as "Jim Crow" laws quickly followed. By the end of the 1920s, in spite of occasional interventions by the Federal Government, the triumph of this segregated order was absolute. Virtually every aspect of African-American life commercial, educational, political, and sexual—was governed by an inviolable and highly regulated code of white supremacy. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), "The slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."¹⁶ In a sense, these developments simply clarified what Douglass had anticipated all along: that while the Civil War had removed the barriers to emancipation, it had not removed the barriers to equality. African Americans were, in fact, living somewhere between slavery and freedom—in the blighted and contradictory wilderness of an America that was simultaneously opposed to their enslavement and to their equality. And yet it was within this liminal space that the African-American democratic imagination began to flower anew.

The Post-War Reawakening

¹⁵ The scope of these codes was profound: *Labor laws* dramatically limited economic prospects for African American workers, binding them to dependence on white employers. *Criminal codes*—such as vagrancy statutes and the so called "Pig Laws"—subjected African Americans to higher rates of arrest and to more severe punishments for crimes. These criminal laws paved the way to the notorious convict leasing system in which prisoners were leased both to farmers and to large corporations as a way of once again supplying the Southern economy with free labor. (On the nature, extent, and meaning of this system, see Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*). *Identity clauses*, which defined individuals with one-eighth or more black ancestry as "Negro" insured that these new codes secured the subjugation of as many people as possible. And *suffrage laws*, whose goal was to obstruct the polls, and whose enforcement was overseen by white paramilitary groups, denied African Americans access to the very political power needed to resist these developments.

¹⁶ Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, 26.

The Separatist Strategy

For some, this labor toward democratic existence took what might most helpfully be described as a *separatist strategy*.¹⁷ As we have seen, social separation between African Americans and white Americans had long been an axiom of American democratic life. Indeed, for hundreds of thousands of African Americans living in the South, the strong ties of local kinship, debilitating lack of opportunity, and constant threat of violence created a context in which social separation from whites was the only form of "democratic" life they ever knew.

Others, however, took this vision of social separation and forged it into a strategy of democratic action. Initially this separatist instinct took the radical form of *Black Nationalism*. Because of its different religious and political expressions, this nationalism is difficult to define precisely, but at its heart lies the conviction that black identity and thriving can only finally be secured apart from the oppressive structures of white American culture. Initially this nationalism was, ironically, a white movement. In the early days of the 19th century, largely in response to the increasing and troubling presence of African-American "freedmen" in the new American society, white religious and civic leaders began to explore the possibility of an African-American return to Africa. But by the turn of the following century, African-American leaders such as Martin Delaney, Henry McNeal Turner, and Marcus Garvey had embraced this vision in their own right, and sought to argue for expatriation on political grounds.¹⁸

¹⁷ On King's engagement with the separatist strategy, see Chapter Two.

¹⁸ On Back to Africa and other black nationalist movements, see Emma J. Lapsansky-Wernerand Margaret Hope Bacon. *Back to Africa: Benjamin Coates and the Colonization Movement In America, 1848-1880 (University Park,* Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Jenkins, David. *Black Zion : The Return of Afro-Americans and*

The varied proponents of this "Back to Africa" movement were driven by the hope that such a strategy would give both communities what they desired: African Americans would be free to pursue a society of their own in an environment more "suitable" to their culture, while white Americans would be free to pursue the dreams of the American republic apart from the awkward task of extending their republican freedoms to their African-American neighbors.¹⁹ For others, however, this conviction of black separateness was driven not by political but by religious energy. In an ironic sacralization of the racial identity developed in support of Jim Crow, religious groups such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam insisted not simply on an independent black identity, but also on an independent black polity. And while the specifics of such a polity were never entirely clear, the animating conviction was clear: life together is best lived radically apart.²⁰

In truth, however, these two forms of radical separation never took broad hold in the African-American community. This was in part due to a hesitancy among Americanborn African Americans—whose lives were already deeply unstable—to cut the only the

West Indians to Africa (London: Wildwood House, 1975); Barnes, Kenneth C. Journey of Hope : the Back-to-Africa Movement In Arkansas In the Late 1800s. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; Cronon, Edmund David. Black Moses: the Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. 2nd ed. Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, c1969; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey (New York: New York University Press, 1996); William L. Van Deburg, Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakban (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Ch 4 in Kevin Kelly Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture In the Twentieth Century, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Deidre Mullane, ed., Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing, (Paradise, CA: Paw Prints Press, 2008), 468-477. ¹⁹ One of the most interesting features of this movement is that though its strategy was frankly separatist, its animating vision was overwhelmingly democratic. It was separatism for the sake of democracy. More on this below.

²⁰ On black Muslim movements in this period, cf. Michael Angelo Gomez, *Black Crescent: the Experience and Legacy of African Muslims In the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Adib Rashad. *Islam, Black Nationalism and Slavery: A Detailed History* (Writers Inc Intl, 1995); Richard Brent Turner, *Islam In the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Ch 2 in Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam In America: From the New World to the New World Order* (Cambridge [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

cultural ties they knew, and in part because of white economic dependence on cheap African-American labor. Because of this, and without a doubt, the most important expression of the separatist strategy was *relative* separation of the "Great Migration" of the 20th century. Between 1910 and 1930 nearly one and a half million African Americans left the South to begin new lives in northern cities. And while the Great Depression interrupted this migration during the 1930s, the following decade saw a renewed movement of African Americans into cities of the north and west. By the end of this migration in the 1970s, nearly seven million African Americans—almost 50 percent of the nation's African-American population—were building new lives outside the South.²¹

This migration, the largest non-wartime movement of a people group in the history of the world, was driven by many realities: the increasingly oppressive conditions at home, expanding economic opportunities abroad, and the growth of newly stable black communities in the wake of American urbanization. But it was also driven by a growing conviction that the best hope for African-American democratic life was to live on the terms of white-black social separation. Indeed this migration ensured separatism as an enduring theme in African-American democratic imagination.²²

²¹ Indeed, this migration permanently transformed African American life from a largely Southern, rural, and agricultural existence into northern, urban, and industrial one.

²² Cf. James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010); Harrison, Alferdteen. *Black Exodus: the Great Migration From the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements*, 1890-1910 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); Joe William Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington, IN: IU Press, 1991); Grossman, James R, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the *Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

The Gradualist Strategy

Others, however, began to pursue what might be called a *gradualist strategy*, wedding the realization of African-American democratic ideals to a form of conciliation with the American South.²³ In 1895, just three years after the Chicago World's Fair, the South had a kind of fair of its own. It was called the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition, and was intended to be a public demonstration of the glories of the new postreconstruction South. As a part of this event, white organizers invited the African-American leader Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) to give a public speech. It was this speech that would launch him into both national prominence and enduring controversy. In his address, Washington laid out the basic framework for the program of gradual progression. And, as had many African-American leaders before him, Washington spoke to two audiences. On one hand, Washington spoke to African Americans, pointedly calling them to undertake a slow and deliberate process toward personal responsibility for their own economic future.

Concerned that African Americans—especially those in the South—were not culturally equipped for the changes that emancipation had brought, Washington exhorted them to resist both the unwitting continuance of the structures of dependence embedded in their enslaved past and the grandiose dreams of an immediately transformed present. Instead, they were to put their hands to the work before them and begin the long process of building an alternative future. As he said,

To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern

²³ On King's engagement with the gradualist strategy, see Chapter Three.

White man who is their next-door neighbor, I would says: Cast down your buckets where you are; cast it down in making friends, in every manly way, of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions ... Our greatest danger is that, in the great leap from slavery to freedom, we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in the proportion that we learn to dignify and glorify common labor ... No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.²⁴

On another hand, Washington spoke to white Southerners, calling them to open

up a space for African Americans to participate in the emerging Southern economy—an

economy so grandly on display at the Exposition—so that the South itself might flourish.

To those of the white race ... were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race. 'Cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down among the 8,000,000 negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested ... Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labor wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and, with education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sickbeds of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in the defense of yours interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.²⁵

²⁴ Qtd. in Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 175–176.

²⁵ Ibid.

Washington's speech embodied the two defining characteristics of reconstructionera African-American gradualism: First, it frankly assumed an improved status for African Americans, even in the post-war American South. Washington's speech suggested, as did his entire career, that a devotion to industry, to the slow accumulation of wealth, and to conciliatory relations with white neighbors, would lead African Americans to gradual "progress" toward the realization of its democratic ideals. In the midst of the emerging Jim Crow society of 1895 Atlanta, this was no small feat. And yet, secondly, the vision Washington gave of African-American progress was framed in a way that left much of the white supremacist Southern order intact. Indeed many of the Southern whites in the audience could not be faulted if they missed the note of African-American progress altogether. This is because Washington, in a way that would enrage other African-American leaders around the country, characterized African-American life in precisely those terms that were most familiar to white Southern ears: *the terms of economic benefit and social separation*.

On one hand, Washington appealed to white economic interests, arguing that the economic position of white Southerners would be improved if they would but make a space for African Americans in the larger economy. This not only had the shrewd effect of joining African Americans and Southerners in common economic cause—no small thing given the economic ruins of the Reconstruction South—but also of rendering African-American presence in precisely those terms with which white economic leaders were most familiar: cheap labor. And yet on another, more troubling hand, Washington appealed to white *social* interests, particularly to their interest in social segregation. He assured his white audience that African Americans had no immediate intention of pushing

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for social equality, and that any such equality, should it come, would come solely as the result of African-American economic self-development. As he said,

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized.²⁶

There is a sense in which Washington's words have a quality of remarkable realism. That he understood his audience—their lingering resentment over the war, their weariness of racial struggle, and their resistance to any insinuation of African-American equality—is clear. Southern whites, even Southern progressives, would have nodded in agreement with Washington's dignified call for African-American self-improvement and with his sage deferral of African-American social equality. Indeed the broadly relieved acclaim his speech received from both northern and Southern whites shows the effectiveness of his conciliatory tone. Here at last, it seemed, was a sensible leader for the African-American cause. This was certainly Washington's intention. Both his words on that day and throughout his career suggest a remarkably consistent belief that given the exhausted cultural reality of the post-war South, a gradualist strategy was the only peaceful way in which the long-standing democratic hopes of African Americans might finally be realized.

²⁶ Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 142.

But for many, Washington's speech gestured not toward the fulfillment of those hopes, but to their deferral, not toward progress, but in fact to regress.²⁷ They could not be blamed for thinking so. The startling constitutional amendments and civil rights legislation in the decades following the Civil War declared that African Americans would no longer be understood fundamentally in economic but in civil terms, that civil liberties would be granted uniformly on a constitutional basis; and that the inequalities of Southern society would give way to a form of equality before the law. And yet, as noted above, Washington's speech seemed to equivocate on these very points. African-American social presence was justified not in terms of constitutional democracy, but of economic merit. And, to the delight of Southerners, the society of segregation seemed no longer to be an object of protest by the African-American community, but in contrast, it seemed to bear the imprimatur of its most important leader. Thus while leaders such as Washington saw the strategy of gradual progression as a slow and steady march towards the fulfillment of African-American hopes, others-not least white Southerners-saw in it the possibility of those hopes endlessly deferred.²⁸

The Activist Strategy

²⁷ For Washington's account of both black and white reactions to his speech, see Washington, Booker T. *Up From Slavery: an Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1924), 225–237.

²⁸ For more on Washington and the gradualist strategy, cf. Booker T. Washington: *The Future of the American Negro* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1899); *The Negro In Business* (Boston: Hertel, Jenkins & Co, 1907); and *Character Building* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903). Cf. also Moore, Jacqueline M. *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift*, (Wilmington, DE.: Scholarly Resources, 2003).

Because of this, resistance to Washington's gradualism became a hallmark of another strategy for securing African-American democratic ideals: *the activist strategy*.²⁹ Many African-American leaders at the turn of the century understood that while the Reconstruction amendments and civil rights legislation of the 1860s and '70s provided a legal foundation for their social progress, they did not at all render that progress inevitable. Freedom had been promised, but slavery still crouched at the door. Because of this, many African-American leaders believed that the only way this slavery could be resisted and progress secured was through a renewed form of activism. This belief was well founded. In 1883, due in part to the increasingly conciliatory ethos of a war-weary North, the United States Supreme Court overturned the *Civil Rights Act of 1875*, deeming it unconstitutional. This judgment effectively removed the Federal government from the process of reconstructing Southern society, placed the power of that process in the hands of the Southern states themselves, and opened the way for a new era of bondage for African Americans living in the American South.

But it wasn't only the South. During the 1890s and early 1900s, the Southern perspective on African Americans seemed to take on a more national scope. One of the most important demonstrations of this fact took place at the 1892 World's Fair in Chicago. This fair, known also as the World's Columbian Exposition, was organized to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World, but it also put on display a particular vision of that world's future. The Chicago organizers were not subtle in the vision they portrayed. In the main, African-American exhibits artfully concealed from the main avenues of the exhibition. And those that were seen largely functioned as

²⁹ On King's engagement with the activist strategy, see Chapter Three.

"primitive" counterpoints to the images of industrial progress that filled the exposition's architectural center, called, appropriately, "The White City." To the deep anger of African-American leaders such as Ida Wells and the aging Frederick Douglass, fairgoers saw a vision of the American future that closely resembled the humiliations of America's segregated past.

Even so, the future was not easy to predict. The presidencies of both Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909) and William Howard Taft (1909–1913), with their efforts to address racist labor and peonage practices respectively, sent hopeful if complicated signals that the post-war steps toward African-American democratic life were not in vain. But these signals faded with the 1912 election of Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924; president 1913–1921). Wilson, the Virginia son of a slave-holding Southern Presbyterian minister, reflected almost none of the comparative racial progressivism of his predecessors. To the contrary, his concessions to Southern political leaders enabled the acceleration of Jim Crow policies across the nation, extending even to the federal government itself. For the first time since reconstruction began, African Americans working in Washington found themselves working in a wholly segregated environment.³⁰

³⁰ "The election in 1912 of Woodrow Wilson, an openly white supremacist Democrat from Virginia, precipitated a dramatic expansion of Jim Crow restrictions on African Americans. In the nearly half century since the Civil War, the federal government had been the one province of American public life where black officials could still be appointed to important public positions, such as postmasters, customs officers, and other administrative roles. The Washington government hired thousands of black workers and within Federal buildings, African Americans maintained a measure of civil equality with whites...Wilson dramatically curtailed the number of black appointees in his own government. His administration largely introduced to Washington DC the demeaning Southern traditions of racially segregated work spaces, office spaces, and restrooms...Another half-century would pass before the civil rights movement could crack the anti-black legal regime consolidated during Wilson's tenure." Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 357-358.

Thus, at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, fifty years after Emancipation, African Americans remained suspended between slavery and freedom.

Interestingly, however, it would be within Wilson's tenure that the next wave of African-American activism would mature. Just as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars had done, American entrance into World War I raised new questions about the role of African Americans in the American democratic experiment. This war, justified by Wilson as a war fought "to make the world safe for democracy" relied on the armed service of some 367,000 African Americans, nearly twice as many as had fought in the Civil War.³¹ Once again, this experience of fighting for democracy abroad while being denied democracy at home exposed the ironies of African-American existence. In the face of these ironies, a new African-American activism began to emerge. The energy of this activism was, perhaps, most clearly articulated in W.E.B. Du Bois' 1919 article titled "Returning Soldiers."

We are returning from war! ... We return from the slavery of uniform which the world's madness demanded us to don to the freedom of civil garb. We stand again to look American squarely in the face and call a spade a spade. We sing: This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land. It lynches ... It disenfranchises its own citizens ... It encourages ignorance ... It steals from us ... It insults us ... This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is our fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of our country are our faults. Under similar circumstances we would fight again. But by the God of heaven we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the

³¹ One African American unit, the notorious "Harlem Hellfighters," remained on the front line of battle longer than any other unit in the American armed forces, seeing over 170 of its members honored with medals for combat merit. Catherine Reef, *African Americans in the Military* (New York: Infobase, 2010), xiii, 152–154.

Great Jehovah we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.³²

Du Bois said more than he knew. African-American war veterans returned to a nation of brooding crisis. The rise of Jim Crow society in the South, labor shortages in the north, fears of communism—especially African-American communism—across the nation, and the renewed indignation of returning African-American war veterans conspired together to create a context of extreme social volatility. In 1919, that volatility erupted. Starting in late spring and continuing into the early fall, cities across American boiled with racial violence. In what James Weldon Johnson called "the Red Summer," there were nearly 30 race riots in cities ranging from Charleston to Chicago. Most of these consisted of white mobs carrying out arbitrary violence on African-American agitation or, more frequently, did nothing. In response to these developments and to accommodationist policies such as Washington's that enabled them, some African-American American leaders began to pursue the long-standing African-American dream of democratic inclusion through multi-form strategies of active resistance.

Political Activism

Initially, this resistance movement spoke largely in *political* terms. That is to say, while African-American leaders clearly understood that their afflictions flowed from many sources, the strategies they employed for addressing those afflictions were primarily political: suffrage rights, civil rights legislation, and constitutional amendment. This is

³² W.E.B. Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers", The Crisis, XVIII (May 1919), 13.

certainly understandable. While African Americans had long engaged in multiple forms of resistance to white supremacy—especially in the days following the Civil War—their attempts to live as democratic citizens, free from the structures of white oppression, had had been sourced by democracy itself.

One early and important expression of this political emphasis is what came to be known as "the Niagara Movement."³³ In July of 1905, a group of 29 African-American leaders from 14 different states gathered on the Canada side of the Niagara Falls. This group, organized by W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter, came together to formalize a program of African-American activism.

During their first gathering they drafted a multi-point "Declaration of Principles" that, in direct contradiction to the gradualist vision of Booker T. Washington, called for immediate redress of the various obstructions to full African-American participation in American democracy. Many of their themes of this declaration were familiar: While acknowledging real African-American progress, they nonetheless pointedly identified a number of areas in which the lives of African Americans were afflicted with deep inequalities. These areas of inequality included limited suffrage rights, segregated social spaces, "iniquitous" economic practices, limited educational opportunities, inaccessible health care, inequitable treatment in the justice system, exploitative labor practices, unequal pay to soldiers, poor legal enforcement of civil rights legislation, and segregated

³³ On the Niagara Movement, cf. Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing, ed. Deidre Mullane (Paradise, CA: Paw Prints Press, 2008), 428-432.; Elliott M. Rudwick, "The Niagara Movement," The Journal of Negro History, 42.3 (July 1, 1957): 177-200; Angela Jones, African American Civil Rights: Early Activism and the Niagara Movement (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011); Ch 5 in Omar H. Ali, In the Balance of Power: Independent Black Politics and Third-Party Movements In the United States (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

religious life. In response to these inequities, the framers declaration proclaimed their intention to persist in "manly agitation" until this redress was given.³⁴

For a number of reasons—not least Booker T. Washington's efforts to suppress both African-American knowledge and white financial support of this movement—the momentum of the Niagara Movement stalled within a few years. But its political strategy for securing a democratic space for African Americans did not. In 1910, largely in response to the terrible racial violence of the Atlanta riots of 1906 and the Springfield riots of 1908, W.E.B. Du Bois gathered a multi-racial committee in New York City for the purpose of giving renewed energy to the movement for African-American social progress. This gathering gave rise to one of the most important sources of African-American activist energy ever developed: *The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (*NAACP*).³⁹ Like the Niagara Movement before it, the NAACP committed itself to addressing the various social travails of African Americans through fundamentally political means.³⁶ And yet, as we will see, the NAACP—by virtue of its institutional infrastructure, its abundance of capital, and its sophistication of method—profoundly

³⁴ Mullane, Danger Water, 430-432.

³⁵ On the history of the NAACP, cf. Mullane, *Danger Water*, 433–437; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The* NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement (New York: New Press, 2009); Ronald Walters, *Fighting Neoslavery in the 20th Century: The Forgotten Legacy of the NAACP* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2015); and Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

³⁶ This can be seen in the founding principles of the NAACP: "1. To abolish legal injustice against Negroes. 2. To stamp out race discriminations. 3. To prevent lynchings, burnings, and torturings of black people. 4. To assure every citizen of color the common rights of American citizenship. 5. To compel equal accommodations in railroad travel, irrespective of color. 6. To secure for colored children an equal opportunity to public school education through a fair apportionment of public education funds. 7. To emancipate in fact, as well as in name, a race of nearly 12,000,000 American-born citizens. The only means we can employ are education, organization, agitation, publicity—the force of an enlightened public opinion." Mullane, *Danger Water*, 435. In these words, the newly formed NAACP established itself as a deliberate counterweight to the gradualism of Washington.

expanded both the capacity and the confidence of this vision and defined the shape of African-American political activism for generations to come.³⁷

Economic Activism

And yet early on, African-American activists began to supplement the political strategy of the NAACP with what might be called an overtly *economic* form of activism. This was not a wholly new development, of course. From the earliest days of the colonies, African Americans developed and employed economic strategies for resisting white supremacy. Indeed for those living under the conditions of slavery, economic resistance—no matter how small—was often the only form of resistance available. In the years following the establishment of the NAACP, however, African-American activists began to deliberately supplement its political form of activism with a more explicitly economic approach. It is significant to note that this approach reflects a growing ambivalence about the efficacy of democratic processes for securing a democratic space for African Americans. This ambivalence is reflected in the emergence of two African-American labor organizations, two of the most important expressions of African-American American economic protest: the *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* and the *American Negro*

The Brotherbood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was founded in August of 1925 in response to the discriminatory labor practices of the Pullman Palace Car Company, a manufacturer and operator of railway cars. While the Pullman Company was in some

³⁷ For more on black political activism in this time, cf. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, Michael J. Klarman, Michael J. From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Manning Marable, *Speaking Truth to Power: Essays On Race, Resistance, and Radicalism*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

ways a strong contributor to the development of stable African-American communities through its provision of African-American jobs and its consistent support of African-American churches and schools—it paid its African-American Porters inequitably, and flatly denied them career advancement on racial grounds. After years of complaints often met by intimidation, firing, and violence—nearly 500 Pullman Porters met in Harlem in 1925 to start a Labor union, adopting as their motto: "Fight or Be Slaves." With these words, the leaders of the BSCP situated themselves firmly within the African-American story of both racist oppression and democratic aspiration. And yet reflecting their ambivalence about the utility of political strategies for realizing those aspirations, they turned to a fundamentally economic strategy.³⁸

So too did the leaders of the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC). But in their case, the ambivalence about the role of democratic processes in creating a just social order for African Americans was even more profound. In the years following the Russian revolution of 1917, the newly established Bolshevik government—as justification for their own expansionist ambitions—took relentless aim at the greed of American capitalism and the failure of American democracy. As justification for this scorn, leaders in Moscow pointed to the plight of African Americans. American pretensions to freedom and equality, they said, were a farce predicated upon the economic enslavement of the African-American worker. They had a point, and some African Americans were listening.

³⁸ On the BSCP, cf. Larry Tye, *Rising From the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics In Black America*, 1925-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Robert L. Allen, Robert L, *The Brotherbood of Sleeping Car Porters: C.L. Dellums and the Fight for Fair Treatment and Civil Rights* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2015); and Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherbood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

Among them was Lovett Fort-Whiteman (1894–1939). Fort-Whiteman, a native Texan who was once a student at Washington's Tuskegee Institute, first encountered Communist organizers in the early 1920s. It was a momentous encounter: Fort-Whiteman—often described as the first Black Communist in America—committed himself to the work of economic resistance against the white supremacy imbedded in American democracy. This led him more deeply into the formal structures of the Communist party, and by 1924, he found himself in Moscow for organizational education. While there he was struck, as were the host of African Americans to visit Moscow in the 1920s and 30s, by the apparently "post-racial" society of the Communists. Fort-Whiteman returned a year later to work toward a post-racial society in America. To this end, in October of 1925—just two months after the organization of the BSCP—the *American Negro Labor Congress* was born.³⁹

It would be tempting to read the development of these two organizations as signaling an abandonment of the long-standing African-American struggle toward democracy. After all, the methodologies of both the BSCP and the ANLC suggest a deep suspicion about democratic processes, and the putative ideology of the ANLC suggests a rejection of democracy itself. And yet even so, this temptation needs to be avoided.

With respect to methodology, it must be remembered that the while the strategies of economic resistance employed by African-American labor organizations such as the BSCP and the ANLC were extra-political, they were never *extra-democratic*. To the

³⁹ On the fascinating history of post-war African American radicalism, see: Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008); Mark Solomon, The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-36 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Erik S. Gellman, Death Blow to Jim Crow: the National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Marable, Speaking Truth to Power.

contrary, each sought explicitly to appropriate a mode of economic resistance already permitted by American democracy—labor unions. And more than this, each relied upon the structures of democratic order for the structure of their organizations—free elections, separation of powers, and elected officers accountable to organizational members. With respect to ideology, there were certainly those (like Fort-Whiteman) who rejected the formal structures of American democracy as a legitimate basis for African-American life and advocated a communist alternative. But in truth, and largely because of the antitheological assumptions of the communist order, this view never took firm hold in the minds of African-American leaders. And among those for whom it did take hold, the exposed contradictions of communist life meant that the hold was fleeting.⁴⁰ Indeed, by the middle of the 20th century, while the African-American strategy of economic resistance endured, any notion that this resistance was in the service of anything other than a democratic order had almost wholly vanished. Thus, these economic forms of resistance, rather than being expressions of a growing anti-democratic sentiment among African Americans, reflected instead an extra-political pursuit of an enduring democratic dream.41

Cultural Activism

In addition to these political and economic forms of democratic activism came what might be called a *cultural* strategy. In this strategy, African Americans—in the face of

⁴⁰ Perhaps the most glaring of these contradictions is that Fort-Whiteman himself was caught up in a Stalinist purge, convicted of Trotskyism, and died in the Kolyma labor mines in 1939.

⁴¹ For more on African-American economic activism, cf. Nembhard, Jessica Gordon. *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. State College, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2014.

relentless cultural structures of dehumanization—collaborated to produce cultural artifacts whose dignity and power were undeniable. It is of course true that African Americans had long produced cultural works of dignity and power. And it is also true that American whites had long seen the beauty of these works—of food, of music, of craftsmanship, of husbandry—and had grafted them into "white" culture.⁴² But over time, the censorial power of the Jim Crow order had largely diminished black cultural production to a form that accorded with the psychological needs of white supremacy, centered around the types of the mammy, the minstrel, and the boy. In response to this, in the early years of the 20th century African-American leaders took cultural productionthus far merely a cultural inevitability—and forged it into a cultural strategy for democratic action. At the heart of this cultural strategy stood the African community of Harlem, New York. By the second decade of the 20th century, the Great Migration of African Americans from the South was well underway. And while these African Americans made their way to a number of cities throughout the northern United States, New York was the city most frequently chosen for new beginnings. And for an African American in New York City in the 1920s, Harlem was the place to be.

Harlem was originally designed as a neighborhood for middle and upper class whites, but by the turn of the century—due to a delay in subway construction, subsequently falling real estate prices, and an increase in the population of European immigrants—these whites had began to move on. This movement opened a space for African Americans to move in, and by the early 1920s Harlem had begun to take on a distinctly African-American character. For the first time, African Americans had a large,

⁴² This is a reverse example of the creolization process referred to above.

beautiful space within a major American city that they could claim as their own. This shared life, leavened by the cultural vibrancy of the rest of Manhattan, created the conditions for one of the most important cultural movements in American history: the Harlem Renaissance.

In one sense, the importance of this movement lies in the *artifacts it produced*. The African-American community living in Harlem between 1915 and 1935 gave birth to one of the most prodigious flowerings of cultural and artistic production in American history. Writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay; painters such as Beauford Delaney and Jacob Lawrence; and musicians such as Marion Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and Theolonius Monk—all emerged during this time.⁴³ No moment in the history of African-American artistic production—before or since—has seen this level of generative power.

In another sense, the importance of this movement lies in the *antbropology it expressed*. While the longstanding contests over the place of African Americans in American democracy were multifaceted—drawing on religious belief, political theory, economic practice, etc—African-American leaders understood that at heart, these contests were over the meaning of African-American personhood itself. For centuries, African Americans struggled—in the face of profound and contrarian cultural pressure to understand, articulate, and express the dignity of their humanity. But, as we have seen, by the 1920s this struggle had borne little fruit in the larger cultural imagination. Alain

⁴³ For a survey of this cultural production, cf. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997) and *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Viking, 1994); Mullane, Danger Water, 478–533; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York, Atheneum, 1980); Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance In Black and White*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

Locke (1885–1954), one of the most important architects of the Harlem Renaissance, put it this way:

The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. He has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstance of dependence. So for generations in the mind of American, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality. Through having had to appeal from the unjust stereotypes of his oppressors and traducers to those of his liberators, friends and benefactors, he has had to subscribe to the traditional positions from which his case has been viewed. Little true social or selfunderstanding has or could come from such a situation.⁴⁴

The cultural activists of the Harlem Renaissance sought to press against this anthropological reductionism and to articulate a new vision of African-American personhood; a vision they called "the New Negro."⁴⁵ This "New Negro" vision found a host of potent expressions in theater, dance, music, and letters—each bearing deliberate witness to the dignity of African-American personhood, and each a deliberate refutation of the diminished anthropological space of African Americans in American democracy. The words of the poet Langston Hughes (1902–1967) in his poem, "I, Too" are representative of both this witness and this refutation:

⁴⁴ Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 47.

⁴⁵ This is Locke's phrase, and his summary of the meaning of the Harlem Renaissance (which he called "the New Negro Movement"), taken from his 1925 Anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation of Negro Life*.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen When company comes, But I laugh, And eat well, And grow strong.

Tomorrow, I'll be at the table When company comes. Nobody'll dare Say to me, "Eat in the kitchen," Then.

Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.46

Hughes' words—and the words, songs, and bearing of so many of his contemporaries emerged in defiance of the inherited tropes of African-American dehumanization and sought to give African Americans both a sense of themselves and a sense of their role in American democracy; to give them, in Locke's words, "true social [and] self understanding."⁴⁷

This fact gestures to another, and perhaps most important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance: its *approach to democratic transformation*. Understanding the long-term significance of the Harlem Renaissance—not least with respect to its influence on King requires us to see that it was not just a moment of artistic flowering; not just, as David

⁴⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David E Roessel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 46.

⁴⁷ Locke, Reader, 47.

Levering Lewis exquisitely put it, "a glorious necklace of anecdotes and *tours de force*."⁴⁸ Nor was it simply an attempt to reassert and rearticulate the dignity of African-American personhood. It was an expression of a new approach to democratic change: an attempt to resist the oppressive structures of white America not simply by reframing its politics, or resisting its economic practices, but by reshaping its imagination. The cultural activists of the Harlem Renaissance sought to realize the long-desired democratic aspirations of African Americans by showing themselves to be not only democratically free or economically productive, but also inherently beautiful. They sought, in other words, to create a democratic space for themselves on the moral grounds of their own glory.

THE INHERITED STRUGGLE

This account is important for understanding Martin Luther King's democratic imagination for two reasons: First, because it suggests that the African-American story from the debasement of 17th-century Jamestown to the dignity of 20th-century Harlem has, for all of its complexity, been a long struggle to imagine and attain a democratic space in which people of deep difference might live together in peace. And secondly, because in 1929—as Lovett Fort-Whiteman recruited for the communist party in the cities of the South, as the young Langston Hughes made his way to Harlem, and as the Great Depression slowed the first wave of the Great Migration—Martin Luther King was born.

⁴⁸ Lewis, When Harlem was in Vogue, xxvii.

In the years immediately following the Civil War, Atlanta—like many reconstruction-era Southern cities—was transformed by the influx of newly freed African Americans. Intending to leave both the oppressive social conditions and limited economic possibilities of plantation life behind, these African Americans came to Atlanta seeking the chance to develop economically and to do so in the refuge of a rapidly developing and relatively insular African-American community.⁴⁹ It was precisely for these reasons that King's maternal grandfather, Adam Daniel Williams (1861–1931), left a plantation in Greene County Georgia in 1893 and moved to Atlanta to start a new life. Within a year, "A.D." became the pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, the same congregation his grandson would one day pastor. In the following years, his experience and his congregation's experience—of the emerging blight of Jim Crow Atlanta, inclined him to a ministry marked not only by the traditional tasks of spiritual care, but also by the critical work of social activism. In the years following the 1906 race riot in Atlanta, this inclination grew into a certainty.⁵⁰ This certainty led him to devote himself—and his church—to a number of social and civil causes in the service of African Americans, eventually becoming the first African-American president of the newly formed Atlanta branch of the NAACP.

A.D. Williams and his wife Jennie had one child, a daughter named Alberta. A strong and talented woman, Alberta was both formed and admired by the many visitors to

⁴⁹ According to the US Census and Slave Schedules, from 1860 to 1870 Fulton County more than doubled in population, from 14,427 to 33,336. The effects of African-American migration can be seen by the increase in Fulton County from 20.5% enslaved African Americans in 1860 to 45.7% colored (African-American) residents in 1870. Data from the Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Library, accessed at http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu.

⁵⁰ For a history of these riots, see Rebecca Burns, *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot* (Atlanta: University of Georgia, 2006), and David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005).

and boarders of the Williams home. One of these was a young man from nearby Stockbridge, Georgia named Michael King. King, drawn to Atlanta for many of the same reasons as Williams himself, met Alberta through his sister, and eventually began the long process of winning her hand. In the coming years, no doubt as a part of this process, King began to pursue both his formal education and a career as a pastor. In 1926, after several unsuccessful attempts, King was admitted to Atlanta's prestigious Morehouse College, and later that year he and Alberta were married.

As King completed his education, he served as Williams' assistant at Ebenezer, and upon Williams' death in 1931, King became pastor of Ebenezer himself. In so doing, Michael King climbed from the fields of rural Georgia to a role of considerable prestige in the African-American community, both in Atlanta and abroad. And yet, this was just the beginning. Through a combination of personal charisma, shrewd institutional leadership, and civic courage, King transformed that prestige into a powerful ministry of both ecclesial and cultural leadership. Indeed, in a few short years, King grew his congregation from several hundred to nearly four thousand, organized effective stewardship campaigns and voting drives, and found himself invited onto several prominent Boards of Trustees, including that of Morehouse itself. These successes became a platform for King's continuation of the pastoral calling he inherited from his father-in-law: the calling to secure both the spiritual and civic good of his people. As an expression of this calling, upon returning from a trip to Europe in 1934, Michael King took the radical step of changing his ordinary sharecropper name to one more suited to the powerful ecclesial and cultural vocation he had come to inhabit. Martin Luther.

The impact of this name change would extend beyond King himself. At the time of his return from Europe, he and Alberta King had three young children, the second of which was a five-year-old boy named Michael Jr. When his father's name was changed, so was Michael Jr.'s; the young boy was renamed "Martin Luther King Jr." In some ways, this name change was as profound for the boy as it was for the man. This was so not only because of the general strangeness of changing something that is simultaneously so intimate and so public, but because also of the particular meaning of *this* change. It was a change that conferred not only a new name but also a new identity, a new possibility, and a new calling—the calling to inhabit the inheritance of his people, to continue the African-American struggle for democratic life.⁵¹

Within a year of this name change, this calling and struggle became King's own. When he was six years old he had his first—though not last—experience of white rejection. His account of this rejection is as telling as it is moving:

From the age of three I had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around every day; his father owned a store across the street from our home. At the age of six we both entered school—separate schools of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school; this was not my desire, but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more. I will never forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents what was behind such a statement. We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of the race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that

⁵¹ The change of name was one of the most important events in the younger King's early life. For him it would be the mark of great expectations, a statement of identity that honored traditions in both religion and race. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 44.

moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty to love him. 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? This was a great question in my mind for a number of years.⁵²

The force of this question expressed itself just nine years later, when the fifteen-year-old King gave his first public speech: "The Negro and the Constitution." The Black Elks—a non-profit, African-American charitable organization—was created at the turn of the 20th century to provide relational and material support to African-American communities throughout America. To that end, the Georgia Branch of the Black Elks hosted an oratory contest for African-American high-school students throughout the state. In 1944, Martin Luther King—a junior at Atlanta's Booker T. Washington High School—was chosen to represent his school in this contest, held 150 miles away in Dublin, Georgia. The sanctuary of the First African Baptist Church was full that day, and when it was King's turn to speak, he stepped to the pulpit, looked out at his audience, and began:

Negroes were first brought to America in 1620 when England legalized slavery both in England and the colonies and America; the institution grew and thrived for about 150 years upon the backs of these black men. The empire of King Cotton was built and the Southland maintained a status of life and hospitality distinctly its own and not anywhere else. On January 1, 1863 the proclamation emancipating the slaves which had been decreed by President Lincoln in September took effect—millions of Negroes faced a rising sun of a new day begun.⁵³

⁵² Martin Luther King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development" in *Papers*, Vol 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 362.

⁵³ King, Papers, 1:109-111.
It is significant that these, King's first public words, tell a story of African-

American civic progress: arriving in slavery, enduring exploitation, constructing society, and, in time, emerging into a dawn of freedom. He could not have imagined as a fifteenyear-old boy that he would one day come to symbolize this story to the world. But it is also significant that his words did not end there. For as he continued, it became clear that for King this "new day" of freedom was shadowed by lingering bondage.

Black America still wears chains. The finest Negro is at the mercy of the meanest white man. Even winners of our highest honors face the class color bar.... So, with their right hand they raise to high places the great who have dark skins, and with their left, they slap us down to keep us in "our places." "Yes, America you have stripped me of my garments, you have robbed me of my precious endowment." We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in ignorance. We cannot have a healthy nation with one tenth of the people ill-nourished, sick, harboring germs of disease which recognize no color lines—obey no Jim Crow laws. We cannot have a nation orderly and sound with one group so ground down and thwarted that it is almost forced into unsocial attitudes and crime. We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flaunt the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule. We cannot come to full prosperity with one great group so ill-delayed that it cannot buy goods. So as we gird ourselves to defend democracy from foreign attack, let us see to it that increasingly at home we give fair play and free opportunity for all people. Today thirteen million black sons and daughters of our forefathers continue the fight for the translation of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments from writing on the printed page to an actuality. We believe with them that "if freedom is good for any it is good for all," that we may conquer Southern armies by the sword, but it is another thing to conquer Southern hate, that if the franchise is given to Negroes, they will be vigilant and defend even with their arms, the ark of federal liberty from treason and destruction by her enemies.⁵⁴

Speaking to a largely African-American audience in segregated Dublin, Georgia, this account of bondage would have come as no surprise. Just twenty-five years before King's speech, the surrounding community of Laurens County had been the scene of the

⁵⁴ King, Papers, 1:109-111.

notorious lynching of Eli Cooper. In the early morning hours of August 28, 1919,

Cooper, an African-American farmer who had both spoken out against racial abuse and sought to organize black farm laborers and secure higher wages, was murdered in his home in front of his family. He was then dragged to the grounds of his local church and burned, along with the church itself. When his body was recovered, it was estimated that he had been shot nearly five hundred times. Four members of the mob were later charged and tried, but all were acquitted. At the time of King's speech, several of these men still lived in the area.⁵⁵

But bondage was not King's only theme. Faced with the painful contradictions in African-American civic life, King turned to the familiar theme of democratic hope.

The spirit of Lincoln still lives; that spirit born of the teachings of the Nazarene, who promised mercy to the merciful, who lifted the lowly, strengthened the weak, ate with publicans, and made the captives free. In the light of this divine example, the doctrines of demagogues shiver in their chaff. Already closer understanding links Saxon and Freedman in mutual sympathy. America experiences a new birth of freedom in her sons and daughters; she incarnates the spirit of her martyred chief. Their loyalty is re-pledged; their devotion renewed to the work He left unfinished. My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom. And I with my brother of blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect, may stand beside the Saxon—a Negro—and yet a man!⁵⁶

These two accounts-of the six-year-old and fifteen-year-old King-are

important for a number of reasons: their poignant vision of King's early pain, their

intimate portrait of a mealtime conversation, their disclosure of his parental guidance,

⁵⁵ Cf. Chicago Defender, September 6, 1919 and also Jan Voogt, Race Riots and Resistance: the Red Summer of 1919 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁵⁶ King, Papers, 1:109-111.

their attestation to his early gifts, and their foreshadowing of the great theme of his life: love in the midst of hate. But perhaps most importantly, they show that by an early age, King had begun to embrace both the vision and the strategies of the African-American democratic struggle as his own. As we will see, for the rest of his life, King inhabited hope of a just democratic order that had come down to him through African-American history: the vision articulated by the fifteen-year-old King endured.

As we will see, King also struggled to achieve that vision using precisely those strategic forms that had come down to him. At times—especially in his sermons to African-American communities—King evoked the spirit of the separatist, urging African Americans to work together to build local communities in which their own democratic ideals might be realized. At other times, King sounded like a gradualist—simultaneously assuring whites that African Americans meant no harm and calling African Americans to win their freedom through the dignity of their conduct. And yet most frequently, King self-consciously embraced the activist tradition, urging African Americans—indeed all Americans—to press toward realizing their democratic aspirations through the strategies of political, economic, and cultural action. In this respect, the struggle of the six-year-old King endured as well. In time, this struggle would lead him to the pulpit, to the jail cell, to the freedom march, to the Nobel stage, and finally, to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. This long African-American struggle—to imagine and attain a democratic space in which people of deep difference might live together in peace—was King's inheritance.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ It is of course true that King—both in his years at Morehouse and in the years following the Selma March of 1965—was an outspoken critic of American democracy. This truth has led some—notably theologian James Cone—to emphasize what I have called the *separatist* aspects of King's social vision and to suggest that King was increasingly disenchanted with democracy itself. In Cone's view, King was

C. "We Must Meet Hate With Love:" King's Theological Improvisation

One of the great temptations in King scholarship is to understand King merely in continuity with this inheritance, to see him simply as its most famous or most inspiring heir. This is wholly understandable, for as we have seen, King did understand himself as an heir to long-standing African-American struggles over racism, economic injustice, and democratic order. Because of this, studies tend to view him largely through one of these lenses. Some view him fundamentally through the lens of race, situating him in the midst of the long-standing and uniquely African-American struggle for dignity under the conditions of white oppression.⁵⁸ Others tend towards a more economic approach, situating King against the backdrop of long-standing economic inequalities in American culture and the mid-century expanse of capitalism around the globe.⁵⁹ Still others portray

increasingly drawn away from an American democratic vision (what Cone calls "integrationism") and drawn to a form of black "nationalism" that defined its identity by "resistance to America and determination to create a society based on their own African history and culture." James H. Cone, "Martin and Malcolm and America: Integrationism and Nationalism in African American Religious History", qtd. in *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003), 405.

Cone is surely right to point out both King's separatist tendencies and his sympathy for the blacknationalist movement. As we will see, in spite of the benign mythologies surrounding him, King's indignation over African American experience, and his ambivalence about the possibility of a substantive change in that experience under the conditions of American democracy, were both real and enduring. That said, Cone somewhat misrepresents King by forcing him into a binary that King himself rejected. In truth, King's indignation and ambivalence about American democracy were never truly about democracy itself. They were, rather, about the possibility of realizing a true democracy under the oppressive structures of its existing American form. Because of this, King is best understood not as abandoning democracy, but as seeking to change the structures that precluded its full realization.

⁵⁸ Cone, Martin and Malcolm and America, introduction.

⁵⁹ Cf. Michael Eric Dyson, April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America (New York: Basic Books, 2008), especially chapters four and five.

King fundamentally as a democratic figure, situating him in the broader twentiethcentury struggle to realize America's political promise.⁶⁰

THE VOCATION OF LOVE

Each of these readings is, in its own way, faithful to a part of King's life. Indeed, the data of King's life and work suggests each of them in different times and in different ways: He *was* a racial figure who fundamentally identified himself with the long struggle of what he called "my people." He *was* an economic figure who saw himself as an advocate for the poor and a critic of American structures of greed. And he *was* a democratic figure who saw his work, and the larger movement of which he was a part, as a basic pursuit of American integrity.

And yet, while each of these lenses illumine, they also obscure. In one respect, this is due to the tendency of these scholars to oversimplify King by viewing him almost wholly through one of these lenses, thereby minimizing other aspects of his thought. In another, and I believe much more important, respect this is due to the almost universal tendency of King scholarship to de-sacralize King by failing to reckon seriously with the foundationally theological framework with which he approached each of these other concerns; by failing to recognize that he inhabited his democratic inheritance fundamentally as a pastor.

"I am Fundamentally a Clergyman"

⁶⁰ Cf. Branch, America in the King Years and David Garrow, Bearing the Cross Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

In the years following his renaming, King resisted the call to pastoral ministry.

This resistance was, in part, a product of the doubts that plagued him. From an early age the cerebral King was uncomfortable with the fundamentalism of his home church, and struggled deeply with how to reconcile his intellectual disquiet with a pastoral calling.⁶¹ But it was also a product of the mentors who formed him. While King's father was a deeply formative presence in his life—and would remain so until King's tragic death—the elder King was never quite his son's equal. Because of this, the son—even as he clung to his father—looked to other men as well in order to catch a glimpse of what he himself might become.

Of these, few were more formative than Benjamin E. Mays (1894–1984), the president of Morehouse College during King's years there. Mays, though also a minister, was something that King's father was not: an intellectual power and a respected scholar. In Mays, King saw an alternative vision of his future—a professor, a scholar, and an African-American intellectual leader. In truth, the vision that Mays awakened in King never really left him. It was this vision that led King to Crozer Seminary, and from there, to Boston University for a Ph.D. And yet, counter-intuitively, it was this vision that led King into his first pastorate in Montgomery: the path to intellectual leadership in the African-American community passed through the pulpit. In the pastorate of Dexter Avenue, King saw an opportunity to develop the skills in public oratory, applied theology, church politics, and institutional leadership that he saw in mentors like Mays.⁶²

⁶¹ King, Papers, 1:361-362.

⁶² Cf. Troy Jackson, Becoming King: Martin Luther King and the Making of a National Leader (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008).

His early hope, in other words, was not simply to move into the pastoral identity—but to move through it into the professorial identity of African-American intellectual leadership.

In the wake of the Montgomery bombing, and with increasing strength after the boycott's success, King had the opportunity to realize this vision. Indeed, as the concussive force of that bomb hurled King into the larger cultural and political crisis of the civil rights movement, many identities would be thrust upon him: intellectual, activist, moral leader, public menace, political star. And yet ten years later—two years after his famous speech at the March on Washington, one year after having been awarded the Nobel Prize, and three years before his murder in Memphis—King described himself in this way:

I am many things to many people: Civil Rights leader, agitator, trouble-maker, and orator, but in the quiet recesses of my heart I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and 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.⁶³

These words were no mere rhetorical flourish. In the *Ebony Magazine* article from which these words are taken, "The Un-Christian Christian," King framed his work in fundamentally ecclesial terms. He did so first by lamenting the failure of the white church to recognize and guard the dignity of their African-American brothers and sisters: "Who can explain their silence, their apathy, their indifference, and even their participation in acts of brutality and evil against their brothers? ... How can they not see that the Word of God has called for the 'Oneness of the church' and that in Christ there is neither Jew nor

⁶³ Martin Luther King, "The Un-Christan Christian," Ebony, August 1965, 77.

Greek, slave nor free, male nor female' but all are one?"⁶⁴ However, King's solution to this problem was not to abandon the church, but to reinvigorate it. Because of this, King exhorted the African-American church to step into this crisis and seek—for the sake of all—a new reality. As King said:

We Christians of color may well have to be the salvation of Christ's church, as indeed we already are. This is not to imply that we are the perfect Christians. We only say that God has placed us in a unique place in the history of the world! That through our suffering we have come to know of His way...In this day and time, when all the forces of history are in tremendous flux, the Church can speak out with clarity and vision, pointing the way far beyond the law to a kingdom where all men are brothers, and where each person, no matter how rich or poor, how educated or illiterate, how black or white, can contribute to his society in love and confidence that his worth is insured by the very fact that he is God's child, and that God has breathed into him the breath of life, placed him in a certain spot in history and society and challenged him to live as an heir and partner to the kingdom of God. If the church takes this challenge and opportunity, the whole world will shout for joy and the sons of God will weep no more, but if we fail, some future Toynbee, writing the annals of the history of our civilization, will say that, in the hour of trial, the church and the Christian were weighed in the balance and found wanting, and that this was the beginning of the end of an age.65

These words suggest that, in spite of his early intentions, King had come to

embrace the pastoral life not simply as a pathway to another vocation, but as the essence

of his calling.⁶⁶ And more than this, they suggest that as King took up the work of

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 80.

⁶⁶ This is not, however, to assume a simple continuity between King and his ministerial forebears. King explicitly distanced himself from them in aspects of both theology and style; resisting both the mere fundamentalism and what he called the "whooping" emotivism that characterized much of the black church that he knew. Yet it is important to understand that even though King struggled to embrace the theology he found in his childhood church—at some times more than others—he nonetheless wholly embraced the vocation he found there.

improvising upon his African-American democratic inheritance, he did so fundamentally as a clergyman.⁶⁷

"The Gospel I Will Preach to the World"

But what does it mean to take the pastoral character of King's public work seriously? At the most basic level, it simply means to honestly acknowledge King's pastoral *bistory*, the fact that King was born into—and never left—the Christian church. At another level, it means to reckon with King's pastoral *style*. King, like a number of leaders in the early civil rights movement, began his public life in the pulpit. As noted above, King's pastoral ministry was the place where he learned to preach and to lead, to rebuke and to inspire, to prophesy and to persuade. And though the events of his time carried him far from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the pastoral style that he honed there marked him for the rest of his life. His speeches—no matter the audience—were sermons. His mass meetings were worship services. His nation was his congregation. Taking this pastoral style seriously requires us to see these things not simply as the residue of his early formation, but as the marks of an enduring pastoral call.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ For helpful treatments of King as a public actor driven by pastoral concerns, see Charles Marsh, *The Beloved* Community: *How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Lewis V. Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) and *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King* (New York: Oxford, 2010); and Richard Wayne Wills, Sr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God* (New York: Oxford, 2009). I see my work as building on theirs.

⁶⁸ For important treatments of the meaning of King's pastoral style for his public work see especially Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King and the Word the Moved America* (New York: Oxford, 1995), Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2008), and Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1998).

But at still another level—a level too frequently ignored by King scholars—to reckon seriously with the pastoral character of King's life means to reckon seriously with its fundamentally pastoral—or theological—*content*. One of the oddities of King scholarship is what feels to be a persistent embarrassment about the theological character of King's democratic vision. This is understandable, in a way. In our age, to a degree far greater than in King's own, King's talk about God, about love, and about long arcs of justice are redolent of a disconcerting essentialism, a sort of illiberal theological foundationalism. Because of this, treatments of King that acknowledge his theological vocation tend to transpose his theological language into the more palatable vocabulary of liberal democracy. In this transposition, King's conviction that we are "all God's children" comes to mean something like, "We are all equal before the law." His call to a theological ethic of neighbor-love becomes little more than a call to a liberal ethic of tolerance. His insistence that "God's justice will roll down like mighty waters" becomes something like an affirmation of the inevitable triumph of liberal ideals.⁶⁹

To be fair, there are reasons for this reading. King did often rhetorically conflate theological and democratic aspirations, leaving the impression that they signified the same things.⁷⁰ And he did say things like this: "Let us continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race and color. This is the gospel I will preach to the

⁶⁹ David Chappell's book *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion in an Age of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), is an almost pristine expression of this tendency. On this, see Charles Marsh's review of Chappell in *Political Theology* 6, no. 2 (2005): 266-71.

⁷⁰ In part, as we will see in Chapter 4, this conflation grew from the close—though not identical relationship in King's own mind between the kingdom of God and the social structures of the "here and now" that he inherited from Walter Rauschenbush. But in part, as we will see in Chapter 3, this conflation reflects a rhetorical strategy that he used when speaking to different audiences. On this point, see again, Lischer, *Preacher King*.

world."⁷¹ And yet, however understandable, this attempt to demythologize King's democratic imagination—which is really a failure to seriously reckon with its foundationally theological character—has profoundly distorted our understanding of both the civil rights movement and King's contribution to it by rendering in simplistically binary terms.

On one side of this alleged binary stand those who imagined democracy in terms of a *racially grounded vision of separation*. We have already seen the various shapes this vision took in the African-American community: the ubiquitous submission to Jim Crow, the diffuse currents of Black Nationalism, and the unprecedented flight of the Great Migration. And yet this separatist democratic imagination was a white vision as well. The most obvious example of this was the Jim Crow social order of the American South, whose prima facie intention was to enforce social separation in exacting detail.

But there were other forms too: white Southern moderates who, though theoretically committed to black equality, were also committed to a political gradualism that functionally prohibited that equality from taking social shape. Likewise, white Northern progressives, who pursued African-American social advancement through patronage to African-American institutions,⁷² unwittingly—through that very patronage—conspired with segregationist intentions to confine African-American life to an altogether separate realm.⁷³ Thus for many in both white and black communities, the fatigue of unrelenting American racial conflict had calcified into something of a social

⁷¹ Martin Luther King to Corretta Scott, 18 July 1952. *Papers* 6.11, 126.

⁷² Washington's Tuskegee Institute is a prime example of such an institution.

⁷³ One of the ironies of American democratic history is that white moderates—like their black counterparts (e.g. Washington) became provisional accomplices in preserving the segregated status quo, even as they sought to undermine it.

axiom: The best way to negotiate the trauma of American difference is by means of a racially grounded social separation. This axiom was more than mere prejudice; it was a strategy for ordering democratic life.

On the other side of the binary stand those who imagined a democracy in terms of a *liberally grounded vision of integration*. In both white-American and African-American communities, this vision centered on two convictions: first, that African Americans were human beings, and second, that as such they ought to have free exercise of their constitutionally conferred rights. It was this vision that emerged in the colonial period under the leadership of Richard Allen and his white abolitionist counterparts. It was this vision that, thanks to the leadership of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, persevered through the decades of Civil War.

It was this vision that drove the gradualist strategy of Booker T. Washington and the white Southern moderates, for whom integration was—for good or ill—the inevitable American future. It was this vision that found restless expression in the political vision of W.E.B. Du Bois and the cultural energies of the Harlem Renaissance. It was this vision that found renewed strength in the years of Jim Crow. And while each of these particular expressions of integrationism had its own origin and its own impact on American life, the vision that drove them all was the same: full integration of African Americans into democratic life.

Thus, in the standard account, the mid-twentieth-century struggle to re-imagine American democracy was a contest between two imaginative options: a racially grounded vision of social separation and a liberally grounded vision of social integration. Yet what of King? Where does he fit into this binary account of democratic imagination? Some,

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highlighting the increasingly prophetic anger of his later years, and his growing despair over the possibility of an equitable future for blacks in America, suggest that in the end, King was an heir of the *separatist* tradition.⁷⁴ Most treatments of King, however, interpret him fundamentally as an heir—perhaps *the* heir—of the *integrationist* tradition. In this account, King's contribution lies less in the originality of his vision, and more in the power and beauty with which he articulated it.⁷⁵ Each of these readings of King has a strong degree of plausibility. He did self-consciously position himself as heir to the democratic ideals of Lincoln, Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois. And he did especially in his latter years—articulate a growing doubt about the possibility of black flourishing under the conditions of American culture.⁷⁶

But while these accounts grasp something true about King's ministry, they fail to grasp a more fundamental truth about "the gospel that he would preach to the world."⁷⁷ King's democratic imagination was never simply a reiteration of either a racially grounded vision of separation, or a democratically grounded vision of integration, but an improvised articulation of something altogether new: *a theologically grounded vision of love*. It was love that led King to talk about race, economics, and democracy. It was love that led him to sound by turns like a separatist, a gradualist, and an activist. It was love that led him into the oscillations of both despair and hope. Thus, in 1958 he said,

From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of

⁷⁴ Cf. Cone, Martin and Malcolm and America.

⁷⁵ This seems to me to be the fundamental lens of Taylor Branch, David Garrow, and David Chappell.

⁷⁶ On this, see Chapter Four.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther King to Corretta Scott, 18 July 1952. Papers 6.11, 126.

these expressions was mentioned: the phrase most often heard was 'Christian love.' It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.⁷⁸

THE SOURCES OF LOVE

But what did King mean by love? This is not an easy question to answer, in part because King never offered anything like a full treatment of the subject; his elaborations on love came largely in the form of improvised homiletics rather than systematic theology. Because of this, understanding King's theology of love is itself a work of improvisation—of following clues and assembling fragments. But even so, a faithful account of King's view of love is possible if we attend both to the sources that nurtured his vision of love and, perhaps more importantly, to the shape that this vision took in the world.

"A Family Where Love was Central"

The first and, in some ways, most enduring source of King's theology of love was his family,⁷⁹ and the extended family of the church.⁸⁰ It was here, in the ordinary rhythms

⁷⁸ Martin Luther King, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 16.

⁷⁹ On the role of the family in forming King's theology of love, see esp. Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead* and Rufus Burrow Jr., *Extremist for Love: Martin Luther King Jr.: Man of Ideas and Nonviolent Social Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

⁸⁰ On the role of the church in forming King's theology of love, see esp. Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience*.

of family life, that he learned of both the reality and the responsibilities of love. Thus, in an autobiographical essay written during his time at Crozer Seminary, he said,

My home was very congenial. I have a marvelous mother and father. I can hardly remember a time when they ever argued...or had any great falling out. These factors were highly significant in determining my religious attitudes. 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.⁸¹

One of the most important legacies of King's home on his theology of love is that it was here that he learned that he—as an African American—was worthy of love. It must be remembered that King lived in the white supremacist context of the American South, in which such a notion was almost wholly—and deliberately—denied.⁸² As a counter to this oppressive context, King's family—especially his mother—took particular pains to remind the young King that he was worthy of love. This can be seen in King's account of his mother's response to the rejection he experienced from his childhood friend.

My mother, Alberta Williams King, has been behind the scene setting forth those motherly cares, the lack of which leaves a missing link in life.... In spite of her relatively comfortable circumstances, my mother never complacently adjusted herself to the system of segregation. She instilled a sense of self-respect in all her children from the very beginning.... She taught me that I should feel a sense of somebodiness but that on the other hand I had to go out and face a system that stared me in the face every day saying you are 'less than,' you are 'not equal to.'... She said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: 'You are as good as anyone.'⁸³

⁸¹ Martin Luther King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner, 1998).

⁸² On this, see my reflections on the danger of being a "nigger lover" in the American South Chapter Two.

⁸³ King, Autobiography, 3-4.

Importantly, this conviction that King was worthy of love was reiterated weekly in the larger family of Ebenezer Church. Week after week, as the men and women of that community took the young King on their laps, straightened his tie, corrected his behavior, celebrated his growth, and delighted in his gifts, Martin Luther King Jr. learned that even though he was an African American, he was worthy of love.

And yet in addition to teaching King that he was worthy to receive love, his home also taught him of the responsibility to extend it. This responsibility was first to take shape in his life with his family—his grandparents, parents, and sibling. It was also to take shape in his life with his church—the larger community of men and women with whom King lived on a daily basis. It was here—in his weekly interactions with the elderly, difficult, and ordinary men, women, and children of his church community—that King learned the broader obligations of love.

But perhaps most importantly for King's future, it was in his home that King first learned that love was also to be extended to his enemies—to those who sought to bring him harm. Following that first childhood rejection at age six—and all of the rejections to come—King's parents took special pains to remind him not only that he was worthy of love, but that his enemies were as well. As he said, "My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him."⁸⁴ This too was reinforced in King's weekly life in the church. It was here—as the men and women of his extended family greeted one another with kindness, applauded one another's songs, carried one another's burdens, and interceded for their enemies—that

⁸⁴ King, Autobiography, 7.

King grew to understand the call to love others. Thus, King's first and most important source for his theology of love, was the experience of life in his family and with them, life in the larger family of the Christian church. It was here that King gained an experiential knowledge of the both the reality and the responsibilities of love.⁸⁵

In time, however, King began to give this early domestic and ecclesial experience of love a more deliberately theological form. And while, as we will see in the following chapters, the sources of this theological framework were both varied and many, it is important at this point to clarify the role of three particular theological sources of King's emerging theology of love—the agapic tradition, the theology of the social gospel, and Niebuhrian realism.

"The Ethic of Love"

A close reading of King reveals that the organizing center of this public theology was a theological vision of *agape*. Scores of times, in sermons and writings, in pulpits and lecture halls, King returned to the scriptural language of *agape* and sought to frame his public vision as a social elaboration of its meaning. These words are typical:

The Greek language uses three words for love. It talks about *eros*. Eros is a sort of aesthetic love. It has come to us to be a sort of romantic love and it stands with all beauty. But when we speak of loving those who oppose us we're not talking about *eros*. The Greek language talks about *philia* and this is a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends. This is a vital, valuable love. But when we talk of loving those who oppose you and those who seek to defeat you we are not talking about *eros* or *philia*. The Greek language comes out with another word and it is *agape*. *Agape* is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. Biblical theologians say that it is the love of God working in the minds of men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. And when you come to love on

⁸⁵ Baldwin, Voice, 15.

this level you begin to love men not because they are likable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them, and here we love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. It is the type of love that stands at the center of the movement that we are trying to carry on in the Southland—*agape*.⁸⁶

Those familiar with mid-century theological ethics will recognize these words as a gloss on the agapic theology of the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren (1890–1978).⁸⁷ And although, as I note below, to over-identify King's view of love with Nygren's is a misunderstanding of King, understanding Nygren and the tradition he represents is important for understanding the ways in which King both embraced that tradition and diverged from it.

Nygren's work *Agape and Eros*, published in two Swedish volumes in the early 1930s and translated into English later that same decade, was—as the title suggests—an extended exploration of the difference between the "Greek" notion of love as *eros* and the "Christian" notion of love as *agape*. In Nygren's rendering, eros is a form of self-interested desire, a seeking born of need, a hunger that orders itself towards the possession and, in the end, the consumption of the other.

Eros [is] acquisitive love ... it is a desire, a longing, a striving. But man only desires and longs for what he has not got, and of which he feels a need ... Hence

⁸⁶ King, Testament, 12.

⁸⁷ Another perhaps more generally important figure in this tradition is Paul Ramsey, who, in his seminal 1950 work, *Basic Christian Ethics*, insists on love as Christianity's organizing ethical principle. And although there is some evidence that King was both exposed to Ramsey's work in his last year at Crozer seminary and appropriated parts of Ramsey's work in his own first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, and although there are certain resonances between King's view of love and Ramsey's own, I am aware of no place beyond seminary in which King directly appropriates Ramsey's categories or engages particular aspects of his thought. Because of this, though Ramsey remains an important figure in the agapic tradition, it is not at all clear that he functioned as a direct influence on King's thought. Thus my consideration of the agapic tradition will focus on King's relationship to Anders Nygren. On King's encounter and appropriation of Ramsey, see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 112; and Burrow, *Extremist for Love*, 258-259.

[eros] has ... two main characteristics: the consciousness of a present need and the effort to find satisfaction for it in another state ... The aim of love is to gain possession of an object which is regarded as valuable and which man feels he needs.⁸⁸

In Nygren's view, eros is fundamentally concerned not with the other—whether divine or human—but with the self. It is, as he says, "egocentric."⁸⁹ And because of this egocentrism, in a departure from much of Christian theological history, Nygren views eros not as a component of Christian love, nor even as a precursor to it, but as a sub-Christian rival view of love.

Against this alleged egocentricity of pagan eros, Nygren insists that true love is best understood in terms of Christian agape. In his view, agape is first and finally *divine* love, a love that has its origin not in the merit of its object, but *wholly* in the gratuitous depths of the divine heart. Thus for Nygren, divine agape is "spontaneous," "unmotivated," and "groundless, "in the sense that there are no extrinsic grounds for its existence; it is "indifferent to value." As he says, "The only ground for it is to be found in God Himself ... *any thought of valuation whatsoever* is out of place in connection with fellowship with God. It is only when all thought of the worthiness of the object is abandoned that we can understand what Agape is."⁹⁰ Thus, for Nygren, rather than recognizing the worth of its object, agape love actually *creates* that worth by virtue of its bestowal: "God does not love that which is already in itself worthy of love, but on the contrary, that which itself has no worth acquires worth just by becoming the object of

⁸⁸ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, Philip Watson, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982),175-176, 180; cf. also Nygren, *Essence of Christianity: Two Essays*, Philip Watson, trans. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

 ⁸⁹ "The entire structure of Platonic Eros is egocentric. Everything centres in the individual self and its destiny. All that matters from first to last is the soul that is aflame with Eros." Nygren, *Agape*, 179.
⁹⁰ Nygren, *Agape*, 75-77, emphasis original.

God's love.... Agape does not recognize value, but creates it."⁹¹ This is the heart of divine agape: a spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative love for another.

And yet while for Nygren, agape is most properly understood as divine love, it is also to be expressed by human beings. First, human beings are to express this love to God. Because God loves human beings with an agapic love, they are in a sense "possessed by" His love and are now to redirect this love back to God. Nygren's vision of divine fellowship is one in which God and human beings live together in a divinely wrought agapic embrace.⁹² Yet agape is not simply the love of divine fellowship; it is to mark human fellowship as well. For Nygren, divine agape is the "prototype" for a human agape that, like its source, "must be "spontaneous and unmotivated, uncalculating, unlimited, and unconditional."⁹³

Thus in Nygren's account, human neighbor-love is rooted not in the merit of the neighbor, but wholly in the agapic love of God. As he says, "Man's love for his neighbor should be spontaneous and unmotivated. There is no occasion to look behind our neighbor's actual condition for any hidden valuable quality that will explain and justify our love for him. God's love is explanation and sanction enough." While more could be said about Nygren's view, and will in what follows, for now the key point is that for Nygren, agape—in both its divine and human expressions—is best understood as the inversion of eros. It is a love that, in the most fundamental sense, is disinterested rather

⁹¹ Nygren, Agape, 78.

⁹² Although the problem of God as object of a "spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and value-creating love" is never satisfactorily addressed by Nygren.

⁹³ Nygren, Agape, xx.

than self-interested, devoted not to the self, but wholly to the other. For Nygren, it is this vision of love that ought to define Christian life in the world.⁹⁴

The importance of Nygren for King is complicated. On the one hand, it is clear that King deliberately appropriated Nygren's language and understood himself to be an heir to Nygren's agapic framework. As we will see in Chapter Two, like Nygren, King believed that agape was the foundation for God's relationship to creation and for the relationship of God's creatures one to another. As we will see in Chapter Three, like Nygren, King believed that agape entailed an inescapable obligation to work for the interest of another. And, as we will see in Chapter Four, like Nygren, King believed that agape was, finally, a call to redemptive suffering. But even so, to read King's theology of love through the lens of Nygren is—for several reasons—both a historical and theological mistake.

Historically speaking, although King often alludes to Nygren, it is not entirely clear that he ever actually read Nygren himself. King makes only two explicit references to Nygren, both in his seminary years. One of these, a paper from February 1950, misspells the title of Nygren's work and fails to include it in the bibliography.⁹⁵ The other paper, written two years later, gives Nygren a more extended treatment but does so almost wholly by means of quotations from a secondary source.⁹⁶ This suggests that

⁹⁴ In spite of broad acclaim and broad ethical appropriation (e.g. Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* and, in a highly nuanced way, Timothy Jackson, *Love Disconsoled: Meditations on Christian Charity*), Nygren's account has been seriously criticized on methodological, exegetical, historical, and philosophical grounds. On this cf. Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice,* Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor,* Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter on Christian Love,* and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love.* For an analysis of these various perspectives cf. Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis,* Werner Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love,* and Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity.*

⁹⁵ King, Papers, 1:27.

⁹⁶ This work was Walter Marshall Horton's Contemporary Continental Theology. On this, cf. King, Papers, 2:113,

though King knew enough of Nygren to appropriate his language and appeal to his framework, it is not at all clear that he either knew or internalized the whole of Nygren's project.

Theologically speaking, it is in fact the case that at times King's ideas of agape stand in stark contrast to Nygren's views. This contrast is seen first in King's insistence that *agape* is a *not* an act of conferring worth, but that it is, to the contrary, an act of recognizing it—both in the self and the other.⁹⁷ It is not, therefore, wholly gratuitous. Furthermore, this contrast is seen in King's insistence that *agape* seeks the good not only of one's neighbor, but also of oneself. This is most clearly seen in his call for the African-American community not only to recognize its own dignity but also to participate in a movement to secure the freedom and justice that dignity entailed. For King, this movement was driven—as Nygren's categories surely demand—not as an expression of self-interested eros but by agape itself.⁹⁸ Finally, the contrast between King and Nygren may be seen in King's insistence that *agape*, like Nygren's *eros*, is a "striving" love—a love that presses to see its yearnings realized in the world. This, again, suggests that while King appropriated some of Nygren's distinctions, he—perhaps unknowingly—delineated the meaning of those distinctions in his own way.

In truth, King was not terribly interested in the nuanced particulars of these theological debates about love. Rather, his words bore witness to one of his most important intellectual habits: instinctively recognizing useful ideas and then appropriating them for his own purposes. This, it seems to me, is the best way to understand King's

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⁹⁷ On this, see Chapter Two.

⁹⁸ On this, see Chapter Three.

appropriation of the agapic tradition: Sensing its importance as an organizing principle for the African-American struggle, King borrowed its language and categories and fashioned them into an agapic theology that was wholly his own.

"A Theological Basis for Social Concern"

While King's family gave his theology of love its foundation, and the agapic tradition gave this theology its language, it was the theology of the social gospel that gave King's vision of love its social energy. King regularly referred to his seminary encounter with Walter Rauschenbusch's 1907 work *Christianity and the Social Crisis* as foundational to his view of the social gospel. As he said, "I came early to Walter Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis, which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experiences."⁹⁹ Even so, it was not Rauschenbusch who would help King situate this social responsibility within the framework of love. Indeed, one of the more interesting features of Rauschenbusch's theological project is its relative inattentiveness to love as an animating ideal.

For King, the joining of the theology of the social gospel to theology of love would come through the African-American theologian Howard Thurman (1899–1981). By the time King was at Morehouse and coming into his own intellectually, Howard Thurman was already broadly revered as an African-American intellectual and pastoral leader. Having attended Morehouse himself in the 1920s, where he graduated as valedictorian, Thurman went on to pastor several churches and, in 1932, to become the

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⁹⁹ Martin Luther King, *Stride: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon, 1958), 79. For a more extended treatment of King's relationship to Rauschenbusch, see Chapter Three.

Dean of the Chapel at Howard University. In subsequent years, Thurman's career and interests presaged many of King's own: In 1936, when King was just seven years old, Thurman addressed Morehouse College on the topic of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle against British Imperialism.¹⁰⁰ In 1944, Thurman moved to California to help establish—alongside a white pastor—one of the first deliberately multicultural churches in the United States. Thurman also worked as the dean of the chapel at Boston University during King's years there, serving as a mentor both to King and to some of King's closest friends.

But perhaps Thurman's most important contribution to King's theology of love came in his 1949 publication of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, one of the few books that King carried with him all the time,¹⁰¹ and one that, perhaps more than more than any other, would shape King's social vision. ¹⁰² Originally given in sermon form in 1935 at the School of Theology at Boston University under the title *Good News for the Under Privileged*, this work was driven by a basic, and piercing, question:

The significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall.... The question which individuals and groups who live in our land always under the treat of profound social and psychological pressure face [is]: Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? The question is

¹⁰⁰ King, Stride, 79.

¹⁰¹ A copy of Jesus and the Disinherited was found in King's suitcase on the morning he was murdered

¹⁰² "Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited (1949) was perhaps as important for King as any other intellectual source he studied at Boston. Once King became a Civil Rights leader, he was known to take a copy of the book with him as he moved from airport to airport. Apparently, preacher-intellectuals like Thurman...were a constant and enduring influence on King's thinking regarding the church during his Boston years. They helped assure that the black church would remain a significant frame of reference for King's understanding of what a the church as a whole should be, even as he studied the ecclesiological perspectives reflected in various streams of Western ethics, theology, and philosophy." Baldwin, *Voice of Conscience*, 65.

searching, for the dramatic demonstration of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issue is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship.¹⁰³

In answer to this question, Thurman's work seeks to show Jesus as one who speaks with greatest force precisely to those who are most vulnerable. He does this by showing how Jesus was himself dispossessed, how Jesus speaks to their fears, how Jesus calls them to resist the besetting temptations of the vulnerable—dishonesty and hatred—and finally, how Jesus calls them to turn and face their enemies in love. Importantly, however, Thurman situated his entire project in the framework of love. As he says,

The central emphasis of the teaching of Jesus centers upon the relationship of individual to individual, and of all individuals to God. So profound has been the conviction of Christians as to the ultimate significance of his teaching about love that they have rested their case, both for the validity and the supremacy of the Christian religion, at this point. When someone asked Jesus what is the meaning of tall the law and the prophets, he gave those tremendous words of Judaism, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is One, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy mind, heart, soul, and strength. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Jesus rests his case for the ultimate significance of life on the love ethic.¹⁰⁴

And yet—in a way that would prove crucial both for King's agapic account of the social nature of the gospel and his application of that gospel to the racial struggles of American democracy—Thurman defined this not as a vague wish of the heart for the well-being of another, but as an obligation to labor to secure that well-being in the world.

The religion of Jesus says to the disinherited, "Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common

¹⁰³ Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinberited (Boston: Beacon, 1946), xix.

¹⁰⁴ Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger: Meditations For Apostles Of Sensitiveness (New York: Harper, 1951), 108-109.

sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it." For the Negro it means that he must see the individual white man in the context of a common humanity. The fact that a particular individual is white, and therefore may be regarded in some over-all sense as the racial enemy, must be faced and opportunity must be provided, found, or created for freeing such an individual from his white necessity.¹⁰⁵

"The Selfishness of Men"

The final theological source of King's agapic vision—for our purposes—is the theologically funded political realism of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). Niebuhr began his theological career with a deep commitment to the theology of the social gospel. Indeed it was this commitment that led him to understand his pastoral ministry in Detroit in terms of both personal and public obligation. But over the following years, as he wrestled with both the deep cultural and economic conditions of American culture and the terrible tragedy of the first World War in Europe, Niebuhr began to temper his initial optimism with a more "realistic" view of the social possibilities of redemption.

King first encountered Niebuhr in 1952, while King was a graduate student at Boston University.¹⁰⁶ It was a surprisingly significant moment for King. Like many students of his age, he was profoundly motivated by the social gospel theology of American liberal Protestantism. It was, as we will see, this theology that compelled King to seek the redemption of American democracy for the rest of his life. And yet in Niebuhr, King found a voice of powerfully chastening dissent. For Niebuhr, the social optimism of theological liberalism was predicated upon an atrophied account of the personal and systemic character of sin—and as such was blind to the ways in which those

¹⁰⁵ Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 90.

¹⁰⁶ King, Papers, 2:8, 141-151.

who seek social change are themselves participants in that sin. Thus, in his work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr says,

What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations. Failure to recognize the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought.... They do not see that the limitations of human imagination, the ways of subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end.¹⁰⁷

As a black man from the white supremacist American South, King intuitively recognized the truth of Niebuhr's critique. Because of this, he began immediately to incorporate Niebuhr's theology into his own agapic vision. Thus, in his first seminary essay on Niebuhr, King says this: "[Niebuhr] is right, it seems to me, in insisting that we must be realistic regarding the relativity of every moral and ethical choice. His analysis of the social situation is profound indeed, and with it I would find very little to disagree."¹⁰⁸ Two years later, in a lecture called "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," King echoed this original assessment, saying, "Over and against these [liberal] anthropologies which ... in spite of the inner logic of their assumptions and of the refutations of history persist in falsifying the human situation by false notions of progress and human perfectibility, Niebuhr sets forth the biblical and Christian anthropology."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), xx; cf. also Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 42–47.

¹⁰⁸ King, Papers, 2:150.

¹⁰⁹ King, Papers, 2:272.

It is true, however, that King never fully renounced the agapic compulsions he found in the theology of the social gospel. In both the essay and the lecture mentioned above, King criticized Niebuhr for "the inability of his system to deal adequately with … how the immanence of Agape is to be concretely conceived in human nature and history" and for failing "to see that the availability of divined Agape is an essential affirmation of the Christian religion."¹¹⁰ And yet—as we will see—King forever tempered the agapic energy of the social gospel with the wisdom of Niebuhr's constraint.¹¹¹

More could be said about the sources of King's theology of love, of course, and will be said in the chapters to come. But in my view it is these sources—the *family*, the *agapic tradition*, the *social gospel*, and *Niebubrian realism*—that most powerfully informed the theology of love that King voiced on that violent night in Montgomery, and for thousands of nights to follow.

THE SHAPE OF LOVE

That said, this understanding of the sources of King's theology of love yields an incomplete picture. One reason for this—as I said above—is that King's theology was not merely reiterative, it was *improvisational*: Having received these theological sources, King fashioned them into an agapic theology that was his own. But perhaps a more important reason for this is that King's struggle to fashion a theology of love was not first a philosophical act, but a *public* act—a struggle undertaken in the midst of and in response to the crisis of American democratic imagination. Because of this, understanding King's theology of love requires us to attend not only—perhaps not even primarily—to its

¹¹⁰ King, Papers, 2:150.

¹¹¹ For a more extended treatment of King's relationship to Niebuhr, see Chapters Three and Four.

sources, but to the shape it took in the world. For it is here—not in its systematic formulation, but in its lived application—that the meaning of King's agapic vision is most clearly beheld.¹¹²

In one respect, this public and applied character of King's theology of love gives it an inherently unstable quality. Indeed, throughout his life—in his sermons, speeches, and writings—King inflected agape with many meanings. At times, agape was a personal posture: "an inner attitude," an "understanding good will," an overflowing "compassion," and a "refusal to humiliate." At other times it was a social tool: a "weapon," "a durable power," "a soul force," "a potent instrument for social and collective transformation." Still at other times, it was a claim about the character of reality: love is "the heartbeat of the moral cosmos," "the highest good," the trajectory of the "arc of the universe," and the guarantee of "a new dawn." And characteristically, King emphasized some of these over others according to the needs of the moment. And yet even so, a careful study of the function of agape in King's public imagination suggests that for King, *agape* must finally be understood in three ways: as recognition, obligation, and expectation.

Agapic Recognition

First, agape entails the *recognition* of the worth of another. Martin Luther King believed that human beings were made by the love of God, in the image of God, and for

¹¹² It is therefore no coincidence that King's longest reflection on the meaning of love comes in the midst of a reflection on the meaning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Cf. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 92-95. On this approach of understanding theology through its lived application, cf. Charles Marsh's Project on Lived Theology at the University of Virginia: "the patterns and practices of religious communities offer rich and generative material for theological inquiry. These patterns and practices are not just ways of 'doing things'...they are also ways of 'saying things': practices and patterns are 'communicative.''' http://www.livedtheology.org/overview.

a relationship with God. And he also believed that even though human beings have—in sin—rejected God's love, disfigured this image, and broken this relationship, the dignity that comes from God's love remains.¹¹³ Because of this, King viewed the first act of love as that of recognition—the act of willfully seeing the worth of all human beings.

This insistence on worth was at the heart of King's ministry to African Americans; he wanted them to know that in spite of centuries of degradation, they remained creatures of worth. As he says,

During the years of slavery in America it is said that after a hard day's work the slaves would often hold secret religious meetings. All during the working day they were addressed with unnecessary vituperations and insulting epithets. But as they gathered in these meetings they gained a renewed faith as the old unlettered minister would come to his triumphant climax saying, you—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God's children. This established for them a true ground of personal dignity....¹¹⁴

But King's conviction of dignity was not simply reserved for African Americans. Perhaps even more potently, he insisted that *all* human beings—even those who oppress—are to be viewed with the eyes of agapic recognition. As King says,

When you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls the 'image of God,' you begin to love him.... No matter what he does, you see God's image there. And there is an element of goodness that he can never slough off. Discover the element of good in your enemy. And as find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude ... when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men not because they are likable, but because God loves them. You look at every man and you love him because you know God loves him.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ For more on King's theological account of human beings see Chapter Two.

¹¹⁴ King, Papers, 1:281.

¹¹⁵ King, Papers, 4:318-319.

As we will see in Chapter Two, it was this call to agapic recognition that led King to the work of re-imagining democratic identity. Rejecting both the identity of racial supremacy in which human beings were understood in fundamentally racial terms, and the identity of liberal equality in which human beings were understood in fundamentally civic terms, King fashioned an identity of agapic brotherhood in which human beings were understood in the fundamentally theological terms of the love of God. King's first call of love—and the first call of life together—is the call to *agapic recognition*.

Agapic Obligation

Secondly, agape entails the obligation to work for the good of another. Martin Luther King believed that God not only created human beings, but that He also because He loves humanity—desires their good. And he also believed that though human beings—through both personal and systemic sin—bring harm to themselves and to one another, God's desire for the good of His creatures remains.¹¹⁶ Because of this, for King, love means not simply seeing one another's work, but also laboring for one another's flourishing in every respect.

At times, this agapic obligation took the form of *compulsion*—of an undeniable call to seek the good of both one's self and one's neighbors. Indeed, this was the essence of King's vision of direct action. In his words,

Agape says that you must go on with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, but you must keep moving. We have a great opportunity in America to build here a great nation, a nation where all men live together as brothers and respect the

¹¹⁶ For more on King's theological account of human flourishing see Chapter Three.

dignity and worth of all human personality. We must keep moving toward that goal.¹¹⁷

At other times, this agapic obligation took the form of *constraint*—of a self-denying call to renounce those actions that threaten the good of another. This was the essence of King's vision of non-violence: "Our aim must not be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must never become bitter nor should we succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, for if this happens, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness."¹¹⁸ But at all times, King's vision of obligation was governed by love.

As we will see in Chapter Three, the call to agapic obligation led King to the work of re-imagining democratic action. Rejecting the sufficiency of both the radicalist tradition, which above all seeks the realization of transcendent ideals, and the gradualist tradition, which above all seeks the preservation of social order, King fashioned a vision of democratic action, which above all seeks the good of one's neighbors.

Agapic Expectation

Finally, agape entails a mature form of *expectation*, a nurtured and grounded hope that our labors toward the common good are not in vain. Martin Luther King believed that God's purposes for the world were not merely impotent intentions subject to the whims of the present age, but sovereign promises determining the character of the age to come. And he also believed that because of the sinfulness of the world, the struggle to realize these promises inevitably entailed suffering. And yet even so, King believed that—

¹¹⁷ King, Testament, 14.

¹¹⁸ King, Papers, 5:504.

perhaps in and through this suffering—God would keep his promises to His people.¹¹⁹ Because of this, King understood agape not *only* as recognition and obligation, but also as expectation—as a form of realistic but ineradicable hope.

In one respect, King's notion of expectation was a claim about the meaning of the present—that because of the reality of sin, the labors of love were marked with pain. This is why he constantly encouraged his people to expect suffering:

You better get ready for stiff backs. You better get ready for some homes to be bombed. You better get ready for some churches to be bombed. You better get ready for a lot of nasty things to be said about you, because you getting out of Egypt. And whenever you break loose from Egypt, the initial response of the Egyptian is bitterness...Freedom never comes easy. It comes through hard labor and it comes through toil. It comes through hours of despair and disappointment. And that's the way it goes. There is no crown without a cross.¹²⁰

And yet in another respect, King's agapic expectation was a claim about the nature of the future; that the sufferings of this world would—by God's power—lead to the realization of the kingdom of God. And this is why he constantly exhorted his people to expect the triumph of redemption.

Evil in the form of injustice and exploitation cannot survive. There is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil. This is our hope ... God has a great plan for this world. His purpose is to achieve a world where all men will live together as brothers, and where every man recognizes the dignity and worth of all human personality. He is seeking at every moment of his existence to lift men from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, and finally to the promised land of personal and social integration. May it not be that this is entirely within the realm of possibility? I prefer to live by the faith that the kingdoms of this world shall

¹¹⁹ For more on King's theological account of redemptive suffering see Chapter Four.

¹²⁰ King, Papers, 4:163.

become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.¹²¹

As we will see in Chapter Four, it was this notion of agapic expectation that led King to the work of re-imagining democratic possibility. Doing so brought him into direct conflict with the dominant accounts of democratic possibility in his time. On one hand, some understood democratic possibility in utopian terms—seeing within it the possibility for the democratic redemption of the world. Others understood democratic possibility in cynical terms—believing that because of the profound corruptions of the social order, democracy could finally aspire to little more than the containment of violence by means of violence itself.

King saw both of these as forms of false closure: one expecting too much, the other too little. In his view, to simply claim the inevitable progress of democracy—as so many white liberals seemed to do—was to deny the reality of the suffering that such progress demands. Likewise, to simply assume the inevitable devolution of the world into a contest of power was—for all of its alleged realism—an abandonment of hope and a guarantee of a future of endless misery. In their place, King fashioned a form of agapic expectation that, while keenly aware of the suffering inherent in social change, was also deeply committed to the fact that in the end "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."¹²²

In its essence then, King's improvisational theology of love is best understood as a threefold agapic movement: First, as *recognition*—the commitment to see the dignity of all

¹²¹ King, Papers, 3:262.

¹²² From "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," in King, Testament of Hope, 226.

human beings; secondly, as *obligation*—the responsibility to labor for the good of all human beings; and finally, as *expectation*—the simultaneously realist and redemptive hope that in the end, these labors are not in vain. This is the theology that King gleaned from his family, the agapic tradition, the theology of the social gospel, and the theologically funded political realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. And this is the theology with which King improvised on his inheritance and re-imagined American democratic life.

D. "A More Excellent Way:" King's Theological Re-imagining of Democracy

My intention in this chapter has been to illumine the character of King's distinctively theological democratic imagination. To that end, I have suggested that his democratic vision is best understood in terms of both his African-American democratic inheritance and his own theological improvisation. Furthermore, I have argued that the essence of this theological improvisation was a powerful theology of love. Because of these things, I believe that Martin Luther King's public ministry is best understood not simply as a religiously accented expression of a more fundamental democratic vision, but that his democratic vision was an expression of a more fundamental theology of love; that when he stepped out onto the porch of his bombed house that evening in Montgomery in 1956 and spoke of love, he was inviting his fellow citizens to re-imagine the very shape of American democracy.

In the following chapters, I intend to substantiate this belief by demonstrating how King's theology of love served as the basis for his re-imagining of three of the most important aspects of democratic life: the identity of democratic citizens, the character of democratic action, and the scope of democratic possibility. For it is here—in these discrete spheres of democratic life—that we see how, in the midst of all of the competing democratic imaginations of the American civil rights movement, and in all the possible ways that American democracy could still go, King's public theology of love offers a still more excellent way.
Chapter Two

All God's Children: Re-imagining Democratic Identity

"The question, 'What is man?' is one of the most important questions confronting any generation. The whole political, social, and economic structure of a society is largely determined by its answer to this pressing question. Indeed, the conflict which we witness in the world today between totalitarianism and democracy is at bottom a conflict over the question, 'What is man?'" Martin Luther King, 1958

A. "The Darkest Hour Before the Dawn:" The Conflict of Democratic Identity

On November 14,1956—nearly eleven months after his home was bombed— Martin Luther King Jr. sat at a defendant's table at the front of a Montgomery, Alabama courtroom and listened as his adversaries tried to do through law what they had failed to do through violence: end the bus boycott and force African Americans back into their rightful place as second-class citizens. It had been a long and tedious year. Following the dramatic bombing of his home, the dehumanizing hostilities of Montgomery's white supremacists began to take on a more mundane shape. This is, in part, a testimony to the power of King's words that evening. When he stood on his ruined porch and spoke of love, he not only summoned the moral resources of his people, he also exposed the moral poverty of his enemies. Such exposure, especially in the context of a "Christian" South that viewed itself as a defender of truth, had the inevitable effect of driving the most radical of his adversaries underground. But this mundaneness was in part a testimony to

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his enemies' calculation. Loath to be shamed in the eyes of the nation—especially by a "nigger"—King's adversaries turned to subtler strategies of dehumanization.

THE ASSAULT ON DEMOCRATIC IDENTITY

Private Terror

The first of these was private terror. One of the dark marvels of Southern white supremacy is how long it was able to persist, given the degree to which blacks outnumbered whites. One of the secrets to this persistence, however, was secrecy itself. From the earliest days of slavery, Southern whites, aware of the fragility of their dominance, used strategies of private terror to dehumanize and control the blacks around them. Initially, these strategies included abduction, hidden sexual assault, secret acts of violence and murder, and the creation of a social structure in which such acts were flatly denied. After the humiliations of the Civil War, however, each of these strategies found focused form in the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Concealed by white hoods and dark nights, these "knights" of the Southern order—numbering between three and six million at their peak in the 1920s—terrorized the dreams of black communities with burned crosses, burned churches, and burned bodies. These offenses were charred reminders of the subhuman status African Americans held in the Southern order. These warnings were not idle. From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, lynch mobs killed thousands of Southern blacks with impunity, and thousands more disappeared into the fields, forests, and hidden mines of the convict leasing system.¹

It was this impulse to dehumanize through private terror that led King's assailants to bomb his home under cover of darkness. And when he spoke to them unabashedly from the remains of his home, it was this impulse that drove them to give that terror a subtler shape. Initially this terror took the form of anonymous phone calls to the King home. Occasional at first, these calls eventually increased to thirty or forty per day, each marked with the same malice or contempt: "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery."² As King recalls, "The telephone rang all day and most of the night. A large percentage of the calls had sexual themes. One woman, whose voice I soon came to recognize, telephoned day after day to hurl her sexual accusations at the Negro."³ In time, anonymous notes to King's home came as well. King recalled that postcards were signed "KKK" and warned him to

¹ Amy Louise Wood, Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence In America, 1890-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching In the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 8, 259.

On the history of lynching in America, cf. also Douglas Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II; Stewart Emory Tolnay and E. M. Beck, A Festival of Violence : an Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Christopher Waldrep, The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment In America (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Jonathan Markovitz, Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Michael J. Pfeifer, Rough Justice : Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

On the convict leasing system, cf. Alexander C. Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: the Political Economy* of Convict Labor In the New South (London: Verso, 1996); Matthew J. Mancini, One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing In the American South, 1866-1928, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Blackmon, Slavery; Milfred C. Fierce, Slavery Revisited : Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933 (Brooklyn, NY: Africana Studies Research Center, 1994).

² Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years: 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 162.

³ King, Stride, 123.

"get out of town or else."⁴ Others were "misspelled and crudely written letters [that] presented religious half-truths to prove that 'God do not intend the White People and the Negro to go to gather if he did we would be the same' [and many] ... were unprintable catalogues of blasphemy and obscenity."⁵

Lending sinister force to the calls and the notes were an endless parade of rumors coming to King through friends, claiming that the threats were reliable. As King remembered, "One day a white friend told me that he had heard from reliable sources that plans were being made to take my life. For the first time I realized that something could happen to me ... Almost every day someone warned me that he had overheard white men making plans to get rid of me."⁶ Each of these acts was an expression of the long-held Southern strategy of enslavement through psychological terror. In time, King himself began to feel the weight of the chains. "Almost every night I went to bed faced with the uncertainty of the next moment. In the morning I would look at Coretta and 'Yoki' and say to myself, 'I can be taken away from them at any moment'.... It seemed all my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point."⁷

Public Theater

Saturated though he was, King was forced to contend with another Southern strategy of dehumanization—that of public theater. One of the most ingenious perversities of Southern white supremacy was the extremity to which its stewards were prepared to go to cloak the horrors of its dehumanization behind a façade of virtue. As

⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁷ King, Stride, 124.

we will see below, this façade was theological for some—fashioned of textual claims about the divinely ordered inferiority of blacks, and of ethical obligations for whites to keep these dark children in a social space reflective of this divine order.⁸ Others constructed a scientific façade for their dehumanization of African Americans, combining philosophical notions of a "chain of being" to emerging evolutionary theories that allegedly demonstrated black inferiority.⁹

By the time Martin Luther King Jr. was pastoring in Montgomery in 1954, however, these façades—though still widely held in private—were rarely used in public.¹⁰ Their lack of broad support within the disciplines from which they emerged, and lack of resonance with larger American mores, made them risky foundations for Southern respectability. Because of this, Southerners began to construct a legal façade—an attempt to assault the humanity of African Americans not through theology or science, but through law. At the broadest level, this Southern legal appeal anchored itself in the longstanding anti-federalist tradition of American democracy.

From this perspective, Southern resistance to Federal intervention in institutions such as slavery, schools, buses, and storefronts was based not on the myth of black inferiority per se, but on the principle of state sovereignty. This form of argument, whatever its intrinsic merits, had the advantage of allowing the advocates of the Southern order to conceal their commitment to African-American subjugation within a more broadly palatable commitment to states' rights. However plausible such an argument may

⁸ Cf. David Brion Davis, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56, 64-70.

⁹ Cf. Davis, Inhuman, 73-76. More on this scientific façade below.

¹⁰ On this shift, cf. Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and David Chappell, *Stone of Hope* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

have seemed to the broader American public, its application in the South revealed its true character. Freed from the threat of Federal intervention, the Southern criminal justice system became the primary vehicle for African-American dehumanization.¹¹

For King—and for many of his colleagues in the Montgomery movement—this dehumanization initially expressed itself in the constant threat of arbitrary arrest. King recounted seeing his people subjected to "a series of arrests for minor and often imaginary traffic violations. People who had never received a ticket were booked and on several occasions taken to jail. Negro drivers in the car pool were stopped throughout the city and questioned about their licenses, their insurance, their place of work."¹² King's account of his own arrest, after picking up several boycott members from a city parking lot, is illustrative of the larger pattern:

I picked up three passengers and drove to the edge of the lot, where I was stopped by [an officer]. While he was asking me to see my license and questioning me concerning the ownership of the car, I heard a policeman across the street say, "That's that damn King fellow." Leaving the lot, I noticed two motorcycle policemen behind me ... Slowly and meticulously I drove toward home with the motorcycle [officer] behind me. Finally, as I stopped to let [my] three passengers out, the policeman pulled up and said, "Get out, King. You are under arrest for speeding thirty miles an hour in a twenty five mile zone" ... Soon a patrol car came, two policeman got out and searched me from top to bottom, and drove off ... After depositing my things and giving the jailer the desired information, I was led to a dingy and odorous cell. As the big iron door swung open, the jailer said to me, "All right, get on in there with all the others." For a moment, strange gusts of emotion swept through me like cold winds on an open prairie. For the first time in my life, I had been thrown behind bars.¹³

¹¹ More on the use of law as a tool for African-American dehumanization below.

¹² King, Stride, 116.

¹³ King, Stride, 118-119.

This first time, however, was not the last. After this, the arrests only continued both for King and for large numbers of his fellow laborers. Reflecting the long Southern tradition of arbitrary arrest, the charges against them ranged from vagrancy to disorderly conduct to conspiracy to boycott, but they all understood that their actual crime was having been born black.¹⁴

Even so, the strategy of arbitrary arrest had to be applied carefully. The Federal investigations into Southern convict leasing and peonage in the early twentieth century reminded Southerners that their capacity to arrest and imprison American citizens—even citizens of color—had a limit. Because of this, the primary legal expression of Southern resistance to black humanity was endless litigation. This strategy was fairly straightforward: make the costs of change high enough, the timetable of change long enough, and the process of change wearying enough, and change would fail. It was not an altogether foolish approach. As veterans of African-American political activism well knew, it was precisely this strategy that enabled the architects of the post-reconstruction Jim Crow South to systematically undermine the meaning of virtually every Civil Rights law of the 19th century.¹⁵ Because of this, African-American activists knew that if racial progress would ever come to the South, it would eventually have to come through litigation.¹⁶

¹⁴ "As I look at it, I guess I have committed three sins. The first sin I have committed is being born a Negro. The second sin that I have committed, along with all of us, is being subjected to the battering rams of segregation and oppression. The third and more basic sin which all of us have committed is the sin of having the moral courage to stand up and express our weariness of this oppression." King, *Papers*, 3:199. ¹⁵ On this long strategy of litigation see Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: the Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ This is why, since its founding in 1910, the legal activists of the NAACP had been almost wholly given to the work of countering the endless stream white supremacist litigation on matters ranging from zoning laws

It was this strategy of endless litigation that led Martin Luther King, on that November morning, to the courtroom in Montgomery. There, he listened as his opponents sought, once again, to mire the processes of racial progress in countervailing processes of trial and appeal. This time, the issue before the court was the legality of the boycott's share-a-ride cooperative. City attorneys claimed that the system functioned as an unlicensed private enterprise set up to compete with the legitimate tax-paying transportation systems the city of Montgomery had in place. As evidence, they produced a surprise witness from the bank who testified that the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) had nearly \$200,000 saved in an account there. In the minds of the city attorneys, this was evidence that the ride share was in truth a for-profit transportation business and that as such it ought to be brought under the control of the city or banned by injunction. Furthermore, the attorneys argued for a \$15,000 fine to be applied toward back taxes. Whatever the merits of the argument, the message to the African-American community was clear: the white citizens of Montgomery will never let you rest.

If, as King sat and listened to these arguments, he had looked back over the boycott of the past year, he would have had much with which to be proud. For 11 months, in the face of private terror and public theater, his people had persisted in their cause. When the bus line refused to integrate, they organized and funded their own transportation system. When a court injunction declared that system illegal, they walked. When they were subjected to arbitrary arrest, they complied. When convicted of crimes,

to employment practices, to voting rights, to school segregation. On this counter-strategy to Southern litigation, cf. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*.

they submitted. When white policemen lingered in the back of their mass meetings, they greeted them by name from the pulpit and invited them to come in and have a seat. When state attorneys sought to thwart them with charges and then with appeals, they met those challenges head-on. And they did so for nearly a year.

But even so, after a year there was little tangible progress to show. The buses weren't integrated. The private terror continued. The public theater of litigation dragged interminably on. And now, by stopping the transportation system that was the boycott's lifeblood, it appeared that King's opponents might finally succeed in their effort to end the boycott altogether. This appearance was so strong that the night before the hearing, King reluctantly went to a mass meeting and warned the people that they were likely to lose their transportation system and with it, perhaps, the boycott itself.

I knew that they had willingly suffered for nearly twelve months, but how could they function at all with the carpool destroyed? Could we ask them to walk every day back and forth to their jobs? And if not, would we then be forced to admit that the protest had failed in the end? For the first time in our long struggle together, I almost shrank from appearing before them. The evening came, and I mustered up enough courage to tell them the truth. I tried, however, to end on a note of hope. "This may well be," I said, "the darkest hour before the dawn."¹⁷

While King spoke these words in desperation and left the meeting in "a cloud of uncertainty," he had no idea how right they would prove to be. The next morning, as King and his legal team sat morosely at the front of that Montgomery courtroom, a reporter excitedly passed him a note that told him that mere moments before, the United States Supreme Court had declared Alabama's laws requiring the segregation of buses unconstitutional. And just like that, it was over. With the Supreme Court's decision, the

¹⁷ King, Stride, 151.

African Americans of Montgomery had accomplished what only hours before—minutes before—had seemed impossible: They had challenged the segregationist order of Alabama, and they had won. King's account of the moment bears full quotation:

As chief defendant I sat at the front table with the prosecuting and federal defense attorneys. Around twelve o'clock-during a brief recess-I noticed unusual commotion in the courtroom. Both Commissioner Sellers and Mayor Gayle were called to a back room, followed by two of the city attorneys. Several reporters moved excitedly in and out of the room. I turned to Fred Gray and Peter Hall and said, "Something is wrong." Before I could fully get these words out, Rex Thomas—a reporter for the Associated Press—came up to me with a paper in his hand. "Here is the decision that you have been waiting for. Read this release." Quickly, with a mixture of anxiety and hope, I read these words: "The United States Supreme Court today affirmed a decision of a special three-judge panel in declaring Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional." The Supreme Court acted without listening to any argument, it simply said "the motion to affirm is granted and the judgment is affirmed." At that moment my heart began to throb with an inexpressible joy. The darkest hour of our struggle had indeed proved to be our first hour of victory. At once I told the news to the attorneys at the table. Then I rushed to the back of the room to tell my wife, Ralph Abernathy, and E.D Nixon. Soon the word had spread to the whole courtroom. The faces of the Negroes showed that they had heard. "God Almighty has spoken from Washington D.C.!" said one joyful bystander.¹⁸

Although the implementation of this victory would take another month, its impact on both white and black Montgomery alike was immediate. White Montgomery took recourse to its familiar strategies. Local radio announcers solemnly proclaimed that a Klan parade would be held that evening on the streets of black neighborhoods. Muffled calls breathing threats of bombs and violence rang the telephones of black homes. The work of private terror was renewed in earnest; and in public, the leaders of white Montgomery recommitted themselves to the work of public theater. As King recalls, "the immediate response of some influential white people was to scoff at the court decision

¹⁸ Ibid., 152-153. See also Branch, Parting, 193.

and to announce that it would never be put into effect. One pro-segregationist said, 'We are prepared for a century of litigation.'"¹⁹

For black Montgomery, however, it was a new day. Nearly a year earlier, African Americans in Montgomery—of their own initiative and with their own resources—had challenged segregation in the very heart of the former confederacy. During the following months of private terror and public theater, they had articulated their cause with power, carried it out with skill, borne its afflictions with character, and had realized its aims with finality. And they knew it. The excited outbursts in the courtroom—excitement that took the judge several minutes to subdue with a gavel—suggested that for African Americans, the curtain had fallen on the public theater of Southern white supremacy. The strategy of private terror fared no better. When the African-American community learned of the impending Klan parade, King recounts,

We decided that we would not react as we had done too often in the past. We would not go into our houses, close the doors, pull the shades, or turn off the lights. Instead we would greet them as any other parade. When the Klan arrived—according to the newspapers 'about forty carloads of robed and hooded members'—porch lights were on and doors open. The Negro people had gathered courage. As the Klan drove by, people behaved much as if they were watching the advance contingent for the Ringling Brothers Circus.... Many walked about as usual; some simply watched; others relaxed on their stoops; a few waved as the cars passed by. This required tremendous effort, but the Klan was so nonplussed that after a few short blocks it turned off into a side street and disappeared into the night.²⁰

These instances of laughter before a white judge and leisure before a white parade—these rare expressions of unabashed black personhood—are incredibly

¹⁹ King, Papers, 3:447.

²⁰ King, Papers, 3:447.

important. This is because they reveal that the African-American community intuitively grasped the essential meaning of the day's events. They understood that the Supreme Court decision of November 13, 1956 meant more than the reconfiguration of their transportation practices; it constituted a recognition of their *personhood*. In spite of the relentless campaign of private terror and public theater, a campaign deliberately construed to deny their humanity, this humanity had prevailed. The voices of the black community of Montgomery, Alabama, had cried out, and the Supreme Court of the United States had answered them. This call and response—a powerful liturgy of democratic identity—unmasked both the frail illusion of white supremacy and the fiction of black inferiority upon which it was built. The court decision, in other words, was a statement not just about where African Americans could sit, but about *who* African Americans were. King had said it: A new day had dawned, and in its light African Americans saw both themselves and their oppressors with new eyes.²¹

The Centrality of Democratic Identity

In truth, the experiment of American democracy was always about identity—even during its colonial beginnings. In the years following the costly Seven Years' War of the mid-18th century, the British Parliament sought to generate revenue by increasing taxation on their American colonies. From the British perspective, these acts of taxation were simply extensions of Parliament's natural authority over the colonies, measures necessary

²¹ On the Montgomery Bus Boycott, cf. Ch 5 in Branch, Parting, 143–205; Stewart Burns, Daybreak of Freedom: the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Cheryl Fisher Phibbs, The Montgomery Bus Boycott: A History and Reference Guide (Portsmouth, NH: Greenwood, 2009); David J. Garrow, The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub., 1989); Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw, The Thunder of Angels: the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2006).

for the economic integrity of the British Empire. From the colonial perspective, however, these acts—especially absent of due representation—constituted an assault on the integrity of persons. That this is so may be seen in the words the colonial leaders famously used to defend their decision to dissolve their political bonds with England and to seek independent existence:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them to another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men...²²

In these words, the founders of American democracy defended their revolutionary actions to the world not on economic grounds, not even on political grounds, but on more fundamental *anthropological* grounds. That is, they claimed something intrinsic to persons that entitles them to live freely and to the end of their own happiness. And furthermore, they claimed that the purpose of political order is to secure the free exercise of these entitlements. The system of American democracy, in other words, was born of a particular vision of human identity.²³

In the following years, the shape of this new democratic polity would reveal the prejudices buried within this vision. Political leadership was tied to land ownership, as was suffrage. Each of these was restricted to men and, by default, to white men. The

²² Declaration of Independence (1776).

²³ By human identity, I mean a vision of what human beings, fundamentally, are.

rights of women were undefined. Slavery was unaddressed. In the larger context of 18thcentury European cultural mores, these early decisions about democratic form are not surprising. But even so, the tension between the anthropological principle of democracy and the actual practice of democracy had sown the seeds of a crisis—the crisis of democratic identity.²⁴

At the heart of this crisis stood a basic question: Who counts as one of those "created equal," and "endowed with unalienable rights?" Or, to put it another way: Whose "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" is it, exactly, that American democracy exists to secure? At the time of the American founding, the answers to these questions were not entirely clear. Even then, deep differences existed regarding the democratic status of landed British loyalists, landless tradesmen, assimilated Native Americans, and women. But these differences were largely sublimated in the interest of the founding itself. In the travails of revolution, the chief goal was to achieve the rudiments of a democratic American identity. The work of specifying the precise meaning of that identity would have to wait.

From one perspective, the history of American democracy is the history of this work of specification. In fact, many of the greatest crises in American life have centered on the nature of democratic identity. The early Federalist debates, the pursuit of American Expansion, the forced migration of Native Americans, the struggle for female suffrage, the Civil War itself—each of these was, at some level, a struggle to re-imagine

²⁴ On the passage of the Missouri Compromise (1820), which allowed Southern slavery to survive for another 40 years, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "I considered it at once as the knell of the Union...I regret that I am to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of '76, to acquire self government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it." Jefferson, letter to John Holmes, 22 April 1820.

the meaning of democratic identity, to give the principle of equality integral political form. This is, perhaps, the most enduring legacy of the American founders: because of their famous words, the meaning of independence could not be understood apart from the meaning of individuals, nor the structures of politics apart from the substance of persons. The struggle for democratic identity is, in a sense, the most fundamental American struggle.

But even so, this struggle has been singularly terrible for African Americans. This, as we will see below, is due in part to the fact that the majority of Africans arrived in the Americas under the conditions of slavery, an institution that assumes—and calculatingly reinforces—the inhumanity of the slave.²⁵ But, as we will also see, it is also due in part to a sustained, multi-faceted, institutionally embodied, and violently enforced American commitment to the denial of black personhood. And while this commitment has not been shared by all Americans, and has been contested in nearly every era of American life, it has nonetheless been an incredibly powerful, and in time perilous, force in American democracy.²⁶ Indeed, this commitment to the denial of black personhood gained a measure of public and political recognition—for example after the Revolutionary and Civil Wars—proved revisable under its force. The implication of this is that no matter how strong their

²⁵ On the relationship between slavery and inhumanity see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*. More on this below.

²⁶ "For American rebels, a bold affirmation that all men are created equal seemed necessary justification for waging a fratricidal war against their sovereign, little realizing apparently that those words would come back to haunt the nation ever after. Keen to the demands of personal honor as well perhaps, some of the most gifted orators of the independence had raised the rhetorical stakes of the conflict to befit the boldness of the step they now championed, seemingly oblivious all the while to the ironies of their personal situation as owners of property in human beings." Holt, *Children of Fire*, 104.

personal sense of identity, the *democratic* identity of African Americans—their place in the polity of equal creation and unalienable rights—was never truly stable, never finally resolved.

This background provides an important framework for understanding what had and what had not—been accomplished by the Supreme Court's decision on that November morning. At the most formal level, the court's ruling simply meant that the state of Alabama could no longer require segregated seating on public buses. Informally, however, as everyone knew, the court's ruling was an implicit rejection of the antidemocratic structure of the Southern order and an implicit recognition of the democratic claims of African Americans. These gains were indeed cause for celebration.

But what the court did not do—did not even attempt to do—was articulate a vision of African-American democratic identity. Indeed, as subsequent events would demonstrate, it was not at all clear that the court's ruling would have any bearing on African Americans with respect to lunch counters, racist zoning ordinances, or employment practices. It simply stated that they could ride the bus in the same way as anyone else. And while this statement did indeed suggest a small reconfiguration of civic life for whites and blacks alike, the more fundamental question regarding the nature of democratic identity remained unanswered. If the order of white supremacy—an order that named some men "nigger" and other men "Sir"—was fading away, how were African Americans to understand themselves? How were they to understand their neighbors? How were they to understand their enemies? Even as the African-American community in Montgomery laughed in the courtroom, lounged on their porches, and rejoiced in King's new dawn, these questions bore in upon them. Though the struggle of the boycott was

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behind, a larger and even more fundamental struggle lay ahead: the struggle to re-imagine democratic identity.

B. "There's a Danger Here:" Identities of Racial Supremacy and Liberal Equality

The evening after the Supreme Court's ruling in November 1956, King and the other leaders of the MIA-in anticipation of huge crowds-planned two nearly simultaneous mass meetings at Hutchinson Street and Holt Street Baptist churches. The stated purpose of these meetings was for the African-American community to vote formally to end the boycott and return to the buses upon Montgomery's implementation of the court's decision. As the MIA leaders had suspected, the meetings were packed with nearly 4,000 people each.²⁷ Each meeting followed the same pattern: welcome, hymn, Scripture reading, and finally, an address from King himself. King's address was, for many, the climax of the long struggle. For the past year, he had been their leader. They had watched him take his first unexpected steps into public leadership, watched him struggle under its weight, and heard him articulate their struggle with an almost unbelievable power. They had, in some ways, watched Martin Luther King become a man. Because of this, when he arrived at the second mass meeting-already in progress at Holt Street—his arrival ignited a standing ovation that could only be quieted by the reading of Scripture.²⁸ After the reading, King stepped into the pulpit. It was the moment they had been waiting for.

²⁷ Branch, Parting, 194.

²⁸ Branch, Parting, 194.

I'm so happy to see you here this evening in such large numbers and such great enthusiasm. It reveals to all of us that after eleven months, you are not tired [Audience:] (no) and that you are still determined to struggle and sacrifice for the great cause of justice. (Yes)... I have a message, a statement rather, that I would like to read to you, that I tried to put together and express a recommendation or two that we have from the executive board. After reading this statement, I will have you vote on the recommendations.... The Executive Board of the Montgomery Improvement Association recommends that the eleven-month-old protest against the city buses will be called off, and that the Negro citizens of Montgomery, Alabama will return to the buses on a non-segregated basis. (Yes!) [applause]...It is further recommended that this return to the buses will not take place until the mandate from the United States Supreme Court is turned over to the federal district court.... Now we are ready to vote. All in favor of the motion let it be known by standing. It seems that this is a unanimous, that this is unanimously carried, so that you accept the motion.²⁹

The formality, one might even say mundaneness, of these early words is important. It suggests a growing sense of agency, a comfort with the ability—through simply speaking, standing, and voting—to express one's intentions in the world, even in the white world. The power of this sense of agency for African Americans living in the South is nearly impossible to overstate. Indeed, as King later noted, these actions suggested that after nearly a year of struggle, "the people knew that they had come of age."³⁰ These early moments of King's address gave his people the opportunity to recognize this fact.

But King went on. Having given his people the opportunity to express themselves, he now sought to help them understand themselves. And not only themselves, but also their neighbors. And not only their neighbors, but also their enemies. He sought, in the first hours of this "new dawn," to help them re-imagine the meaning of democratic identity. He was wise to do so. Even the most prodigious

²⁹ King, Papers, 3:425-426.

³⁰ King, Papers, 3:446.

imaginations have an apostolic quality; they receive what has been handed down and struggle to make of it what they can. So it was with the African-American community of Montgomery. As they turned to the work of re-imagining democratic identity, they would inevitably do so with tools that had been given to them, with patterns of identity long handed down. But for King this was not enough. He knew—too well—that these received patterns of identity had never really allowed African Americans to truly experience "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He knew that there had been other dawns, but that in time the "long night of captivity" had returned. He knew that though there was hope in the room that evening, there was, as he said, "a danger here" too³¹. And so as King looked over the faces that night, he began the work of resisting these received traditions of identity and replacing them with something new.

The Identity of Racial Supremacy

The first tradition King resisted was the identity of racial supremacy. As the name suggests, this anthropological tradition is defined by two claims. First, that the foundational feature of human beings is their race; and second, that not all races are of equivalent value. As we will see below, the process of identifying relevant characteristics of race and corresponding criteria has a variable history. But the logic of racial supremacy itself does not. J. Kameron Carter has argued persuasively that "race" in the sense that it came to be employed in America—as a *definitional and value-conferring* quality—has its origins in early Christians' struggles to distinguish themselves from Jews.

³¹ King, Papers, 3:431

Modernity's racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity's quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots. This severance was carried out in two distinct but integrated steps. First, Jews were cast as a race group in contrast to Western Christians, who...were also subtly and simultaneously cast as a race group. The Jews were the mirror in which the European and eventually the Euro-American Occident could religiously and thus racially conceive itself through the difference of Orientalism. In this way, Western culture began to articulate itself...through the medium of a racial imagination. Second, having racialized Jews as a people of the Orient and thus Judaism as a "religion" of the East, Jews were then deemed inferior to the Christians of the Occident or the West. Hence the racial imagination (the first step) proved as well to be a racist imagination of white supremacy (the second step). Within the gulf enacted between Christianity and the Jews, the racial, which proves to be a racist, imagination was forged.³²

In Carter's account, early identities of racial supremacy had two functions: to provide a coherent identity for a disaggregated population ("Western Christians") by distinguishing them from a minority community (Jews), and to confer value on that population by correspondingly devaluing its minority rival.

The similarity of these early expressions of racial supremacy to the expressions found in the Americas centuries later is not coincidental. Indeed it was this very racial imagination that was transplanted from Europe to the new world. It was, in a sense, the new world's original import. Over the centuries, as it was reinforced in speeches and sermons, through law and through lash, at supper tables and at communion tables, this imported identity of racial supremacy became America's most basic anthropological assumption. So basic, in fact, that even as the African Americans in Montgomery sat and listened to King on that November evening, this fundamentally racial understanding of human beings was the one with which they were most deeply familiar. Because of this, King engaged this tradition directly.

³² J. Kameron Carter, Race: A Theological Account (New York: Oxford, 2008), 4.

White Supremacy

King first engaged the identity of racial supremacy in its white supremacist form. Like American democracy itself, white supremacy was, at its heart, anthropological. Its political and economic structures were reflective not first of convictions about the meaning of states or markets, but about the meaning of persons. And while the architecture of this conviction varied across time and location, its basic foundation remained the same: whites are persons and blacks are not.

On the surface, King's engagement of white supremacy seems relatively straightforward. After all, it was the tradition of white supremacy that had defined the lives of his people. It was the tradition of white supremacy that necessitated the boycott. It was the tradition of white supremacy that had, just a day before, been called into question by the Supreme Court. Given this, it seems reasonable, even predictable, that King would criticize this tradition and the white citizens of Montgomery who perpetuated it. But to read King's words in this way is to misunderstand his intention. Remember, King's audience that night was not white, but black. And his purpose that November night was not to shame the structures of white Montgomery, but to shape the imaginations of black Montgomery. Why, then, did King critique the identity of white supremacy? Because he knew that in spite of the euphoria of the past two days, his hearers were in danger of believing it.

White Supremacy as White Identity

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One of the most interesting features of American white supremacy is the degree to which it created what has come to be known as "whiteness." It is, of course, obviously true that people groups with light skin have long existed. And it is also true that for much of history—even among what would not be considered "non-white" people, light skin has been associated with elevated status.³³ But the shape and social meaning that "whiteness" came to have in the white supremacist order of the new world was, in a very real way, a product of that order itself.

This product is complicated, but it has two essential features. The first is the creation of "whiteness" as a generalizable, organizing category. One of the curiosities of the particularly American understanding of whiteness is that it was capacious and fluid enough to include people of English, French, Italian, Irish, German, and Spanish origin, among others. For centuries these various people groups, recognizing strong and often violently held differences between themselves, understood one another largely in terms of difference. And while they would, according to need, make alliances with one another, these alliances were rarely conceived in terms of "race" in the generalized modern sense. And even when, as Carter has shown, they employed a form of racial reasoning, the structure of that reasoning was not exclusively *physical* but—given that its most consistent employment was against Jews or Muslims—also and perhaps fundamentally *ideological*.³⁴

³³ Though, as we will see below, this association was born more of class than of "race" in any modern sense. ³⁴ I acknowledge the slippery nature of the categories here. It is of course true that over time, in the West at least, Christianity became increasingly associated with what are, in modern terms, "Caucasian" people. But it is important to understand that although this Caucasian feature became of *primary* importance in American white supremacy, it was not always so—even in the West. The Western Christian selfunderstanding that became profoundly racial, in the modern sense of that word, was initially ideological and religious. An interesting illustration of this fact is the broad veneration—in both East and West, especially in Saxony—of the Roman soldier and martyr, Saint Maurice, an indigenous African. In this respect, while I agree with J. Kameron Carter's account of the development of Western racial reasoning, I

And while there is a sense in which the whiteness of American racial reasoning included ideological aspects as well—Christian Protestantism perhaps chief among them—it is also the case that American whiteness came largely to be defined by the quality of whiteness itself. Though, as we will see below, the meaning of whiteness was only truly understood in opposition to blackness, it nonetheless functioned powerfully as a meaningful and definitional category of identity. Thus, while the various people groups immigrating to America from Europe understood themselves in very different ways, when viewed through the pallid lens of the American racial identity, they were all the same—they were *white*.

Having created whiteness as a generalizable, if unspecified, organizing category, American white supremacy also endowed that category with certain social and even moral qualities. At the heart of this qualitative vision of whiteness was what might be called a form of entitlement. That is to say, in the logic of American white supremacy, to be white (whatever that might mean) was to be naturally—even divinely—entitled to the "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" envisioned by the American founders. And not merely entitled, but—and here is the moral component—*uniquely* endowed to that end. In using the words entitlement and endowment, I deliberately invoke their European aristocratic past. This is because the categories that came to be associated with American whiteness are directly related to notions of rightful rule and inherent virtue embedded in that past. The crucial point however is that in this earlier context, these characteristics,

would add the caveat that while, as Carter shows, the structure of that reasoning has indeed been consistent, its racial referent—whiteness—had a more evolutionary character. This seems important not only as an historical point, but also because it highlights what was truly and tragically novel in American white supremacy.

even when understood in terms of blood patrimony, were not consciously tied to *race*—in the sense conceived in American white supremacy. This was the innovation of American white supremacy: to perpetuate a pre-existing set of cultural practices and dispositions and yet to classify them not as aristocratic, but as *white*. It is in part for this reason that, even the poorest, most corrupt, and most miserable American white could—with full social approbation—consider himself to be better than a "nigger." Herein lies one of the most important—if tautological—features of white supremacy: the creation of a highly general and yet socially powerful race-based identity for whites themselves.³⁵

White Supremacy as Black Identity

That said, much of the meaning of whiteness was left embarrassingly unspecified. Its inclusion of multiple people groups made physical delineations specifiable only in the most general sense. Its presence in varied social and economic boundaries made cultural designations of whiteness nearly impossible. Indeed, apart from a common European origin—an awkwardly modern invention in its own right—and common myths of entitlement, whiteness had few unifying traits. To truly understand itself, to flesh out the fullness of its meaning, whiteness needed a foil. This fact demonstrates the relevance of Carter's point above. In America, as in the long Christian history that preceded it, one of the primary functions of racism was to confer both an identity and a value on an otherwise disaggregated people by distinguishing them from a minority that they could

³⁵ On the history of racial supremacy, cf. Ch 1–2 in George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: a Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Fredrickson, *The Black Image In the White Mind: the Debate* On Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914, 1st ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Fredrickson, *The* Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives On Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); W.D. Wright, Black History and Black Identity: a Call for a New Historiography (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002).

all plausibly disavow. In America, for reasons that we will consider below, that minority became "blackness." Of all the various physical and moral characteristics American whiteness could allow, the one it could never allow was blackness. Thus, as with the Jews of Christian antiquity, it was only in the mirror of blackness that whiteness could be fully understood.³⁶ To be white was, in its purest essence, to be *not black*. It is for this reason that the overarching anthropological concern of white supremacy was, ironically, not what it meant to be white, but what it meant to be black.³⁷ Thus, in spite of the extraordinary influence that white supremacy had in the formation of American white identity, its most important legacy is the identity it fashioned for American blacks.

The most basic and enduring premise of this identity was inhumanity. That is to say, of all the things that could and would be said about African Americans, the one thing that could not be said in the framework of white supremacy is that they were, in any socially meaningful sense, human. This conviction of the inhumanity of the other is, perhaps, one of the most ancient strategies used by majority groups to secure social cohesion.³⁸ Thus, it is no surprise that white supremacists seized upon this theme and applied it to African Americans. Even so, functional social orders require more than mere negation. At some point the "other"—even if that other is conceived in human terms must be named. Thus, the white supremacist order needed to say more about African

³⁶ "Especially during the period of racial slavery, the process of animalizing blacks enhanced the white's sense of being rational, self-disciplined, and ambitious people." Davis, *Problem*, 20. In this respect, white identity may be seen as profoundly derivative of, even parasitic upon, the identity it constructed and conferred upon African Americans.

³⁷ This fact accounts for white supremacy's enduring embrace of the racially useful, if scientifically discredited, theories of polygenesis, as well as its pedantic legal formulas for discerning the presence of "black blood." This latter example is a perfect illustration of the derivative aspect of white identity. Legally, whiteness was defined by negation, by the *absence* of black blood.

³⁸ On the social function of "inhumanity" see Patterson, *Death*, pp. 1-104, and Davis, *Inhuman*, pp. 27-76, *Problem*, pp. 3-44.

Americans than simply that they weren't human; it needed also to say what, in the absence of humanity, they *were*. This is a critical point: It was this need for specification that drove white supremacists to construct a version of American black identity. And while a full treatment of this identity is outside the scope of my purpose here, I do want to briefly examine three of its most enduring themes—themes that had direct implications both for King and for his audience that night in Montgomery.

Black Animalization

The first of these enduring themes is that of *black animalization*.³⁹ The earliest white accounts of blacks in the new world suggest that they were viewed in not simply in debased human terms, but in nonhuman, animalistic terms.⁴⁰ While the origins of this animalization are hard to discern, what seems clear is that it was anchored in a combination of slavery and blackness itself. It is difficult to discern which of these was, historically speaking, more fundamental; in truth, it seems that very early in the history of slavery, darkness of pigment and enslavement were correlated—even when sub-Saharan African people were not involved. While the origin of this correlation is complicated, its basic logic is fairly straightforward.

The first step is the link between animalization and slavery. Historically speaking, the institution of slavery has been premised upon and expressive of the animalization of

³⁹ "Dehumanization means the eradication not of a human *identity* but of those elements of humanity that evoke respect and empathy and convey a sense of dignity. Dehumanization means the debasement of a human, often to reduction to the status of an 'animalized human,' a person who exemplifies the so-called animal traits and who lacks the moral and rational capacities that humans esteem." David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2014), 17.

⁴⁰ For a helpful treatment of the development of and character of these early accounts, see Holt, *Children of Fire*, 2-52; and David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 27-102.

the slave.⁴¹ Indeed one of its very purposes—especially visible in those slave-holding cultures in which slavery was not economically beneficial—has been to systematically display and reinforce that animalization. The second step is the link between slavery and dark skin: For most of world history, manual labor of the sort required to build societies has been the provenance of slaves.⁴² Indeed in spite of the nascent "theologies of work" produced in the Protestant Reformation, it was not really until Enlightenment thinkers reframed work as a non-aristocratic path to self-realization that such a perspective began to change.⁴³ Because of this, to be a slave meant, almost universally, to be a manual laborer. Those burdened with this labor, by virtue of constant exposure to the sun, were marked with darker skin. Thus, in almost every slave-holding culture in the world, dark skin and slavery have functioned as a synecdoche: to be a slave was to be dark-skinned, to be dark skinned was to be a slave.⁴⁴ Indeed, by the time modern slavery began to take shape, this correlation was so strong that dark skin functioned not only an indication of slavery, but also as its primary justification. In the Western mind, to have dark skin was to be, in Aristotle's phrase, "a natural slave." This framework of animalization, so deeply

⁴¹ On dehumanization as an essential and universal aspect of slavery, see Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*; and Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*; and Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*.

⁴² "Through much of Western history, the upper classes and literate classes viewed physical work 'as a chore best left to slaves' (or peasants or household servants)." Davis, *Inbuman*, 51.

⁴³ "While many artisans and professionals long took pride in their work, it was not until writers in the Enlightenment and early nineteenth century began to ennoble free labor, even equating work with the individual's quest for achievement, self-expression, and happiness...." Davis, *Inbuman*, 56.

⁴⁴ "In both the ancient and medieval worlds, there was a strong inclination to equate slaves with ugliness and dark skin.... In the second and first millennia B.C.E. the North Chinese tended to view even the South Chinese as barbarians, to say nothing of the dark-skinned 'wild tribes' farther south and west. In ancient India, slavery was linked with dark-skinned Dravidian people conquered by Aryan invaders from the north.... Some Russian noblemen reinvented a supposedly separate origin of Russian serfs and even claimed that they had black bones!... In medieval Western Europe, serfs and peasants were commonly referred to as subhuman and even 'black' as a result of their constant exposure to the sun, soil, and manure.... From early antiquity, and in various parts of the globe, the elites who lived indoors and sheltered themselves from the sun sharply differentiated themselves from the field workers who were darkened by dirt as well as exposure to the sun..." Davis, *Inbuman*, 51-52.

embedded in Western culture, was the foundation of America's white supremacist black identity.⁴⁵ And over the centuries, as it was sacralized in white churches, justified in white pseudo-science, and institutionalized in white social order, it became white supremacy's invisible axiom: To be black was to be an animal.⁴⁶

Black Demonization

In time, however, black animalization proved an insufficient basis for the American white supremacist order. This was in part because of the success of the American abolitionist movement. The story of American abolitionism is painfully circuitous because of the politics and personalities involved. But even so, its rise throughout the nineteenth century—especially in the wake of Europe's abandonment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade—placed enormous pressure not only on slavery, but also on the order of white supremacy itself. This is because, as we saw above, black slavery functioned as one of the chief, if tautological, justifications of that order: Whites were superior because blacks were slaves. This, in part, explains both the dark creativity and the tragic resilience of the white supremacist commitment to slavery: to lose slavery was

⁴⁵ "The psychological mechanism of animalization has been so deeply implanted in white culture, with respect to African Americans, that most white Americans have been unaware of their usually unconscious complicity as well as the significant benefits they have reaped from their 'transcendent whiteness....It took the form of an intellectual theory or ideology, cloaked in science, as well as actions and behavior legitimated by laws, customs, and social structure." Davis, *Problem*, 20. Especially during the period of racial slavery, the process of animalizing blacks enhanced the white's sense of being rational, self-disciplined, and ambitious people.

⁴⁶ Remembering our discussion of the derivative character of white identity, the white corollary to "animalization" (the full exploration of which is outside of the scope of this work) was "Owner-Master." On the roots of animalization, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro*, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), Ch I, VI, esp. 28–31. Cf. also "A Pint of Ink" in Christoph Irmscher, *Louis Agassiz: Creator of American Science* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 219-269, and and Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2001), 97–116.

not simply to lose the Southern economy, it was to lose the entire Southern social order.⁴⁷

But this weakening of animalization was also due to the actions of the white supremacists themselves. One of the most horrible features of American racial slavery—in a long list of horrible features—was its tacit approval of the serial rape of African-American women. Rape had long been a feature of slavery as one of its core strategies for dehumanization, and white men, especially slave-holding men of the American South, employed this strategy with impunity. The unforeseen fruit of this strategy, however, was the relativization of blackness. As more and more slave children were born bearing the physical features of whiteness, attempts to justify their enslavement by appealing to their "animal" features of blackness grew increasingly implausible—even to the prejudiced eyes of white supremacists.

In time, these two facts—the abolition of slavery and the relativization of blackness—led white supremacists to develop a second framework for American black identity: *black demonization*. In this framework, the inhumanity of blacks is assumed not on physical, but on moral grounds. Like the framework of animalization, demonization had long been a part of the logic of dehumanization. Indeed, this aspect was especially necessary in instances in which masters and slaves belonged to the same ethnic group: unable to dehumanize slaves on the basis of their outer darkness, masters justified their treatment on the basis of an alleged darkness within.⁴⁸ Like animalization, this

⁴⁷ On this, cf. Mark Noll, *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006). 51-74.

⁴⁸ "When slaves and slave-like serfs belonged to the same ethnic group as their masters, as in eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia, they were said to be intrinsically lazy [and] licentious." Davis, *Inbuman*, 50.

demonization framework was an early part of American white supremacist logic. In a way that parroted supremacist practices from over the centuries, American whites broadly characterized blacks as "lazy, deceptive, duplicitous, and in need of continuous oversight."⁴⁹ In a way, as Davis suggests, these characterizations were correlates of the more fundamental animalistic framework; whites talked about blacks in the same ways they talked about mules or oxen. But in the years following the Civil War—and especially with the advent of Jim Crow—this framework of demonization took on a pernicious turn.⁵⁰

At the heart of this turn was an almost pathological fear of black sexuality. As we have seen, supremacists' anxiety over the sexuality of their "inferiors" has a long history. For centuries, the deep class stratifications of ancient culture, which eventually came to be identified with race, functioned not just as social but also as moral boundaries.⁵¹ In time, as white supremacy took new shape in the new world, these social and moral boundaries were most intensely focused in the border between whites and blacks. By the end of the 19th century, policing this border became something of an American obsession. This obsession was driven by the convergence of a number of variables: white supremacist mythologies of blood purity,⁵² the "restorationist" vision of the Southern

⁴⁹ Get citation.

⁵⁰ Once again, suggesting that Civil War was never finally about slavery, but about black personhood. On this, see Noll, *The Civil War as Theological Crisis*, chapter 5.

⁵¹ The biblical account of Joseph found in Genesis is an interesting example of the antiquity of this fear. ⁵² On the development of these blood myths, especially in light of race-based pseudo scientific theories of polygenesis, cf. Davis, *Inhuman*, 73-76. These blood myths are especially important in understanding an apparent inconsistency in Southern sexual practice: the tacit social acceptance of white men having sex with a black woman, but the virulent forbidding of the reverse. Almost universally, for a black man to have sex with a white woman was seen as a form of contamination. In the racist reasoning of blood purity, however, when a white man had sex with a black woman this functioned not only as a ritual of dehumanization, demonstrating to black men and women alike that their bodies were not their own, it also functioned as a ritual of "purification" in which a white man gave a black woman (and their children) the

post-war political imagination,⁵³ the reiteration of long-held theological justifications of black inferiority,⁵⁴ and the Victorian revival of convictions about the intrinsic delicacy of females and the corresponding protective imperative of male honor.⁵⁵

The sexual anxiety created by this convergence was profound. In its wake, the threat of black-white sexuality became not just a social offense, but also a *moral* offense, it became, indeed, *the* moral offense of the white supremacist order.⁵⁶ For many, in the way of taboo, this moral anxiety functioned as a form of restraint. Indeed, one of the indications of the power of this anxiety is the relative rarity—given the population—of sexual relationships between black men and white women. For others this moral anxiety functioned as a source of social censure. White women who had sexual relationships with black men were profoundly socially marginalized; branded, in that most candid of Southern phrases, as "nigger-lovers." For the architects of the post-war white supremacist order, however, this moral anxiety lent energy to a new social strategy: if, after the Thirteenth Amendment, African Americans could no longer be subjugated on the basis of being *animals*, perhaps they could be so on the basis of being *dangerous*.

The core of this strategy was the cultivation of what can only be described as a panic over the allegedly predatory sexuality of black males. The word "predatory" is

gift of white blood. Indeed, as Orlando Patterson has shown, this ritual of purification was often the basis of manumission for the slave and/or her children. See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 228-234.

⁵³ On this, cf. Holt, *Children*, chapter 5; and Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

⁵⁴ On these theological justifications, cf. Davis, *Inhuman*, 64-73, and especially, Noll, *The Civil War as Theological Crisis*.

⁵⁵ On Victorian social norms, see Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life In Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ The moral quality of this convergence was the energy behind Southern fulminations against miscegenation and amalgamation. For Southern white supremacists, the stakes were not simply the civic order, but the alleged divine natural order that served as its foundation.

important for understanding black demonization. The concern of white supremacists was not that black men viewed white women as beautiful. Indeed for centuries, white supremacists had used the ever-present and yet finally inaccessible beauty of the white female as a critical part of their strategy of black dehumanization. The concern was that black men saw white women as *prey*, and would, if given the slightest opportunity, express this predatory vision through unrestrained sexual violence. The breadth of this concern is reflected in the fact that one of the most popular images used for black men at the turn of the twentieth century was the *incubus*: a black, winged version of the ancient demon who raped women in their sleep.⁵⁷ White supremacists used the panic created by such imagery to galvanize the disparate factions of the broken confederacy into a new racist Southern order, and in so doing inaugurated one of the most terrible eras of racially motivated violence in American history.⁵⁸

The 1906 race riot of Atlanta is a case in point. In the wake of Reconstruction's failure, Southern democrats launched a powerful and broadly choreographed campaign to reassume the mantle of Southern political power. Calling themselves "Redeemers", democratic strategists like Hoke Smith—who sought (and won) the Georgia gubernatorial race of 1906—promised to cleanse the South of both the political residue of Lincoln's Republicanism and the racial "amalgamation" that the residue enabled. Drawing on both long-standing Southern anxieties about African Americans and on still-fresh Southern resentment over the Civil War, this rhetoric had an incendiary effect. After Atlanta newspapers reported a series of sexual attacks by black men against white

⁵⁷ For an illustration of this image, taken from a North Carolina newspaper in 1900, see Holt, *Fire*, 232. ⁵⁸ "White conservative democrats...honed a potent formula to destroy all of [their political opponents] create a moral panic, cry rape." Holt, *Fire*, 231.

women, the city exploded in racial violence. For three days white mobs, growing as large as ten thousand people and including criminals, police officers, and ordinary citizens, roamed the streets of Atlanta and murdered scores of innocent African Americans. Some were lynched on the streets. Others were beaten to death in their places of businesses. Still others were shot at point-blank range as they lay in their beds. W.E.B. Du Bois, who lived with his family in Atlanta during this time, cried out in the face of such violence in his famous "Litany of Atlanta:"

Bewildered we are, and passion-tost, mad with the madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen father, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the very blood of the crucified Christ: What meaneth this?...

Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and Dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely Thou too art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing? Ah, Christ of all the Pities!⁵⁹

Tragically, it would not be the last time such a cry would go up. While the Atlanta riot of 1906 is, perhaps, the most broadly catastrophic expression of black demonization, it was neither the first nor the last. The race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898), New Orleans and New York (1900), and Springfield, Illinois (1908); the Scottsboro trial (1931); and the sharp and steady rise of vigilante lynching were simply variations on the same sickening theme. And, because of the moral stakes of the alleged

⁵⁹ Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader, 442–43.

offenses, these acts of racial violence were not only carried out with impunity; they were celebrated in rituals of juridical exoneration as expressions of divine righteousness.

The reality of black demonization was not lost on the congregation gathered in Holt Street Baptist church that evening in Montgomery. King himself had experienced it in the angry, sexually charged phone calls to his home.⁶⁰ And they had all experienced it when, just four months before the boycott began, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, was murdered while visiting family in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. Each of these reinforced the second axiom of the white supremacist construction of black identity: African Americans, once viewed as animals to be domesticated by institutionalized slavery, were now viewed as demons to be exorcized by ritualized murder.⁶¹

Black Infantilization

In spite of the dehumanizing power of these frameworks, the need arose for still another theme of white supremacist black identity—*black infantilization*.⁶² Unlike

⁶⁰ One indication of the enduring nature of this sexual anxiety is the consistency with which King's white interlocutors equated his vision of integration with intermarriage. King's interview with Mike Wallace on June 25, 1958 is typical: "Q: How far does this integration go? This Ideal state? David Lawrence says that the underlying fear of white Southerners is interracial marriage.... Isn't this the end step? If one looks at another person as a human being rather than what is the color of his skin, you will have mass intermarriage. A: I don't think you will have mass intermarriage. That isn't what the Negro wants basically. The thoroughly integrated society means freedom." King, *Papers*, 4:436. See also King, *Papers*, 5:432-433. ⁶¹ The white corollary to "demonization" (the full exploration of which is, again, outside of the scope of this work)—especially in light of the religious/martial fusion that characterized both the ritualized murder of the Southern lynch-mob and the organizational identity and practices of the Klan—was what might be called the "Vigilante-Exorcist" identity.

⁶² I confess to some ambivalence about the term "infantilization." Though it connotes what was certainly a feature of white supremacist black identity—the imputation of a sort of childish impairment—it also potentially obscures the fact that blacks were not, strictly speaking, viewed as children as such. Even in an era in which children were viewed largely as incomplete adults and treated with what in our era would be considered abusive corporal cruelty, white children—indeed even impaired white children—were imbued with a sense of humanity that was never available to African Americans. That said, because of its centrality

animalization, which was driven by putative physical characteristics, or *demonization*, driven by alleged moral corruptions, *infantilization* was driven by the presumption of impaired capacity. Like the previous themes, infantilization has long played a role in supremacists' accounts of their "inferiors." Indeed, as David Brion Davis and Orlando Patterson have shown, this "degraded man-child' stereotype was 'an ideological imperative of all systems of slavery."⁶³

Even so, the development and strategic application of this stereotype in America was born not simply of the precedents of ancient slavery, but also of the continuing needs of white supremacy. The themes of animalization and demonization were most effective when used in the service of public spectacles such as political speeches, battle cries, and lynch mobs. But social orders are more than spectacles, at some point the rituals of public spectacle must be rationalized in the structures of private existence. For all of their galvanizing power, the intrinsic volatility of animalization and demonization defied such rationalization. Because of this, the architects of the white supremacist order needed a strategy that allowed them to express their commitment to black dehumanization in a form more broadly conducive to social functioning.

It should be said at this point that the fact that *infantilization* became that form was not at all a given. Indeed, as the world would learn in the middle of the twentieth century, other justifications for supremacist dehumanization exist. The fact that this strategy did emerge, and in some ways prevailed, is a reflection of two realities. The first

to the best scholarly analyses of dehumanization in general and slavery in particular, and with this qualification, I take it up.

⁶³ Davis, Inbuman, 51.

is the power of black humanity.⁶⁴ Over the centuries, the intimacy of day-to-day black white domestic life—even under the highly stratified conditions of the American South created an important and eventually powerful antidote to the pathogens of white supremacy, especially among middle- and upper-class white women.⁶⁵ The second, however, is a reflection of the fact that unlike the Aryan supremacist order of midtwentieth century Germany, the goal of the American white supremacist order was not to extirpate African Americans, but to subjugate them. After the end of slavery, the leaders of that order cynically realized that doing so required a less ostentatious approach. In any event, by the turn of the twentieth century, though animalization continued to function as white supremacy's foundational justification, and demonization functioned to enforce its moral boundaries, it was infantilization that supplied its essential social lubricant.

As noted above, the core assumption of infantilization is that of diminished capacity—the fixed conviction that no matter how reasonable, talented, helpful, loyal, or even "beloved" an African American may be, there remains within them an inherent quality of impairment. The principal source of this conviction was the structure of the white supremacist order itself. For those living under this order—an order nurtured by centuries of supremacist reasoning, rationalized in supremacist institutions, sacralized by

⁶⁴ This is not at all to suggest, given my reference to Nazi Germany above, any sort of weakness of Jewish humanity. While many questions remain with respect to how the German supremacist order was able to so utterly deny the humanity of its "inferiors"—in a way that astonished even its American counterpart—evidence suggests that one of the relevant variables is the fact that German Jews, in a way that starkly differed from African Americans, were not viewed through the lens of cultural servitude. To the contrary, many European Jews functioned as cultural leaders. Not only did this fact preclude the complex paternalistic emotional attachments—however perverse—of masters to slaves, it also presented "Aryan" Germans with a putative source of cultural resentment. In this respect, the catastrophic mid-century assault on German Jews is a testament not to the weakness of their humanity, but to the power of it.
⁶⁵ This reality was reflected in the bus boycott itself when, to the consternation of their Citizen Council husbands, white women in Montgomery enabled the boycotters by transporting their domestic workers to and from work.
supremacist religious and scientific authorities, and ritualized in the daily habits of supremacist life—black impairment seemed an incontestable fact of the world.

But this conviction was also fed by the *fruit* of the white supremacist order. One of the most catastrophic effects of American white supremacy is that it created the very impairment it proclaimed. Human capacity is, in the end, not an individual but a social achievement—its potential and its parameters defined by the social setting in which it emerges. For most human beings, who we become and what we achieve is directly related to the larger context in which we live. To speak meaningfully of human capacity especially at the level of generalization—is finally to speak of the social capacity for human beings to become. Because of this, a powerful social order like American white supremacy, which takes black impairment as both a premise and a goal, inevitably produces a form of that impairment. To withhold education is to bind intellectual development. To preclude economic opportunity is to ensure poverty. To destroy the family is to destabilize the home. This was precisely the effect of the American white supremacist order. In a dark, self-fulfilling prophecy-one fulfilled at the expense of others, however-it not only assumed a form of black impairment, it also all but assured it.66

⁶⁶ Again, to say this is not to ignore the potential for extraordinary capacities in a given individual, and it is certainly not to ascribe "impairment"—even socially constructed impairment—as a general quality of African Americans. It is simply to acknowledge—and lament—what African-American intellectuals have known and lamented all along: that part of the horror of the American white supremacist order is that these capacities were never fully expressed, but were subject to impairment not from within—but from without. In an unusually candid expression of, and response to, this imposed impairment, King said the following: "We must make a vigorous effort to improve our standards wherever they lag behind. We must not be afraid to admit our own shortcomings. One of the sure signs of maturity is the ability to rise to the point of self-criticism. Whenever we are objects of criticism from white men, even though the criticisms are maliciously directed at us and mixed with half-truths, we must pick out the elements of truth and make them the basis of creative reconstruction. We must not let the fact that we are the victims of injustice lull us into abrogating responsibility for our own lives." King, *Papers*, 5:284.

As an expression of the strength of both the structure and the fruit of white supremacy, this belief in African-American impairment expressed itself in almost every area of social life. Its most basic expression was in the realm of direct relational encounter. In a way that almost wholly mirrored adult-child rituals of the day, direct encounter generally took place only at white initiative. In the event of such an encounter, both the modes of address,⁶⁷ and physical mannerisms took the form of ritualized deference.⁶⁸ This conviction of impairment was also reinforced in enduring structures of economic dependence. The most obvious example of this was slavery, in which African Americans were literally dependent upon white masters (who often described themselves as "fathers" to the slaves) for the material goods required for basic existence. But these structures of dependence did not end with slavery. The sharecrop system—especially those in which a white-owned "company store" determined the nature and price of the material goods available to African Americans—perpetuated this dependence.

The structures of white supremacist religious life—especially of religious charity—reinforced this vision of impairment as well. One of the most complex mysteries of American white supremacy is its coexistence with, perhaps even dependence upon, a form of evangelical Christianity. While the intricacies of this relationship are complicated, one of its most tragic features is the way it served to conceal the racist

⁶⁷ "Sir," or "ma'am" were standard when addressing whites, while a first name (real or imagined), "boy," or "nigger" sufficed for blacks.

⁶⁸ In addition to the basic physical markers of deference—standing aside, removing one's hat, giving up one's space—physical mannerisms that might suggest equality, such as direct eye contact and fully erect posture, (especially from black men to white women) were strictly prohibited. Cf. Jennifer Ritterhouse, "The Etiquette of Race Relations in the Jim Crow South," in Ownby, Ted, and Catherine Clinton, *Manners*

and Southern History: Essays (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 20–44.

framework of infantilization within the religious framework of charity. I wish to be careful here. There is no question that the religiously motivated generosity of some Southern whites brought real, and in time invaluable, material benefit to African Americans. And there is also no question that a significant portion of this generosity was motivated not by a desire to press African Americans down, but by a desire to lift them up.

That said, however, it is also true that in many cases this religious impulse, rather than challenging the order of white supremacy, not only operated within its logic but also became instrumental to its ends. By devoting themselves to improving the condition of their impaired black neighbors, white supremacist Christians were able to avoid more fundamental questions about the source and the justice of that condition itself.

Finally, this conviction of black impairment took shape in a wide array of popular portrayals of African Americans.⁶⁹ As we saw in Chapter One, during the Chicago World's Fair, African Americans were portrayed as tribal primitives, still in the thrall of the devolved conditions of the African village.⁷⁰ In musical theater, especially "black-face" and "minstrel" theater, African Americans were portrayed as light-hearted (if helpless) buffoons, caricatures of comedic naiveté. In films, such as *Gone with the Wind*, and advertising campaigns, such as those associated with "Aunt Jemima" breakfast foods, African Americans were portrayed in the form of the loyal, helpful, but also comedic form of the "Mammy."

On the surface these portrayals—in magazines, paintings, musical theater, films, and eventually television—ranged fairly widely. But embedded in each of them is the

⁶⁹ For a helpful treatment of popular black portrayal, see John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006). ⁷⁰ Holt, *Fire*, 189-202.

quality of impairment, the suggestion that apart from paternalistic care of the American whites who consumed these images, they would be hopelessly lost. Taken together, these portrayals are simply variations on what author Orlando Patterson calls the "ideology of 'Sambo,' the degraded man-child that, to the Southerner, constituted the image of the slave."⁷¹ Quoting Stanley Elkins, one of the most incisive expositors of the Sambo ideal, Patterson captures the essential point:

Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being.⁷²

Resisting White Supremacy

Taken together, these three frameworks—animalization, demonization, and infantilization—provided a comprehensive vision of white supremacist black identity: body, heart, and mind. Some African Americans were viewed as animals in need of domestication, others as demons in need of eradication, and still others as children in need of salvation from the consequences of their own hapless impairment. But all were, by nature, fit for subjugation.

And as Martin Luther King stood before his people in the Holt Street church that evening in Montgomery in 1956, he knew that this vision of black identity exerted incredible power over them. It could not be otherwise. For centuries, this identity of

⁷¹ Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 96.

⁷² Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 96. The white corollary to "infantilization" was, predictably, that of "Paternal Overseer." This identity, not quite fatherly, was vaguely father-like in that it saw in itself the responsibility to oversee helpless African Americans and to direct them with either indulgence or discipline.

inhumanity had been seamlessly impressed upon African Americans by virtually every aspect of American culture. Because of this—in spite of the triumph of the boycott—one of the greatest temptations facing King's audience was the temptation to simply surrender to the power of this identity—either by believing it themselves, or simply by inhabiting it for the sake of social peace. This was in fact the precise goal of the Klan parade through the black community in Montgomery the previous evening. And even though they withstood that test, King knew from African-American history that their continuing to do so was not at all a given.

This fact accounts for one of the most important moments in King's speech that evening:

Now, there is the danger that we've been going to the back so long that we'll unconsciously get on the bus and just go to the back and perpetuate segregation. We've just been conditioned to do it so long that we'll just go straight to the back of the bus because we've been doing it, you see. Now I hope we can break the conditioning process now and just go on, on the bus and sit down, you see. Don't just go on to the back, that's what I'm trying to get over to you. Just take a seat. Now don't push over anybody. [Audience:] (No) You see, if there's a seat in the back, and there are no seats in the front, you naturally will take that seat. But now, if there's a seat in the front, you see, you will take that also, if it's convenient. (Yes) [applause]. That's what I'm trying to say. We just gonna take seats.⁷³

These words give us a glimpse into the one of the most intimate and vulnerable aspects of the early civil rights movement.⁷⁴ As African Americans struggled to imagine a new democratic identity, they struggled not only against the white supremacist social

⁷³ King, Papers, 3:431.

⁷⁴ The intimacy of this is further suggested by the fact that in another version of this address, edited later that month for publication in *Liberation* magazine, King omitted this paragraph altogether. See, King, *Papers*, 3:445-451.

order in the American South, but also against the legacy of that order in their own hearts and minds. As King said,

Living under these [segregated] conditions, many Negroes came to the point of losing faith in themselves. They came to feel that perhaps they were less than human. The great tragedy of physical slavery was that it lead to the paralysis of mental slavery.... Then something happened to the Negro [that caused] the Negro to take a new look at himself. Negro masses began to reevaluate themselves. The Negro came to feel that he was somebody.... And the tension which we are witnessing in race relations today can be explained, in part, by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself.⁷⁵

Knowing this, indeed experiencing it himself, Martin Luther King stood before his people that night, and sought—as a matter of first priority—to help them resist the power of the white supremacist black identity that was their common affliction. This, at a Sunday sermon given nearly a year later at Holt Street church, suggests that this theme of re-narrated identity had developed into a something of a set piece in King's addresses to African-American audiences:

But my friends, if we are to be prepared for this new order and this new world which is emerging, we must believe that we belong. Every Negro must feel that he is somebody. [Audience:] (All right, Yeah) He must come to see that he is a child of God and that all men are made in God's image. (Yes) ... Tell your children that. (Yes) Say it to them at every hour, so they will be able to live in this age (Yes) with a sense of dignity (Yeah) and a sense of self-respect.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ King, Papers, 3:455-456.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 4:344. See also, King, *Papers*, 5:284 where King, some years later echoes this same theme: "We must maintain a sense of somebodiness and self-respect. One of the great tragedies of the system of segregation is that it so often robs its victims of a sense of dignity and worth. It tends to develop a false sense of inferiority in the segregated. But despite the existence of a system that denies our essential worth, we must have the spiritual audacity to assert our somebodiness. We must no longer allow our physical bondage to enslave our minds. He who feels that he is nobody eventually becomes nobody. But he who feels that he is somebody, even though humiliated by external servitude, achieves a sense of self-hood and dignity that nothing in this world can take away."

Each of these passages—and dozens of others like them—reflect what became one of King's central convictions: If African Americans and their white neighbors were going to achieve a fully re-imagined democratic identity, they would have to begin by contending with—and together renouncing—the identity fashioned by the white supremacist order. Enabling them to do so became one of King's central tasks.

Black Supremacy

But this was not the only form of racial supremacy with which they would have to contend. To a degree less fully developed, but no less worrisome, King saw another expression of the identity of racial supremacy taking shape: black supremacy. For obvious reasons, both the meaning and the historical development of American black supremacy are fairly difficult to trace. The most basic reason for this is black supremacy's relative rarity. One of the indications of the power of the American white supremacist order is how effectively it rendered a black supremacist identity not merely uninhabitable, but unimaginable.

Given the realities of a culture that reinforced white supremacy at every turn, simply claiming black dignity was a triumphant act of countercultural power; to take the additional step of claiming black superiority was, for most, beyond reach. Another reason for this difficulty, however, is that one of the chief sources of African-American moral formation—African-American Christianity—generally eschewed the framework of supremacy. Its focus was—for obvious reasons—on themes of exaltation for the humble, deliverance for the oppressed, and liberation for the captive. It is true that these themes functioned, as later black intellectuals would point out, to reinforce the social locale

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assigned to African Americans by white supremacy. But it is also true that they—because of their promise of eschatological reversal—nurtured one of the strongest themes in African-American religious life: final vindication.⁷⁷

Importantly, however, this vision of eschatological vindication was largely characterized not in racial, but in moral terms.⁷⁸ But perhaps the most significant reason for this difficulty is the generally circumspect fashion with which African Americans characterized the substance and meaning of their own identities. This, no doubt, is a reflection of the censorial power of white supremacist brutality. In its shadow, African Americans who would speak freely of their own dignity were rare; those who would speak of their supremacy were rarer still. Indeed, given the white supremacist strategy of characterizing the former in terms of the latter—transforming affirmations of intrinsic black dignity into panicked announcements of imminent black rule—it is a sign of extraordinary courage that African Americans asserted their identity at all. But they did. And over time—for many reasons—one of the fruits of this assertion was the framework of black supremacy.

At the most basic level, black supremacy was simply the negative image of its opposite. Like white supremacists, black supremacists viewed the world through the zerosum lens of racial reasoning; they simply inverted its essential commitments: Superiority became intrinsic to blackness, inferiority to whiteness. Furthermore, as white supremacists had done, they sought to give social expression to these commitments through either

⁷⁷ See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. chapter 6.

⁷⁸ It is true that this moral vindication was often rendered in terms of the judgment of white slave masters. But, as the long history of black acceptance of whites suggests—especially in the context of abolition—the essence of this judgment was not whiteness per se, but the injustice of slavery. Although, as we will see, the enduring virulence of white racism would eventually put that fine distinction to the test.

separation or domination. This, in essence, is black supremacy's ideological core. That said, like most social movements, black supremacy rarely expressed itself in its purest essence. Indeed, as King looked out over his congregation in Montgomery, few, if any, of his hearers would have understood themselves in such stark terms. In truth, most were simply relieved at the prospect of even the barest form of social equality. Because of this, King's engagement with black supremacy that evening felt more like a pastoral encouragement of courtesy to whites to than a principled rejection of the supremacy of blacks:

Now, I want to say to you as we prepare to go back to the buses, we have before us, some basic responsibilities and I want you to hear this. I want you to abide by it. Number one, I would be terribly disappointed if anybody goes back to the buses bragging about, we, the Negroes, have won a victory over the white people. [Audience applause] If we do that we will bring about a lot of undue tension. (Right) And I want you to know anyway that the decision that was rendered by the Supreme Court yesterday was a victory not merely for fifty thousand Negroes in Montgomery. That's too small. (Well) It's not a victory for merely sixteen million Negroes over the United States. As I have said to you many times, the tension in Montgomery is not so much a tension between Negro people and white people, but the tension is at bottom a tension between justice and injustice (Yes), a tension between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.... So let us not limit this decision to a victory for Negroes.⁷⁹

But in ways King could never have imagined, these words presaged one of the great struggles of his ministry. For in the years to come, black supremacy would emerge not only as one of his people's greatest temptationsm but as one of his own greatest foes.

Black Supremacy and Black Identity

⁷⁹ King, Papers, 3:428.

Black supremacy originated in the struggle to secure an African-American identity on terms other than those supplied by the white supremacist order. Rejecting characterization as animals, demons, and infants—and devoid of any other accessible history—African Americans struggled toward a new vision of themselves. As we saw in Chapter One—and will discuss in greater detail below—one of the earliest and most promising sources of black identity was that of a democratic citizen. The democratic ideals that fired the imagination of the American colonies fired the imaginations of African Americans as well. Because of this, African Americans began to forge a selfunderstanding defined by the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

After the war, however, as America's early social, political, and economic structures began to emerge, African Americans began to see that precious few of their neighbors shared this view. Importantly, however, African-American leaders continued to insist that this democratic identity, these "unalienable rights," were also rightly theirs. But now, embracing the racial logic of American white supremacy, they began to frame these rights in racial terms to claim that they too, though "Negroes," were entitled to the benefits of liberalism. In one respect, such racial framing was a matter of necessity; in the eyes of American white supremacy, they could be seen in no other way. But in another respect, such framing constituted the first development of what may be called a *black liberalism*, the first explicit link between supremacist notions of blackness and evolutionary notions of freedom. This link between blackness and freedom is crucial for understanding the development of black supremacy. It is, in fact, its first and most enduring conviction.

The social order that followed the American Revolution made it plain to African Americans that while American armies, including its black soldiers, had charged the fields of battle declaring freedom for "all men," what they actually meant was white men. Because of this, though again never relinquishing the liberal identity awakened by the Revolution, African Americans began to search for other forms of self-understanding.

This search led to a second critical aspect of black supremacy, *black messianism*. There is a sense in which black messiansm was the unintended by-product of white America. The binary racial reasoning of American white supremacy provided African Americans with "blackness" as a coherent and galvanizing framework for selfunderstanding. The liberal imagination of American democracy provided a justification for African-American claims to freedom. And the eschatological imagination of American Christianity—especially given its enlistment in the rhetoric of the American Revolution—provided African Americans with both a moral imperative to seek that freedom and an expectation that seeking, they would find. But in another sense, black messianism's power lies in the way these themes were fused in the heat of postrevolutionary African-American indignation and forged into a vision of black selfliberation.

No event in Western history did more to catalyze this vision than the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue was the center of the French slave economy and the largest producer of sugar in the new world. Because of this, for European whites, life in Saint-Domingue was almost unbelievably lucrative. For blacks, however, the vast majority of whom were enslaved, life was exceptionally brutal—even by the standards of New World slavery—so much so that in 1685, King Louis XIV of France passed the *Code Noir*, an (ultimately futile) attempt to regulate violence against French colonial slaves. As is often the case, however, brutality

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begets brutality. Fearing that such codes would lead to insurrection, French colonialists defying their King—decided instead to increase their violence against slaves. This decision would prove fateful. By the end of the eighteenth century, the brutality of French colonial life combined with the fervor of the French revolution to ignite a revolt. That revolt, which began as a slave insurrection in August of 1791, ended in French surrender in 1803; the establishment of the Republic of Haiti in 1804; the expulsion (or murder) of white French colonialists in 1805; and, in the end, signaled the demise of the French slave economy.⁸⁰

In spite of the ideological and moral complexity of this revolution, the ways it was exploited by colonial powers in their ongoing wars with one another, and the broad social misery to which it eventually led, its effect on the development of the black supremacist identity was incalculable. This is because while affirming the democratic convictions of black liberalism, the Haitian Revolution, in using Black Power to attain black liberty, infused these liberal convictions with messianic energy. And this messianic energy enabled African Americans, perhaps for the first time, to dream not only of black self-emancipation⁸¹ but also of black self-governance.

In one of the other ironies of black supremacy, the first American advocates of black self-governance were white. This advocacy, however, was driven less by aspirations for a black society and more by anxieties over white society. From the beginning, colonial

⁸⁰ For a helpful account of the impact of this revolution on the development of black identity, see. Davis, *Inbuman*, chapter 8 and Davis, *Problem*, chapter 2.

⁸¹ The Haitian Revolution remains the largest act of self-emancipation in Western history. For more, cf. Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Toussaint Louverture. *The Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2008); David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution*, 1789-1804, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973).

leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder himself, realized that the American democratic society was built upon the contradictory co-existence of human freedom and human enslavement. White supremacists, as we have seen, resolved this contradiction by simply declaring slaves to be inhuman. However, most American political leaders, their own white supremacy notwithstanding, took the view that this strategy of dehumanization did not solve the contradiction, but only sublimated it—perhaps dangerously so. Because of this, one of the early and enduring interests of American political leadership was the prospect of black colonization. If American blacks were sent elsewhere, the reasoning neatly went, the contradictions of American democracy could be resolved: blacks could have the freedom to which they were entitled, they could simply do so elsewhere.⁸²

The contradiction thus resolved, democratic ideology would be protected from those who exploited slavery as evidence of its failure; American whites would be relieved of the equally unpleasant options of treating blacks as slaves or tolerating them as equals, and American blacks, who would never really fit in the American democratic order, would be free to live their freedom with their own people in their own way. For many (especially Northern) African Americans, and for the leaders of the growing abolitionist movement, this strategy of colonization was an egregious affront, constituting not only a

⁸² "From Jefferson to Lincoln, most of America's major leaders insisted that the blight of slavery could not be overcome unless a distant refuge were found for the black beneficiaries of freedom." Davis, Problem, 83. Cf. also Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N Page, Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011); Beverly C. Tomek, Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery In Antebellum Pennsylvania (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Allan E. Yarema, American Colonization Society : an Avenue to Freedom? (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006); and Ousmane K. Power-Greene, Against Wind and Tide: the African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

political failure to face the demands of liberalism, but also a moral failure to redress the evil of slavery.

But for many African Americans whose imaginations had been shaped by black liberalism to assume self-worth, and black messianism to desire self-rule, colonization made a great deal of sense. If (as both the racial logic and the social structures of white supremacy suggested) blacks were fundamentally "other," and if (as the post-revolutionary development of the new American made clear) black freedom was unlikely to be granted by white power or secured by Black Power, and if (as events in Haiti suggested) African Americans could in fact inhabit a democratic order of their own making, why not?

This line of reasoning gave rise to the third important aspect of black supremacy: *black separatism*. Indeed, because of its fusion of personal experiences of oppression, social patterns of segregation, religious themes of exodus, and political dreams of freedom, black separatism became one of the most important themes not merely of black supremacy, but of black history itself. Over time, as we saw in Chapter One, this separatism took various forms: colonization,⁸³ nationalism,⁸⁴ migration,⁸⁵ and even—as in the case of the Nation of Islam—segregation.⁸⁶ And, in the way of social movements, these various forms were driven by the exigencies of a given moment, the energy of a

⁸³ For more on *colonization*, see Davis, Problem, 83-192.

⁸⁴ For more on nationalism see Davis, Problem, 126-130.

⁸⁵ For more on migration see James N. Gregory. The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Nicholas Lemann, The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America (New York: Vintage, 1991); Isabel Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration (New York: Random House, 2010).

⁸⁶ One of the more interesting features of black separatism is the fact that it often pursued its separatist vision through alliances with white segregationists. Notable in this respect are the partnerships of both "Back to Africa" nationalist Marcus Garvey and Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X with the Ku Klux Klan. On the Garvey partnership see Davis, *Problem*, 131. On the Malcolm partnership, see Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 178-179.

given ideal, or the emergence of a given leader. But even so, each was built upon a separatist presumption: For African Americans to fully enjoy the rights to which they were naturally entitled, they would have to live apart from the structures of white supremacist rule.

Taken together, these three themes—*black liberalism, black messianism, and black separatism*—form the structural core of the black supremacist identity. This powerful combination allowed African Americans to see themselves in a new way: Not as animals, but as men; not as demons, but as liberators; not as helpless children, but as masters of their own order.

Black Supremacy as White Identity

But, in a way that reflected the mirroring logic of white supremacy, this black supremacist identity allowed African Americans to see whites in a new way as well. In one respect this re-envisioning was a natural product of reconceived social relations. If, in the vision of black supremacy, blacks were not by nature domestic animals, predatory demons, or helpless infants, then it followed that whites were not by nature faithful masters, righteous exorcists, or indulgent fathers. Black supremacy, in other words, functioned not just to re-imagine black identity but white identity as well.

Like black supremacy itself, the whiteness it imagined emerged from many sources and took many shapes. However, almost universally, the re-imagined whiteness of black supremacy was based on two assumptions. The first was the meaningfulness of whiteness itself. As we saw above, because of the various cultural backgrounds from which they came, American whites struggled to articulate a coherent physical or cultural vision of

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whiteness itself. Indeed, as we saw above, whiteness was largely defined by not being black. In the logic of white supremacy, blackness and whiteness—however artificially conceived—found their meaning in opposition to the other. Black supremacists embraced this racial logic completely, accepting as a matter of course the meaningfulness of both "black" and "white" as both organizing and *essential* anthropological frameworks.

The word *essential* is particularly important here. Unlike the anti-essentialist anthropological framework of late-modern structuralism, black supremacists—like the white supremacists they mirrored—viewed these racial categories in ontological terms. To refer to "blackness" or "whiteness" was not simply to refer to social convention, it was to refer to something *real*. As we will see, there were many implications of black supremacy's embrace of this racial logic—not only for whites, but also for African Americans themselves.⁸⁷ With respect to white identity, however, this logic allowed black supremacists to conceive of abstract, depersonalized "whiteness" as a meaningful, generalizable, and—perhaps most importantly—*definitional* anthropological principle.

The second and perhaps more important assumption of black supremacy's reimagined whiteness is that it is *evil*. Unlike the *demonic* theme of white supremacy, black supremacy's assumption of white evil was, generally speaking, rooted neither in moral

⁸⁷ In my view, in spite of the real gains made by the black supremacist identity, its fundamental flaw is its failure to renounce the binary and inescapably violent logic of white supremacy. One interesting rejoinder to this, however, is James Cone's contention that appeals to an anthropology (white or black) that transcends race are a dangerous form of abstraction. For Cone, theology is fundamentally to be located in history, and given that modern Western history has unfolded in racial terms, a racial anthropology is in a sense more concrete than theological notions of personhood in the abstract. Cone's concern, which I share, is to rescue theology from the categories of Western abstraction that allowed Christianity to peacefully coexist with the historical realities of racial violence. However, J. Kameron Carter's concern, which I also share, is that Cone's view on this point not only reiterates the inherently abstract, non-particular, and finally non-referential category of race created by the modernist anthropological logic of white supremacy, it also essentializes that logic as *the* fundamental reference point for African-American personhood, thereby enslaving African-American self-understanding to the historical reality of racial violence.

interpretations of physical characteristics nor in mythic accounts of infernal origin, with the exception of the Nation of Islam.⁸⁸ It was rooted, quite simply, in the experience of evil at the hands of their white neighbors. Throughout American history, African Americans had struggled to account for this experience of evil. Some drew on Christian sources, viewing white evil through the lens of sin, and their white masters as sinners to be pitied and, in time, judged.⁸⁹ Others drew on liberal sources, interpreting white evil as a lingering expression of imperial tyranny, to be cast off in time by the unfolding of modern democratic order.⁹⁰ Still, others drew on historical and sociological sources, viewing this evil through the lens of tragic cultural and institutional habit, a legacy of European imperialistic greed breathed out like so much smallpox upon the shores of the new world.⁹¹

These various approaches to the experience of white evil, while differing in significant ways, shared an important feature: each maintained a distinction between the evil perpetrated by whites and the evil of whiteness *as sucb*. Indeed, when Du Bois himself was faced with the racial horror of Atlanta and with his own racial rage, he could nonetheless write, "We are not better than our fellows, Lord, we are but weak and human men."⁹² In the racial logic of black supremacy, however, such a distinction was not possible. Because of the totalizing power of the category of "whiteness," white evil could

⁸⁸ See, for example, Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 161-167, and Marable, *Malcolm X*, 161.

⁸⁹ On this, see Raboteau, Slave Religion, chapter 6.

⁹⁰ See Frederick Douglass, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).

⁹¹ For examples of this approach see W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Study of the Negro Problem* (1898), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (1935), and *Dusk To Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940); and Alain Locke, ed. Charles Molesworth, *The Works of Alain Locke* (Oxford [UK]: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially parts IV, V, and VI.

⁹² W.E.B. Du Bois, "Litany of Atlanta" in Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader, 442–43.

neither be theologized nor historicized; it could only be essentialized. In the racial logic of black supremacy, white evil was best understood not as an expression of sin, or of politics, or of culture, but of whiteness itself.⁹³

The fruit of this essentialist and diabolical vision of whiteness was inevitable. Some pledged to engage white evil with violence, channeling (and in some cases recasting) the messianic legacies of the Haitian Revolution of the eighteenth century, the slave revolts of the nineteenth century, and even those of Ned Cobb in the twentieth century. Though on this point, especially when compared to white violence against blacks, two facts stand out. First, this violence was almost always conceived in defensive rather than offensive terms. Secondly, in spite of mass white terror at the prospect of vindictive black violence, this violence was in fact exceedingly rare. Even with the founding of the notorious Black Panther party in 1966, actual organized violence against whites was negligible.⁹⁴ Far and away the most prominent black supremacist response to evil whiteness was separation.

Drawing on their separatist history, many African Americans began to selfconsciously pursue black life apart from whites. For some, as in the Great Migration, this separatism expressed itself as a literal movement away from white communities. For others, who found this migration either undesirable or impractical, this separatism expressed itself in simply closing one's life to surrounding whites. And yet what

⁹³ Thus, the language of the "white devil" fashioned in the Nation of Islam and embraced by later, if less radical, forms of black supremacy.

⁹⁴ On the Black Panther Party, cf. Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: the History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Philip Sheldon Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970); Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives On a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Kathleen Cleaver and George N. Katsiaficas, *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: a New Look At the Panthers and Their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

distinguishes black supremacist separatism from earlier forms is that it understood its selfsegregation not in pragmatic political terms, but in moral terms. Both strategies, however, reflected the logical conclusion of black supremacist racial reasoning: Democratic equality with whites was not simply impractical. It was immoral.

At this point, I need to insert an important qualification. A principled and systematized account of "evil whiteness" such as the one I have presented has, for most of American history, been a rarity. Indeed, outside of the Nation of Islam, and before the second half of the twentieth century, I know of very few.⁹⁵ That said, however, its basic rudiments—whiteness as meaningful, and whiteness as evil—were firmly established black supremacist themes by the middle of the twentieth century. And more than this, these themes were not merely the special holding of black radicals. To the contrary, they were both present in and—in light of the "massive resistance" of mid-century Jim Crow—increasingly *plausible to* African Americans throughout the nation. This accounted not only for the formal rise of black supremacy in the latter 1960s, but also for King's sustained campaign of resistance to it.

Resisting Black Supremacy

Martin Luther King knew, too well, the experience of white evil. He had stood among its shattered fragments, listened to its threatening calls, been imprisoned in its filthy cells, and endured the hypocrisy of its public theater. And he knew that his people had experienced these things as well. And though there were very few, if any, self-

⁹⁵ On conceptions of whiteness in the Nation of Islam, cf. chapter 5 in Louis A. DeCaro, *Malcolm and the Cross: the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity.* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 82–103.

conscious black supremacists in King's audience that night on Holt Street, he knew that these experiences tempted his people to view their white neighbors with contempt. And so, as he stood before them that evening, he said these words:

Somehow freedom is the duty to respect all people, even though they don't love you, they don't respect you, but you respect them and you feel somehow that they can become better than they are. (Yes) ... You have a duty to respect those—I don't mean you have to respect their opinions, I don't believe in respecting everybody's opinion.... But I respect them as a personality, a sacred personality with the image of God in them.... You know, in Greek culture, in Greek mythology, there was a goddess known as the Goddess of Nemesis. And the chief function of the Goddess of Nemesis was to keep everything and everybody on a common level. And when you got too high and above yourself, the Goddess of Nemesis was to pull you down. And when you got too low and felt that you were too far down, the Goddess of Nemesis pulled you up. (That's right) ... God doesn't want anybody to feel inferior. (That's right, No). Nor does He want anybody to feel superior. (That's right).⁹⁶

In these words, King painted a vision not only of equality, or what he called "a common level." He also painted a vision of respect—even of hope—across the powerful boundaries of hostile racial difference. In so doing, he tacitly urged his people to resist the reductive anthropological vision of black supremacy. As King went on, however, he also urged them to resist both the separatism and the violence of black supremacy's social vision.

Now, there's one other thing. We talked a lot about nonviolence, haven't we? (Yes) ... If we go back to the buses and somehow become so weak that when somebody strikes us we gonna strike them back, or when somebody says an insulting word to us we gonna do the same thing, we will destroy the spirit of our movement—and I know it's hard, I know that. And I know you're looking at me like I'm somewhat crazy when I say that. [laughter] ... But I want to tell you this evening that the strong man is the man who will not hit back (Yes), who can stand up for his rights and not hit back.... What I'm saying to you this evening is

⁹⁶ King, Papers, 3:429, 430.

that you can be courageous and yet nonviolent. You can take a seat on the bus and sit there because its your right and refuse to move no matter who tells you to move because it's your right and yet not hit back if you are hit yourself. (That's right) ... If we hit back we will be shamed (Let's hear it now), we will be shamed before the world.⁹⁷

Taken together, King's words to his people that night amounted to a tacit assault on the emerging identity of black supremacy. For in them, he challenged both the racial essentialism of their anthropological vision and the separatist and violent trajectory of their social vision. In the coming decade, however, King's resistance to black supremacy would become both more explicit and more earnest.

Part of this resistance, as we will discuss in Chapter 3, was a product of King's convictions about the character of democratic action.⁹⁸ Even so, King's fundamental resistance to black supremacy was not born of its insufficiency as a paradigm of democratic action but its insufficiency as a paradigm of democratic identity. Like white supremacy, it re-imagined democratic identity in fundamentally violent terms. A commencement address given at Lincoln University five years later shows the increasingly explicit development of his anthropological concern:

As I have said in so many instances, it is not enough to struggle for the new society. We must make sure that we make the psychological adjustment required to live in that society. This is true of white people, and it is true of Negro people. Psychological adjustments will save white people from going into the new age with the old vestiges of prejudice and attitudes of white supremacy. It will save the Negro from seeking to substitute one tyranny for another. I know sometimes we get discouraged and sometimes disappointed with the slow pace of things. At

⁹⁷ King, Papers, 3:430.

⁹⁸ Pragmatically, the inevitable separatism and violence of black supremacy was a self-defeating democratic strategy for African Americans. For all of its cathartic effect, it would only hurt the prospects of an authentic African-American democratic existence. From a more principled perspective however, both the human vision and the social strategy of black supremacy constituted a violation of democratic actions fundamentally agapic obligation.

times we begin to talk about racial separation instead of racial integration, feeling that there is no other way out. My only answer is that the problem will never be solved by substituting one supremacy for another. Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy, and God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men. But God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and the creation of a society where all men will live together as brothers, where every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality.⁹⁹

King's most extensive treatment of black supremacy, however, and the clearest expression of his anthropological burden in resisting it, is found in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Community or Chaos?.* Written during perhaps the most difficult period of King's public life—when the violence of the first Selma March (1965) and the Meredith March (1966) led a new generation of African-American activists to publicly challenge and finally reject King's call to nonviolence—King spends devotes an entire chapter to "Black Power."

In one respect, King's treatment of Black Power reflects his characteristic generosity. Calling it "a cry of disappointment" born of relentless and unpunished white violence, King frames Black Power not in terms of black contempt, but in terms of black grief. Additionally, he tries to foreground what he takes to be its positive contribution, namely its encouragement of African Americans to take their rightful place in the political and economic structures of democratic society. And furthermore, in light of the deep psychological damage of white supremacy, King affirms Black Power's emphasis on what he calls "manhood," saying: "This self-affirmation is the black man's need made

⁹⁹ King, Testament of Hope, 215.

compelling by the white man's crimes against him. This is positive and necessary power for black people."¹⁰⁰

Having both affirmed these aspects of Black Power and identified himself with them, King turns to the work of resistance. After characterizing it as a nihilistic failure of hope, afflicted with both separatist and martial delusions which he considers "beyond the realm of serious discussion,"¹⁰¹ King concludes his treatment of Black Power by critiquing its assault on both black and white personhood: "The problem with hatred and violence is that ... [it] deepens the brutality of the oppressor and increases the bitterness of the oppressed.... It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible."¹⁰² As an illustration of his point, King quotes a letter written by James Baldwin to his nephew on the centennial anniversary of Emancipation:

The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I means that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, trapped in a history which they do not understand, and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality, and begin to change it.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Qtd. in Fred L. Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee, *I Am Because We Are: Readings In Black Philosophy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 291.

¹⁰¹ King, Testament, 591.

¹⁰² King, Testament, 593.

¹⁰³ Baldwin quoted in King, Testament, 593.

Baldwin's words summarize King's vision. While King, like Baldwin, knew the pain of white evil, he refused to turn either that pain or that evil into black supremacist anthropology. To do so would be not only to condemn both blacks and whites to what King called the "logic of genocide;"¹⁰⁴ it would also, like the anthropology of white supremacy from which it emerged, be to misunderstand the nature of democratic identity, and of human identity itself. Thus, for a democratic order truly to flourish, racial supremacy—in both its white and black forms—it must be set aside, and democratic identity re-imagined on other grounds.¹⁰⁵ But this was not King's only point of resistance. His words that night, and many nights thereafter, suggest that his attempt to redefine democratic identity required him to resist another danger: the identity of liberal equality.

The Identity of Liberal Equality

For anyone even vaguely familiar with King, the suggestion that he resisted an identity of liberal equality may seem strange. Indeed in our time, it is difficult to speak at any length about democratic equality without eventually coming to speak of King himself. This is as it should be. As we saw in Chapter One, one of the central themes of African-American history is its struggle toward the realization of liberal equality. And, as we also saw, Martin Luther King saw himself as an heir to that history. And so he was:

¹⁰⁴ Taylor Branch, At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years: 1965-1968 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 554.

¹⁰⁵ For a simultaneous treatment of white and black supremacy illustrating some of the themes above, see King's sermon "The Man Who Was a Fool," delivered in Detroit in March of 1961: "For what is white supremacy but the foolish notion that God made a mistake and stamped an eternal stigma of inferiority on a certain race of people? ... And the converse is also true. Black supremacy is based on a great deal of foolishness ... that the black man has made all of the contributions of civilization and that he will one day rule the world.... as Negroes we must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship, but we must never use second-class methods to gain it. (Amen) ... God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race (Yeah, Amen) and the creation of a society where all men will live together as brothers and every man (Oh yeah) will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality." King, *Papers*, 6:416.

Much of his brief life was devoted to the dream of seeing African Americans—and their white neighbors—share together in the promises of liberal democratic equality.

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.¹⁰⁶

These famous words, and many thousands of lesser-known words like them, indicate that the social realization of liberal equality was at the very heart of what King referred to as his "dream." Even so, a liberal democratic aspiration is not the same thing as a liberal democratic identity. The first is a vision of a social order, the second is a vision of a self. And though, as I noted above, understanding the political vision American democracy requires us to hold them together, understanding the anthropological vision of Martin Luther King requires that we pull them slightly apart. In my view, though King unequivocally aspired to a liberal democratic future for his people, he resisted doing so on the basis of a liberal democratic identity. To understand King's resistance to the identity of liberal equality, we must understand three besetting problems that he discerned within it.

The Problem of Conferral

¹⁰⁶ King, Testament, 17.

For American whites, the conviction of a democratic identity—of a self that is endowed with unalienable rights—was axiomatic. This conviction is traceable to several sources: Christian theological anthropology, Enlightenment political philosophy, and the social habits of the white supremacist social order, to name a few. That said, it was the powerful eighteenth-century convergence of these sources that gave this conviction its revolutionary force. Because of this convergence, American whites simply assumed that they had an intrinsic form of dignity *and* that this dignity ought to express itself in social, particularly democratic, shape. This is the essence of the identity of liberal equality: the indivisible fusion of individual and social dignity. For white Americans, this identity was, in Jefferson's phrase, "self-evident."

When it came to African Americans however, neither these truths nor, for that matter, the *self*, seemed to be evident at all. As we have seen, the central African-American experience of the identity of liberal equality has been its *denial*. By animalizing, demonizing, and infantilizing African Americans, white supremacists—for nearly four hundred years—had been able to successfully deny the very humanity of African Americans.¹⁰⁷ But another important experience—one more relevant to King's concern—was not the denial of this identity, but its *bifurcation*, meaning that the identity of liberal equality is a fusion of two convictions: individual and social dignity.

¹⁰⁷ One powerful example of the success of this campaign of denial can be seen in the "I Am a Man" posters used in the Memphis Sanitation Strike in the spring of 1968, King's last protest. This phrase is, in all likelihood, a direct reference to a medallion made in 1787 by English potter Jeremiah Wedgewood in support of British abolition efforts. This medallion—one of the most popular abolitionist images ever made—depicted a manacled African-American man wreathed in the words, "Am I not a man and a brother?" This same question—nearly 200 years later—plagued African Americans in the United States.

For American whites, these two elements were a single and seamless whole; individual dignity and social dignity were co-inherent, even synonymous with each other. Indeed, as Jefferson's famous words suggest, the very purpose of specifying individual dignity was to justify its obvious social correlate. With respect to African Americans, however, this indivisibility was, like the Red Sea, miraculously divided. On the one hand, the power of the white supremacist black identity notwithstanding, Christian accounts of the image of God—and, though to a lesser degree, liberal accounts of individual worth gave African Americans both a basis and a language for their own individual dignity. Illustrative of this point is the story—one of King's favorites—of the African-American slave preacher who, looking at his congregation one morning said, "You ain't no slave. You ain't no nigger. You is a child of God."¹⁰⁸

That said, while individual dignity became a strong and deeply consoling theme in African-American identity, its social correlate remained elusive. The following baptismal liturgy from South Carolina went out of its way to show that an African American becoming a Christian, and thus a spiritual "brother" or "sister" to white Christians, was not at all the same thing as becoming a social equal to those same white Christians:

[Do] You declare in the presence of God and before this Congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience that you owe to your Master while you live, but merely for the good of Your Soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessings promised to the members of the Church of Jesus Christ [?]¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: the Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 21. See also Thurman, *Disinberited*, 39.

¹⁰⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 123. This was also true in Virginia, whose legislators declared that "baptisme doth not alter the condition of a person as to his bondage or freedome." Holt, *Fire*, 62.

To preach individual dignity in a slave church was one thing; to express it in a social order was another thing altogether. In this way, the identity of liberal equality that white Americans experienced as an unbroken whole was, for African Americans, torn apart. This sundering had two important effects on African Americans. The first is what might be called an individual effect. This refers to the invisible but powerful sense of inner conflict born of the contradiction between individual and social conceptions of the African-American self. This conflict is the "double consciousness" described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his work, *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in mused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows.¹¹⁰

The bifurcation of the American identity of liberal equality, in other words,

constituted a bifurcation of the individual African-American self. A second effect of this bifurcation, however, was social—revising the nature of the liberal identity itself. While the identity of liberal equality was gained through the mere act of *recognition* for white Americans, it could only be gained through an act of *conferral* for African Americans. That is to say, while white Americans could simply assume the integration of individual and

¹¹⁰ Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader, 29.

social dignity, African Americans had to achieve it. And, under the conditions of white supremacy, the only path to this integration was white conferral. In an 1846 letter written from Ireland to fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass summarized the experience of conferral in words, as is the way of double consciousness, both bitter and relieved: "Lo! The chattel becomes a man!"¹¹¹

This quality of conferral was an innovation in the identity of liberal equality. And while the sources of this innovation are complicated, its consequences for African Americans are not. On one hand, African-American democratic life took on an inherently agonistic quality. What others had acquired by birth, African Americans could only attain by will. This is why, as King himself illustrated, African-American democratic life is so often characterized as a "struggle." And though this struggle has taken many forms—from ingratiation, to manumission, to revolution—its fundamental quality as struggle has endured. On the other hand, because this struggle took place in the context of white supremacy, African-American democratic life also took on an inherently Sisyphean quality. For African Americans, the attainment of equality was not just a struggle, but a struggle without an end. One of the most moving expressions of these two qualities comes, not surprisingly, from Frederick Douglass in his speech "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" delivered on July 5, 1852, in Rochester, New York. After spending several minutes movingly recounting the revolutionary achievements of the American founders (though portentously describing them to his largely white audience as "your" fathers), Douglass then turned to show the hypocritical folly with which white America had—through its treatment of African Americans—scorned this inheritance:

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¹¹¹ Douglass, Selected, 19.

Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? I am not included within the pale of your glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine.... What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham, your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.¹¹²

These words, though molten, are not, however, vindictive. They are not merely an expression of personal anguish over either Douglass' personal enslavement or his "identification" with the enslavement of others. They are, fundamentally, an expression of political scorn: a mocking criticism of America's selective conferral of its own liberal identity, its hypocritical refusal to apply the basis of its own revolution to human beings living within that revolution's bounds. As Douglass says,

You profess to believe "that of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth," and hath commanded all men, everywhere, to love one another; yet you notoriously hate (and glory in the hatred) all men whose skins are not colored like your own. You declare before the world, and are understood by the world to declare that you "hold these truths self-evident that all mean are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which according to your own Thomas

¹¹² Douglass, Selected, 194-195.

Jefferson, "is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose," a seventh part of the inhabitants of your country.¹¹³

In these words Douglass ridicules the perversity of a white supremacist American order, while recognizing that the liberal democratic identity of some refuses it in others. This, in its essence, is the problem of conferral, that while liberal equity is for some an act of recognition, defended in blood, it is for others an act of conferral that even blood may not secure. This problem of conferral was not lost on King or his hearers. Indeed, the boycott of the past eleventh months—with its simple, original goal of fair seating on a public bus—had been little more than an exhausting demonstration of its recalcitrance. For all of its alleged radiance, the light of liberal equity espoused by the authors of the Declaration had—more than a century after Douglass' words—not yet fallen on African Americans. Because of this, on the eve of the boycott in December 1955, nearly a year before, as King sought to justify what was about to unfold, this problem of conferral was his central theme.

You know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression [thundering applause].... We are here, we are here this evening because we're tired now (Yes) [applause].... We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist [applause].... We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.¹¹⁴

Eleven months later, as King's congregation sat in the Holt Street church in November 1956, the success of the boycott had given them a glimmer of this promised

¹¹³ Ibid., 203.

¹¹⁴ King, Papers, 3:72-73.

daybreak coming. Yet, as King well knew, it was only a glimmer. Though the United States Supreme Court had ruled in their favor, they still had to wait a number of days before they could enjoy the equal seating to which they were entitled. But this was just the beginning. Given that the goal had become not just the integration of the buses but also the integration of the entire social order, King warned his congregation that the struggle would have to continue and sought to encourage them to continue with it:

[This] doesn't mean that when the bus problem is solved all the problems are solved. (No) There will be others. But we must keep on moving and keep on keeping on.... We'll keep going through the sunshine and the rain. Some days will be dark and dreary, but we will keep going. Prodigious hilltops of opposition will rise before us, but we will keep going. Mountains of evil will stand in our path, but we will keep going. (Yes) ... We can't afford to stop. (Yes) We've got to keep moving.¹¹⁵

King and his people knew the truth. In spite of the success of the boycott, in spite of the integration of the buses, in spite of the affirmation of the Supreme Court, the identity of liberal equality had not yet been conferred. The Sisyphean struggle would continue.

The Problem of Provisionality

In the days after the Civil War, it seemed to many African Americans that the long-awaited conferral of a liberal identity had finally come. And so it had. *The Emancipation Proclamation* of 1863, in freeing Southern slaves, also conferred upon them the legal status of humanity. The Thirteenth Amendment, adopted two years later, outlawed slavery forever. Following in the wake of these, the rapidly adopted *Civil Rights Acts* of 1866, 1871, and 1875 and the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments

¹¹⁵ King, Papers, 3:432-433.

conferred citizenship, equal protection under the law, equal access to public accommodations, and suffrage protection, respectively. These powerful acts of conferral gave African Americans a sense that Lincoln's promise of a "new birth of freedom" had arrived.¹¹⁶

But as we have seen, although this liberal identity was formally conferred upon African Americans, the social and political realities of the post-war America kept it from being fully inhabited. This fact exposed the second problem for the identity of liberal equality—its *provisionality*. At the most basic level, this expressed itself in the fact that this identity could, the force of its conferral notwithstanding, be provisionally *embodied*. That is to say, while the Constitution conferred the fact of citizenship upon African Americans, it did not—and could not—guarantee that the entailments of such an identity would be fully embodied in the actual practices of their social lives.

While this provisional embodiment had many social expressions—especially after the failure of Reconstruction—perhaps the clearest is the Supreme Court's *Plessy v*. *Ferguson* decision of 1896. In 1890, reflecting the beginnings of a new Jim Crow order, the state of Louisiana passed a *Separate Car Act* requiring separate train accommodations for white and black Americans. Local African-American political activists, persuaded that this state law violated the Fourteenth Amendment, sought to challenge this law in Federal Court. To do so, they persuaded Homer Plessy, a free "octoroon" African American to ride in a white car, secure arrest, and take his case to trial. In time, the case reached their desired destination: the United States Supreme Court. The court, however, sided with the state of Louisiana. In a cynical refashioning of the language of the Declaration of

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¹¹⁶ Lincoln, Abraham. "The Gettysburg Address." 19 Nov 1863.

Independence, the court famously asserted that democratic identity may be faithfully expressed in "separate but equal" terms:

We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.... The argument also assumes that social prejudices may be overcome by legislation, and that equal rights cannot be secured to the negro except by an enforced commingling of the two races. We cannot accept this proposition. If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals.¹¹⁷

The court's decision was explicitly founded upon the conviction that liberal equality, when it came to African Americans, entailed certain unique provisions. Chief among these provisions was *separation*. African Americans could, so the argument went, be both fully equal to whites and yet fully separate from the social, economic, and civic opportunities white Americans enjoyed. Thus, in a way that would have profound implications for the shape of the American future, social equality and social participation were segregated.

This segregation led—as a matter of course—to the second aspect of liberal equity's provisionality. Not only was it provisionally embodied, in the end it could also only be provisionally *beld*. That is to say, this identity—having been conferred—could simply be taken away. And so it was. In the years following the collapse of federal oversight of post-war Reconstruction, Southern state governments began a slow but

¹¹⁷ Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U. S. 537 (1896).

inexorable process of rolling back the effects of the "identity-conferring" executive, legislative, and judicial acts of the 1860s and 1870s.

This process, as we have seen, was multi-form: Economically, through the creditbased morass of the sharecrop system, former slaves became bonded laborers. Politically, suffrage requirements suppressed African-American influence of democratic process. Legally, criminal statutes were rewritten and reinterpreted to allow the broad grounds for the arrest and re-enslavement of African Americans through the convict leasing system. Socially, the development of local ordinances governing institutions—such as schools, transportation, and businesses—effectively excluded African Americans from the very infrastructure of civic life. While (in keeping with the theme of public theater) these efforts were characterized as expressions of the rights of private citizens to order their affairs and the rights of sovereign states to structure their society, their effect was simply to denude the meaning of African-American liberal equality. Perhaps the most poignant symbol of this denudation was lynching.

When considering the social meaning of lynching, it is important to understand that it arose concomitantly with other, more subtle efforts to subvert African-American equality. Indeed the high water mark of American lynching was from 1890–1930, the very years in which Jim Crow laws were taking social shape. This is no mere coincidence. Lynching, for all of its unbridled and chaotic horror, was not an irrational social anomaly in white supremacist society. It was, to the contrary, the most public expression of its

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aims.¹¹⁸ This fact was not lost on Frederick Douglass who, nearly thirty years after the *Emancipation Proclamation*, wrote:

All the presumptions of the law and society are against the Negro. In the days of slavery he was presumed to be a slave, even if free, and his word was never taken against that of a white man. To be accused [is] to be condemned.... The men who break open jails and with bloody hands destroy human life are not alone responsible. These are not the men who make public sentiment. They are simply the hangmen, not the court, judge, or jury. They simply obey the public sentiment of the South, the sentiment created by wealth and respectability, by the press and the pulpit.¹¹⁹

Douglass saw lynching for what it was: the scornful spectacle of the inherent and profound provisionality of African-American liberal equality. As with the quality of conferral, King and his hearers understood the problem of provisionality perfectly. Over the course of their year-long struggle (a struggle that almost perfectly re-dramatized that of Homer Plessy sixty years earlier), they faced the constant knowledge that any ground they gained might at any moment be reversed. White Montgomery understood this as well. Indeed the revision of African-American equality was the secret hope of private terror and public theater alike. Because of this, King, as he stood before his victorious congregation on Holt Street that evening, reminded them of this provisionality. In helping them to understand the rationale for stopping their carpool system, even in the face of the Supreme Court's vindication, King said this:

[In spite of the Supreme Court's ruling] this [local] injunction is still on us, the temporary injunction, and that means that our car pool is still out of operation ...

¹¹⁸ On this see, Amy Louise Wood, Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and James Allen, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms, 2000).

¹¹⁹ Douglass, Selected, 750.
we're going to continue to do that until we go back to the buses, until the mandate comes down...I don't believe any court will be ambitious enough ... to get an injunction against feet. [laughter and applause]¹²⁰

This knowing laughter at the notion that a court would try to get injunction even against human feet betrays the relentlessness with which the white supremacist order sought to revise even the slightest forms of equality available to African Americans. And even though King spoke these words from the perspective of victory, he knew—as we saw above—that the struggle would continue. He knew that, no matter how promising that morning's conferral of equality had been, it was provisional. He knew the possibility that in time even that day's triumph could be marked by Du Bois' tragic epitaph: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."¹²¹

The Problem of Self-Referentiality

King's final problem of the identity of liberal equality is of particular importance. This is because, unlike the previous two problems, it is a reflection of not simply the African-American experience of liberal equality, but with the identity of liberal equality itself. At the heart of the liberal democratic identity lies a tension between understanding oneself as individually free (the *liber*) and understanding oneself as also bound to the freedom of others (the *aequalis*). Because of this, one of the inescapable struggles of democratic life has been the struggle to locate—and at times to fix—the mysterious borderland between individual liberty and social equality. In truth, there is no precise

¹²⁰ King, Papers, 3:427.

¹²¹ Cf. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, 26.

location. There is only the constant work of holding two strong, and at times opposing, convictions together: Each human being is endowed with an unalienable right to pursue their own life, liberty, and happiness; and the government exists to secure the free exercise of that right to its citizens, each of whom has his/her own vision of what such happiness entails.

This work has fueled some of the most important political debates of the modern age about the rights of an individual; the nature and limits of authority; the relationship between branches and levels of governments; and the character of common life. And not only has it sparked debates: This struggle has also shaped the self-understanding, social habits, and daily experiences of millions of people living within a democratic order. This suggests that the tension inherent in liberal equality is, in some ways, the source of democracy's vitality, the poles within which it constantly struggles to self-correct. Given this, one of the enduring themes of democratic life is the temptation to *self-referentiality*, the temptation finally to refer the rights and privileges of democratic life to the self.

At the most basic and perhaps most obvious level, this temptation expresses itself in terms of a *self-referential individualism*, in which a given individual seeks to express their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in a way that correspondingly diminishes the equally democratic claims of others. This is, perhaps, democracy's besetting sin. As we will see in the next chapter, it is certainly the case that King worried that his people, having been given a bit of freedom, would succumb to this temptation and begin to pursue their rights at the expense of others. Because of this, King repeatedly sought to steer the ethos of the civil rights movement away from this sort of selfreferential individualism. King's greater concern, however, was over what might counterintuitively be referred to as *self-referential collectivism*. This is the tendency to refer both democratic identity and the rights and privileges it entails not simply to the self, but to the group in which the self is a part.

Throughout its history, American democracy has been not simply marked by but *defined* by this sort of self-referential collectivism—the collective of *whiteness*. That is to say, the framework in which American democratic political debates and civic habits have taken shape is a framework that assumes *whiteness* as the norm. Indeed from the beginning, American struggles for individual liberty and social equality have largely served to advance *white* liberty and *white* equality. This is not at all to suggest that African Americans have not played important roles in those struggles. Nor is it to suggest that African Americans in view. It is simply to suggest that because African Americans historically have been excluded from the horizon of the American democratic imagination, the *civic fruit* of these struggles was the enhancement of liberty and equality *for whites*. The practical truth throughout American democratic history is that the "*we*" who hold, the "*truths*" that are held, and "*self*" to whom these truths are evident have fundamentally referred back to whiteness.

The fruit of this democratic history is that white Americans and African Americans have had qualitatively different experiences in the American democratic order, a difference not in degree but in *kind*. For American whites, the basic democratic struggle between individual freedom and social equality is an assumed political inheritance. This is because no matter how fierce the political debates or how fraught the social order, American democracy's basic framework has been *whiteness*. African Americans, on the

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other hand, had no such inheritance. Except in the most unusual circumstances, white American conflicts over individual liberty and social equality did not truly refer to them. Their existence was defined not by democracy's inner conflict but by its outer boundary. This redefinition was the foundation of American democratic white supremacy. By simply referring liberal equality to whiteness, American whites denied blacks the democratic identity that is the *sine qua non* of democratic participation. This allowed whites not only to create a civic order whose daily habits reinforced white superiority through slavery, secession, segregation, and murder, but also to view themselves as *democratic* while doing so. Thus, in the political alchemy of self-referential collectivism, democratic identity became little more than the collective will to power.

This self-referential setting is the context in which both King and his hearers had lived their lives. Their experience of freedom—of other people's freedom—had been the experience of self-referentiality. King knew—because of this—that while the Supreme Court's decision had secured a measure of freedom, it had also subjected them to temptation: the temptation to mirror the logic of white supremacy by understanding their newfound freedom in collectively self-referential terms. This framework explains one of the most revealing parts of King's speech that evening in Montgomery, in which he resists the identity of liberal equality as a sufficient basis for democratic life:

You know we talk a lot about our rights. And we ought to—we're supposed to, and we have certain unalienable rights. That's the glory of our Constitution: that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But not only must we become bogged down in rights, because if we stop there we might misuse our rights. We might use our rights to trample over other people's rights (That's right). It's not only rights that we are seeking. We not only have the right to be free, we have the duty to be free (Yes). And when you see freedom in sense of duty, it becomes greater than seeing it in sense of right, your right to be free. You have a duty to be free. And when you see that you have a duty to be free, you discover that you have a duty to respect those who don't even want you to have freedom (Yes)....Somehow freedom is this duty to respect all people ... to respect them as a personality, a sacred personality with the image of God in them.¹²²

In these words, King affirms the fact of liberal equality; the fact of freedom both for one's self and for one's neighbor. In doing so, he not only directly refutes the selfreferentiality of the white supremacist order, but he also warns his African-American hearers against the temptation to establish a self-referential order of their own. He does so, however, by appealing to grounds outside of liberal equality itself. He grounds his call to democratic life not in the democratic identity of unalienable rights, but in the theological identity of the image of God. It was not the last time King would do so. In a speech the following month, he put it this way:

We cannot be satisfied with a court 'victory' over our white brothers. We must respond to the decision with an understanding of those who have opposed us and with an appreciation of the difficult adjustments that the court order poses for them.... If we insist on our 'rights' we will return to the buses with the psychology of victors. We will think and say—by our manner if not our words—that we are the victors. This would be unworthy of us and a barrier to the growth we hope for in others.... We are appealing especially to church people to examine their lives in the light of the lives and teachings of the great religious leaders. They teach that all men, whatever their race or color, are children of one Father and therefore brothers, one of another. He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.¹²³

A few days later, in a speech detailing the next steps in the Montgomery struggle for democracy, King elaborated on this call to love, saying:

¹²² King, Papers, 3:428-429.

¹²³ King, Papers, 3: 447, 449.

We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of civilization. There is still a voice crying out in the terms that echo across the generations saying: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you, that you may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven. This love might well be the salvation of our civilization...It means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men.¹²⁴

By appealing to the themes of understanding, appreciation, prayer, blessing, brotherhood, and love, King sought to help his hearers understand both themselves and their neighbors in terms other than the identity of liberal equality. Indeed, while an identity of liberal equality can accommodate such categories, it cannot generate them and it certainly cannot require them. But King *does* require them. And he does so because he understood that an identity of liberal equality—a self-understanding anchored in constitutional rights—with its inherent susceptibility to conferral, provisionality, and selfreferential reinterpretation, was an insufficient basis for democratic life. Because of this, as King stood before his people that evening, he reminded them that if they were to realize the dream of democratic equality, they would have to do so based on a vision of identity anchored outside of democracy itself.

C. "Brothers, One of Another:" The Turn to Agapic Identity

A glimpse of this identity came earlier in the evening service that King preached at Holt Street in November 1956. After an opening hymn and before King's presentation, a young pastor named Robert Graetz (1928 –) stepped to the pulpit. Graetz, a recent graduate of a Lutheran seminary in Ohio, was the new white pastor of Montgomery's

¹²⁴ King, Papers, 3:459. See also the sermon, "Conquering Self-Centeredness" in King, Papers, 4:248-258.

small and mostly African-American Trinity Lutheran church. He and his young family had arrived just the year before, sent to Montgomery on a "missionary assignment" to take the place of the previous pastor, an African American named Nelson Trout. Trinity Lutheran, though small in size and influence when compared to the local African-American Baptist congregations, had nonetheless, by virtue of its African-American private school, played an important role Montgomery's African-American community.

Upon his arrival, Graetz devoted himself to maintaining this role, becoming the first white pastor to live in the church's parsonage, located in an African-American neighborhood, and gently insisting on sitting in the "Negro" section of movie theaters and buses. Gentle though he was, decisions such as these made Graetz's presence awkward for Montgomery's white community. When the bus boycott began just a few months after his arrival, however, this awkwardness hardened into animus. Indeed many Montgomery whites, unable to imagine African-American activism in its own right, viewed Graetz as the boycott's organizer, as an "outside agitator" come to disrupt the social order.

Welcome or not, however, Graetz remained present with his people. He was with them in the back of the bus before the arrest of Rosa Parks. He was with them when they voted to initiate the boycott in response. He was with them when they shared rides through the city and when they walked miles to their jobs. Because of this, when they gathered in the Holt Street church to celebrate their victory, he was given the honor of reading the evening's scripture. White, tall, lanky, and big-eared—looking every bit the Midwestern Lutheran—Graetz stepped to the pulpit to read. King recalls the moment:

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After our opening hymn, the Scripture was read by Rev. Robert Graetz, a young Lutheran minister who has been a constant reminder to us in these trying months that white people as well as colored people are trying to expand their horizons and work out the day-to-day applications of Christianity. He read from Paul's famous letter to the Corinthians: 'though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not love, I am nothing...Love suffereth long and is kind...When he got to the words, 'When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things,' the congregation burst into applause. Soon there was shouting, cheering, and the waving of handkerchiefs. To me this was an exciting, spontaneous expression by the Negro congregation of what had happened to it these months. The people knew they had come of age, that they had won new dignity. They would never again be the old, subservient, fearful appeasers. But neither would they be resentful fighters for justice who could overlook the rights and feelings of their opponents. When Mr. Graetz concluded the reading with the words: 'And now abideth faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love,' there was another spontaneous outburst. Only a people who had struggled with all the problems involved in trying to be loving in the midst of bitter conflict could have reacted in this way.¹²⁵

As Graetz read, both King and his congregation understood that they were again crossing a threshold, entering into a new way of understanding themselves and understanding their neighbors. No longer would their lives be defined by the identity of racial supremacy or even, given its frailty, the identity of liberal equality. The boycott victory had opened a new identity to them all: *an identity of agapic unity*.

The Identity of Agapic Unity

To embrace an identity of agapic unity is, in its barest form, to view human beings not fundamentally through the lens of race or of rights, but through the lens of love. It is to see the self and the other neither as foes seeking racial supremacy, nor merely as citizens seeking liberal equality, but—to use King's words—as "brothers" seeking loving

¹²⁵ King, Papers, 3:446

union.¹²⁶ This is not to ignore the historical themes of race or the democratic aspirations of liberalism. Nor is it to naively deny the violent realities of opposition. As we will see, it is quite the contrary. It is simply to situate each of these anthropological frameworks (as well as a potential host of others) within the larger framework of unconditional love. This identity of agapic unity was an early and recurring theme in King's ministry. Its basic guestions formed the substance of his earliest known speech,¹²⁷ a number of his seminary¹²⁸ and graduate writings,¹²⁹ his summer sermons in his father's pulpit at Ebenezer,¹³⁰ and his first sermons in his own pulpit at Dexter Avenue.¹³¹ It was present in his address on the night before the boycott began,¹³² and in those he gave throughout the boycott's duration.¹³³ On each of these occasions, King labored to articulate the nature of an agapic identity and its implications for his hearers. In the months following the boycott, as the implications of this identity emerged, as its critics countered, and—in time—as its credibility staggered, King struggled to develop and defend this identity more deeply. And though he was never able to fully systematize this identity, its basic shape emerged over the years, ordered by four fundamental anthropological convictions.

"A Child of the Almighty God"

¹²⁶ King's consistent use of masculine language, while a reflection of his use of the language of available biblical translation, also raises legitimate questions about the place of women in his anthropological imagination. For a critique of King's failure to transcend sexism, even as he sought to overcome racism, see Garth Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyiness: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theory of Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 172-184.

¹²⁷ King, Papers, 1:109-111

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1:232-242; 1.273-280

¹²⁹ Ibid., 2:139-152, 179-186, 248-256, 269-280

¹³⁰ Ibid., 6:126

¹³¹ Ibid., 6:174, 214.

¹³² Ibid., 3:72

¹³³ Ibid., 3:115, 151, 198, 232, 236-38, 241, 266, 278, 305-306, 326-27, 344, 414-420; 6.241-271.

The first of King's anthropological convictions is that all human beings are "children of the Almighty God." One of the most enduring, if inequitably applied, convictions of the Christian tradition is that human beings are creatures of dignity; that we are, in some ineradicable sense, glorious. It is also one of Christianity's most influential convictions: its light has illumined countless individual lives, and its heat has fueled profound social transformations. And yet its power may be most clearly seen in its effect on those whose dignity is assaulted and glory denied. For these, the disinherited, the claim that all human beings are crowned with the dignity of love comes as a healing word of prophetic affirmation.¹³⁴

Like many African Americans living in the South, Martin Luther King understood the meaning of disinheritance. Though he was a son of what to many would seem considerable privilege, King nonetheless belonged to a disinherited people living in a social order that, for centuries, had denied its dignity and scorned its glory. King's knowledge of this history and his own experience of its bitter fruit led him, as it led so many African Americans before him, to derive his identity not from the denigrating structures of American democracy but from the dignifying teachings of the Christian faith. This identity was the foundation of his home,¹³⁵ the theme of his church,¹³⁶ and the substance of his education.¹³⁷ This identity, with its insistence on personal dignity, served

¹³⁴ On this, see Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, especially pp.39-47.

¹³⁵ Cf. Baldwin, *Voice*, also Richard Wayne Wills Sr., *Martin Luther King and the Image of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29-35.

¹³⁶ Baldwin, The Voice of Conscience and Wills, Image, 36-41. BRANCH

¹³⁷ Baldwin, Voice, Wills, Image, 41-112, Branch, Parting.

as a powerful antibody to white supremacy and gave African Americans a sense of "self" of what King called "somebodyness"¹³⁸—even while living in its midst. As he said,

When the Christian comes to believe that he is a child of an all loving Father he feels that he counts, that he belongs. He senses [a] confirmation of his roots...During the years of slavery in America it is said that after a hard days work the slaves would often hold secret religious meetings. All during the working day they were addressed with unnecessary vituperations and insulting epithets. But as they gathered in these meetings they gained a renewed faith as the old unlettered minister would come to his triumphant climax saying, you—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God's children. This established for them a true ground of personal dignity.¹³⁹

This pursuit of dignity is an important aspect of King's early theological

development. Rejecting the "stream of pessimism"¹⁴⁰ that he saw in American fundamentalism's emphasis on depravity and judgment, King, along with a number of his mentors and peers, moved toward what he saw as the more "optimistic" anthropology of theological liberalism. As King wrote in an early paper, "The liberal does not agree with the orthodox views of human nature. For him there never was a fall of man. The liberal sees the value in human nature. He cannot sing with sincerity the hymn, would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as l?"¹⁴¹ While, as we will see, King eventually attenuated his affirmations of theological liberalism, his affirmations of dignity only deepened, in time becoming one of the central themes of his life.

¹³⁸ Cf. Baker-Fletcher, Sombodyness: Martin Luther King and the Theory of Dignity.

¹³⁹ King, *Papers*, 1:281. This slave account is taken from Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 21. See also Thurman, *Disinberited*, 39.

¹⁴⁰ "When we turn to the reformer's view of man and human nature, we are immediately confronted with a stream of pessimism." King, *Papers*, 2:179. "In the same [vein] we must reject Luther's and Calvin's view that man is incapable of performing any saving good and that man can do nothing to save himself. Certainly we must agree that the image of God is terribly scared [sic] in man, but not to the degree that man cannot move toward God." King, *Papers*, 2:190

¹⁴¹ King, Papers, 1:240

But for King, in what did this glory consist? In the broadest of terms, Christian theology has anchored its conviction of human dignity to the concept of the "image of God." In this framework, human dignity is derived from the fact that each human reflects or *images* God, who is both the source and substance of dignity itself. Over the history of Christian theology, the nature of this image has been variously defined. This variance is reflected in King's own reflections on the theme. Following a long theological tradition, King sometimes identified human glory with the human mind, marveling that "man, that being God created just a little lower than the angels, is able to think a poem and write it; he's able to think a symphony and compose it; he's able to imagine a great civilization and create it."¹⁴²

At other times, King framed human glory in terms of humanity's moral responsibility, its free moral agency to act in the world. "Along with this strong intellectual capacity in man, there is a will. Man has within himself the power of choosing his supreme end.... [and] acting upon his own nature.... [He] can be true or false to his nature.... a hero or a fool. Both possibilities, the noble and the base alike, indicate man's greatness."¹⁴³ King's emphasis on these two aspects of the image of God was more than mere catechesis. It was an affirmation of black dignity at the very points at which that dignity had so often been denied: intellectual and moral capacity. Again and again in his sermons, speeches, and lectures, King reminded his largely African-American audiences that they—in their minds and their wills—reflected the dignity of the *imago dei*, or image of God.

¹⁴² King, Papers, 6:178.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 6:178.

Significantly, however, King's most consistent framing of the image of God was not in terms of mind or of will, but in terms of *love*. By the nature of the case, all conceptions of the image of God rest upon prior conceptions of the nature of God. For King, God's nature, fundamentally and unequivocally, was love. In notes for King's first sermon following his move to Dexter Avenue, titled "God's Love," King wrote these words: "God is love. God's love is not a single act, but is the abiding state of God's heart. God does not begin to love. God's love has no beginning and will have no ending. God always has loved and always will love."144 As we will see in the following chapters, however, this is not simply a transcendent love contained within God's self. Indeed, King's early criticism of Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy was based on his concern that it removed the reality of God's love from the world (what King called Barth's "radical transcendence").¹⁴⁵ King believed that God's love must be understood as a love expressed in, for, and through the world.¹⁴⁶ As he said, "God is the personal spirit, perfectly good, who ... creates, sustains, and orders all. The motive of God in the universe is holy love.... Such holy love ... being the substance of his character, is the motive for God's activity in relation to other existence."147 These words are not mere homiletic fodder. In fact, King spent the months prior to Dexter writing a doctoral dissertation in their defense.¹⁴⁸ His

¹⁴⁴ King, *Papers*, 6:180. Much of King's early insistence on God's love was developed explicitly against what he perceived as the tendency, inherited the Protestant Reformers, to emphasize God's sovereignty over God's love. As he said, "God is first and foremost and all loving Father and any theology which fails to recognize this, in an attempt to maintain the sovereignty of God is betraying everything that is best in the Christian tradition." King, *Papers*, 2:188, 190.

¹⁴⁵ King, Papers, 2:104.

¹⁴⁶ "We've got to go back and rediscover the principle that there is a God behind the process." King, *Papers*, 2:253.

¹⁴⁷ King, Papers, 1: 244

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 2:339-548.

dissertation, written on the philosophy of personalism,¹⁴⁹ and titled A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Weiman, was theologically a defense of the enduring, active, and deeply personal love of God.¹⁵⁰

This view of God—as both fundamentally and personally loving—is critical to understanding King's view of human dignity. If, as King said, God fundamentally relates to "other existences" out of the motive of holy love, then this means that human beings are fundamentally to be understood as objects of love. For King, the first and foundational fact of human identity is this: We are loved by God. But this fact, as a matter of course, led on to another central aspect of King's notion of the *imago dei*. Given that God is fundamentally characterized by love, and given that human beings are not just loved by God but are also *made* in God's image, this means that human beings exist not only as recipients of love, but also as *bearers* of love. Human beings are, in other words, not simply loved by God, but are also created with the dignity of being lovers of God in return. In an early version of what was to become one of his most frequently repeated sermons "What is Man?," King put it this way:

Man is a spiritual being born to have communion with the eternal God of the universe. God creates every individual for a purpose—to have fellowship with him. This is the ultimate meaning of the image of God ... that man is designated for and called to a particular relation to God.... Man is a child of the almighty God, born for his everlasting fellowship.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Rufus Burrow, God and Human Dignity: the Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Burrow and Dwayne A Tunstall. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), chapters 4, 5 and 13;

¹⁵⁰ "To King, God was a readily perceivable entity, comprehendible and immanent. He preached that the knowable God maintained a personal interest in each human soul." King, *Papers*, 6:9.

¹⁵¹ King, *Papers*, 6:178-9. King anticipated many of these thoughts in an early seminary paper, written sometime in the 1949-1950 school year at Crozer seminary. In a section entitled, "What a Christian should believe about Himself," King wrote, "Each Christian should believe that he is made in the image of God. God creates every human being for a purpose, to have fellowship with him, to trust him.... man is

This framework of love is the foundation of King's notion of the *imago dei*. For King, human dignity is found not fundamentally in reason or in morality, but in love—in being loved by God and made to love God in return. This agapic identity allowed King to re-imagine the meaning of his fellow citizens in a way that the identities of racial supremacy and liberal equality could not, viewing them, as he wonderfully said, as "stamped with the indelible imprint of preciousness."¹⁵² This reimagining came first, naturally, to his African-American neighbors, a people who were "harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that [they were] Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, plagued with inner fears and outer resentments ... forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness."¹⁵³

Like generations of pastors before him, King understood that because of this situation, a crucial part of his work was to remind African Americans that they had been crowned with the dignity of love. For a people who, as he said, were this insistent on an ineradicable love-born dignity, this was nothing less than an anthropological revolution: "It's so easy for us to feel that we don't count, that we are not significant, that we are less than.... But I say to you this morning you should go out with the assurance that you belong and that you count and that you are somebody because God loves you..."¹⁵⁴ King

designated for and called to a particular relation with God (Brunner).... The concept of the image of God assures a man that he is capable of having fellowship with the divine. Man is privileged with a dynamic relationship with God." King, *Papers*, 1:280.

¹⁵² King, Papers, 6:410.

¹⁵³ King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in Testament, 293.

¹⁵⁴ King, Papers, 6:315.

also spoke, "Every Negro must feel that he is somebody. (All right, Yeah) He must come to see that he is a child of God and that all men are made in God's image."¹⁵⁵

In hundreds of sermons before African-American audiences, King repeated these words. And in time, as he surely intended, these words of anthropological revolution expressed themselves in terms of a cultural revolution. Indeed, for King it was precisely this affirmation of personal dignity that led the African Americans of Montgomery to seek democratic change. He explained this change in a talk given shortly after the boycott's end: "The extreme tension in race relations today is explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself and of his destiny.... We believe in ourselves."¹⁵⁶ This, for King, was the power of love's re-imagination—the recognition of one's own glory.¹⁵⁷

In time, as King turned his attention outside of the context of the American South, he began to speak in the same way about other oppressed minorities around the world. Looking to Africa, India, and especially Vietnam, King sought to recognize the dignity of those who, like African Americans, lived in contexts in which this dignity was denied. For him, the social unrest of these people was "at bottom a quest for freedom and human dignity on the part of people who have long been the victims of colonialism and imperialism."¹⁵⁸ King saw that part of his vocation was to speak of them in terms of this same agapic identity. In his most extended treatment of this theme, his 1967 speech on

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 4:334.

¹⁵⁶ King, Papers, 3:237-238.

¹⁵⁷ King's insistence that love requires the recognition of one's own dignity is an important way in which King's view of *agape* differs from Nygren. For Nygren, *agape* expresses itself in disinterest, an almost total self-forgetfulness. For King this is a mistake. *Agape* is not the denial of the self, but the proclamation of the self as loved, and bound in love to others, that frames the true essence of the agapic ethic. ¹⁵⁸ King, *Papers*, 6:323

the Vietnam War given at New York City's Riverside Church, King makes this calling explicit:

I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of son-ship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them. This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nations' self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.... 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. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men-for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? What then can I say to the 'Vietcong' or Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death if must I not share with them my life?¹⁵⁹

Given the context—the violent height of the Cold War—these words constituted a profound re-imagining of human identity. For in them, King defined human dignity not in terms of national boundary, political or economic system, or racial identity, but in terms of the total and self-sacrificing love of God. It is possible, however, to read these words simply as an expression of God's love for the oppressed; to see them as an expression of King's solidarity with the dispossessed around the world. And so they were. King, as we have seen, saw the call to speak dignity to the "weak and the voiceless."

But what of the oppressor? What of the powerful and the violent, the purveyors of private terror and public theater alike? This is an important question. For, as many Civil

¹⁵⁹ King, Testament, 234.

Rights activists well knew, it is one thing to apply an anthropology of love to those who show themselves to be "people of goodwill"—"black and white, Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant" alike. Given the context, the counter-cultural power of this impulse should not be ignored. It is another thing, however, to apply an anthropology of love to people of manifestly ill will. And yet King, often to his own harm, insisted that this agapic identity be recognized even in the enemy.

It is in this insistence that the power of King's agapic identity is most clearly beheld, for in it we see King contending not just for the dignity of the oppressed but also for the oppressor. Indeed, for King, this is love's clearest expression. As he said, "The only testing point for you to know whether you have real genuine love is that you love your enemy (Yeah), for if you fail to love your enemy there is no way for you to fit into the category of Christian love. And so this is what we have before us as Christians. This is what God has left for us. He's left us a love. As he loved us, so let us love the brother."¹⁶⁰

This love for the enemy, however, is no mere sentimentality, no naïve blindness to the enemy-ness of the enemy. Indeed, as we will see, King's agapic vision neither denies nor diminishes the reality of evil, violence, or harm. Instead, it refuses to reduce a human being to those things and make them into the oppressor's identity. For King, oppression was the aberration, the tragic mask that obscures a more fundamental dignity discernible only to the eyes of love. *Agape*, in other words, sees not less than evil, but more. Because of this, King devoted himself to cultivating these eyes in his hearers. In a Dexter Avenue sermon just one year after the boycott's triumphant end, King said it this way:

¹⁶⁰ King, Papers, 6: 444.

Within the best of us there is some evil, and within the worst of us there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals. The person who hates you most has some good in him. Even the nation that hates you most has some good in it. Even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls the "image of God," you begin to love him in spite of. No matter what he does, you see God's image there. And there is an element of goodness that he can never slough off. Discover the element of good in your enemy. And as you see to hate him, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude ... when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men not because they are likable, but because God loves them. You look at every man and you love him because you know God loves him.¹⁶¹

This vision of the love-wrought dignity of the enemy was, for King, fundamental to the logic of the civil rights movement. While, as we have seen, King certainly understood himself to be seeking a society that restored dignity to African Americans, it is was also the case that he sought a society that would restore dignity—true dignity—to white Americans. This is why King so often characterized the movement not simply as a struggle on behalf of the oppressed, but also on behalf of the oppressor. Indeed, at times and in a way that galled much of white America, King emphasized the needs of the oppressor, portraying the civil rights movement as an African-American missionary movement for the salvation of white sinners:

¹⁶¹ King, *Papers*, 4:318-319. See also a 1961 sermon given in the aftermath of the violent Freedom Rides, in which King echoed this same theme: "We must recognize that the negative deed of the enemy does not represent all that the individual is. His evil deed does not represent his whole being ... there is some good in the worst of us [Amen] and some evil in the best of us. (Amen) And when we come to see this we begin to love all men. And we see an element of good even in the person who is trying to defeat us and even in the person of the group that hates us most. And finally we come to see that there is within every man the image of God, and no matter how much it is scarred, it is still there. And so when we come to recognize that the evil act of our enemy neighbor is not the whole being of our enemy neighbor, we develop a capacity to love him in spite of his evil deed." King, *Papers*, 6:424.

Saint Paul assures us that the loving act of redemption was done "while we were yet sinners"—that is, at our greatest need for love. Since the white man's personality is greatly distorted by segregation, and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro. The Negro must love the white man, because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, his insecurities, and his fears.¹⁶²

And again:

"All that I am saying leads to this—along with our work on the foreign field we must begin to do a missionary work right here. Each of us must do this. And we must begin with the white man.... Love him."¹⁶³

This conviction that human beings have dignity because they are made both *by* and *for* love is the foundation of King's agapic identity. It is from this perspective that King re-imagined the agapic identity of his fellow human beings and insisted that they understand themselves and one another not first in terms of race, or even of democracy, but in terms of love—as "children of the Almighty God."

"The Gone-Wrongness of Human Nature"

King's vision of humanity as the children of God, while foundational, was also complicated. Early on, King's search for African-American dignity inclined him to resist the "fire and brimstone" of American fundamentalism and to embrace the optimistic anthropology of Protestant liberalism. This was especially the case during King's university and early seminary years, in which King's anthropological convictions were framed in decidedly optimistic terms. And yet even so, his daily experience of white humanity challenged this view. As much as he may have wanted to view humanity through the lens of what he often called "rosey-colored" glasses, his experience of

¹⁶² King, Testament, 19.

¹⁶³ King, Papers, 6:250.

inhumanity simply wouldn't allow it. Because of this, in his later seminary years, King's view of human identity went through what he called "a state of transition" in which he, while insisting on the reality of a glorious humanity, began also to insist on the reality of humanity gone wrong. In a seminary essay titled "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man," written sometime in the school year of 1949-50, King revealed the transition that was taking place:

The difficulty is found in the fact that my thinking about man is 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 I encountered there made it very difficult for me to believe in the essential goodness of man. Other 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 ... I have become a victim of eclecticism ... I do see [neo-orthodoxy's] emphasis on sin and the necessity for perpetual repentance in the life of man. I think liberal theology has too easily cast aside the term sin, failing to realize that many of our present ills result from the sins of men.¹⁶⁴

In these words, we see the beginning of the second fundamental aspect of King's view of human identity: that the insistence on human glory must be wed to an equally strong insistence on human sin. But what, for King, was human sin? In his earliest attempts to answer that question, King defaulted to some of the categories of liberal theology, describing human sin in terms of human limitation, in terms of the social constraints of history, wealth, and power. Though he remained concerned about these social constraints, over time he became increasingly critical of the limits of such formulations in addressing the profound social darkness facing African Americans. A 1951

¹⁶⁴ King, Papers, 1:272.

graduate school essay entitled, "Contemporary Continental Theology" is exemplary of this criticism:

Somehow we must rethink many of our so-called liberal theological concepts. Take the doctrine of man. There is a strong tendency in liberal Protestantism toward sentimentality about man.... Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency man faces the ever-present possibility of swift relapse not merely into animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice. Maybe man is more of a sinner than liberals are willing to admit. I realize that the sinfulness of man is often over-emphasized by some continental theologians, but at least we must admit that many of the ills of the world are due to plain sin. The tendency on the part of some liberal theologians to see sin as a mere [law] of nature which will be progressively eliminated as man climbs the evolutionary ladder seems to me quite perilous... Only the one who sits on the peak of his intellectual tower looking unrealistically with his rosey colored glasses on the scene of life can fail to see this fact. The word sin must come back into our vocabulary.¹⁶⁵

Interestingly, in moving away from the anthropology of liberalism, King began cautiously—to move toward the anthropology of fundamentalism that he had once rejected.¹⁶⁶ This is seen first in the fact that for King, sin is not first an external rupture of society, but an internal revolt against God. In what is perhaps his most extended treatment of this theme, a sermon written sometime between 1954 and 1960 titled "Man's Sin and God's Grace," King put it this way: "Sin is this revolt against God; sin is at bottom separation. It is alienation. It is the creature trying to project himself to the status of the creator.... Man is a sinner before the Almighty God. That is one of the basic facts of the universe and one of the basic facts of life."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ King, Papers, 2:136-137.

¹⁶⁶ This is not at all to say that King became a fundamentalist in every theological sense. He certainly did not. It is to say, however, that with respect to his view of persons, his anthropology is much *more* closely aligned with that of the Protestant Reformers—the American fundamentalist tradition—and even with certain aspects of neo-orthodoxy than it is with theological liberalism.

¹⁶⁷ King, Papers, 6:382.

This rejection of liberalism is also revealed in King's view that this revolt against God corrupts human beings, condemning them to both intractable struggle and inevitable failure. Suggesting an affinity for the deep moral realism of neo-orthodoxy, King went on to say, "Wherever there is a struggle for goodness, we discover on the other hand, a powerful antagonism, something demonic, something that seems to bring our loveliest qualities to evil and our greatest endeavors to failure." This was no mere spasm of cynicism. While it is true that King eventually developed a fair degree of ambivalence about what he saw as neo-orthodoxy's overly cynical view about the possibility of social goodness, it is also true that its insistence on the fundamental corruption of human beings remained one of his enduring themes. We will explore this more in Chapter 4.

One early expression of neo-orthodoxy's influence on King may be found in a lecture called "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr" given to Boston University's Dialectical Society in 1954:

Over and against these anthropologies which fail to do justice to the dimension of human nature, and which, in spite of ... the refutations of history, persist in falsifying the human situation by false notions of progress and by false dogmas of human perfectibility, Niebuhr sets forth the biblical and Christian anthropology ... [taking] issue with the utopian optimism of modernism.¹⁶⁸

Though given in 1954, the themes of this lecture remained consistent in King's thought for the rest of his life. Finally, King's "transition" may also be seen in that his view of sin—like his view of dignity—was universal, extending unequivocally to all.¹⁶⁹ As he said, "Every man experiences it.... So that in our own personal lives, as we look at

¹⁶⁸ King, Papers, 2:272.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 6:382.

ourselves, as we look at the personal dimensions of our everyday living, we discover this dimension of sin. And there is something about it that causes us to know ... that we are in eternal revolt against God."¹⁷⁰ Thus in spite of King's early draw to theological liberalism, his developing convictions about the theological, destructive, and universal character of sin led him finally to assess liberalism's anthropology as profoundly inadequate:

Now we've tried to get away from this in the modern world; we hate to hear the word sin. We try to run from it, and we try to talk about it in other terms. This is one of the weaknesses of religious liberalism ... and that is that it became a sentimental and soft feeling that man was evolving from a lower state to a higher state and eventually he would move on up the evolutionary ladder and throw off all of the evils and sin of his nature. Then, we came back to see that even after all of that man is still a sinner.... When man got through talking in terms of all of his bombastic and psychological phrases, he discovered that, at bottom, he was still a sinner before that Almighty God and that, at bottom, the conflict is not between the id and the superego but the conflict is between God and man. And the universe stands with that glaring picture of the reality of life—that man is a sinner; man is a sinner in need of God's redemptive power. We can never escape this fact.¹⁷¹

As with King's theological view of dignity, his view of depravity had profound implications for his view of civic life. In the same way that democratic life could not be truly understood apart from universal dignity, so it could not be understood apart from universal sin. Indeed for King, this sin was at the heart of American democracy's social afflictions. "Ultimately our problem is a theological one," he wrote to Coretta in a letter about American culture in 1952. "Man has revolted against God and through his humanistic endeavors he has sought to solve his problem himself only to find that he has

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 6:386.

¹⁷¹ King, Papers, 6:382-383.

ended up in disillusionment."¹⁷² Such a statement, written in such a context, could be viewed merely as the romantic and simplistic generalization of a young theological student. But for King it was not. It was an enduring conviction about the essentially theological character of civic life. In one of his most frequently repeated sermons, "Rediscovering Lost Values"—a sermon preached in the midst of the horrors of segregation and nuclear armament—King nonetheless insisted that the *real* problem was human sin. In an early version, preached in Detroit in the winter of 1954, he put it this way:

The problem is with man himself and man's soul. We haven't learned how to be just and honest and kind and true and loving. And that is the basis of our problem. The real problem is that through our scientific genius we've made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius we've failed to make of it a brotherhood. (Lord have mercy) The real danger confronting civilization today is that atomic bomb which lies in the hearts and souls of men (Lord have mercy) capable of exploding into the vilest of hate and into the most damaging selfishness. That's the atomic bomb we've got to fear today. (Lord help him) Problem is with men. (Yes, yes) Within the heart and souls of men. (Lord) That is the real basis of our problem.¹⁷³

That King viewed America's social problems in terms of sin explains two of the most his important categories for social redress. The first of these is *compassion*. One of the most important features of King's agapic identity is that because dignity is foundational, sin is seen as an aberration, an infirmity. This allows King, even in clearly seeing the reality of sin, to situate that sin inside the larger reality of love, seeing man not only as perpetrator but also as victim, even victim of his own folly. Doing so allows King to view "the sinner" not through the eyes of contempt, but through the eyes of compassion. This

¹⁷² Ibid., 6:125 .

¹⁷³ King, Papers, 2:249.

compassion is seen in the way that King, even while exposing the sins of America to his African-American congregations, often characterized the white American as both a "victim of his own sins," and a "victim of the blindness and cruelty of neighbors," suffering from a terrible and tragic form of moral blindness.¹⁷⁴ This can be clearly seen in the sermon, "Love in Action," portions of which King preached repeatedly. In this sermon, King compares white supremacists to the Roman soldiers at Jesus' cross, who, even as they crucified Christ, failed to realize the meaning of their actions:

They know not what they do said Jesus. Blindness was their trouble. Enlightenment was their need. We must recognize that Jesus was nailed to the cross not simply by sin but by blindness. The man who cried Crucify him were not bad men but blind men ... they knew not what they did. What a tragedy.... This tragic blindness is found in racial segregation.... Some of the most vigorous defenders of segregation are sincere in their beliefs and earnest in their motives.... There are some who sincerely feel that what they do in attempting to preserve segregation is best for themselves, their children, and their nation. In most instances they are good church people, anchored in the religious faith of their mothers and fathers.... They go on blindly believing in the eternal validity of an evil called segregation and the timeless truth of a myth called white supremacy. What a tragedy. Millions of Negroes have been crucified by conscientious blindness. Like Jesus on the cross we must look lovingly at our oppressors and say, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."¹⁷⁵

King's eyes of compassion were not, however, reserved for white Americans alone. He saw African Americans in the same way. While, as we have seen, King believed that all human beings—including African Americans—were in revolt against God, he also believed that African Americans were uniquely victimized by the "blindness and cruelty of their neighbors." Because of this, even as he lamented—and as we will see in the next chapter—vigorously resisted the sins of his people, the eyes of compassion led King to

¹⁷⁴ King, Papers, 1:276.

¹⁷⁵ King, Papers, 6:489, 491-492.

look not only at the sins themselves, but also the contexts in which those sins took shape. Not to do so was, in his mind, a form of cruelty, a religious sham.

As a minister of the gospel I must not only preach to men and women to be good, but I must be concerned about the social conditions that often make them bad. (Yeah) It's not enough for me to tell men to be honest, but I must be concerned about the economic conditions that make them dishonest. (Amen) It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but I must be concerned about the new Detroit, the new New York, the new Atlanta. (Amen, Tell it) It's all right to think of a city and the street flowing with milk and honey, but religion must be concerned about those streets in this world where individuals go to bed hungry at night. (Right, Amen) And any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and fails to be concerned about the economic conditions that corrupt them, the social conditions that damn them, the city governments that cripple them, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood.¹⁷⁶

While King was clear that human beings are "sinners before Almighty God," he was also clear that they were first "children of Almighty God." Because of this, King believed one of the fundamental callings of democratic life was the call to see with the eyes of compassion, to see that what others most needed was "not our condemnation, but our help."¹⁷⁷

From compassion flowed King's second most prominent category for social redress: *repentance*. King believed that because human beings are children of God, they have hope—even in sin. And while we will explore the meaning of this hope below, it is important to understand that King's hope comes through the act of *repentance*, of renouncing the sin that afflicts and returning once again to God, who is our home. King's sermons contained personal calls to repentance for sins such as pride, greed, lust, anger, and vanity, but one of the most important aspects of his preaching was the way in which

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 6:333.

¹⁷⁷ King, Papers, 6:200-201.

his sermons also conceived of repentance as a social category. Following the prophetic tradition of the Bible, King preached not just individual but collective, even national, repentance.

To this end, King commonly portrayed America as a sinful prodigal son who, through the selfishness of white supremacy, had left the home of his father and had fallen into abject misery.

America, You've trampled over sixty million of your precious citizens. You've called them dogs, and you have called them niggers. You have ... pushed them in an inferior economic and political position. And now you have made them almost depersonalized and inhuman. And there you are in that far country of oppression, trampling over your children.¹⁷⁸

Harsh as they were, these were not words of condemnation but of invitation to repent and find life: "But Western civilization, America, you can come home and if you will come home, I will take you in. And I will bring the fatted calf and I will cry out to all of the eternities, 'Hallelujah' for my nation has come home.... If you will rise up and come home, I'll take you in."¹⁷⁹ Thus for King, if human identity is to be truly conceived, it must be framed in terms of sin. For in the end, it is sin that estranges us from God, victimizes us, alienates us from one another, and ravages our social order. And though King insisted that the recognition of sin must not be an occasion for contempt, but rather for compassion and repentance, he also insisted that the denial of sin would not heal us; it would only condemn us to deeper harm.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 6:390.

¹⁷⁹ King, Papers, 6:390.

¹⁸⁰ "Now we must admit that through our sinfulness some of the image of God has left us. God's image has been terribly scarred by our sin. In our modern world we have tried to get away from this term sin. We have

"Lifted from the Valley of Hate"

King's notion of compassion and repentance, while properly derived from his anthropological vision of sin, nonetheless gestured toward the third aspect of his agapic identity: the capacity for redemption. Generally speaking, Christian claims about redemption are most basically claims about God and about God's power to renew that which sin has broken. So it was for King. As he said, "That's the beauty of our faith. It says that standing over against the tragic dimension of man's sin is the glorious dimension of God's grace. Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more exceedingly.... God's grace stands over man's sin."¹⁸¹ Indeed, as we will see in chapters three and four, King's framework, for both democratic action and democratic hope, was his belief in God's gracious and redemptive action in history.

It is important to understand, however, that King's vision of deliverance also functioned as a claim about human beings, about the possibility for personal transformation. That is, rather than viewing human beings as finally locked in the tragic dualism of dignity and depravity, King viewed persons through the lens of deliverance, believing that though "man has often made such a poor showing of himself.... Yet in the midst of this Christianity insists that there is hope for man¹⁸²... to be lifted from the

attempted to substitute for it high sounding psychological phrases and other explanations that will relieve us of responsibility. But my friends, whether we want to accept it or not, man is a sinner in need of God's grace. Whenever a man looks deep down into the depths of his soul he becomes painfully aware of the fact that the history of his life is the history of a constant revolt against God. 'All we like sheep have gone astray.' Every nation, every class and every man is a part of the gone-wrongness of human nature. Of all the silly, sentimental teachings which have ever characterized any generation the denial of human sin is the worst." King, *Papers*, 6:178.

¹⁸¹ King, Papers, 6:387-388.

¹⁸² Ibid., 6:253-254.

valley of hate to the high mountain of love."¹⁸³ At the heart of King's anthropology then is *possibility*; the belief that repentance can lead to transformation. And—as with sin—this transformation is not only for individuals, but also for communities. King believed that because God is love, because God is active in history, and because God relates to all things in love, nations too—if they would but repent of this systemic sin—could be redeemed. King's consistent call for America to repent of the sin of white supremacy is best understood not merely as a condemnation, but as an invitation.

And while King never specified exactly what "national repentance" entailed, or what "national conversion" could or should mean, he nonetheless persisted in holding out the possibility of a penitent and redeemed America. Indeed, this is why King consistently characterized American democracy as a "prodigal son": "This is what happens any time that man decides to rise up. This is what happens any time a nation or an individual decides to rise up. The God of the universe stands there in all of His love and forgiving power saying, 'Come home."¹⁸⁴ For King, even though individual and corporate sins are real, because God, like the father in the story, "always reserves for man the possibility of repentance,"¹⁸⁵ redemption is also real.

It is this vision of redemptive possibility—both individual and corporate—that accounts for King's consistent emphasis on the necessity of forgiveness. As he said, "The first thing the individual must do in order to love his enemy is to develop the capacity to forgive. The person who hurts must repent, but the person who is hurt is the one that

¹⁸³ Ibid., 2:32.

¹⁸⁴ King, Papers, 6:337.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 6:82.

must forgive...."¹⁸⁶ For King, to merely condemn another is to consign them to the realm of dark and static impossibility, while to forgive another is to recognize within them even if they do not recognize it themselves—the dynamic horizons of love. However, as anyone who has either given or received it will know, forgiveness is complicated especially for corporate sin. How can an individual forgive a group? How can a group forgive a group? What, in these cases, do either repentance or forgiveness entail?

In truth, as with many things, King never really addressed the nature of forgiveness in any full or systematic way. As we saw above, at times King described forgiveness as a compassionate way of seeing, of recognizing the blind weakness of the sinful other. Appealing to Jesus' words on the cross, King urged his hearers to forgive white American, "for they know not what they do."¹⁸⁷ At other times, King described forgiveness as an act of pardon. For King, this pardon was not a denial of the reality of sin, but a denial of sin's finality, a setting aside of the rightful claims of condemnation in the interest of a renewed future. As King said, "First of all [forgiveness] is a pardon. It is a fresh start, another chance, a new beginning¹⁸⁸ And again, "Forgiveness does not take away the fact of sin. But it restores the offender to communion with us, which he had forfeited through his offense."¹⁸⁹

These last words gesture toward another aspect of King's understanding of forgiveness, that it entails the restoration of relationship. This is to be expected because King believed that human beings were made for love, that sin was the destruction of love,

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 6:423.

¹⁸⁷ King, *Papers*, 6:407. "Then said Jesus, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' It is an expression of Jesus' awareness of man's stupidity. They know not what they do."
¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 6:580-81.
¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 6:83.

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and that redemption was a return to love. It follows, then, that forgiveness is fundamentally the re-establishment of love. As he said, "In the final analysis, forgiveness means a willingness to go any length to restore a broken relationship. Forgiveness means the development of a new relationship."¹⁹⁰ This language of "development" is importantly revealing. It suggests that forgiveness is not merely an act of recognition—love's way of seeing the sinner—it is also an act of restoration—love's way of being with the sinner. Forgiveness is, in other words, not simply an implication of redemptive possibility, but also an instrument of it. This is why King described love expressed in forgiveness, as "the Christian weapon of social redemption … the Christian weapon against social evil" and urged his people to "go out with the spirit of forgiveness, heal the hurts, right the wrongs and change society with forgiveness."⁽¹⁹¹ To love the sinner through forgiveness—whether understood individually or corporately—was to overcome the sin itself. In a 1957 version of the sermon "Loving Your Enemies," King portrayed the redemptive of love in this way:

Love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That's why Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they're mistreating you.... Keep loving them. Don't do anything to embarrass them. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long.... And by the power of your love, they will break down under that load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative.... So this morning as I look into your eyes, and into the eyes of all of my brothers in Alabama and all over American and over the world, I say to you, "I love you. I would rather die than hate you." And I am foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love somewhere men of

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 6:423.

¹⁹¹ King, Papers, 6:580-581.

the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God's kingdom.¹⁹²

This is not to say that King was naïve about the obstacles to these redemptive visions. He often expressed profound discouragement about the challenges of reconciliation and the realization of redemption in American life. In truth, as we will see in Chapter Four, King's democratic eschatology was rather complicated. His anthropology, however, was not. From the beginning of his ministry to the end, King believed that human beings—even those mired in vicious and violent racism—were capable of redemption, subject to the redemptive power of love. Indeed, it was this redemptive vision of love that allowed King—in defiance of the cynically static identities of racial supremacy and liberal equality—to stand before his people on the evening of the Supreme Court's ruling and declare the dynamic identity of redemptive love. Describing his enemies—those who had spent the past months opposing, maligning, threatening, and assaulting him—he said:

I respect them as a personality, a sacred personality with the image of God in them. And although that image has been scarred, terribly scarred, although they, like the ... prodigal son have strayed away to some far country of sin and evil, I must still believe that there is something within them that can one day come to themselves (That's right, Yes) and rise up and walk back up the dusty road to the father's house. (Yes) And we stand there with outstretched arms. That's the meaning of the Christian faith. (That's right, that's right) that's the meaning of this thing. (Yes) Our Christian religion says somehow that a prejudiced mind can be changed. And I'd close up my books and stop preaching if I didn't believe that. (Yes) I want to tell you this evening that I believe that Senator Englehardt's heart can be changed. (Yes) I believe that Senator Eastland's heart can be changed! (Yes) I believe that Ku Klux Klan can be transformed into a clan for God's kingdom (Yes). I believe that the White Citizens' Council can be transformed into

¹⁹² Ibid., 4:321-322, 324.

the Right Citizens' Council! (Yes) I believe that. That's the essence of the Gospel. $^{\rm 193}$

"Inseparably Bound Together"

The goal of love—the restoration of relationship—gestures toward the final feature of King's identity of agapic unity, that human beings are "inseparably bound together," inextricably joined as a common family. One of the most enduring themes of King's ministry, a theme found in his occasional writings, speeches, sermons, and correspondence, is the theme of brotherhood. Indeed, this theme is so pervasive—from King's first speech as a 14-year-old boy to one given 25 years later on the eve of his death—that King can hardly be understood apart from it. The reason for this pervasiveness for King is the defining reality of all human personhood in what he called the "fatherhood of God"—the fact that human beings exist by God's creative intention and share in God's dignifying love.

This conviction of divine fatherhood led naturally—and necessarily—to the conviction of human brotherhood, to an agapic cosmopolitanism that views all humanity through the eyes of love, in spite of its differences. Indeed for King, the rich variation in human personhood—including the differences between whites and blacks—was best understood not in terms of antagonism, but as a reflection of God's own fatherly richness: "Black and white can live together. Our biological differences are but varying expressions of the richness and complexity of the divine nature."¹⁹⁴ However, in light of what we have seen of King's anthropology, we must remember that this vision of familial union was not

¹⁹³ King, Papers, 3:429.

¹⁹⁴ King, Papers, 6:579.

merely a sentimental rhetorical device that King used to gesture toward what humanity might come to be. It was first a theological declaration of what humanity *already is*. For King, to be children of God *is* to be brothers of one another, to embrace one without embracing the other is impossible: "Man's relationship to God is dependent upon man's relationship to man. It is impossible simultaneously to love God and hate your brother."¹⁹⁵

These dual convictions of the fatherhood of God and the "brotherhood" of human beings are the theological foundation of the identity of agapic unity. For King, human beings must love one another as one because God has, in love, made us one. It is precisely for this reason that King's theological claim is, of necessity, also a social claim. The agapic unity of human beings is not simply an intellectual construct but a creational fact, thus it must find expression in the social structures of creation itself. In a 1957 sermon titled "You are All One in Jesus Christ," King made this link explicit:

All men, created alike in the image of God, are inseparably bound together. This is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. This is clearly expressed in Paul's declaration on Mars Hill: ... "God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth ... made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth...." Again it is expressed in the affirmation, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ." The climax of this universality is expressed in the fact that Christ died for all mankind. This broad universality standing at the center of the gospel makes brotherhood morally inescapable. Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ. Segregation is a tragic evil that is utterly un-Christian... If we are to remain true to the gospel of Jesus Christ we must not rest until segregation is banished from every area of American life.... If we accept the challenge with more devotion and valor we can speed the day when men everywhere will recognize that we "are all one in Christ Jesus."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 1:282.

¹⁹⁶ King, Papers, 4:125.

The goal of democratic life, in other words, is to express the unity of humanity in the unity of the social order. Given the reality of sin and its besetting anthropological blindness, King understood that the work of building this social order had to begin with *seeing* one another as *one*. On the one hand, King urged his fellow African Americans to take up this work of "seeing." In one of his frequent expositions of the biblical parable of the "Good Samaritan," King reminded his people that, "the good Samaritan will always stand before us as a nagging reminder that we must remove the cataracts of provincialism from our spiritual eyes and see men as men.... The good neighbor will look beyond the external accidents long enough to see those inner qualities that make all men human, and therefore brothers."¹⁹⁷

But on the other hand, King knew that it was not just his hearers that needed to recognize unity; it was also his enemies. This is why, as we have seen, King made such a deliberate effort not only to re-imagine white identity in the minds of African Americans but also to re-imagine black identity in the eyes of white Americans. Thus, in a 1959 public address outlining the goals of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), King took particular pains to say to the white community, "We who call upon you are not so-called outside agitators. We are your Negro brothers whose sweat and blood have also built Dixie. We yearn for a brotherhood of respect and want to join hands with you to build a freer, happier, land for all."¹⁹⁸ For King, living together as brothers began with seeing others as brothers.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 6:481.

¹⁹⁸ King, Papers, 5:341.
But it did not end there. Time and again, King insisted that agapic unity also required treating others as brothers, acting toward others in a way consistent with the reality of brotherly love. He insisted it in the midst of the boycott when, in an article for Liberation Magazine in 1956, he reminded his readers that the African Americans of Montgomery did not "wish to triumph over the white community" but "to move toward an interracial society based on freedom for all."199 He insisted it on the night of the Montgomery triumph, urging his hearers to understand their struggle for justice not simply as a struggle on their own behalf but also on behalf of their neighbors: "... the tension in Montgomery is not so much a tension between Negro people and white people, but the tension is at bottom a tension between justice and injustice (Yes), a tension between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.... So let us not limit this decision to a victory for Negros."²⁰⁰ He insisted it again the following month, explaining the rationale for the boycott in this way: "We are convinced that great gains can be made if religious men will seek to practice true love toward their brothers and sisters."201 He insisted it in his famous "Dream" speech several years later, when he urged a fractured nation to "rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed-we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal," and to labor to "transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."202 He insisted it in his Nobel Acceptance Speech the following year, reminding the world that, "Sooner or later, all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 3:241.

²⁰⁰ King, Papers, 3:429

²⁰¹ Ibid., 3:449.

²⁰² King, Testament, 219, 220.

therefore will transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood."²⁰³ And he insisted it in his 1967 speech on the Vietnam war, when he grounded both his anti-war activism and humanity's very survival in the conviction that "Every nation must develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole.... This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men."²⁰⁴

These words—and many more like in kind—suggest that Martin Luther King understood his public struggle in fundamentally anthropological terms. For him, the civil rights movement was a struggle not first for a new understanding of American life, but for a new understanding of American persons. Rather than viewing human beings through the American traditions of racial supremacy or liberal equality, King sought to anchor democratic identity in terms of agapic unity; to re-imagine human beings first as neither racial beings competing for social dominance, nor as civic beings competing for liberal equality, but as theological beings—made by and for the work of love.

D. All God's Children: King's Theological Reimagining of Democratic Identity

This re-imagined democratic identity is the public fruit of King's theology of agapic recognition: Rather than conceiving of human beings fundamentally in the inherently conflicting terms of racial supremacy or in the unstable terms of liberal equality, King called his fellow citizens to re-imagine one another as children of the Almighty God who, though gone wrong because of sin, could be lifted from the valley of hate by God's salvation and were, because of God's love, inseparably bound together as

²⁰³ Ibid., 225.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 243.

brothers one of another. It was this agapic re-imagining of democratic identity that, King believed, provided both the truest account of human beings and the surest hope for civic peace.

In a speech given one month after the end of the boycott in December 1956, King reported that he had found encouraging reasons—from the most unexpected of quarters—to believe that this re-imagined agapic identity might actually bear fruit. In one instance, King reported that one of his most intransigent foes, a prominent member of the Montgomery White Citizens' Council, had begun to talk to King in "a dignified and courteous manner [saying] that he understands us better ... and that he respects persons who have deep convictions and are willing to stand up for them at the cost of personal suffering."²⁰⁵ In another, perhaps more remarkable case, King reported that one of his most consistently hateful anonymous callers, who had been "calling for months to insult and threaten me and then slam down the receiver ... recently stayed on the phone for half an hour, giving [him] the opportunity to discuss the whole underlying problem with him. And the end of the call he said, 'Reverend King, I have enjoyed talking with you and am beginning to think that you may be right."²⁰⁶

King would need the encouragement. For as he turned from the local struggles of Montgomery, Alabama, to the larger struggles of American life—from the work of reimagining democratic identity to the work of re-imagining democratic action—he would find that his struggle for love's dawn had only just begun.

²⁰⁵ King, Papers, 3:449.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 3:449.

Chapter Three

The Absolute Power: Love and Democratic Action

"Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And so put us in jail and we will go with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit morally, culturally, and otherwise for integration, and we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours, and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and we will still love you. (That's right) Be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. (Yes) And one day we will win our freedom, but not only will we win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your beart and conscience that we will win you in the process. (Yes, Lord) And our victory will be a double victory. This seems to me the only answer and the only way to make our nation a new nation and our world a new world. Love is the absolute power." Martin Luther King, 1961

A. "The Protest is Still On:" The Movement from Identity to Action

community of Montgomery returned to the buses. To mark the occasion, King and a few other leaders of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) met and walked to the bus stop together, accompanied by a small group of journalists and photographers. The images from that morning suggest the complexity of the moment. In one photo, King stands in a line of quietly laughing African Americans as they make their way up the steps into the bus. Several others show King sitting near the front of the bus talking easily with Glenn Smiley, a white minister and fellow civil rights activist. Another captures the tension of the moment: King sits beside Ralph Abernathy in a crowded bus. No one is speaking. King stares out the window while Abernathy stares—almost glares—directly

Several days after King's speech at the Holt Street Church, the African-American

into the camera. Behind them, in what was until that morning the "Negro section," a white man stands without a seat.



King and Smiley – Montgomery, 1956



King and Abernathy – Montgomery, December 21, 1956

Each of these photographs captures an important aspect of the struggle that had taken place in Montgomery. But of all the images of that morning, one stands out as evocative of the even greater struggle that was yet to come. King, obviously posing, stands beside the open door of a bus. He wears a light grey suit, a hat, and a dark tie neatly clipped to a white shirt. Apart from the shadowed image of the driver, no one else is visible. Tense and unsmiling, King seems impatient with the photographer. His body turns toward the bus, as if eager to leave. His hand reaches into his pocket, as if for a ticket. His eyes look not to the camera but to something beyond. The whole image suggests a man on his way to somewhere else.



Montgomery, December 26, 1956

In a way that few understood at the time, when King stepped up into that bus he began a journey that bore him not just into the streets of Montgomery, but beyond them, into a national—and in time, international—struggle to re-imagine the meaning of democracy. And yet, images of King from the following years suggest that he had begun a new aspect of this struggle—a struggle to re-imagine not just the nature of democratic identity, but also the nature of democratic action itself.

A photograph from April 1957 shows a young King, dressed in a black clerical robe, stepping confidently to a podium on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the National Prayer Pilgrimage. While this speech is less well known than his "Dream" speech given in that same spot six years later, it marked King's first step into the national civil rights spotlight. Another, taken that same month, shows King in a white tuxedo and his wife Coretta in an evening gown at a gala in the newly independent nation of Ghana. Between them stands Vice President Richard Nixon. This image captures King's first introduction the leaders of American democracy and to African leaders struggling for democracy abroad. A photograph from June 1958 suggests that King's encounter with Nixon was only the beginning of his tumultuous relationship with American political elites. Standing in the oval office with a dark suit and a smile whose breadth obscured the difficulty of the meeting, King and other civil rights leaders posed with President Eisenhower and members of his staff.



King at the National Prayer Pilgrimage – Washington, D.C., April 1957



King at the White House – June 1958

An image from February 1959 finds King in New Delhi, India. King, standing next to Coretta, looks fixedly on as a man lays flowers on the site of Mohandas Gandhi's cremation. This trip to India, as we will see, had profound effect on the shape of King's unfolding vision of nonviolent democratic action. A photograph from January of 1960 shows King and Coretta, themselves surrounded by flowers, as they sit on the platform of Dexter Avenue church during a farewell service marking an end to their years in Montgomery. After six years in at Dexter Avenue, King and his family moved to Atlanta where he became, as has his father and grandfather before him, the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist. This move placed King more firmly in both the economic center of the white South and the ecclesial center of the black church. Another image from the following month shows King standing in a black overcoat at a closed Woolworth lunch counter in Durham, North Carolina. This is one of the earliest images linking King to the new wave of student activists leading the "sit-in" movement across the South.



The Kings in India – January 1960



King with Abernathy and Rev. Douglas Moore at a Woolworth's in Durham – February 16, 1960

In October 1960, King's participation in the Atlanta version of that movement would lead him to the Georgia State Prison in Reidsville, Georgia. It was from Reidsville that King wrote the first of his letters from prison in which he reflected on the redemptive nature of suffering. Writing to Coretta, who was pregnant with their third child, King said,

Today I find myself a long way from you and the children.... I know this whole experience is very difficult for you to adjust to, especially in your condition of pregnancy, but as I said to you yesterday, this is a cross that we must bear for the

freedom of our people. I have the faith to believe that this excessive suffering that is now coming to our family will in some little way serve to make Atlanta a better city, Georgia a better state, and American a better country. Just how, I do not yet know, but I have faith to believe it will. If I am correct, then our suffering is not in vain.¹



King upon release from prison in Reidsville, GA – October 1960

A photograph taken days after this letter shows King standing with a celebratory crowd at the moment of his release. Around him men and women hold signs of welcome. Beside him Coretta stands and kisses him on the cheek. In front of him his young children stand hesitantly and distantly, as if uncertain as to whether their father could really belong fully to them. In an unprecedented move that would have profound implications for his upcoming presidential campaign, Senator John Kennedy had personally called Coretta King to express his concern over King's imprisonment. News of this call had the double effect of nudging Georgia's white political leaders to release King and of turning African Americans toward the Democratic Party.

¹Branch, Parting, 363.

Another image, from May of 1961, shows King in a bus station in Montgomery, Alabama. A small group of "Freedom Riders" gathers around him. In the moments leading up to this photo, these students, about to make their way to Mississippi and to prison, appealed to King to join them. He declined, saying that he needed to stay and focus on the larger movement of which the Freedom Ride was but one piece. In the photograph most of the young students stare directly at King while he looks wearily over their shoulders to something—or someone—just out of frame. It was not the last time the leaders of the direct action student movement would accuse King and his colleagues of looking in the wrong direction.

A photo taken in Albany, Georgia in late 1961 shows King standing in front of Police Chief, Laurie Pritchett (1926–2000). Many viewed the Albany Movement—begun in 1961 by student activists—as the first major failure for King and the civil rights establishment that he had come to represent. Indeed, King viewed it in this way, as neither his words nor his strategies of nonviolent resistance seemed to have any evident effect on the segregated order of Albany. This fact was largely due to the shrewdness of Chief Pritchett. Determined to avoid the violent racial spectacles that only strengthened the cause of integration, Pritchett met the nonviolence protestors on their own nonviolent terms. Ordering his officers to renounce any trace of aggression and to keep their nightsticks belted except for true emergencies, Pritchett's arrest of protestors bordered on the courteous. When protestors turned violent, throwing rocks and bottles at the officers, Pritchett's men refused to retaliate. Instead, Pritchett held a press conference telling the world that his men had upheld law and order even as they were assailed with what he ingeniously called "nonviolent rocks." When King sought to energize the

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movement with his own arrest and refusal to pay bail, Pritchett secretly paid the fine himself, sending a bewildered King back to Atlanta. In Pritchett, King seemed to have met his match. The photo suggests as much. Pritchett stands calmly speaking to the crowd, while King stands before him, head bowed, eyes staring downward as if searching for a way beyond the defeat.



King and Laurie Pritchett in Albany Georgia – 1961

The failure of Albany inaugurated a crisis for King. In what seemed an astonishingly rapid marginalization, the civil rights movement of which he had been a sacred symbol began to leave him behind. Long standing civil rights establishment figures such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Roy Wilkins, sensing an opportunity to step out of King's shadow, distanced themselves from his organization. A new generation of student activists such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) Diane Nash, committed to creating new forms of nonviolent social pressure, openly questioned his leadership. White northern liberals such as the Kennedys, sensing that King had over-reached his effectiveness, deliberately ignored his advice. Indeed at the time, virtually everyone around King—not least King himself—wondered whether his work of protest had come an end.

The crisis presaged by these assembled images and inaugurated in Albany was, at its heart a crisis over the nature of democratic action, over the meaning and purpose of action taken in the interest of shaping the democratic social order. And while King's early years certainly entailed reflection on this theme—and though he continued to maintain his early concern with democratic identity—it was at this point in his ministry that King began deliberately to turn to the work of re-imagining democratic action. This brings us to the central image of our chapter, a photograph taken in Birmingham, Alabama, in April of 1963. For it is here, in the events captured by this image, that King's turn to re-imagine democratic action took its decisive step.

Birmingham was the symbol of the hard-core segregationist order, a sort of "American Johannesburg"² whose apartheid was "enforced by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the mob, the police, and many branches of the state apparatus."³ Presiding over this order was Eugene "Bull" Connor (1897–1973), Birmingham's notoriously brutal Commissioner of Public Safety, "an old school head-smacking champion of the segregationist order."⁴ It was Connor who, after the 1954 *Brown vs. Board* decision declared that "blood would run in the streets" before Birmingham accepted integration. It was Connor who, as the 1961 Freedom Riders road into Birmingham, guaranteed the Klan fifteen minutes to punish the riders before the police

² Jonathan Rieder, Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from the Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 14.

³ These are the words of the Pulitzer Prize winning American journalist Harrison Salisbury, quoted in Rieder, *Gospel*, 14.

⁴ Ibid., 14.

would arrive. It was Connor who, having filled the Birmingham police force with fellow Klansmen, found himself conveniently unable to either prevent or solve violent crimes against African Americans in his city—including seventeen bombings of Negro churches and homes between 1957 and 1963.⁵ Birmingham was, as King put it, "a city where brutality directed against Negroes was an unquestioned and unchallenged reality … [whose] silent password was fear … the largest city of a police state … [and] the most segregated city in America."⁶

In response to this, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth (1922-2011), an indomitable African-American activist in Birmingham devoted himself to the destruction of Bull Connor's segregationist order. To that end, in 1956, Shuttlesworth established the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACHR) and soon thereafter affiliated his organization with King's larger Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLS). Over the years Shuttlesworth challenged Connor's order on almost every front: in sermons from the pulpit, in cases in the courts, in protests in the streets. He paid dearly for his defiance. He was beaten and jailed multiple times, and his home and church were each bombed. Connor's regime of private terror met Shuttlesworth's public protest with a darkly symmetrical ferocity. And yet even so, Shuttlesworth refused to back down, and in the spring of 1962—as King was moving toward Albany—he began to conceive of a massive collaborative campaign of direct action against Connor's Birmingham.

King and his colleagues at the SCLC were slow to respond. In one respect this delay was due to circumstances in King's own life—his move to Atlanta, his growing

⁵ King, Why We Can't Wait, 47.

⁶ Ibid., 48-49.

family, and his rising prominence. In another respect, this delay was due to the overwhelming demands on both King and the SCLC. Since the triumph of Montgomery, the struggle for civil rights had taken on new dimensions of strategic, relational, and geographic complexity. Because of this, both King and the SCLC—especially given the uncertainty of Albany—were reticent to take on another project. Yet in still another respect, this delay was due to the complexities of Birmingham itself. Shuttlesworth's call for Birmingham to become a new center of national civil rights activism—a new Montgomery—was deeply threatening to Birmingham's white elites.

With the focus on other cities like Montgomery, Alabama; Greenwood, Mississippi; and Albany, Georgia, Connor's Birmingham—in spite of its notorious segregationist excesses—had been largely shielded from national view. Indeed it was this very obscurity that allowed its brutality to continue. Yes, Connor's excesses were embarrassing at times, but with no one watching, his embarrassments were tolerable as long as the order was upheld. But the threat of a national campaign—especially a campaign that threatened to include the now internationally famous Martin Luther King—was a threat they wished to avoid. This wish led some of Montgomery's white elites to invite Shuttlesworth to enter into a series of fragile negotiations.

In most respects these negotiations were merely public theater, tedious rehearsals of the scripts of condescension and equivocation with which African Americans were so painfully familiar. But they did give Birmingham's white elites what they most needed time to develop a plan. They used that time well, developing a plan elegantly calculated to deliver Birmingham from both Connor's embarrassing excesses and Shuttlesworth's embarrassing protests. The plan was this: They would support an opposition candidate

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against Bull Connor in the upcoming elections. The candidate would still be a full segregationist, of course, but would be more moderate in his approach to maintaining the segregated order. It was a shrewd move: by ending the reign of Bull Connor, the white elites of Montgomery would not only recast themselves as moderates and, in all likelihood, be left alone, they would also diffuse the moral energy of Shuttlesworth's campaign, recasting him—if he persisted in his protests—in the role of the unreasonable antagonist. It was a change not in substance but in style—but it was driven by the knowledge that in the eyes of the nation, style was likely enough.

Shuttlesworth was not so easily cowed. Seeing the replacement of one segregationist with another as mere farce, he saw the new division in Birmingham's ruling elite as an opportunity, and began to try to mobilize Birmingham's African Americans to action. His plan was to put economic pressure on white voters through an Easter season boycott of Birmingham's downtown stores. For Shuttlesworth, white resistance was not an argument for delay, but for decisive action. The Kennedy administration saw the white moderate strategy as an opportunity as well, leadership, but preferred a strategy of deescalation. They began quietly to encourage Birmingham's white moderates in their efforts to destabilize Bull Connor's hold on local politics, viewing even moderate segregationists as preferable to the swaggering recalcitrance of Southern leaders such as Connor. And more than this, they sought to enlist Birmingham's black leadership—some of whom had personal antipathy for the mercurial Shuttlesworth—in the work of withdrawing African-American support for the protests. While Shuttlesworth pressed forward, the Kennedys—and other white moderates—pressed back. Each sought to enlist King in their strategy. Shuttlesworth's activist alliance urged King to come to Birmingham and lend his prominence to their efforts. His presence, they argued, could tip the balance and break the back of segregation. The Kennedys urged King to stay away, insisting that an escalation at a time when Southern whites were themselves moderating would backfire. They suggested that King's presence would not only galvanize southern whites but would also discredit King in the eyes of an already racially weary nation. And many of Birmingham's African-American elite—whether for or against the protests—urged King to stay away as well. In their eyes, this was their town and they didn't need the help of a celebrity outsider (especially after the failure of Albany) to aid them in its transformation.

King faced a difficult decision. To refuse the protests in Birmingham was both to embrace a gradualism that guaranteed continued—if moderated—segregation in Birmingham and to signal to civil rights activists in Birmingham (and beyond) that he was not to be trusted. To join the protests at a time when both white and black moderates advised against it was to risk both the humiliation of another public failure and the alienation of the Kennedy White House and Southern black leadership at the very time when African Americans most needed their help. To further complicate the Kennedy issue, upon hearing of the impending protests, the Birmingham government secured an injunction against all forms of protest. To protest, then, was to defy the very government he had pledged to uphold. If King went to Birmingham, his future was certain: he would find himself in a Birmingham jail without either the local black community or the national white leadership behind him.

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In January of 1963, King and his closest SCLC colleagues withdrew to Savannah, Georgia, for a strategy retreat. After several days of tense debate, they made the difficult decision to go to Birmingham and to support the plans of Shuttlesworth and his colleagues there. Having made their decision, they began to plan their approach, "crafting a tight plan with clear goals: the desegregation of downtown lunch counters, bathrooms, and water fountains, the upgrading of employment in the stores, and the formation of a bi-racial committee to discuss grievances. The campaign was designed to reach an Easter climax."7 Even so, King was notably melancholy. He had travelled a long road since Montgomery, and much of it had been difficult. But even so, Birmingham was different. It was, he said, "the most segregated city in America."8 It was a city marked by a "general atmosphere of violence and brutality [where] local racists had intimidated, mobbed, and even killed Negroes with impunity."9 It was a city where, from the year 1957 until January 1963, there were "seventeen unsolved bombings of Negro churches and homes of civil rights leaders."10 Because of this, in a moment later independently recounted by nearly all present, King looked at his friends and said,

I want to make a point that I think everyone here should consider very carefully and decide if he wants to be with this campaign. There are something like eight people here assessing the type of enemy we're going to face. I have to tell you that in my judgment, some of the people sitting here today will not come back alive from this campaign. And I want you to think about that.¹¹

⁷ Rieder, Gospel, 24.

⁸ King, Wait, 48-49.

⁹ King, Wait, 47.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rieder, Gospel, 24.

These words reveal the essence of King's melancholy over the days ahead. Not only did he believe that his small group of friends was likely moving towards death, he also believed, given the loss of support from their typical allies—white moderates and black leadership—that they were doing so alone.

The weeks ahead were harried with planning. SCLC staffers, including King himself, visited Birmingham to case businesses, build contacts, and learn local ordinances. Their plans were complicated, and Bull Connor remained a threat. Having lost his post as Commissioner of Public Safety, Connor entered into a Mayoral race and was locked in a three-way tie that was, as of yet, unresolved.¹² Given this, to go too strongly into Birmingham was to risk galvanizing segregationist fervor and tipping the scales in Connor's favor. To go too weakly—to fail to dramatize the horror of Connor's order however, was to risk catering to the status quo and tip things in Connor's favor as well. For his part, King maintained his hectic schedule, maintaining a full speaking schedule both in his pulpit at Ebenezer church and in cities around the nation—all along keeping the upcoming campaign a secret. Several days before the campaign began, King, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, and a few other staffers held a secret—and crowded—meeting in the New York apartment of Harry Belafonte. The purpose of this meeting was to raise bail money to support those swept up in the anticipated mass arrests set to begin in a few day's time. As King and Abernathy sat up late that night talking with the Belafontes, several hundred miles away both planners and participants began to slip into Birmingham to prepare for Shuttlesworth's long awaited assault.

¹² It would, in fact, take two run-off elections before Connor would finally concede defeat in April of 1963. On this cf. Rieder, *Gospel*, 27.

The early days of the campaign were besieged with discouragement. This was due in part the predictable—though enduringly painful—criticism King encountered from white Southern moderates and Northern liberals. In Montgomery, King leaned heavily on both the moral encouragement and public advocacy of these communities. And these same communities had both welcomed and sheltered him in the years since Montgomery. To go now into the nation's most segregated city without this shelter was—for King both a personal grief and a strategic vulnerability. But perhaps the most discouraging aspect of the early days of the campaign was the ambivalence of the African-American community itself. King's reception by Birmingham's African-American elite was, at best, chilly. Many viewed him as a meddling celebrity outsider who presumed to tell them and their people—how to engage their community. In fact, in direct opposition to King, many of them argued for giving Birmingham's new segregationist mayor Albert Boutwell—who had defeated Bull Connor in a runoff election—a chance to change Birmingham himself.

If Birmingham's African-American elites were slow to embrace King, the African-American community in general seemed slower still. The endless threat of violence, the unnerving delay caused by Connor's run-off elections, the conflict between their leaders, and the confusion over what new mayor Boutwell might do had simply weakened their resolve. Because of this, the "mass movement" that King and Shuttlesworth with which threatened to transform Birmingham, was dwindling before their eyes. At the very moment when King most needed to step into the movement, they appeared to be stepping away. Fearing a repeat of Albany, King began first to shame and then to plead with local African-American leaders to join the protest and to give themselves to the work of taking on Birmingham's segregated order once and for all. Even so, the results were meager—instead of thousands filling the jails, there were a mere three hundred. King's presence notwithstanding, the mass meetings remained awkward, the protests remained sparse, the jails remained empty, and the city remained segregated. The protest was falling apart.

On the morning of Good Friday, King and some of his staff met in the Gaston Motel room downtown to decide the fate of the Birmingham campaign. Several days before—in an announcement rich with messianic symbolism—King had declared his intention to go to jail on Good Friday. But, not long after this announcement, he and his team learned that—even with the small number of jailings that had taken place—their bond fund had run dry. Because of this, as the morning of Good Friday lengthened, he and his staff remained locked in an anxiety-laden debate about whether his going to jail would help—or finally end—the protests. On the one hand, if King was in prison, who would raise the money to keep the movement moving? On the other hand, if King refused prison, how could they expect others not to do the same? The critical hour was upon them and yet they did not know what to do. King's account of the moment gives a sense of the confusion and loss:

Good Friday morning, early, I sat in Room 30 of the Gaston Motel discussing this crisis with twenty-four key people. As we talked, a sense of doom began to pervade the room. I looked about me and say that, for the first time, our most dedicated and devoted leaders were overwhelmed by a feeling of hopelessness. No one knew what to say, for no one knew what to do. Finally, someone spoke up and, as he spoke, I could see that he was giving voice to what was on everyone's mind. "Martin" he said, "this means you can't go to jail. We need money. We need a lot of money. We need it now. You are the only one who has the contacts to get it. If you go to jail, we are lost. The Battle of Birmingham is lost." I sat there conscious of twenty-four pairs of eyes. I thought about the people in jail. I thought about the Birmingham

Negroes already lining the streets of the city waiting to see me put into practice what I had so passionately preached. How could my failure now to submit to arrest be explained to the local community? What would be the verdict of the country about a man who had encouraged hundreds of people to make a stunning sacrifice and they excused himself? Then my mind began to race in the opposite direction. Suppose I went to jail? What would happen to the three hundred? Where would the money come from to assure their release? What would happen to our campaign? Who would be willing to follow us into jail not knowing when or whether he would ever walk out once more into the Birmingham sunshine? I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt, with two-dozen others in the room. There comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man surrounded by loval friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself. I was alone in that room. I walked to another room in the back of the suite and stood in the center of the floor. I think I was standing at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought of the twenty-four people, waiting in the next room. I thought of the three hundred, waiting in prison. I thought of the Birmingham Negro community, waiting ... I thought of the twenty million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt. I pulled off my shirt and my pants, got into work clothes and went back to the other room to tell them I had decided to go to jail.¹³

This is the scene of our central image. King sits in a jail cell in Birmingham, in solitary confinement. He is wearing dark pants and a light prison-issue shirt. He rests his chin on his hands, his index finger over his lips suggestive not only of silence but also of contemplation. He gazes out of the bars of his cell and from beyond them a shaft of sun falls, bathing his face, hands, and clothing with light. It is a remarkably complicated image, at once evoking darkness and light, bondage and freedom, silence and speech—an image capturing the consequences of an action whose basic meaning was contested, and whose final outcome remained unclear. But even in the midst of this complexity, the photo makes one thing completely clear: In spite of the criticisms, and in spite of the

¹³ King, Wait, 79-81.

costs, for Martin Luther King the struggle to re-imagine democratic action was just beginning. The protest was still on.



King in the Birmingham Jail – November 1963

B. "Between These Two Forces:" Radicalist and Gradualist Political Action

King's struggle to re-imagine democratic action did not take place in a vacuum. In one respect it was occasioned by the nature of democracy itself. One of the marvels of democratic life is its intrinsic dynamism, born of the fact that democracy emerges out of the people, exists for the people, and is executed by the people, and "the people" *change*. Because of this, one of the central themes of democratic life is that of a people even struggling to imagine anew how best to enact their own democratic ideals. Begun in revolution, democracy sustains its life through an unending series of revolutions, great and small. As we saw in Chapter One, this inescapable revolutionary energy—especially as mediated through the African-American story—forms the backdrop to King's own struggle to re-imagine democratic life. And yet in another respect, King's struggle emerged in the context of a *particular* moment of democratic crisis in the middle of the twentieth century in which people struggled to define and embody their visions of democratic action. And while, by the tumultuous nature of the case, this struggle often yielded informed imaginings, two general traditions emerged with which King would have to struggle as he re-imagined democratic action: *radicalism and gradualism*.

RADICALIST ACTION

The first of these frameworks conceives of democratic action in what might be called *radicalist* terms. The story of political radicalism in general and its democratic expression in particular is at once complex and fascinating, displaying the extremes of courage and brutality that have alternately animated and decimated social orders. And while a detailed exploration of this story is beyond the scope of this work, a general grasp of its central themes is important for understanding both the context in which King sought to re-imagine democratic action, and the shape that his re-imagining would come to take.¹⁴

¹⁴ My account of the internal features and historical forms of radicalism is taken largely from the following: *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edition, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicaco: University of Chicago, 1987), which provides a series of chronological essays tracing the development of radicalism in political thought; Andrew R. Russ, *The Illusion of History: Time and the Radical Political Imagination* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), which, while focusing on the way various radical thinkers conceived of history, provides an extremely helpful account of the inner philosophical logic of radicalism itself; Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); and *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G. Baylor, (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1991)—each of which make a case for the theological foundations of modern radicalism. Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 31-50; Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 30–153; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 25–158; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 265-384—each of which provide insight into the origins of radicalism in America. Gerald R. McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park,

While, as we will see, there are a number of distinct elements to the radicalist framework of democratic action, its essence is what might be called *visionary disruption*. That is, radicalism combines a visionary conception of what should be, a restless agitation over what it is, and an interventionist mandate to bring these two together in time. And while radicalisms vary with respect to the shape of their vision, the sources of their agitation, and the strategies for intervention, their visionary disruption is marked by several characteristics: a commitment to the transcendence of its ideals, a restlessness over the imperfections of history, and the burden for disruptive action in the world.

The Transcendence of Ideals

For all of its evident historical concern, radicalism actually begins not from within history and its constructions but in some sense, outside of them—with a vision of order that aspires to transcend the contingencies of time. And while radicalist visions may vary broadly with respect to their sources (drawing exclusively or eclectically from theological, political, or economic streams) and with respect to the metaphysical intentions of their respective transcendences (some seeking to reflect a fixed theological or natural order, others seeking simply to unmask the illusory ontological status of a given historical order), radicalisms as such are all situated within and animated by a sort of cosmology of ideals.

Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); and Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990); John Witte, Jr. *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 2007), which provide insight into the Puritan expression of radicalisms; and Sidney Lens, *Radicalism in America* (New York: Crowell, 1966); which, though in my opinion framing radicalism's motivations in reductively economic terms, provides a very helpful historical overview of the development of political radicalism in the United States.

The ideological constellation from which American democratic radicalism emerged was the Enlightenment, at the heart of which stood *the ideal of the free self*. This was not a simple concept. Sources for this ideal ranged from classical Roman texts on the nature of governance to Christian theological reflections on the image of God.¹⁵ Interpretations of its meaning ranged from freedom within the constraints of nature to freedom from constraint as such. Its various effects included liberation from the intellectual and moral confines of medieval religion, the economic misery of peasantry, and the political hypocrisy of monarchical governance. And yet even with these complexities, it became the basis from which Enlightenment leaders re-imagined virtually every sphere of cultural life: philosophical discourse, religious authority, artistic representation, scientific investigation, economic production, and political order. These were the discrete horizons of a singular transcendent ideal: the ideal of the free self.

The Imperfections of History

Radicalism's insistence on the transcendence of ideals leads inexorably to its second theme, the imperfections of history. Because radicalism derives its energy from an ideal that it takes to be transcendent (in the sense of being neither fully derived from nor finally accountable to the exigencies of time) it therefore views any order's attempt to contain the full possibilities of that ideal to be, at best, imperfect. Like the ideal of the free self, this conviction of the imperfections of history was complicated in its origin and its application. Its sources ranged from theological convictions about the sinfulness of human society to more explicitly political convictions about the tyranny of monarchical

¹⁵ On the intellectual sources of individual freedom, see Witte, The Reformation of Rights.

and aristocratic rule. The focus of its criticism ranged, depending upon context, from the practices of ecclesial orders, to certain features of political orders, to order as such. But in spite of these varied sources and applications, radicalism maintained an ethos of restlessness toward existing orders.¹⁶

In some instances, this restlessness is constructive in character, a yearning not simply to transcend the various intellectual, moral, aesthetic, or civic constraints imposed upon its animating ideal by a given historical order, but to do so in the hope that the ideal itself may be more fully realized. One of the earliest and most striking examples of this ethos of constructive restlessness is found on the title page of Francis Bacon's 1620 work, *Novum Organum Scientarium (New Instrument of Science)*. In this work, Bacon outlined a new system of philosophical reasoning that would, he hoped, not only free scientific inquiry from its methodological infancy, but also lead to greater understanding of the natural world. That he considered it so may be seen in the image of its title page: a ship passes through the mythic Pillars of Hercules, beyond the boundaries of smaller waters and into the shimmering promise of open sea. This is radicalism's constructive restlessness: a yearning for that which is not, but may yet come to be.

But this restlessness can also take a more deconstructive shape. Because social orders suffer from a delusional sense of attainment, one of radicalism's basic tasks is to unmask the vanity of this delusion. In this regard, one thinks naturally of one of the earliest voices of deconstructive radicalism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Animated by the conviction that the institutions of the modern social order are little more than the accretions of constraint upon humanity's "natural" freedom, Rousseau set

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¹⁶ On the various expressions of radicalisms' "restlessness" see esp. Russ, *The Illusion of History*.

about the work of deconstruction. This work takes its most mature form in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, in which, his notion of "natural freedom" became the basis for his philosophical unmaking of the economic, legal, political and, perhaps most of all, moral institutions of modern social life.¹⁷ For Rousseau, rather than manifestations of progress (as they alleged), these institutions, with their manifest greed, injustice, and self-preservation, are in fact forms of regression—of movement away from humanity's natural state of freedom.

Because of this, Rousseau sought to offer a new account of human beings (as naturally free and equal), and of history (as the gradual constriction of that freedom). And while Rousseau's accounts of each played pivotal roles in the late 18th century political revolutions that aspired to construct new social orders, Rousseau himself never finally transcended the work of deconstruction. His account of "natural" human freedom remained locked in a mythic past. His account of social history remained impervious to constructive change. He himself remained restless, a "solitary walker" who could only find true freedom by moving away from the "layers of convention who have caused it to be utterly lost."¹⁸ This is radicalism's deconstructive restlessness, a yearning to unmask those things that are, that they may yet cease to be.

Taken together, these two forms of restlessness illustrate radicalism's discontent with history. In the constructive version, history is seen as under-realized, as a failure to become what it ought to be. Because of this, as with Bacon's title page, the imperfections

¹⁷ Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses and the Social Contract, trans and ed. John T. Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Alan Bloom, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edition, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 578.

of history are overcome only by breaking through to a mythic future of progress toward the transcendent ideal. In the deconstructive version, history is seen as over-realized, as a bloated devolution from what once was, but is no longer. Because of this, as with Rousseau's "solitary wanderer" the imperfections of history are overcome only—if at all by returning to a mythic past in which the transcendent ideal dwelled in unadulterated form.¹⁹ But in either case, history—in the sense of what has come to be—is viewed only through the lens of imperfection.

The Burden of Action

In the fertile gap between the transcendent ideal and its imperfect historical embodiment, radicalism's moral imperative grows: the inescapable burden to act. It may be helpful at this point to remember that the burden of action—the burden to realize the transcendent ideal in the midst of history—did not always exist. Indeed, for much of what we call political history, most ordinary human beings lived under regimes of empire, convention, or hierarchy that rendered disruptive social action virtually unimaginable. This is not to suggest that social action as such was nonexistent, of course. It is simply to say that this action—even dissenting action—was generally undertaken *with the grain* of the existing order. An example of this non-disruptive approach to social action may be seen in the earliest Christian communities. These communities, driven by transcendent ideals that differed sharply from their imperial rulers, and marked by deep (and often apocalyptic) historical restlessness, nonetheless devoted themselves to the service of the

¹⁹ This mythic past may be seen, for example, in Rousseau's extended fascination with Sparta as the ideal of civil society. The appropriation of mythic pasts will, as we will see, become very important in the development of radicalism in America.

empire. And when, as was inevitable, the obligations of faith required them to dissent from a given imperial practice, they did so through withdrawal and were willing to suffer the consequences for doing so. They were, in other words, willing to dissent but not to disrupt.²⁰

However, in the Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century, and especially in its Calvinist wing (of all places), social action began to be reconceived in more overtly radicalist terms. It is a complicated story, but this reconceiving is perhaps most simply understood as the fruit of two convictions. The first of these is the conviction of personal agency. This is an ancient conviction in Christian theology, and that it emerged in a religious movement devoted to restoring Christianity to its ancient form is no surprise. But even so, the prominence of personal agency within a religious movement so broadly identified with its denial still surprises. But this is to misunderstand the Reformation. While it is true for John Calvin (1509–1564) and his followers that human beings—apart from Christ—live under a virtually absolute form of moral bondage, it is also true that—united to Christ—moral agency returns in a real, if limited form. For Calvin, the goal of the Christian life is continually to redirect this new moral agency back to God and His purposes through the works of faith, repentance, and obedience. This is an anthropology of agency, a vision of human beings called to take responsibility for redirecting their work in the world toward the will of God.

The conviction of personal agency in itself is not, however, a sufficient source for radicalism. For radicalism to occur, personal agency must be joined to social

²⁰ For an account of these early Christian forms of non-disruptive dissent, see *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), esp. parts 1-4.

responsibility. And so, for Calvin, it was. In one sense this joining was simply an expression of his theological anthropology. "Human beings," he declares at the beginning of his *Institutes*, are social beings, capable of understanding themselves only insofar as they live in society with God.²¹ In another respect, it was an extension of his theology of his creation. For Calvin the world is a "theater of God's glory," a stage upon which God's character and purposes are to find expression. Furthermore, the purpose of humanity—as the crown of creation itself—is, in part, to nurture creation toward the full expression of this glory.²² In still another respect, it was an extension of his theological eschatology. For Calvin, the story of history is the story not only of creation, but also of redemption—and indeed of the triumph of God's purposes in the world. That is, Calvin viewed history as on a trajectory toward a time when God's will, originally expressed in creation, would be finally established in re-creation—in a world in which the very structures of the earth would be re-fashioned for God's glory. It was a decidedly this-worldly view of the eschaton, a view in which the kingdoms of the world become, as the Bible would put it, "the kingdom of God and of his Christ."23

Taken together, these theological convictions of personal agency and social responsibility fused into an early version of the radicalist burden of action. It was this burden that led Calvin himself not only to transform the structures of the city of Geneva, but also to open his most famous work—the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—with a letter to the King of France, and to conclude it with a meditation on the right of a people to

²¹ Jean Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536), I.

²² Calvin, Institutes I.5.8, I.6.2.

²³ Revelation 11:15.

resist an unjust king.²⁴ It was this burden that led his reformed protestant heirs such as the Huguenots in France, the Covenanters in Scotland, and the Puritans of England and America to devote themselves—sometimes fatally—to resist both ecclesial and civic structures in the name of theological conviction. And it was this inherited burden, though in de-sacralized form, that led eighteenth-century revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic to disrupt the inherited social orders of the west in order to secure the transcendent vision of the free self.²⁵

Radicalism in America

By the seventeenth century European radicalism made its way to the shores of the new world. And while the import of its explicit theological foundations ebbed and flowed, its commitment to the ideal of freedom, its restlessness over the imperfections of existing orders, and its burden of action became quintessential features of American life.²⁶

In the pre-revolutionary period, this radicalism found its clearest expression in Puritanism. Driven by a vision of a divinely-ordered covenantal society, and having failed in their efforts to realize such a society in England, the Puritans came to the new world to build out their ecclesial and civic ideals in relative peace. The comprehensive scope of the Puritan social imagination is one of its most radical features. Rather than simply seeking to modify a given element of the order toward conformity to their covenantal ideal, they

²⁴ Calvin, "Introductory Address to Francis I, King of France" (1536), in Institutes, Institutes IV.20.

²⁵ On the theological sources and historical development of radicalism, see esp. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*; Duncan B. Forrester, "Martin Luther and John Calvin" in *History of Political Philosophy*, 318-352; and *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Baylor.

²⁶ For a fascinating observation of the ideas and effects of American radicalism—written while this radicalism was still in infant form, cf. Alexis De Tocquville, *Democracy in America* (Wellington: Floating Press, 2009).

sought to re-imagine every aspect of social life: educational systems, architectural forms, economic practices, religious practice, political structures, and family life. As Mark Noll puts it, "New England Puritans followed English precedent and consistently viewed their whole society as standing in covenant with God.... New Englanders did not doubt that the society they constructed was also a sacred society."²⁷ The Puritan social vision was, in other words, a radical re-ordering of the entire social order around the transcendental reality of covenant life with God.²⁸

In time however, Puritanism's radicalist energy began to dissipate. Its covenantal ideals remained, of course, but its restlessness toward history and its burden toward disruptive action—so prevalent when turned toward the monarchical order of England—began to wane when its own order was in view. Though fashioned in the heat of disestablishment, Puritanism eventually became synonymous with the establishment, setting aside disruptive radicalism for something akin to the preservation of the status quo. In a strange respect then, Puritanism was its own undoing, for it was its radicalist energy rather than its social vision that was to endure.

In the middle of the eighteenth century this energy took new form. Largely discarding the theological grounding of Puritanism's theocratic covenantalism, this new radicalism framed itself in terms of deistic republicanism. The development of this form of American radicalism is a complicated story, but its eventual essence consisted of a feverish insistence on individual liberty, an allergy to all forms of tyranny (especially its

²⁷ Noll, America's God, 38.

²⁸ For an account of the rise and fall of puritan radicalism in America see Noll, America's God, 31-50; Noll, A History of Christianity, 30–153; Holifield, Theology in America, 25–158; Ahlstrom, Religious History, 265-384; McDermott, One Holy and Happy Society; and Ryken, Worldly Saints.

aristocratic forms), and an anchoring of each of these in a vague form of divine law.²⁹ The importance of this development is nearly impossible to overstate. For not only would this form of republicanism become the *sine qua non* of American national identity, it would also become the source of America's ideological and, in time, structural break from the old world. As Noll reminds us,

American Christians, despite substantial conflicts among themselves, took for granted a fundamental compatibility between orthodox Protestant religion and republican principles of government. Most English-speaking Protestants outside of the United States did not. Americans have long been accustomed to think of the values of religion and the values of republicanism as supporting each other.... The long habit of uniting these value systems has dulled awareness of how strikingly original the new nation's "Christian republicanism" actually was. In fact, among a panoply of exceptional things about the American founding, one of the most unusual was the commitment by almost all religious people in the new United States to distinctly republican vision of public of life. The American position was unusual, not only by comparison with English-speaking contemporaries in the late eighteenth century, but also because almost all observers outside the United States assumed that republican thinking contradicted the principles of traditional religion.³⁰

Inevitably, this idiosyncratic form of American radicalism flowered into revolution. Animated by an ideal of a divinely endowed individual liberty and restless with the constraints imposed upon that liberty by the English crown, America's founding radicals acted decisively to disrupt those constraints and build a new republican social order.³¹ But rather than consuming radicalist energies, the fires of revolution actually

²⁹ "The republicanism of the early United States...[was] more a soft-edged series of ideals than sharply defined set of principles.... Yet despite a wide range of definitions, American republican language returned consistently to two main themes: fear of abuses from illegitimate power and a nearly messianic belief in the benefits of liberty." Noll, *America's God*, 55-56.

³⁰ Noll, America's God, 54.

³¹ On the role of radicalism in the American Revolution see esp. Noll, *America's God*, 115–157; Lens, *Radicalism in America*, 5-41; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University

forged them into a force that would endure throughout the entire history of American democratic life.³²

The American civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century was an almost pristine example of this endurance. For in it, American radicals employed the ideal of the free self to disrupt the existing order in the interest of a new social reality. It is difficult to imagine an event that stands in greater continuity with the radicalist vision of the American founding. And yet the movement was also an indication of American radicalism's unfolding complexity. For in it, American radicals employed the ideal of the free self in different ways, set themselves against different orders, and labored toward different visions. It was, in many respects, a contest within radicalism itself.

On one side of this contest stood what I referred to above as the constructive radicals. This group included men and women of every age, race, generation, and geographic region of the United States. Embracing the transcendent ideal of freedom, they sought break through the constraints of American white supremacy, in the hope of securing an as-yet-unseen future of freedom for every American. And while different constructive radicals differed with respect to the source of the animating ideal, the shape of the disruption, and the vision of the future, the basic logic of constructive radicalism was broadly evident.³³

Press, 1976), 1–144; and Ralph Ketcham, ed., *The Anti Federalist Papers and the Constitutional Convention Debates* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

³² On the post-revolutionary re-emergence of American radicalism, see esp. Lens, *Radicalism in America*. ³³ On the role of constructive radicalism of the civil rights movement, see Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, chs. 1 and 4; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*; Sarah Azaransky, *The Dream is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), chs. 1-3; and Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the civil rights movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), chs. 1–2.

On the other side stood the more deconstructive wing of American radicalism. Animated by the same ideal of the free self, these radicals sought primarily to unmask and disrupt existing orders of oppression.³⁴ Though it may seem counterintuitive now, the strongest movement of deconstructive radicalism came from within the white South. In the view of many white southerners, the order most in need of disruption was the American federal government, which had become (in their view) little more than a tool for the spread of atheistic communism. The chief evidence of this fact was its brazen attempt to force racial integration (an allegedly communist doctrine) on an unwilling American citizenry.

In the view of many white Southerners, this enforcement was not only a direct assault on the American ideal of freedom, it was also a direct violation of the word of God. Because of this, the only righteous response was disruption. For southern radicals such as Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, this disruption took the form of militant violence. Appealing to a mythic past of Anglo-Saxon Southern freedom, Bowers and his fellow Klansmen sought to build a movement whose entire purpose was militant resistance to the dominant atheistic order.³⁵ A Klan recruiting poster put it this way:

The Administration of our National Government is now under the actual control of atheists who are Bolsheviks by nature. As dedicated agents of Satan, they are absolutely determined to destroy Christian civilization and all Christians ... [Our] members are Christians who are anxious to preserve not only their souls for all

³⁴ One of the distinctives of this deconstructive form of radicalism is that, though it appealed to visions of what could be, these visions were usually highly vague and rooted in a accounts of a mythic past. In truth, these visions functioned less as coherent aspirations and more as symbolic justifications of its fundamental rhetorical and practical task: disruption of an existing order.

³⁵ For a fascinating, if chilling, account of Bower's deconstructive vision, see Marsh, God's Long Summer, ch. 2.
eternity but are MILITANTLY DETERMINED, God willing, to save their lives, and the Life of this Nation, in order that their descendants shall enjoy the same, God-given blessings of True Liberty that we have been permitted to enjoy up to now.... If you are a Christian, American, Anglo-Saxon who can understand the simple truth of this Philosophy, you belong to the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi.³⁶

But much of white Southern radicalism took a more passive form. One of the interesting challenges of civil rights scholarship is how, politically speaking, one ought to characterize Southern resistance. This is in part because many Southerners viewed themselves as defenders of tradition against the assaults of a radicalist regime. But in truth, much of the Southern resistance to civil rights was deeply marked by the logic of radicalism. Driven by the transcendent ideal of freedom (as expressed in mythic visions of Southern identity), and restless against an American order that strove to unmake that ideal, they found themselves burdened to act in order to disrupt the corrosive encroachments of the federal government. And act they did. They halted buses, closed schools, closed parks, shuttered businesses, and stood in university doorways to prohibit African-American entrance—each a reflection of the logic of radicalism. This suggests that while Southern political actors understood their position of passive resistance to be that of the vigilant traditionalist, it was in fact radicalism in disguise.³⁷

For a number of reasons, the majority of black radicals aligned themselves—at least until the late 1960s—with radicalism's more constructive wing. Partnering with people of every race, they saw themselves as heir to and stewards of the larger American

³⁶ Cited in Marsh, God's Long Summer, 50 (emphasis original).

³⁷ For a persuasive account of the radicalist nature of white Southern resistance see Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the civil rights movement, 1945–1975* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

story of "liberty and justice for all." But in the middle of the twentieth century, a more deconstructive form of black radicalism began to emerge. As we saw in Chapter Two, this radicalism—like its white counterpart—had roots in the logic of racial supremacy. Appropriating this mythic account of identity, black deconstructive radicals were driven not simply by a vision of black equality, but by a vision of black power.

Interestingly, these radicals also devoted themselves to the disruption of the American cultural order, but their reasons for this were almost wholly antithetical to those of their white counterparts. Where white radicals viewed America as a tool for the amalgamating ideologies of communism, these black radicals viewed America as little more than a tool for white supremacy. And though both the sources for and shape of a black future on the other side of white supremacy were contested within black radicalism itself, one conviction was clear: the order of white supremacy must fall. In light of this conviction, black radicals—from the Nation of Islam to the Black Panthers—mirrored white radicals by devoting themselves to bringing this fall about through myths of nationalism, an ethos of provocation, and an embrace of violence.³⁸ Michael Dawson, in his book *Blacks in and Out of the Left*, summarizes it in this way:

Throughout the twentieth century, black radicals shared many ... beliefs and practices that distinguished them from more liberal and social democratic left formations, black or otherwise. They tended to identify with the more militant versions of Marxism and with revolutionary thinking more generally. Black Radicals insisted on the centrality and revolutionary potential of African-

³⁸ For helpful accounts of the various strands of black deconstructive radicalism, see Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, ch. 5; King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, ch. 7; Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*; Michael C. Dawson, *Blacks In and Out of the Left* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), ch. 1–2; and especially James Foreman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries: a Personal Account* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

Americandemands and movements and ... embraced the right to armed selfdefense and did not rule out the use of revolutionary violence.³⁹

Understanding this basic structure of radicalism—its commitment to the transcendent ideal of freedom, its restlessness over the imperfections of history, and its burden for disruptive action—is critical for understanding Martin Luther King. For while he empathized with the radicalist account of democratic action and evoked aspects of its basic logic, he also—as we will see—struggled to re-imagine democratic action on other grounds.

GRADUALIST ACTION

Others conceived of democratic action in what might be called *gradualist* terms. Unlike radicalism, what I here refer to as "gradualism" is not, properly speaking, a political tradition. It is, rather, a set of political impulses shared by what are variously referred to as traditionalists, conservatives, and what Andrew Russ refers to as "historical institutionalists."⁴⁰ And while these various political strands differed with respect to both their intellectual sources and their historical outworking, they shared common convictions about the perils of abstraction, the wisdom of history, and the burdens of patience. It was this set of political impulses that characterized what King, in his own reflections about democratic action, referred to as gradualism. And while a full account of the history and substance of these impulses is beyond the scope of this work, a general

³⁹ Dawson, Blacks In and Out of the Left, 31.

⁴⁰ Russ, Illusion, chapter 1.

grasp of them is important for understanding the ways in which they differed from radicalism and, in time, from King himself.⁴¹

The Peril of Abstraction

The philosophical heart of political gradualism is a deep concern about the social peril of abstract ideals. This is not at all to suggest that those whom we may identify as gradualists lack visions of the ideal good or hopes for a given social order. It is, rather, to suggest a deep concern about abstracting this ideal—or any other—from the exigencies of history. In the early Enlightenment, this concern—especially its political form, which is our concern—expressed itself with reference to an emerging (and specifically Kantian) vision of transcendent morality.⁴² At heart, Kant's moral project was to anchor the foundations of the ethical life outside of the contingencies of history. Of necessity, this project entailed a metaphysical dualism, a vision of reality divided between the noumenal realm of transcendent rationality and universal moral law and the phenomenal realm of contingent historical existence. Mediating between these realms is the free human will, endowed with the faculty of reason through which (when freed from the distortions of

⁴¹ My account of the internal features and historical forms of gradualism is largely taken from the following: History of Political Philosophy, 3rd edition, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, which provides the basic contours of the thinkers I cover below; Russ, The Illusion of History, which, though properly focused on radicalism, provides an enormously helpful account of some of radicalisms' early critics; Michael Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991); Michael Oakeshott and Timothy Fuller, The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); and Michael Oakshott, On History (London: Blackwell, 1983)—each of which provide a contemporary philosophical account of the logic of gradualism. Also, Noll, America's God; Noll, A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada; and Holifield, Theology in America; Ahlstrom, A Religious History; and Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition (New York: Vintage Books, 1989)—each of which provide insight into the post-revolutionary emergence of republican gradualism in America, and Marsh, God's Long Summer, Dupont, Mississippi Praying; Stephen R. Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Chappell, A Stone of Hope—each of which provides an account of gradualist political impulses in the American civil rights movement. ⁴² On this cf. Pierre Hasner, "Immanuel Kant" in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edition, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 581-621; and Russ, Illusion, 6-32.

passion) enables a person to both understand and to pursue the "categorical imperative" of transcendent morality.⁴³ Kant's intention in this dualism was to ground the human person and the social order in the static safety of a fixed rationality, and—correspondingly—to guard each of these from the chaotic dynamisms of irrationality. Indeed, Kant (1724–1804) viewed this work of grounding and guarding through the lens of urgency. As he said, "Is it not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure moral philosophy which is completely freed from everything which may be only empirical and thus belong only to anthropology?"⁴⁴

Some of Kant's contemporaries, however, saw two dangers hidden within in his dualism. The first of these was misconstrued reason. In Kant's account, reason is a moral faculty which, when freed from the distortions of passion, enables us to both access and pursue the transcendent moral imperative within the chaotic contingencies of the world. It is, in other words, a reliable faculty of mediation between the phenomenal and noumenal realms. These critics—especially F.H. Jacobi (1743–1819) and J.G. Hamann (1730–1788)—conceived of reason in considerably different terms. For them, reason never attains transcendence, but is always and only carried out within and subject to the exigencies of history. For Jacobi, these exigencies were initially sensory; reason cannot properly be conceived apart from the contingent variables of human sensory perception. Because of this, Kant's transcendent and rational morality is an inaccessible delusion. As he said, "Like all the other contemporary philosophers, he called something that is not reason by the name of reason—i.e. the mere faculty of concepts, judgments, and

⁴³ "For Kant, the categorical imperative is a guiding principle for a humanity that exists in time, but that is in possession of a reason that is unperturbed and untouched by duration and continuity." Russ, *Illusion*, 9. ⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 51-52.

inferences that hovers above the senses but is unable to reveal anything at all by itself.⁴⁵ Reason cannot reveal anything "in itself," for Jacobi, because the only material reason's disposal is "delivered to it by the senses alone."⁴⁶ Having done this, Kant's reason becomes "pure nothingness" and "nihilism." For Jacobi, in severing transcendent rational morality from sensory reality, Kant has severed it from its own sources.⁴⁷

But sensory reality was not the only relevant horizon of historical contingency. For Jacobi—and especially for his friend and fellow foe of rationalism J.G. Hamman contingency also had a cultural horizon. That is to say, not only is reason intimately bound to sensory faculties, but also to structural realities that shape human experience. For Hamman, one of the most important of these structural realities was that of language. It is through language—historically contingent and dynamic—that reason finds its form and content. Because of this, any attempt to conceive of reason apart from this structure is an attempt at false purification from the "genealogical priority of language." As he says, "How is the faculty of thought possible? The faculty to think left and right, before and without, with and beyond experience? … No deduction is needed to demonstrate the genealogical priority of language.... Not only is the entire faculty of thought founded upon language, but language is also the center point of reason's misunderstanding with

⁴⁵ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "David Hume on Faith (Preface, 1815)" in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, translated with an introduction by George di Giovanni (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1944), 541.

⁴⁶ Jacobi, "David Hume in Faith" in *Main Philosophical Writings*, 552.

⁴⁷ Frederick C. Beiser summarizes Jacobi's concern as follows: "The problem is that reason is not a completely self-governing faculty; it is controlled by our needs and functions as living beings. We cannot separate reason from our needs and functions as living beings because its task is to do nothing more than organize and satisfy them. Of course, it is the business of reason to create laws, Jacobi happily concedes to Kant. But he then adds: in doing so, reason is governed by our interests as living beings, which are not in turn subject to rational control and appraisal. Rather, they determine the very criteria of rational appraisal." Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 87.

itself."⁴⁸ By extracting reason from language Kant had, in other words, torn rationality from the roots of its own intelligibility.⁴⁹

There was much more to their critique, of course, but the essential point for my argument is this: for both Jacobi and Hamann, Kant's distinction between the realm of transcendent, rational morality and the realm of historical contingency constituted a fundamental misconstrual of reason. In response, they sought to rescue reason from the "timeless and ahistorical implulses of the philosopher"⁵⁰ and to re-embed rational morality in the historical contingencies of "human relations, laws, customs, institutions, dialogue, acts, and events."⁵¹ For them, reason is best understood not as faculty for escaping the constraints of the phenomenal realm, but an activity employed⁵² for ordering life within it.⁵³

But Kant's misconstrual of reason was not the chief object of his critic's concern. Lurking within his abstraction they saw a much greater danger than philosophical

⁴⁸ Johann Georg Hamann, *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*, translated and edited by Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 211.

⁴⁹ "Language is the singular stuff from which the dualist needlessly abstracts his reified terms, rendering them relationless and divorced from the processes and currents of life registered in language. But perhaps most importantly, language for Hamann is the Urspring of human culture and history. Kant had forgotten his membership in the great community of speakers, for whom the continual use of words makes them participants in history. Kant could no more derive his atemporal and ahistorical autnomous forms from this medium than he could convey his thoughts by being mute. Language is the original institution and constitution, and is thus the foundation for all attempts to instantiate and constitute anything in time and history." Russ, *Illusion*, 20–21.

⁵⁰ Russ, Illusions, 21.

⁵¹ Ibid., 18. English political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, contemporary heir to the anxiety over abstraction, put it the same thought in this way: "The Objects which compose this present are not...the mere furnishings of an abode in which our doings take place; they are themselves the abode. They are themselves the language in which we compose our wants and conduct the transactions designed to satisfy them, the terms of our habits, the steps of our wanderings to and fro." Oakeshott, *On History*, 13. ⁵² "Reason was always an activity of historically situated people, and this treating it as a universal faculty distorted considerably reason's scope and capabilities." Russ, *Illusions*, 17.

⁵³ This is not, of course, to suggest that they viewed either personal or social reality as irrational or immoral. It is simply to suggest that for them, rationality and morality as such both originate and instantiate only within history itself.

misconstrual, they saw social nihilism itself. Given Kant's tireless attempt to anchor rationality and morality in transcendence the charge of nihilism is not instinctive. But for Jacobi and Hamann, it was inescapable. In sequestering rational morality from history by turning it into what Jacobi called "pure nothingness" and Hamann called "a ghost"— Kant had not in fact guarded reason from the corrosions of contingency. He had simply evacuated history of rationality and morality altogether. In spite of his intention, Kant's history—rather than being anchored in and oriented toward a transcendent ideal becomes merely a plane for the exercise of what Jacobi referred to as "absolute subjectivity." But importantly, it is a subjectivity that fails to recognize itself as such, a contingent vision that assumes its own transcendence. Cloaked in the robes of transcendent delusion, subjectivity is thus freed to conceive, construct, and deconstruct its various utopian or dystopian ambitions. This is the heart of social nihilism, subjectivity masking itself as transcendence and expressing itself in the will to power.

This was, for example, the explicit concern of in the political writings of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). In some respects, Hegel was an idealist of the first order. Resisting all forms of what he took to be materialistic determinism, Hegel anchors human freedom and morality in a form of transcendence—characterizing this transcendence as "true infinity" or, most famously, as "*Geist*." His goal in this, like Kant, was to liberate human freedom from the nihilisms of philosophical and historical nihilism. And yet, like Jacobi and Hamann, Hegel understood that solitary and inaccessible transcendence was itself a form of nihilism. Because of this, especially in his political writings, he sought to bring the transcendent and the contingent together. But he did this, importantly, not by drawing the contingent up into the realm of a transcendent and ahistorical ideal (thus rendering history meaningless), but by envisioning the consummate expression of the transcendent ideal in gradually unfolding historical terms.⁵⁴ Hegel, in other words, sought not to guard the integrity of the ideal, but to guard against the nihilism of "mere transcendence" by attributing to the ideal the goal of historical consummation.

Hegel found in history the means of reconciling or synthesizing the competing demands of the substantial and concrete with the abstract. His project can be summed up as a vast philosophical attempt to reconcile the cleavage between the finite and the infinite. This idealist position always demands recognition of the unfolding mediations of the concept. This recognition must take into account the concept's concrete particular existence, its universal and self-relating identity, and the ground were these are fused and developed. By taking all of these into account, Hegel provides a philosophical, yet historical process of development. So while Hegel is the most absolute of idealists, it however forces him to be a political realist. [For Hegel, the transcendent] must be actualized in the shifting institutions that are fused in the crucible of history and give expression to the competing and shifting voices of humanity.⁵⁵

The gradualist political vision, then, begins with a deep concern—both philosophical and political—about the peril of merely transcendent and ahistorical abstractions. Setting these aside, it seeks to ground political life not in the warm consolations of a realm beyond history, but in the wisdom of history itself.

The Wisdom of History

In a 1956 essay, Michael Oakeshott articulated the fundamentally historical character of political reflection in this way: "Let us begin at what I believe to be the

⁵⁴ Hegel's political philosophy is enormously complex—ranging from a comprehensive theology of history to particular suggestions about the shape of political institutions. However, my intention at this point is simply to suggest the way in which Hegel represents one of the foundational philosophical concerns of gradualism: the peril of ahistorical abstraction. For more on Hegel's political philosophy see, Pierre Hassner, "Georg W.F. Hegel" trans. Alan Bloom in, *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edition, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 732-760; and Russ, *Illusions*, 24–26.

⁵⁵ Russ, Illusions, 26.

proper starting-place; not in the empyrean, but with ourselves as we have come to be."⁵⁶ The place to begin reflection upon political action is, in other words, not in the heavenly realm of what should be, but in the historical realm of what, in fact, is. For all of their pithiness, Oakeshott's words aptly summarize another central theme of the gradualist political vision: the wisdom of history. This is not to suggest that all gradualist thinkers conceive of history as inevitably unfolding toward unity with a transcendent vision of wisdom. As we will see below, gradualist thinkers have remarkably different views about the teleology of history and, indeed, as to whether such a thing actually exists. But what unites these thinkers—and why I group them together below—is the conviction that political wisdom comes through sustained attention to the concrete realities of particular historical existence.

In one sense, the gradualist insistence on the wisdom of history functions as a bias toward the past. For English political polymath, Edmund Burke (1729–1797), the past with its ideological foundations, deliberative processes, and structural forms—is the place where contemporary reflections on political order ought to begin. This is not because the past is endowed with the qualities of perfection. To the contrary, Burke sees "perfection" as one of the dangerous illusions of the idealist. For Burke, the importance of the past lies neither in its perfection or imperfection, but in its *existence*. Unlike the vague and inaccessible realm of transcendent ideals, the past bears witness to particular existence, to the complex reality of historical concreteness. Thus unburdened of radicalist anxieties about the relative perfections and imperfections of history, Burke views the past not as a

⁵⁶ Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" in Rationalism in Politics, 424.

mine for transcendent ideals, but as a demonstration of the varied complex forms of life within history's contingency.

Viewed in this way, the past becomes a concrete source for practical political wisdom, what Burke calls "prudence." Prudence is the ability to order social and political life not in accord with theoretical abstractions, but in accord with the actual social and institutional circumstances of a given moment in time. Because Burke (like Jacobi and Hamann) understood social reality in concretely historical rather than generally ideological terms, he views prudence as "the first of all virtues and the supreme ruler of them all."⁵⁷ As he says, "Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect."⁵⁸ For Burke the past is an account of the various applications of prudential judgment in history; by attending to it, we deepen the work of prudence in our own moment in history.

On one hand, this deepening comes through attending to history's failures. By understanding social and political harm of historical imprudence, we can learn to avoid similar harms in our own time. But for Burke, the far better part of wisdom comes from attending to history's successes—to the ideas, processes, and forms that have endured in securing order and justice over periods of time. These, above all, must be venerated and, where prudent, preserved. This instinct toward preservation is what Burke refers to as "prejudice." For Burke, prejudice is a civic disposition in which the members of a community instinctively favor the ideological and institutional forms of their own social

⁵⁷ Edmund Burke, The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Bohn's British Classics, 8 vols (London: Bohn, 1854–1889), 7:161.

⁵⁸ Burke, Works, 2:282.

inheritance and resist the revision of those forms. In our time such prejudice is viewed in almost wholly negative terms, as a sort of blind devotion to a dubious status quo. But for Burke prejudice was something almost wholly positive. This is because for him it functioned as a form of civic vigilance against the perils of idealism. As Russ explains, "Burke ... defined prejudice as the inherited possession of members born to a social order, which serves to safeguard a nation from regression or degeneration. The conventions and proclivities of a nation, gestated and fostered by time and history, were defenses against 'precipitous, rash, and doctrinaire reform.'"⁵⁹

It will be helpful at this point to remember Burke's context. Burke, (like Jacobi and Hamann,) lived in a historical moment in which a form of idealist rationalism was being embraced with emancipatory fervor. This embrace had many social implications, but for Burke one of the most significant was the advent of radicalist political revolution. Animated by transcendent ideals of personal liberty and deep restlessness over the imperfections of inherited social orders, political radicals acted to disrupt those orders in the interest of attaining political instantiation of the visionary ideal. And yet as Burke looked across the English Channel and beheld the effects of revolutionary idealism in France, he suspected that he saw radicalism's true face: instability, violence, and death. However, these features of radicalism were conceived not merely in personal but in civilizational terms; the revolution entailed the violent death not just of persons, but of an entire social inheritance.

For Burke this sort of social death is the fruit of governing out of speculative political ideology, rather than by prudential attention to the actual circumstances of the

⁵⁹ Russ, Illusions, 23.

moment. Having fashioned the particular and "extreme" abuses of the French into a generalized and universal doctrine of political radicalism, the revolutionaries, plagued with what he called "metaphysical madness," had destroyed their own social order. ⁶⁰ This is the backdrop against which Burke's doctrine of prejudice emerged. For him, preference for the past was not simply a subjective and arbitrary predisposition toward stasis; it was a collectively embraced antibody against the rash reforms of idealism, and a safeguard against the threat of social disintegration.

And yet even as the wisdom of history is a claim about the past, it also functions as a claim about the future. Contrary to popular imaginings, gradualists such as Burke believe in social change. They believe, in fact, that such change is not only inevitable but, insofar as it is governed by prudence, also good. And yet crucially, unlike the radicalist vision, for the gradualist, the goodness of change is found not in conformity to a transcendent ideal, but in its opposite. Change prevents ideological hardening from overwhelming the dynamism of historical processes. As Burke says, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its own conservation. Without such means it might even risk the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished most religiously to preserve."⁶¹ In other words, change, when applied with prudence, becomes a means of conservation.

Thus, counter-intuitively, gradualism entails a commitment to a transformed future. The means of this transformation is not the radical imposition of transcendent ideals but the patient application of contextual prudence. The goal of this transformation

⁶⁰ Burke, Works, 5:114.

⁶¹ Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (London: Penguin, 1986), 106.

is the protection of that which is wise against the establishment of that which is merely new. It is a vision of the future that is at once open and secure: open to the dynamic and prudential movements of history, and yet secure by the very fact of being so.

The Discipline of Patience

Because political reality is understood in terms of historical processes, because historical processes are, by their nature, subject to temporal development, and because the central political task in the present is to prudentially apply the wisdom of the past in the interest of an unknown future, one of the core characteristics of the gradualist political vision is the discipline of patience.⁶²

In one respect, this patience expresses itself as a sort of disposition of acceptance and even of enjoyment of the present as it is. Impervious to the beckoning of transcendent ideals, and freed from the radical restlessness to transform the present into a better version of itself, the gradualist seeks simply to accept the world as a gift. This acceptance is not, it should be remembered, because of the correspondence of the present to an ideal form, but simply because it *is*. Oakeshott describes this disposition of acceptance in this way:

The general characteristics of this disposition are not difficult to discern although they have often been mistaken. They centre upon a propensity to use and enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or look for something else, to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be. Reflection may bring to light an appropriate gratefulness for what is available, and consequently the acknowledgement of a gift or an inheritance from the past, but there is no mere

⁶² While this discipline of patience is a constant theme in gradualist political writings, my account below is largely taken from what I take to be one of its most mature expressions: Michael Oakeshott's essay, "On Being Conservative" in *Rationalism In Politics*.

idolizing of what is past and gone. What is esteemed is the present; and it is esteemed not on account of its connections with a remote antiquity, nor because it is recognized to be more admirable than any possible alternative, but on account of its familiarity.⁶³

In another respect, this patience expresses itself as an instinctive defensiveness against anything that it perceives to be driven by the spirit of impulsive disruption. This is only natural: because the present is to be both received and enjoyed, intrusions upon that present are—at least initially—to be viewed with suspicion. Part of this suspicion is directed toward the evanescence of the idealism. Because the gradualist mind thinks—or aspires to think—at a civilizational scale, it views the idealism of revolution as a form of political adolescence, as a green impulsiveness unchastened by the critical evaluations of time.

Everybody's young days are a dream, a delightful insanity, a sweet solipsism. Nothing in them has fixed shape, nothing a fixed price; everything is a possibility.... There are no obligations to be observed, no accounts to be kept.... Since life is a dream we argue (with plausible erroneous logic) that politics must be an encounter of dreams, in which we hope to impose our own.⁶⁴

But this instinctive defensiveness is not simply directed against misplaced adolescent zeal, it is also directed against the unintended effects of that zeal on the social order. For the gradualist, idealism entails inevitable harm. This is because it views history with a sort of false clarity, a naïve simplification of complex process through which a transcendent vision takes concrete historical form. By so doing idealism virtually guarantees a disjunction between what it aspires to be and what, in the end, it becomes.

⁶³ Oakeshott, "Conservative" in *Rationalism In Politics*, 408.

⁶⁴ Oakeshott, "Conservative," in Rationalism in Politics, 436.

This was, of course, Burke's great concern about the revolutionaries in France: Though appealing to liberty, through its misunderstanding of the wisdom of history, it became the embodiment of tyranny itself. Thus, from the gradualist perspective, the history of idealist radicalism is a history of unintended consequences, a history of harms wrought in the name of the greater good. Because of this, the gradualist discipline of patience expresses itself not simply through the disposition of acceptance, but also a defensiveness against naïve intrusions grounded in the mists of abstraction.

[The conservative] favours a slow rather than a rapid pace, and pauses to observe current consequences and make appropriate adjustments...he believes the occasion to be important, and, other things being equal, he considers the most favourable occasion for innovation to be when the projected change is most likely to be limited to what is intended and least likely to be corrupted by undesired and unmanageable consequences...the disposition to be conservative is, then, warm and positive in respect of enjoyment, and correspondingly cool and critical in respect of change and innovation...He is cautious and disposed to indicate his assent or dissent not in absolute, but in graduated terms. He eyes the situation in terms of its propensity to disrupt the familiar features of the world.⁶⁵

But there is a final aspect to the gradualists' discipline of patience. Not only does it entail a disposition of acceptance and defensiveness against intrusion, it also entails a deferral of its own ideals. It is important to remember at this point that gradualists are not without social and political ideals. Indeed, in the American context, it is impossible to conceive of political gradualism without reference to the ideals of liberty and equality. And as with radicals, gradualists have deeply conceived and strongly held convictions about the shape that these ideals ought to take in the world. But unlike radicals, gradualists are principally committed to deferring the full realization of those ideals in the

⁶⁵ Oakeshott, "Conservative" in *Rationalism in Politics*, 412.

interest of safeguarding the complex processes of history. The political implication of this fact is an instinctive commitment to allow the gradual processes of history to determine the pace of political change. Russ (in speaking of Montesquieu) captures the essence of this commitment as follows:

Montesquieu was no less concerned with freedom that his more idealistic counterparts, but his greater singular insight was that freedom's passage into reality was always dependent upon the receptivity of a particular society.... He says of all social innovations and experiments that 'they should relate to the degree of liberty which the constitution can sustain, to the religion of the inhabitants, their inclinations, their wealth, their numbers, their commerce, their mores and their manners.' Here liberty is predicated upon the needs of a culture rather than seeking to redirect the culture from its abstract perspective.⁶⁶

Montesquieu, like other gradualist thinkers, sought to oppose neither political ideals nor political change, but simply to embed each of these in a vision of political action that sees history not simply as the imperfect expression of a given ideal, but as the touchstone for both social inheritance and possibility. This perspective, with its emphasis on what Burke calls "timeliness" is the essence of the gradualism: the patient commitment to see a political vision come not from outside of history, but slowly to take shape from within.⁶⁷ Thus where political radicals are driven by a courageous restlessness to act, gradualists see the better part of political wisdom as the patient willingness to wait. As Oakeshott says,

⁶⁶ Russ, Illusions, 22.

⁶⁷ See, for example Burke's suggestion in a 1789 letter to Charles-Jean-Francois Depont, that it is better to "acquiesce in some qualified plan that does not come up to the full perfection of the abstract idea, than to push for the more perfect." Edmund Burke, *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters,* ed. David Bromwich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 412-413.

The conservative will have nothing to do with innovations designed to meet merely hypothetical situations; he will prefer to enforce a rule he has got rather than invent a new one; he will think it appropriate to delay a modification of the rules until it is clear that the change of circumstances it is designed to reflect has come to stay a while; he will be suspicious of proposals for change in excess of what the situation calls for, of rulers who demand extraordinary powers in order to make great changes and whose utterances are tied to generalities like 'the public good' or 'social justice' and of Saviors of Society who buckle on armour and seek dragons to slay; he will think it proper to consider the occasion of the innovation with care; in short, he will be disposed to regard politics as an activity in which a valuable set of tools is renovated from time to time and kept trim rather than as an opportunity for perpetual re-equipment.⁶⁸

Gradualism in America

The advent of democratic gradualism was at once unexpected and inevitable. It was unexpected because, as we have seen, American democratic identity emerged in the throes of republican radicalism. Driven by ideals, restless with the imperfections of history, and committed to the disruptive intervention of existing orders, radical republicans understood themselves to be casting off the past in the interest of a transformed future. American democratic action originated, in other words, in reaction to the oppressive stasis of the European gradualist vision.⁶⁹

And yet, unexpected as it may seem, the emergence of gradualism was also inevitable. Ironically, this is largely due to the success of the American Revolution, whose

⁶⁸ Oakeshott, "Conservative," in Rationalism in Politics, 431.

⁶⁹ For an interesting example of this tension between radical and gradualist perspectives on democratic development, consider the differing reaction to the French Revolution found in Burke and Tocqueville: "Toqueville's theme, in regard to the French Revolution, was democracy, and he showed how the influence of literary men and philosophes fed the passion for equality that characterized the Revolution. Burke's theme was the intrusion of metaphysicians, one consequence of which was a democratic leveling that 'perverts the natural order of things.' Yet, whereas Burke could not believe that democracy was in accord with nature, and hence must be traced to the perversion of theorists, Tocqueville believed that democratic claims were at least partly natural to men, hence always available to be understood by theorists. This difference appears in utterly contrary judgments of the French constitution makers in 1789: Burke describes these 'constitution mongers' as 'the wickedest and most foolish of men' and condemns them for trying vainly to make a constitution wholly anew; Tocqueville praises them for this very attempt, despite their failure." Harvey Mansfield Jr., "Edmund Burke" in *History of Political Philosophy*, 695.

goals were not merely ideological but also institutional—to give republican ideals concrete historical form. It was this institutional incarnation of republicanism, especially as it was sustained over time, which created the possibility of a new form of republican gradualism. In truth, hints of this political impulse were already evident in the early debates surrounding the shape of the new American republic. United by a common commitment to the ideal of freedom, ⁷⁰ the American founders nonetheless struggled with deep and occasionally violent differences about the specific institutional form this ideal should take. This is, for example, evident in the tension between Federalist and anti-Federalist impulses that shaped the Constitutional Convention of 1787.⁷¹

Formally speaking, the debates were over the inherently republican tension between central governance and popular sovereignty. Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton, concerned that both the size of the emerging nation and the instability of "pure" popular sovereignty would lead to a new form of despotism, argued for a strong, representative, central government as a mediating structure for national order. Anti-Federalists, especially Thomas Paine (and, in time, Thomas Jefferson), concerned that a strong central government threatened the liberty of the people, argued for the distribution of governing powers along more local bodies. This tension formed the basically bi-polar context within which the American founders struggled to create the

⁷¹ For a helpful introduction and edited account of these debates, see *The Anti-Federalist Papers and the Constitutional Convention*, ed. Ralph Ketcham; Martin Diamond, "The Federalist" and Francis Canavan, S.J., "Thomas Paine" in *History of Political Philosophy*; and Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), esp. parts II, III, VI, and VII.

⁷⁰ "As the Federal Convention assembled in May 1787 its members did agree...on some basic principles and use of terms. All believed in government by consent ... and virtually all shades of opinion reviled monarchy and democracy [i.e. pure unrepresentative populism] and ... affirmed republicanism." Ketcham, *Anti-Federalist Papers*: 7.

executive, legislative, judicial, economic, and martial institutional structures of the new republic.

It is important at this point to remember that these debates took place in the context of commonly held republican ideals. They were not, in other words, arguments about ideas so much as about institutions, and as such, about history—specifically, about the degree to which the new republic would break not just from the ideas, but also from the institutional forms of a shared European past. That this is so is suggested by the degree to which, even in the midst of the revolution, some of the vestiges of the past—for example, aristocratic predilections, discriminatory suffrage, and economic reliance on slavery—were preserved by the convention. Thus, while the new *Constitution* reflected a shared radicalist impulse to break from the old world, it also reflected a strong gradualist reluctance to, institutionally speaking, make that break absolute.⁷²

The institutional—rather than merely ideological—nature of this conflict allowed Federalists and anti-Federalists alike to press their own particular institutional vision as that which was most faithful to America's founding republican ideals. And in time, according to the peculiarities of region, democratic process allowed each of these respective visions to take institutional form. Because of this, Americans began plausibly—not only to conceive of republicanism in terms of divergent and often contradictory institutional forms, but also to defend those conceptions on the gradualist grounds of historical precedent.

⁷² "Though John Adams believed Paine's [Anti-Federalist] ideas a 'star of disaster' and warned that it was 'safest to proceed in all established modes to which the people have been familiarized by habit,' he still saw in independence 'Rays of Ravishing Light and Glory." Ketcham, *Anti-Federalist Papers*, 3.

In time, and for reasons beyond the scope of this study, these distinctive republican visions began to take on a vaguely regional character. The northern region of the new republic—especially in its larger urban centers—began to take on a more Federalist character. For elite northern urbanites, the complex civic pressures resulting from immigration, urbanization, and industrialization created a context in which a more centralized governing structure seemed necessary for the preservation of republican ideals. Contrariwise, the southern region continued to nurture long-standing anti-Federalist sentiment. Elite southerners, whose culture was deeply informed by agrarian sentiments and whose economy was dependent upon slavery (an institution of increasingly dubious standing both domestically and abroad) saw anti-Federalist republicanism as at once a promise of individual liberty and a protection from tyrannical intervention.⁷³ Ominously, each of these emerging regional identities interpreted their own intentions through the logic of gradualism, seeing themselves as protectors of historic republicanism. As the nation began to expand to include the border-states, the stage was set for a contest over whose historic vision would prevail.

In time, that contest came in the form of the American Civil War, in which each party believed itself to be heir to the principles of the American founding, and believed the other to be a radical aggressor against those principles. In the North—especially after the shots were fired on Federal troops stationed at Fort Sumter off the South Carolina coast in April of 1861—the South was broadly understood as a region in rebellion against the most important institutional structure of American life: the union itself. Because of

⁷³ For a fascinating study of the role of these political predilections in the creation of American regional identity—especially in the American South—see Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

this, Northern actors believed that they had little choice but to resist this rebellion and seek to preserve the union by means of defensive war. In the South, particularly following the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, the North was broadly understood in similarly intrusive terms. In a way that strongly anticipated the "outside agitator" rhetoric of the following century, southern political leaders characterized the north—and especially its proxy, the federal government—as tyrannical and interventionist enemies of democratic freedom. Thus, with each perceiving itself as the defender of historical tradition and the other as a radical departure from it, the Civil War unfolded as a brutal contest of mutually exclusive struggles for preservation.

The end of the war would demonstrate the resilience and the inadequacy of each of these political visions. The North preserved the union, but—especially after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln—lost not only a clear vision for its specific form, but also the moral and economic resources to bring that vision, should it emerge, into being. The South irretrievably lost its social order, but—especially after the failure of reconstruction—preserved the moral energy and political will both to rebuild itself into a distinct political entity and to resist re-entering the union on wholly Northern terms. And while in subsequent years, a spirit of "national unity" would serially emerge,⁷⁴ in the end these distinctive and mutually suspicious regional identities—with their longstanding republican instincts—endured. Though they were held together by common republican commitments—especially in the face of international threats—each nonetheless maintained a self-conscious commitment to the wisdom of its own historical inheritance,

⁷⁴ Perhaps the high-water mark of this "spirit of national unity" was the presidency of Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921). On Wilson, see Chapter Four.

each defended itself from perceived encroachments of the other, and each patiently labored toward an occasion with which to galvanize the nation at large to its cause.

In an important respect, the American civil rights movement is a witness to the endurance of the gradualist tradition of American republicanism. This is because—as it had with radicalism—the movement became an occasion for these competing historical visions to break their uneasy truce and to openly contend with one another for the future of American democracy. On one side of this contest stood Northern liberals.⁷⁵ In the middle part of the twentieth century Northern liberalism was a tradition in conflict. On one hand, its conviction of the wisdom and strength of America's civic institutions was at an all time high. This conviction was not without merit: Domestically, these institutions had led the nation out of the Great Depression in the form of the New Deal, and—in a time of war-transformed America into an economic power. Internationally, these institutions had led to victory in two world wars and had established America as a foundational force in the formation of world order.⁷⁶ These realities gave to Northern liberals a sense of the inevitability of democratic progress; a sense that if only the programs of its historic political, educational, and economic institutions could be given time to unfold, a new order of peace could emerge. If ever there was a moment in which preserving the institutional inheritance of American history seemed wise, it was then.⁷⁷

At the same time, northern liberalism was plagued with a nagging sense of inadequacy, the sense, as David Chappell put it, "that something was missing." Part of

⁷⁵ For a helpful treatment of Northern liberalism, cf. Chappell, A Stone of Hope, especially chapters 1–2.

⁷⁶ On this, cf. Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), especially chapters 1, 2, and 7.

⁷⁷ For more on American confidence in progressive democratic unfolding, see Chapter Four below.

this sense of inadequacy was driven by international experience; particularly by the terrible recidivist experience of global war. That such war could take place among "civilized" nations—not once, but twice—raised long-standing gradualist anxieties about inflicting violence through the imposition of ideals—even those of liberalism—onto social orders unprepared for them. But part of this sense of inadequacy was driven by domestic concerns. As I noted above, in the years following the Civil War, Northern liberals viewed southern structures of white supremacy with a restless chagrin. Though few were willing to re-endure the perverse costs of domestic conflict, the South's continued determination not to conform its social order to the republican ideals of northern liberals remained galling.

And yet galling as it was, Northern liberals found that they lacked the moral and political resources necessary to challenge the Southern white supremacist order. For some, the reasons for this were political. In the wake of the Great Depression, Northern and Southern political leaders found it necessary to form strategic alliances in order to secure the promise of Roosevelt's New Deal: securing key Southern support for the New Deal required Northern liberals to leave the Southern order unchallenged. This became all the more the case in the boom years after the American victory in World War II: few were willing to press for massive social change in the midst of apparent social thriving.⁷⁸ Others resisted contesting the south on ideological grounds. Since the early part of the twentieth century, Northerners and Southerners alike had come to fear that civil rights activism, though cloaked in the language of liberalism, was in truth a Trojan horse for communist ideology.

⁷⁸ Chappell, Stone, 12.

Because of this, many Northern liberals—though natural allies of the liberal vision behind the civil rights movement—refused to embrace it precisely on liberal grounds.⁷⁹ For some, however, these political and ideological obstacles suggested a more fundamentally moral deficiency within mid-century liberalism. This concern was driven by the disconcerting fact that—in spite of liberalisms' extraordinary success both domestically and internationally—it remained unable to definitively address the American problem of race. For liberal intellectuals such as John Dewey and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., this failure suggested the need to recover American liberalism's moral mandate.⁸⁰

The significance of these conflicting impulses in mind-century northern liberalism is that, when faced with the trials of the civil rights movement, each found solace in a gradualist vision of democratic action. Liberal optimists, confident of the strength of their institutions, resisted radical action on the grounds that it risked deepening Southern resistance, needlessly disrupting the inevitable triumph of liberal ideals. Liberal pessimists, disconcerted by their own political, ideological, and moral inefficacy, resisted radical action on the grounds of their own ambivalence about the unforeseen consequences of rapid social change. Thus, in true gradualist form, many Northern liberals—wary of abstraction and secure in the wisdom of inherited institutional forms viewed democratic action through the moral lens of deferential patience.

On the other side stood Southern moderates. One of the enduring questions in scholarship around the American civil rights movement is how to characterize Southern

⁷⁹ On this link, cf. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*.

⁸⁰ Chappell, Stone, chapters 1 and 2.

resistance to it.⁸¹ Animated by the same ideal of the free self, these radicals sought primarily to unmask and disrupt existing orders of oppression.⁸² Some of this resistance, as I suggested above, operated out of a radicalist rationale. Anchored in long-standing ideals of regional freedom and restless in the face of an equally long-standing federal order that opposed its ideals, Southerners embraced the radicalist burden of active rebellion.

But there were gradualists in the South too. Like their radical neighbors most of these gradualists were deeply devoted segregationists who sought to preserve the Southern order of white supremacy. Unlike their radical neighbors, these gradualists deeply suspicious of the harm lurking within radical idealism and committed to the wisdom of historical processes—insisted that the work of preservation was one of slow and patient institutional labor. In many respects this form of gradualist reasoning is simply an expression of the long anti-Federalist sentiments of Southern political life. Believing the civil rights movement to be an attempt by Northern, radical (and likely communist) "outside agitators" to undermine democratic order, Southern gradualists sought not only to re-articulate long-standing anti-Federalists arguments but also to reinvigorate those arguments with new legislative and judicial energy. Perhaps the clearest witness to the power of this gradualist impulse is the number of alliances that began to form in its defense. Though by definition suspicious of centralized power, Southern anti-

⁸¹ See, for example, the differing accounts of Southern evangelical resistance found in Chappell, *Stone of Hope* and Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*. While Chappell generally characterizes Southern evangelical resistance in terms of passive neutrality, Dupont characterizes it in much more radical terms.

⁸² One of the distinctives of this deconstructive form of radicalism is that, though it appealed to visions of what could be, these visions were usually highly vague and rooted in a accounts of a mythic past. In truth, these visions functioned less as coherent aspirations and more as symbolic justifications of its fundamental rhetorical and practical task: disruption of an existing order.

Federalist leaders began to set aside their relative independence and collaborate in the interest of "the Southern cause."⁸³ In this respect, the civil rights movement both re-ignited and—in a new way—re-galvanized the southern anti-Federalist political imagination.⁸⁴

But Southern gradualism was not only a political movement, it was a religious movement too. In the middle of the nineteenth century Southern religious leaders such as James Henley Thornwell⁸⁵ (1812–1862) and Robert Lewis Dabney⁸⁶ (1820–1898) began to re-invigorate the doctrine of the spirituality of the church.⁸⁷ Drawing on reformationera arguments about the jurisdictional boundaries between church and state, Dabney and Thornwell contended that the work of the church was fundamentally spiritual in character. That is to say, while individual Christian believers could both hold and defend positions on social matters, the role of the church—as the church—was simply to proclaim the gospel and to cultivate of personal piety. Matters related to political and civic life were, properly speaking, the domain of the state.

Southern Presbyterians saw the church's task as preaching the gospel, trusting that the Holy Spirit would regenerate sinners by His word and build them up in

⁸³ One of the most potent expressions of this collaboration was the publication of the "Declaration of Constitutional Principles" (informally known as the "Southern Manifesto") in 1956. This declaration, signed by the majority of Southern senators and congressmen, gave expression to a renewal of a self-consciously regional political identity. On the unexpected and complicated development of these alliances, cf. Chappell, *Stone*, ch. 8.

⁸⁴ On the role these alliances played in setting the ideological agenda for the rebirth of modern political conservatism in the American South see Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*; and Darren Dochuck, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

⁸⁵ On Thornwell see especially James Oscar Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

⁸⁶ On Dabney, see Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2005.

⁸⁷ For a contemporary expression of this vision see D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, "The Spirituality of the Church," *Ordained Servant* 7 (July 1998), 64-66.

Christ. The church was not commissioned to make the world a better place in which to live. It had no business telling the government how to rule the body politic. It was not to feed the hungry, provide houses for the homeless, or protest social injustice. These political and social temptations only distracted the church from its spiritual calling.⁸⁸

While the intent of this view was, perhaps, to prevent illicit intervention of either the state or the church into one another's respective domains, its effect was to insulate Southern institutions (such as slavery) from the potentially disruptive demands of transcendent ideals. It is not surprising, then, that the spirituality of the church emerged with renewed force in much of the Southern church in the middle of the twentieth century. Facing social pressures from Northern and Southern radicals alike, many prominent southern pastors took refuge in a form of sacralized neutrality. Charles Marsh's description of Jackson, Mississippi, minister Douglas Hudgins is representative of a larger trend:

As the shepherd of First Baptist's highly influential congregation, Hudgins preached a gospel of individual salvation and personal orderliness, construing civil rights activism as not only a defilement of social purity but even more as simply irrelevant to the proclamation of Jesus Christ as God. The cross of Christ, Hudgins explained at the conclusion of a sermon in late 1964 has nothing to do with social movements or with realities outside the church; it is a matter of individual salvation.⁸⁹

The strength of the "spirituality" principle may be further seen in the fact that though the denominations most populated by white Southerners had formally renounced the biblical argument for segregation, this renunciation did not translate into a formal

⁸⁸ D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country:* 300 Years of American Presbyterianism (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 223.

⁸⁹ Marsh, Summer, 89.

embrace of the integrationist cause. To the contrary—and in the face of criticism from radicals of every kind—Southern leaders refused to embrace the civic logic of their theological claims. This refuge of neutrality allowed these leaders simultaneously to be distant from and defenders of the status quo—each under the pretext of Christian faithfulness. The effect of this divinely sanctioned ambivalence in a "Christ-haunted" South was sacralization of the logic of gradualism: the work of resisting radical intervention and preserving the status quo became not just a political impulse, but also a moral mandate.

Understanding this basic structure of Northern and Southern gradualism—its conviction of the peril of abstraction, its predisposition toward the wisdom of history, and its commitment to the discipline of patience—is critical for understanding Martin Luther King. For while he, as he did with radicalism, empathized with the gradualist vision of democratic action and employed aspects of its basic logic, he also—as we will see—struggled to re-imagine democratic action on other grounds.

C. "I Could See the Light:" The Turn to Agapic Action

Part of the significance of the Birmingham campaign of 1963 is that these two frameworks for democratic action—and their claims on King—can be seen with such clarity. On one side, King felt the pressure of radicalism—whether of that Bull Connor or Fred Shuttlesworth—the pressure to disrupt the social order in pursuit of a democratic ideal. On the other side, he felt the pressures of a gradualist vision of democratic actionfrom both Northern liberals and Southern moderates elites—the summons to defer one's own ideal in the interest of a vision of maintaining democratic order. And yet another part of the significance of Birmingham is that it was here that King realized—perhaps for the first time—that he could embrace neither of these two forces, but must, as he said, "stand between them."⁹⁰

The catalyst for this new realization came while King was alone in the Birmingham jail. King had been to jail before, of course, but this incarceration was unusually traumatic. Bull Connor's radicalist vision, with its willingness to defy both common courtesy and criminal law—ensured that King would be deprived of even the smallest consolations of due process. And so he was. He was denied a phone call to his legal counsel. He was placed in a dark cell in solitary confinement—a cell typically reserved, in Connor's savage irony, for violent offenders. He was deprived even of a mattress. He descended into darkness:

For more than twenty-four hours I was held incommunicado, in solitary confinement. Those were the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours I have lived ... I was besieged with worry.... In the mornings the sun would rise, sending shafts of light through the window high in the narrow cell which was my home. You will never know the meaning of utter darkness until you have lain in such a dungeon, knowing that sunlight is streaming overhead and still seeing only darkness below.... But there was more to the blackness than a phenomenon conjured up by a worried mind. Whatever the cause, the fact remained that I could not see the light.⁹¹

⁹⁰ "I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency.... The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence ... I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist." King, *Wait*, 75.

⁹¹ King, Wait, 82-83.

In time the light would come. One morning, when an African-American prison employee brought King his breakfast, he smuggled a newspaper to him as well. As King looked through the paper, drinking in the realities of the world outside of his cell, he realized why the paper had come. That morning the paper had published an open letter on the Birmingham campaign titled "A Call for Unity."⁹² In this letter, eight prominent Alabama clergymen⁹³ said that recent public events (apparently referring to the election of Albert Boutwell) suggested a thawing of segregationist sentiments, and presented an "opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to race relations."

Because of this, and even though they understood "the natural impatience of people who feel their hopes are slow in being realized," this thawing meant that the "series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders" were "unwise and untimely." Their rationale was that these demonstrations though "technically peaceful"—would not contribute to "the resolution of our local problems" but would instead "incite hatred and violence." Because of this, they declared "these days of new hope" as "days when extreme measures are not justified in Birmingham" and called for "our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations and unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham."⁹⁴

⁹² The text of "A Call for Unity," sometimes referred to as the "Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen," was published on April 12, 1863 in local newspapers. It can be found at

⁹³ The signatories were C.C. Carpenter, Joseph A. Durick, Milton L. Grafman, Paul Hardin, Nolan Bailey Harmon, George M. Murray, Ed V. Rampage, and Earl Stallings.

⁹⁴ Interestingly, "A Call for Unity" was a deliberate echo of a letter written by these same signatories criticizing "white radicalism" just a few months earlier. This letter, called "A Plea for Law and Order, and Common Sense" was written in response to Alabama Governor George Wallace's public and theatrical defiance of the Supreme Court's decision ordering school desegregation. In response—and in a way that anticipated the letter King read in the Birmingham jail—these same clergymen urged white Alabamans to obey the courts' decision and pursue their community's ideals not through disruptive public spectacle, but

Discouraging as it was, this letter is was an occasion of profound illumination for Martin Luther King—and this is because it showed him, in a new way, the limitations of gradualism and radicalism alike. As we saw in Chapter Two, King long resisted the destructive violence of racial supremacist radicalism. Addressing the Fiftieth Anniversary Convention of the NAACP in 1959, King put it this way: "There are some of us who still believe that violence is immoral. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his friendship and understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. It is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys the community and makes brotherhood impossible."⁹⁵

For King, to engage in violence—even in the interest of constructive change was to ensure destruction. Because of this, even as King pressed for change, he insisted that it be done slowly, deliberately, and within the boundaries of the law. This insistence cost him dearly. Over the years he experienced both the scorn of black radicals who characterized him as an accomplice to segregation and exploitation of white radicals who saw his non-violence as an occasion to strike out with impunity. Indeed it was the "gradualist" impulse of submitting himself to the institutional processes of democratic life that had led King willingly to submit to the terrors of the Birmingham jail in the first place.

And yet King also resisted the equally destructive gradualist instinct toward the status quo. For him, the personal, moral and social costs of the American racist order were

through deliberative democratic process. See, "A Plea for Law and Order, and Common Sense" (GET CITATION). ⁹⁵ King, *Papers*, 5:248.

incalculably horrible. Not only did this order corrupt the lives of all who participated in it, it also actively corroded the possibility of fully realizing America's republican ideals.

Because of this, King viewed the gradualist indifference of Northern liberals⁹⁶ and Southern moderates as a galling form of illiberal hypocrisy. As he said,

I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice.⁹⁷

In response to this disappointment, King pressed for change by disrupting the institutional structures of American racism. This disruption was costly as well. Branded as a radical, King's short life was plagued by the scrutiny of the Federal Government, the suspicion of white America, and—as in Birmingham—the caprice of southern officials.

As he sat reading the paper in the Birmingham jail, King saw—perhaps for the first time—that he could fully embrace neither of these traditions. Though seeing the need for disruptive action, he also saw—in the works of Bull Connor—the violence that radicalism could create. Though seeing the wisdom of slow change, he also saw—in the words of the Alabama clergymen—the violence gradualism could protect. He saw that each could be twisted to serve injustice and deepen bondage. As he put it:

The conservatives who say, "Let us not move so fast" and the extremists who say, "Let us go out and whip the world" would tell you that they are as far apart as the

⁹⁶ "Another group with a vital role to play in the struggle for racial justice and equality is the white Northern liberals. The racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Therefore, no American can afford to be apathetic about the problem of racial justice. It is a problem that meets every man at his front door." King, *Papers*, 5:504

⁹⁷ King, Wait, 97.

poles. But there is a striking parallel. They accomplish nothing; for they do not reach the people who have a crying need to be free.⁹⁸

He saw, in other words, the need for a new vision of democratic action. It was a moment of illumination, in which the darkness of his cell filled with the light of indignant clarity.⁹⁹ As he later put it, "I don't know whether the sun was shining in that moment. But I know that once again, I could see the light."¹⁰⁰ And so, as King sat staring through the bars of his Birmingham cell he began to re-imagine a vision of democratic action that—though characteristically honoring the insights of these other frameworks—ultimately aspired to replace them with something new.

It was this re-imagining that led him, in the span of a few imprisoned days, to write what was to become the touchstone for all of his future reflections on democratic action, the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." For a number of reasons, this letter has become deeply important for both King scholars and devotees alike. Part of its importance lies in the dramatic process of its production, it was written on scraps of news and toilet paper, smuggled out of jail by visitors, and typed for in secret in hopes of publication.¹⁰¹ Part of its importance lies in the unusual intimacy of its tone; slowly shedding his characteristic formality, King's allowed his cup to "runneth over"¹⁰² with an almost incandescent indignation. Still another part of its importance lies in the clarity of

⁹⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁹ "As angry as King may have been at the clergymen, he owed them greatly. Their statement energized him. Before long, he was surging up out of his valley of despair on a flood of indignation." Rieder, *Gospel*, 42.

¹⁰⁰ King, Wait, 84.

¹⁰¹ Because King was initially deprived of writing paper, he poured his first rejoinders onto the margins of newspaper and then onto toilet tissue.... After a few days, King gained access to writing paper, a pen, and an array of smuggling lawyers. Rieder, *Gospel*, 43.

¹⁰² This is how King's SCLC colleague, Wyatt Tee Walker, described the letter. Cf. Rieder, Gospel, 44.

its vision; over the course of the letter King exposed the folly of radicalism and gradualism alike. But one of the most important aspects of this letter is that it shows that when faced with the task of reimagining democratic action, King turned—as he had with democratic identity—to *love*.¹⁰³ The result was an *agapic vision of democratic action*, what King called "Christianity in action"—a vision of democratic action originating in, submissive to and oriented toward love.¹⁰⁴

In its most elemental form, King's agapic vision is this: democratic action—that is, action taken in the interest of shaping the democratic social order—is legitimate insofar as it is governed not simply by either the transcendent ideals or historical forms of democracy, but by the obligations of love. To put it another way, for King the basic question of democratic ethics is not finally "What do our ideals demand?" nor "What can our institutions bear?" but "*What does love require?*" This is not to suggest that King ignored either democracy's ideals or its inherited forms—not at all. Indeed, part of the complexity of King's democratic vision (and part of the reason he is claimed by radicals and gradualists alike) is his deep attentiveness to each of these. It is simply to suggest that for King—in a way that at crucial moments distinguished him from both the radicalist and gradualist traditions—neither was a sufficient foundation for democratic action. For King, the only protection against the weakness of both transcendent democratic ideals and

¹⁰³ This is not to suggest that the "Letter" was a comprehensive treatment of agapic action, but that—as we will see—it strongly anticipated and articulated its central themes, which King would develop over the rest of his life.

¹⁰⁴ As he put it, "We are using passive resistance as the method and love as the regulating ideal." King, *Papers*, 3:276.

inherited democratic forms—the only foundation sufficient for the complex ethical demands of democratic life—was what he called the "absolute power" of love.¹⁰⁵

As with his agapic account of identity, King's agapic vision of action was an early and recurring theme in his ministry. It can be found in his earliest known speech;¹⁰⁶ a number of his seminary¹⁰⁷ and graduate writings;¹⁰⁸ his summer sermons in his father's pulpit at Ebenezer;¹⁰⁹ and his first sermons in his own pulpit at Dexter Avenue.¹¹⁰ It was present in his address on the night before the boycott began¹¹¹ and in those he gave throughout the boycott's duration.¹¹² Again and again King labored to help his hearers reimagine their democratic actions in agapic terms. And while he was never fully able to systematize this identity, over the years its basic shape emerged, ordered by three foundational convictions.

"God in History"

At the heart of the Christian vision of the world stands the conviction that the God of the Bible dwells both beyond and within the structures of history. While this conviction is most clearly expressed in the belief that in Jesus Christ, God entered the

¹⁰⁵ Cf. "[Love] seems to me the only answer and the only way to make our nation a new nation and our world a new world. Love is the absolute power." King, *Papers*, 6:428; "I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. Over the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good. This has been the chief quest of ethical philosophy. This was one of the big questions of Greek philosophy. The Epicureans and the Stoics sought to answer it; Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it. What is the *summum bonum* of life? I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, 'God is love.' He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God." King, *Papers*, 6:303.

¹⁰⁶ King, Papers, 1: 109–111.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1:232–242; 1:273–280.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 2:139–152; 179–186; 248–256; 269–280.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 6:126.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 6:174, 214.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 3:72.

¹¹² Ibid., 3:115, 151, 198, 232, 236-38, 241, 266, 278, 305-306, 326-327, 344, 414-420; 6:241-271.
world as fully divine and yet fully human, in truth it also serves as the foundation for the very structure of Christian theology. Indeed, the story told in Christian accounts of creation, providence, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and parousia all suggest that though the transcendence of God and the immanence of history may be distinguished, they may never finally be separated. In Christianity, the God of the Bible is a God who creates, governs, inhabits, and redeems the structures of history.

While this conviction has been a universal *sine qua non* of Christianity throughout history, it has been particularly important for those who feel abandoned by history—the poor, the captive, and the oppressed. Because of this, like many other African Americans living in the South, Martin Luther King grew up in a religious context in which the presence of God in history was axiomatic. Week upon week, the young Martin witnessed its impassioned proclamation in sermons, its ecstatic celebration in worship, and its courageous enactment in civic engagement. And although, as we saw in Chapter One, King often struggled with the fundamentalist terms in which this axiom was rendered, it remains the case that for him, the conviction that God is a God of history was an inheritance that he never relinquished.¹¹³

Over time, King struggled to fashion this inheritance into a coherent theological conviction. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of King's theological development is the consistency with which he resisted any theological framework that removed the life of God from the life of the world. Initially this resistance positioned itself against the "escapist" tendencies of American fundamentalism's "heavenly" vision. King saw that while

¹¹³ On King's theological continuity with his African-Americanchurch experience, see especially, Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*.

such a vision sought to console African Americans with the hope of a redeemed future, it had the unintended consequence of stranding them in an unredeemed present. In a 1954 sermon at Dexter Avenue Church, he put it this way:

Too often have we talked about the primacy of the spiritual with little concern for the material. It might be true that man cannot live by bread alone, but the mere fact that the alone is added to the passage implies that man cannot live without bread. My friends man is body as well as soul, and any religion that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, and the economic order that cripples them, is a dry, passive do nothing religion in need of new blood. As I look at the economic and social injustices existing in our world, I plead for a church that shall be a fountainhead of a better social order. We can talk all we want to about saving souls from hell and preaching the pure and simple gospel, but unless we preach the social gospel our evangelistic gospel will be meaningless.¹¹⁴

It was this same concern that led King later to resist what he took to be the "radically transcendent" vision of Karl Barth.¹¹⁵ While eventually joining Barth in resisting modern liberalisms' domestication of God,¹¹⁶ he nonetheless worried that Barth's insistence on the "absolute transcendence" of God repeated the failure of fundamentalism: it removed God's life from the life of the world. Thus, in 1952, King wrote the following criticism of Barth:

First, let us take the point of God's transcendence, for it is here that Barthianism irks the liberal Christian mind probably more than elsewhere. Not that God is not transcendent. The liberal so believes, but he also contends that God is also immanent, expressing his creative genius throughout the universe which he is ever creating and always sustaining as well as through the essential goodness of the world and human life.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ King, Papers, 6:176.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2:104.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 2:106.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 2:104.

In response to both the escapism of fundamentalism and the "radical transcendence" of neo-orthodoxy, King sought a theological vision that—while guarding the transcendent character of God and the redeemed character of the future— nonetheless sought to embed the reality of each not simply beyond history, but within it. It was this search that led him to the two theological movements through which he came to articulate his conviction of the God of history: the theology of *personalism* and the theology of *the social gospel*.

Personalism is a philosophical movement that—though having deep roots in European intellectual tradition—emerged in strength in the early part of the twentieth century. Seeking to resist the abstract and impersonal determinisms of idealism and materialism alike, personalism "always underscores the centrality of the person as the primary locus of investigation ... the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological, and axial principle of all reality."¹¹⁸ Though this movement has many both many sources and many expressions, King first encountered personalism in its theological form at Crozer Seminary in 1951, while reading Edgar S. Brightman's *A Philosophy of Religion*.¹¹⁹

At the heart of Brightman's work stands what he "theistic finitism;" the view that while God is one sense "infinite ... eternal ... absolute ... and perfect,"¹²⁰ God is nonetheless "a personal finite God whose finiteness consists in his own internal structure: an eternal unitary personal consciousness whose creative will is limited both by external

¹¹⁸ Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/personalism/>.

¹²⁰ Paul Deats and Carol Robb, eds, *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1986), 136.

necessities of reason and by eternal experiences of brute fact."¹²¹ In the personalist account, in other words, God is a personal God who—though infinite—nonetheless dwells within the unfolding processes of history. This personalist account of God had a profound impact on King, in part because it provided him with an intellectually rigorous framework for grounding what he had falteringly believed from his childhood: that God is with us. This can be seen in King's almost mystical conclusion to his review of Brightmans' work:

How I long for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book. It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless. As I reflect on the matter, however, I do remember moments that I have been in awe and awakened; there have been many 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 only now becoming aware of it.¹²²

It would be tempting to view King's account of a personal encounter with God as the gushing enthrallment of a young graduate student. But in truth this vision of divine presence became a foundational theme for King's entire life, forming both the substance of his scholarship¹²³ and the basis of his ministry. Indeed, it was this vision that served as a turning point for King during the menacing uncertainties of the Montgomery movement. Of a January night in 1956, he writes:

¹²¹ King , Papers, 1:414.

¹²² King, Papers, 1:415-416.

¹²³ King's dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Weiman," was an attempt to articulate a personalist critique of contemporary theological concepts of God. For this, cf. King, *Papers*, 2:339-548.

One night toward the end of January I settled into bed late after a strenuous day. Coretta had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen nigger, we've taken all we want from you, before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but couldn't sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point. I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.... 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. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."124

The power of this moment would endure. In 1957, just months after the boycott ended, King—seeking to encourage his people in the work before them—turned again to the consolations of divine presence. Revealing that "the suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God; More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God"¹²⁵ he called his people to the same hope: "You know that God walks with you. Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you know that God is there. Even though you stand amid the ... shadow of disappointment, you don't despair because you know God is with you."¹²⁶ In 1960, just weeks after the student sit-in movements had begun to incite violence across the South, he turned again to this theme, saying,

In recent months I have also become more and more convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in past

¹²⁴ King, Stride, 124–125.

¹²⁵ King, Papers, 5:443-444.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 6:282.

years the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category which I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life.¹²⁷

And in 1963, as he sat alone in the Birmingham jail, King turned to this theme again: "I was aware of a feeling that had been present all along under the surface of consciousness, pressed down under the weight of concern for the movement: I had never been truly in solitary confinement; God's companionship does not stop at the door of a jail cell."¹²⁸ For King, the personalist account of a God who dwells with history had become both a fundamental aspect of his theological vision and an inexhaustible source of his pastoral hope.¹²⁹

However, personalism was not the only source of King's theology of a God of history. Indeed it could not be. This is because while personalism offers the presence of God within history, it does not offer the promise of God to change history. And for King, what African Americans most needed was a God who was not simply with them in their oppression, but who was also able to deliver them from it. For this, King would have to look beyond the theology of personalism to the *theology of the social gospel* found in the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918)¹³⁰ and—of perhaps greater importance for King—Howard Thurman (1899–1981).¹³¹ In its contemporary form, the theology of the social gospel emerged in response to both the terrible social conditions of the early

¹²⁷ Ibid., 5:424.

¹²⁸ King, Wait, 84.

¹²⁹ For King and his congregation the firm belief in God's presence gave them the courage to continue the struggle to live out the social gospel even in times of great duress. King, *Papers*, 6:26.

¹³⁰ On the importance of Rauschenbusch for King, see Rufus Burrow Jr., Extremist for Love, ch. 4.

¹³¹ Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited.

twentieth century and to the American Protestant church's apparent inability to address those conditions constructively.

For Rauschenbusch, this theology emerged out of his eleven-year pastoral ministry in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. It was here, in the West Side of Manhattan, that he saw first-hand the toxic residue of the gilded age: the profound disparities between the rich and the poor, the depraved conditions of industrial work, the cramped conditions and chronic disease of the working class, and the repetitive grief of child mortality. And it was here that he saw the maddening inefficacy of middle class Protestantism in the face of these things. Hobbled by an inward-pietism, an expiatory account of salvation, and a deferred eschatology, much of the church as he saw it was simply ill equipped to contribute meaningfully to the betterment of its neighbors. In response, Rauschenbusch began to re-imagine Christianity in more focally social terms.¹³² Thus, in the introduction to A Theology for the Social Gospel he writes, "We have a social gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough to match it.... [This] book offers concrete suggestions how some of the most important sections of doctrinal theology may be expanded and readjusted to make room for the religious convictions summed up in 'the social gospel.^{""133}

For Thurman, this theology emerged out of his experience as an African American in the Jim Crow South. It was here that he witnessed not only the serial degradation of African Americans, but also the chronic inability of both white and black Christian churches to constructively address the oppressive order of the American South. Like

¹³² Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel (New York: Macmillan, 1917);

and Watler Rauschenbush, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the* 21st Century (New York: HarperOne, 2007). ¹³³ Rauschenbusch, *Theology*, introduction.

Rauschenbusch—indeed relying partly upon him—Thurman struggled toward a theological vision of social liberation for the oppressed of the world.¹³⁴ As he put it,

The solution which Jesus found for himself and for Israel ... becomes the word and work of redemption for all the cast-down people of the world.... Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.¹³⁵

While the social gospel theologies of Rauschenbusch and Thurman differed in both ethos and argument, their respective accounts shared a common theme: The redemption offered in Jesus Christ is not only for the souls of human beings, but also for the structures of the world; not only for the future, but also for the present. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the social gospel for both King's developing conviction of the God of history. This is because it provided King—in several respects—with a vision of God who is not only present within history, but also *active* within it.

First, it provided a vision of a God who established history on a moral foundation, declaring absolutely that—as King would put it—"some things are right and some things wrong."¹³⁶ Indeed, it is this theological vision of a God who establishes history that serves as the basis of King's oft-repeated claim that "*the arc of the universe is long*, *but it bends toward justice*."¹³⁷ Secondly, the social gospel provided a vision of a God who is

¹³⁴ Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited.

¹³⁵ Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 28–29.

¹³⁶ "The first principle of value that we need to rediscover is this—that all reality hinges on moral foundations. In other words, that this is a moral universe and that there are moral laws of the universe, just as abiding as the physical laws. (Lord help us) ... I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. (Yes) Eternally son, absolutely so.... Some things in this universe are absolute. The God of the universe has made it so." King, *Papers*, 2:251.

¹³⁷ Martin Luther King, "Out of the Long Night," *The Gospel Messenger*, February 8, 1958, 14. This magazine was published weekly by the General Brotherhood Board in Elgin, Illinois.

working in history now to restore the world to its divinely established moral purpose. Indeed, it is this conviction gave King the ability to encourage his people to, rise up and know that as you struggle for justice you do not struggle alone. But God struggles with you. And He is working every day."¹³⁸ Thus, in one of King's most oft-repeated sermons, "Our God is Able," he says these words:

At the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that there is a God of Power in the universe who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and history. This conviction is stressed over and over again in the Old and New Testaments. He is able to beat gigantic waves of opposition and bring low prodigious mountains of evil. The ringing cry of the Christian faith is that God is able.¹³⁹

Finally, the social gospel provided a vision of a God who had promised—in time—

to bring his redemptive work to completion. It is important to understand that though

King spoke often of a "deep faith in the future," this was no mere optimism. It was, rather,

grounded in a vision of a God who would make history new.140 Indeed, this vision of a

future defined by God's decisive redemptive action in history that served as one of his

ministry's foundational consolations. And while, as we will see in Chapter Four, it is true

that King struggled over the precise nature and timing of this redemptive future, it

¹³⁸ King, Papers, 4:166.

¹³⁹ King, Papers, 6:527-528. Cf. also the following: "Yes, God is able to conquer the evils of history. His control is never usurped. His ways may seem slow, but his mills are grinding exceedingly fine. If at times we begin to despair because of the relatively slow progress being made in ending racial discrimination, and become disappointed because of the silence of people whose support is so urgently needed, and because of the undue cautiousness of the federal government, let us gain consolation from the fact that God is able, and in our sometimes difficult and lonesome walk up freedom's road, we do not walk alone, but God walks with us. He has placed in the very structure of this universe certain absolute moral laws. No matter how much we try, we cannot defy or break them; if we disobey them, they end up breaking us. The force of evil may temporarily conquer truth, but truth has a way of ultimately conquering its conqueror. Our God is able." King, *Papers*, 6:531-532.

¹⁴⁰ "Basic in our philosophy is a deep faith in the future. This is why our movement is so often referred to as a spiritual movement. We have the strange feeling down in Montgomery that in our struggle we have cosmic companionship. We feel that the universe is on the side of right and rightness. This is what keeps us going." King, *Papers*, 3:306.

nonetheless remains true that he never lost his vision that it would come. Thus, in the midst of Montgomery he would proclaim:

God has a great plan for this world. His purpose is to achieve a world where all men will live together as brothers, and where every man recognizes the dignity and worth of all human personality. He is seeking at every moment of his existence to lift men from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, and finally to the promised land of personal and social integration. May it not be that this is entirely within the realm of possibility? I prefer to live by the faith that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.¹⁴¹

Understanding the theology of personalism and the theology of the social gospel is foundational to any effort at understanding King's democratic vision. This is not because of King's deep fidelity to either of them; indeed, as we will see, at times he differed considerably from the core convictions of each. In truth, as was often the case, King was less interested in the particulars of their arguments than he was in the space they created for him both to explore his own theological vision. While the philosophy of personalism allowed King to claim that God is present in history, the theology of the social gospel allowed King proclaim that God is active within history—creating, sustaining, and reordering the structures of this world to his own ends. Taken together, these two theological movements strengthened one of King's earliest and most enduring theological convictions: that God is both present and active in the midst of history.

As the events of King's life propelled him into the turmoil of the civil rights movement, this theological conviction became foundational to his vision of democratic action. That is to say, as Martin Luther King set out to re-imagine American democracy,

¹⁴¹ King, Papers, 3:262.

he did so not only with the conviction that God is both present and active in history, but also with the belief that this conviction is relevant to the shape that this re-imagining ought to take. This is an important claim. One of the temptations in King scholarship is to view his ministry as a sort of civil-religious performance, as a fundamentally republican project cloaked in the rhetoric of religious conviction.¹⁴² And while, as I said in Chapter One, there are reasons for this perspective, my argument is that to understand it in this way is to miss the fundamentally theological energy of King's public ministry. For King, the theological conviction of a God who both inhabits and shapes history was neither a mere inward piety nor a mere civil-religious trope. It was a confessional basis for democratic action in the world.

Indeed, it was from this basis that King criticized injustice. As early as 1953, we find him criticizing American nationalism as a form of false worship: "Today we need prophetic voices willing to cry out against the false god of nationalism.... Against the claims of the false god nationalism we must affirm the supremacy of the eternal God of the universe, the Father of all mankind."¹⁴³ Several years later, in 1956, he assured his people in Montgomery that "the God of the Universe is on the side of integration.... God seeks to bring the disintegration of the universe together ... to bring that which is

¹⁴² This seems to me to be one of the most significant shortcomings of David Chappell's otherwise helpful book, *The Stone of Hope*. Though rightly pointing out that much of the energy of the civil rights movement came from religious sources, he characterizes those sources in almost wholly formal rather than substantive terms. That is to say, in his reading, the energy for the civil rights movement came from King's (and others') appropriation of the prophetic power of religion, rather than from the actual substance to which those prophetic utterances bore witness. Similarly, James Cone portrays King's sermons as a sort of duplicitous racialized religious performance in which King adjusted his rhetoric alternatively to soothe white audiences or inspire black audiences. On this, cf. James Cone, "Black Theology-Black Church," *Theology Today*, Vol. 40. No. 4 (Jan 1984), 409-420. For a helpful critique of this perspective, see Charles Marsh, "The civil rights movement as Theological Drama," *Modern Theology* 18 (2002): 231–250; and Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me*.

¹⁴³ King, Papers, 6:132–133.

disunited into unity."¹⁴⁴ And, in his sermon on Easter of 1957, it was the basis of his criticism of Cold War nuclear armament:

I wish this morning that you would go tell Russia, go tell America ... that hydrogen bombs cannot solve the problems of the world, but it is only through love and devotion to the justice of the universe that we can solve these problems. And then we can go away saying ... that "God reigns, he reigns supreme, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth." And through the love that he revealed through Jesus Christ, things move on.¹⁴⁵

It was also from this basis that King accounted for democratic triumphs. In a 1956 sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," he interpreted Supreme Court's the

Brown vs. Board decision as a triumph of God:

Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation.... For years it looked like he would never get out.... But one day, through a world shaking decree by the nine justices of the Supreme Court of America.... the Red Sea was opened, and the forces of justice marched through to the other side.... It is therefore fitting ... that we assemble here, and praise God for his power and the greatness of his purpose.¹⁴⁶

Just a few months later, in 1957, he interpreted the recent democratic liberation of Ghana

in just this way, saying,

God has said that all men must respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, "And if you don't do that, I will take charge"... I can hear Him speaking throughout the universe, saying, "Be Still and Know that I am God. And if you don't ... stop exploiting people, I'm going to rise and break the backbone of your power. And your power will be no more."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ King, Papers, 3:264.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 6:292.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 3:261.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 4:165.

This conviction was also the basis of King's hope as the difficulties of the civil rights struggle grew. Reminding his fellow boycotters in Montgomery that Jesus will "not be content until justice, goodwill, brotherhood, love, yes the kingdom of God are established on earth,"¹⁴⁸ he encouraged his people with the hope that—even as they struggled—God was both with them and able to triumph in their cause:

The protest is still on. And we want it known throughout the length and breadth of this land—to Asia and Africa—let the world know—that we are standing up for justice... We want the world to know that we believe in God, and we believe that God controls the destiny of this universe, and Evil can't triumph in this universe. This is our hope. This is the thing that keeps us going.¹⁴⁹

For Martin Luther King then, the conviction that God is both present and active

within history served not only as a private piety, but as both the motive for prophetic

encounter and the hope of public renewal.¹⁵⁰ As he said,

Come further, now, and consider that God is found in history. It is not at all easy to believe that God is present in history. Considering the anomalies of history one might logically ask, Is history rational? Is there any purpose in history? ... The key to history is lost when we separate God from the stream of events. And this, for the simple reason that, while history shows man in action, it also discloses

¹⁴⁸ King, Papers, 3:208.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 3:200.

¹⁵⁰ This fact illumines one of the most important aspects of King's civil rights activism: its foundationally *liturgical* character. Night after night, in churches across the South, Martin Luther King joined crowds of African Americans for services of worship. My argument suggests that he did so not simply because it was a familiar platform, and not simply because it was a strategic necessity—not, in other words, for merely pragmatic reasons—but because worship was an expression of King's basic framework for democratic action: that it is both dependent upon and accountable to the God of history. Understood in this way, King's sermons are best interpreted as a proclamation of God's intentions for the world; his praying as an honest invocation for the intervention of God, his singing as a participation in the communal ecstasy of a people on journey with God; and his leadership of his people out of the sanctuary and into the streets a ritualized enactment of democratic action's governing conviction—that God is a God who is both present and active within the structures of this world. On King's sermons see especially Rieder, *Word*, and Lischer, *The Preacher King*. On King's prayers, see especially, For an account of the meaning of music in the CRM, see especially, and for the best overall account of the role of theological conviction in the American civil rights movement, see Marsh, *Beloved Community: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*.

to open mind and sensitive heart the unwearied action of the living God, yet toiling to establish his kingdom over all the earth. The man who fails to see God in history is the man who is spiritually blind.¹⁵¹

The significance of this conviction for King's view of democratic action is that it provided a way out of the binary tension between radicalism's transcendent ideal and gradualism's historical unfolding. With the radical, King believed that there is a transcendent reality in which history has its origins, from which history derives its energy, and to which history will, in the end, be accountable. And yet unlike the radical, King believed that this transcendent was not at abstract ideal such as freedom, justice, or even love, but was instead a personal and loving God seeking to conform history to his loving purposes. With the gradualist, King believed in the danger of heedless idealism, the profound importance of historical moments, and the necessity of patience. And yet unlike the gradualist, King believed that historical processes were finally neither reducible nor accountable to their own internal variables, but to the loving God who—though dwelling within them—nonetheless transcended them as well. In this respect, the first consideration in King's account of democratic action is neither the mandate of ideals, nor the capacities of history, but the loving presence and purposes of God.

"EVIL IN ALL OF ITS TRAGIC DIMENSIONS"

The second foundational element of King's re-imagined democratic action is his conviction of the pervasive and oppressive reality of sin in the world, of what he called "evil in all of its tragic dimensions."¹⁵² King's belief in sin was in many ways firmly

¹⁵¹ King, Papers, 6:595.

¹⁵² Ibid., 3:258.

established in his childhood. On Sundays he heard sin confronted in sermons, confessed in prayers, renounced in conversions, and cleansed in baptism. And between Sundays, as he made his way as an African American in a segregated South, he saw sin expressed in the structures of white supremacy. Like the conviction of "God in history," King's belief in sin as both a personal and a social reality was something of a birthright.

Like his view of God, King's view of sin also grew from a childhood inheritance to a theological conviction. This, however, was a less straightforward path. Though King was nurtured in an American fundamentalist tradition that was very comfortable with the language of sin, his early embrace of liberal theology made him—for a time—less so. This embrace was due in part to the intellectual satisfaction he found in liberalism; in it, he found a way beyond the anti-intellectual and overly emotional faith of his family. And, as we saw in Chapter Two, it was in part due to the dignified optimism that liberalism offered; in it, he found an antidote to the relentless degradations of the white supremacist order.

But in time, it was these very degradations—what he referred to as the "vicious race problem"¹⁵³ of his childhood—that would lead him to question liberal optimism and begin to re-embrace a conviction of sin as what he called a "tragic" reality.¹⁵⁴ King's language of tragedy is revealing. Because he believed that God created the world with a purpose and seeks to order the world toward the realization of that purpose, King saw sin as a form of violence against God's intentions, an expression of the "gone-wrongness" of

¹⁵³ King, Papers, 1:272.

¹⁵⁴ "Some of the experiences I encountered [in the South] made it very difficult for me to believe in the essential goodness of man.... I think liberal theology has to easily cast aside the term sin, failing to realize that many of our present ills result from the sins of men." King, *Papers*, 1:272.

the world. Sin, in other words, is an aberrant deviation from the purposes of God in history.

Over the course of King's ministry, especially as he grew more deeply entangled in the American democratic struggle for civil rights, he began to see the breadth of sin's "tragic dimensions" with ever deepening clarity. But there are two aspects of his view of sin that became—and remained—particularly relevant for his vision of democratic action: the sinfulness of *selves* and of *systems*.

While King maintained an unwavering commitment to human dignity, he also grew to hold an equally unwavering commitment to the fact that one of sins tragic dimensions is its diminishment of human beings. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter Two, for King's entire ministry he insisted that human beings were separated from God,¹⁵⁵ broken in themselves,¹⁵⁶ harmful to the world,¹⁵⁷ and in need of redemption.¹⁵⁸ Though this commitment had its roots in the theology of his childhood, it was his exposure to neo-orthodoxy—and particularly to the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr—that allowed him to articulate this commitment with renewed conviction.

In many ways, Reinhold Niebuhr's (1892–1971) theological journey presaged King's own. Like King, Niebuhr's early theological work reflects a self-conscious devotion

¹⁵⁵ "Ultimately, our problem is a theological one. Man has revolted against God and through his humanistic endeavors he has sought to solve his problem himself only to find that he has ended up in disillusionment." King, *Papers*, 6:125.

¹⁵⁶ "Every man experiences it.... So that in our own personal lives, as we look at ourselves, as we look at the personal dimensions of our everyday living, we discover this dimension of sin." King, *Papers*, 6:386.

¹⁵⁷ "The real danger confronting civilization today is that atomic bomb which lies in the hearts and souls of men (Lord have mercy) capable of exploding into the vilest of hate and into the most damaging selfishness. That's the atomic bomb we've got to fear today. (Lord help him) Problem is with men. (Yes, yes) Within the heart and souls of men. (Lord) That is the real basis of our problem." King, *Papers*, 2:249.

¹⁵⁸ "And the universe stands with that glaring picture of the reality of life—that man is a sinner; man is a sinner in need of God's redemptive power. We can never escape this fact." King, *Papers*, 6:382-383.

to the theological frameworks of liberal Protestantism. But in time, Niebuhr, like King, began to move away from the optimism of liberalism and to reflect more deeply on the presence and power of sin in the world. In a way reminiscent of Rauschenbusch (though leading him to a very different theological conclusion), Niebuhr's theological change may be traced to his experience in pastoral ministry. From 1915–1928, Niebuhr was the pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan. Over the course of this decade, as Niebuhr encountered both the intractable racial conflicts and economic conditions of American industrialism, and the unimaginable tragedy of the first World War, he began to see the inadequacy of liberalism as both a social vision and a pastoral tool. In response—and for the rest of his life—he self-consciously labored to articulate a more "realist" view of the problems and the possibilities of American democratic life. As he says,

About midway in my ministry ... I underwent a fairly complete conversion of thought which involved rejection of almost all the liberal theological ideals and ideas with which I ventured forth in 1915. [These theological windmill], against which today I tilt my sword ... must have tumbled shortly thereafter for every succeeding volume expresses a more and more explicit revolt against what is usually known as liberal culture.¹⁵⁹

It was King's encounter with these "succeeding volumes"—particularly with Niebuhr's 1932 work *Moral Man and Immoral Society*—that deepened his own conviction of the sinful self.¹⁶⁰ Like Niebuhr, King began to move away from the optimism of liberalism and to embrace a more deeply "realist" view of the self. As he says,

¹⁵⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World," *The Christian Century*, April 26, 1939. ¹⁶⁰ "Over and against these anthropologies which fail to do justice to the dimension of human nature, and which, in spite of ... the refutations of history, persist in falsifying the human situation by false notions of

Somehow we must rethink many of our so-called liberal theological concepts. Take the doctrine of man. There is a strong tendency in liberal Protestantism toward sentimentality about man.... This particular sort of optimism has been discredited by the brutal logic of events. Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency man faces the ever-present possibility of swift relapse not merely into animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice. Maybe man is more of a sinner than liberals are willing to admit.... The tendency on the part of some liberal theologians to see sin as a mere [law] of nature which will be progressively eliminated as man climbs the evolutionary ladder seems to me quite perilous.... Only the one who sits on the peak of his intellectual tower looking unrealistically with his rosey colored classes on the scene of life can fail to see this fact. The word sin must come back into our vocabulary.¹⁶¹

This theological conviction of sinfulness of selves was deeply operative in King's struggle to re-imagine American democracy. And while, as we have seen, it was particularly important in his agapic notion of democratic identity, it was also important for his vision of democratic action. Indeed it is this conviction that accounts for what he referred to as the civic task of "self-purification." Throughout his ministry King repeatedly called his hearers to the work of personal change, of purifying themselves from the effects of sin in their lives. At times this work of self-purification took the form of self-*development*, as the labor to become more virtuous in both the habits of heart and habits of action. Thus, in a 1960 address to the National Urban League, he says,

Let us face it. We have been affected by our years of economic deprivation and social isolation. Some Negroes have become cynical and disillusioned. Some have so conditioned themselves to the system of segregation that they have lost that creative something called *initiative*. So many have used their oppression as an excuse for mediocrity. Many of us live above our means, spend money on non-essentials and frivolities, and fail to give to serious causes, organizations, and

progress and by false dogmas of human perfectibility, Niebuhr sets forth the biblical and Christian anthropology ... [taking] issue with the utopian optimism of modernism." King, *Papers*, 2:272. On the particular role of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, see King, *Papers*, 6:335, and also below. ¹⁶¹ King, *Papers*, 2:136–137.

educational institutions that so desperately need funds. Our crime rate is far too high. Therefore there is a pressing need for the Negro to develop a positive program through which these standards can be improved. After we have analyzed the sociological and psychological causes of these problems, we must seek to develop a constructive action program to solve them.¹⁶²

At other times, the call to self-purification tool the form of self-*restraint*, as the labor to resist the destructive pride, anger, and violence that lurks within the human heart and governs human actions. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter Two, it was this call that King used to shape his people in the wake of the victory in Montgomery, urging them both to restrain themselves from inner contempt and outer violence against their oppressors. This is why he says,

Somehow freedom is the this duty to respect all people, even though they don't love you, they don't respect you, but you respect them and you feel somehow that they can become better than they are. (Yes) ... You have a duty to respect those—I don't mean you have to respect their opinions, I don't believe in respecting everybody's opinion.... But I respect them as a personality, a sacred personality with the image of God in them.... If we go back to the buses and somehow become so weak that when somebody strikes us we gonna strike them back, or when somebody says an insulting word to us we gonna do the same thing, we will destroy the spirit of our movement—and I know it's hard, I know that. And I know you're looking at me like I'm somewhat crazy when I say that. [laughter] ... But I want to tell you this evening that the strong man is the man who will not hit back (Yes), who can stand up for his rights and not hit back.... What I'm saying to you this evening is that you can be courageous and yet nonviolent. You can take a seat on the bus and sit there because its your right and refuse to move no matter who tells you to move, because its your right, and yet not hit back if you are hit yourself. (That's right) ... If we hit back we will be shamed (Let's hear it now), we will be shamed before the world.¹⁶³

¹⁶² King, *Papers*, 5:505. See also especially King's 1957 address, "Some Things We Must Do" in which he says, "We must sit down quietly by the wayside and ask ourselves, 'Where can we improve?' Maybe we could be more sanitary...And another thing my friends, we kill each other too much. (All right, yes) We cut each other up too much. (Yes, yes sir)...We've got to lift our moral standards at every hand, at every point...We must improve our standards (Yeah); improve our conduct; we must improve our sanitary conditions; we must even improve our cultural standards. There are many things we can do." King, *Papers*, 4:336.

¹⁶³ King, Papers, 3:429-430.

It is important to understand however, that King viewed this call to selfpurification—both as development and constraint—not simply as a private act of religious devotion, but *as a public act of democratic citizenship*. Indeed, it was in the context of civic action that this call to self-purification most frequently emerged. For King, the work of self-development was not simply a theological act of personal sanctification, but a democratic act through which one seeks to win the trust of one's fellow citizens. This is why, having urged his hearers to "improve their standards," he says, "by improving our standards here and now we will go a long way toward breaking down the arguments of the segregationist.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, the work of self-constraint was not simply a theological act of denying the self, but a democratic act through which one sought to guard the wellbeing of one's fellow citizens. This is why, having urged his hearers to "not hit back" he tells them that if they do they will "destroy the spirit of our movement." This is the importance of King's conviction of the sinful self for democratic action: it accounts for his constant appeal for self-purification as both a religious and a civic act.¹⁶⁵

But perhaps even more relevant than tragedy of sin for selves is King's view of sin's effect on the social systems of this world. Like his view of the sinfulness of selves, King's view of the sinfulness of systems was also derived from Niebuhr. And while, as we will see in Chapter Four, King eventually distanced himself from some of Niebuhr's conclusions

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 5:505.

¹⁶⁵ One of the clearest expressions of this fact is found in King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." In his account of the process that led to the Birmingham Campaign, he says, "As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification." King, *Wait*, 88-89.

about the possibilities for social change, he nonetheless remained to deeply indebted to Niebuhr's conviction that—even more than selves—it was in the social systems of the world that the tragic dimensions of evil were most clearly encountered.

Niebuhr's view of the sinfulness of institutions, like his view of the sinfulness of selves, developed over time. Early in his career, Niebuhr's engagement in pastoral and public life was marked by the social optimism of liberalism—the sense that conditions can, and indeed would, improve. Indeed it was this spirit that led Niebuhr—as it had many of his contemporaries—to embrace both the political vision of socialism and the economic practices of the labor movement.¹⁶⁶ In time however—again, due to the intractable character of local and global injustice—this social optimism began to diminish. Importantly, however, rather than disengaging from public concern, Niebuhr struggled to re-engage social life on other grounds. The fruit of this struggle is, perhaps Niebuhr's most influential contribution: a theologically funded form of political realism.

Niebuhr's theological realism may perhaps be best understood as an intensified application of his view of the sinfulness of persons to the social order. That is, while Niebuhr believes that individual selves are sinful, he believes social and institutional orders are, in some sense, more so—and must therefore be approached with a distinct ethical perspective. Thus, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he says, "The thesis to be elaborated in these pages is that a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ For a helpful account of the cultural climate of optimism in the early 20th century, see Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinbold Niebubr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (New York: Oxford, 1997), especially chapters 1 and 2; and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*.

¹⁶⁷ Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, xi.

Niebuhr's reasons for this distinction are threefold: First, the *impersonality* of social systems. That is, though social systems consist of persons, they are characterized by logics and habits that are impersonal—unaccountable to and blind to the consequences of their actions for individuals or communities. The second distinction is the *power* of social systems. Because social systems give expression the collective agency of a community, their capacity for harm is much greater than that of an individual—especially with respect to those who are already vulnerable. And, finally, the third distinction is the *complexity* of social systems. Because social systems are a complex aggregate of historical inheritance, bureaucratic habit, and collective will, their effect is not only difficult fully to understand but nearly impossible to ameliorate. Niebuhr summarizes in this way:

Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interest other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages to their own. They are endowed by nature with a measure of sympathy and consideration for their kind, the breadth of which may be extended by an astute social pedagogy. Their rational faculty prompts them to a sense of justice which educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved, with a fair measure of objectivity. But all these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups. In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals who compose the group reveal in their personal relationships.¹⁶⁸

Niebuhr's account—a moral claim that the sinfulness of social systems is significantly different from and significantly more problematic than the sinfulness of individual persons—put him into direct conflict with the social optimism of liberalism.

This is, of course, exactly what he intended. As he said,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., xxix.

Inasfar as this treatise has a polemic interest it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill. They do not recognize that when collective power ... exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it.¹⁶⁹

Thus, in contrast to a liberal social vision marked by progressive development, Niebuhr proposes a realist social vision marked by vigilant constraint. This realist vision of systemic sin was deeply influential on the theology of Martin Luther King. Indeed, as early as 1954, the young King explicitly uses Niebuhr's categories to shape the social vision of his own congregation:

Sin grows even worse when we go out to the social dimensions of it, when we pass from the personal to the social. And that is when sin really becomes tragic. When man comes together collected in society, when persons come together and come into, bring into being this big something called society, then sin rises to even more ominous proportions. You know, individuals devoid of society are much more moral, much more rational, much more good than society itself. But it's because man is caught in society that he becomes even a greater sinner.... That is why one theologian can write a book entitled *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.¹⁷⁰

And yet, as it had with Niebuhr, King's conviction of the sinfulness of systems was

functioned not simply confessionally but also civically, it became foundational to his

¹⁶⁹ Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, xii.

¹⁷⁰ King, *Papers*, 6:386. See also King's 1958 Sermon, "The Christian Doctrine of Man," in which he says, "As individuals we are sinful but when we interact in society, it becomes even greater. One theologian looking at this problem could write a book, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Oh, when society becomes a reality before us we see sin in all of its glaring dimensions.... One nation tramples over another nation with injustice and evil and all that we can think of. We leave the battlefields of the world painted with blood, stack up national debts higher than mountains of gold, send men home psychologically deranged and physically handicapped, and fill our nations with orphans and widows (Yeah, Amen). When we look at our collective life, we must cry out. "We are sinners (Yeah Amen, sinners). We need to repent (Amen, yes)." King, *Papers*, 6:335.

reimagining of democratic action. This accounts for King's relentless engagement in the work of what he called "condemnation." As he put it in 1954,

One of the basic responsibilities that Christianity has to society and to individuals is that of condemnation. The Church must forever stand in judgment upon every political, social and economic system, condemning evil wherever they exist.... Jesus realized this, and throughout the gospel he is pictured condemning evil in no uncertain terms.¹⁷¹

For King, the logic of systemic condemnation was straightforward: Because God has intentions for the world, because those intentions are assailed by sin, and because sin is most fully expressed in the systems of social life, these systems must be therefore be subjected to prophetic critique. And so they were. Over the course of his ministry, King turned his critical eye to virtually every institution of American democratic life: the segregated social order of the American South,¹⁷² the apathy of American government,¹⁷³ the inequities of American capitalism,¹⁷⁴ the violence of American foreign policy,¹⁷⁵ and the failure of the American church.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ King, Papers, 6:199.

¹⁷² "There is a ... problem present within each of our communities which is so ostensible that it hardly needs explanation, namely, the race problem. In practically every community men of color are being still being suppressed economically, politically and social. We continue to recite our democratic creeds but fail to practice them in deeds." King, *Papers*, 6:220.

¹⁷³ "The executive branch of our government has been all too silent and apathetic during this period of transition; the legislative branch has been all too stagnant and hypocritical.... Much of the terror and confusion that we are now facing in the South might have been avoided if the office of the president had just given an occasional word counseling the nation on the moral aspects of integrating and the need for complying with the law." King, *Papers*, *5*:267.

¹⁷⁴ "The misuse of capitalism can also lead to tragic exploitation. This has so often happened in our nation. They tell me that one-tenth of one percent of the population controls more than forty percent of wealth. Oh, America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes? If you are to be truly a Christian nation, you must solve this problem." King, *Papers*, 6:341.

¹⁷⁵ "Today the cry that is ringing in the ears of the peoples of the world is peace, peace, peace. I think that the peoples of the world have come to realize that there are no gains from war. They realize that wars send men home physically handicapped and psychologically upset. They realize that war piles up a national debt higher than a mountain of gold and fills our nations with orphans and widows. So everybody is crying for peace. Yet we have no peace. Even the temporary let us in Korea is far from an assurance of peace. A Truce

Once again, it is crucial to understand, that King viewed this condemnation—this systemic critique of the institutions of American life—not simply as a pastoral act of religious performance, but *as a public act of democratic citizensbip*. For King, part of the work of democratic life is the work of exposing the sinful shape of the systems of the social order. Thus, in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he describes the Birmingham campaign as an effort to expose the hidden corruptions of the segregated social order, saying,

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.¹⁷⁷

is not a peace. And there is the danger that the flames of war might arise at any time to redden the skies of our dark and dreary world. Why is it that we have no peace in the world today? It is because we have failed to follow the principles of the gentle Prince of Peace who died on a Roman cross atop a Judean hill centuries ago. In other words we have failed to place righteousness first. So long as we place our selfish economic gains first we will never have peace. So long as the nations of the world are contesting to see which can be the most imperialistic we will never have peace. So long as America places 'white supremacy' first we will never have peace. Indeed the deep rumbling of discontent in our world today on the part of the masses is actually a revolt against the imperialism, economic exploitation, and colonialism that has been perpetuated by Western civilization for all these many years. All of these injustices must be eliminated, if we are to have peace. When will a stupid world rise up to see that a 'get tough' policy cannot bring peace; universal military training cannot bring peace, the threat of the atomic bomb cannot bring peace, but only through placing love, mercy, and justice first can we have peace." King, Papers, 6:144–145 ¹⁷⁶ "There is another thing that disturbs me to no end about the American church—you have a white church, and you have a Negro church. You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning to sing 'In Christ There is No East or West,' you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America.... Oh, my friends, this is blaspheming. This is against everything that the Christian religion stands for. I must say to you, as I have said to so many Christians before, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. Moreover, I must reiterate the words that I uttered on Mars Hill: 'God that made the world and all things therein hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." King, Papers,

177 King, Wait, 97-98.

^{6:342.}

For King, the work of systemic condemnation was not simply a theological act of prophetic denunciation, but a democratic act through which one seeks—in a Niebuhrian sense—to expose, constrain, and condemn the sinfulness of the systems of collective life.

The significance of this conviction of the personal and social character of sin for King's view of democratic action is that it too provided a way beyond the binary tension between radicalism and gradualism. With the radical, King believed that social structures were imperfect reflections of a larger transcendent purpose, and that—as such—they needed to be both condemned and (as we will see below) transformed. And yet unlike the radical, King believed that imperfection is not just a feature of the system, but also of the self—of all selves—and that as such responsible democratic action entails not just the radical drive toward freedom, but also the responsible work of constraint. With the gradualist, King saw the dangerous temptations of the idealist, and the need for both individuals and ideals to be disciplined by the systems of social life. And yet unlike the gradualist, King believed that these systems were also dangerous—indeed more dangerous than individual actors—and were themselves in need of both condemnation and constraint. Thus, because of his conviction of both the personal and systemic nature of sin King conceived of democratic action neither as the mere resistance of systems nor as the mere restraint of selves, but as resistance to evil in all of its tragic dimensions.

"WE HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION"

Thus far we have seen that King's vision of democratic action was built upon two theological convictions. The first is a conviction about God, namely, that God has purposes for creation and is present within creation to bring those purposes about. The second is a conviction about sin, specifically, that sin afflicts both individual selves and social systems. The final theological conviction that informed King's re-imagining of democratic action is a conviction about persons, namely, that human beings have what he called a "moral obligation" to construct a just social order. As he says,

In the name of God, in the interest of human dignity and for the cause of democracy, I appeal to these millions to gird their courage, to speak out and to act on their basic convictions.... We have a moral obligation to carry out. We have the duty ... to struggle for justice, because we are opposed to all injustice, wherever it exists.¹⁷⁸

Because King believed that God has intentions for history and that sin disrupts those intentions, he believed human beings have a "duty" to press back the reality of evil and to press toward the realization of the purposes of God.

Critically, however, King understood this moral obligation in the theological

terms of love. As he said in 1958,

From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of these expressions was mentioned: the phrase most often heard was "Christian love." It was Jesus ... that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.¹⁷⁹

It is this fact that, above all else, distinguishes King's vision from both the radicalist and gradualist traditions of democratic action. This is because while (like the radicalist) he affirmed the importance of transcendent ideals, and (like the gradualist) he affirmed the wisdom of historical inheritance, he believed that neither of these traditions contained

¹⁷⁸ King, Papers, 4:371.

¹⁷⁹ King, Testament, 16.

the resources necessary for constructive democratic action. The foundation for truly just democratic action must, in other words, come from outside of democracy itself. Because of this, King finally sought to regulate democratic action by neither the demands of ideals or institutions, but by the complex and improvisational obligations of love. Thus he says, "I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need to emulate the do-nothingism of the complacent nor the hatred of the … nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love."¹⁸⁰ To understand both the meaning and significance of this "more excellent way" for King's notion of "obligation," it is critical to see that for King, love functioned—in a way that evokes the impulses of radicalism and gradualism alike—as both *compulsion* and *constraint*.

Love as Compulsion

On the one hand, King understood love as a form of *compulsion*, as an inescapable obligation to labor toward a just and peaceful social order. This, in one respect, is a reflection of King's understanding of Christianity. As we have seen, against the *pietistic* interpretations of Christianity found in both American fundamentalism and particularly in the doctrine of the "spirituality of the church," King maintained a life-long commitment to the "social" nature of the gospel.¹⁸¹ And even though over time he grew critical of some of the aspects of the social gospel,¹⁸² it remains the case that for King, the Christian faith retained an inescapable quality of social obligation; an agapic compulsion to seek the

¹⁸⁰ King, Wait, 100.

¹⁸¹ "In the early '50's I read Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis, a book which left an indelible imprint on my thinking. Of course there were points at which I differed with Rauschenbusch. But in spite of these short-comings Rauschenbusch gave to American Protestantism a sense of social responsibility that it should never lose." King, *Papers*, *5*:422.

¹⁸² On this, see Chapter Four below.

well-being of one's neighbors.¹⁸³ In another respect King's notion of "moral obligation" reflects his vision of history. Against what he called the gradualist "cult of inevitable progress,"¹⁸⁴ King insisted that "even a casual look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability" and that those who supposed otherwise risked becoming "powerful [allies] of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation."¹⁸⁵ Because of these two convictions, King viewed democratic action as a form of *agapic compulsion*, as the moral obligation—one behalf of God and one's neighbor—to labor toward a just democratic order. As he put it,

Agape says that you must go on with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, but you must keep moving. We have a great opportunity in America to build here a great nation, a nation where all men live together as brothers and respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. We must keep moving toward that goal.¹⁸⁶

This is the agapic compulsion that lies at the heart of King's relentless appeal for what he called "direct action." Though, as we saw in Chapter One, King was a self-conscious heir to the African-American activist tradition, part of his genius lies in the way that he

¹⁸³ The fact that this theological conviction served as a source of democratic obligation may be seen in the fact that in both of his congregations, King insisted on having an active "social action committee." Thus, in 1960, King wrote the following to his Ebenezer congregation: "Since the Gospel of Jesus is a social Gospel, as well as a personal Gospel, seeking to save the whole man, a Social Action Committee shall be established for the purpose of keeping the congregation informed (intelligently) concerning the social, political, and economic situation. This committee shall keep before the congregation the importance of supporting such civil rights organizations as the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference." King, *Papers*, 5:379.

¹⁸⁴ King, Papers, 5:422. Cf. also Papers, 6:215.

¹⁸⁵ King, *Papers*, 5:283. See also *Papers*, 4:161, in which King says, "Don't go out this morning with any illusions. Don't go back to your homes and around Montgomery thinking that the Montgomery City Commission and that all of the forces of leadership of the South will eventually work out this thing for Negroes, it's going to work out, it's going to roll in on the wheels of inevitability. If we wait for it to work itself out, it will never be worked out. Freedom only comes through persistent revolt, through persistently rising up against the system of evil."

¹⁸⁶ King, Testament, 14.

gathered up that tradition and re-interpreted it through the ethic of love. Thus, when King called his people to give themselves to democratic action, he did so because he believed that this is what love required. Sometimes love compelled King to the work of *resistance*. Because human beings are caught within social systems that are deeply inflected with sin, love requires deliberate resistance of those systems on behalf of the neighbor. Thus, calling his people to resist segregation, he said,

It must be our firm conviction that segregation is an evil that we cannot passively accept. Segregation is evil because it seeks to repudiate the principle that all men are created equal. Therefore, we must not rest until segregation is removed from every area of our nation's life. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic, which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized.¹⁸⁷

But at other times, love compelled King to the work of *renewal*. That is to say,

King understood democracy's moral obligation not simply in terms of pushing against the sins of society, but also of pushing toward the purposes of God—the purposes of brotherly love. This is why, over the course of his ministry, King sought deliberately to transform the many of the central institutions—political,¹⁸⁸ educational,¹⁸⁹ economic,¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ King, *Papers*, 5:337-338. See also *Papers*, 5:483-485, in which King calls for national political leaders to "make a clear moral stand against colonialism and racism of all kinds, everywhere, and especially in Africa where apartheid has led to the massacre of hundreds of people seeking only to live in freedom in their own land."

¹⁸⁸ "We must continue the struggle through legislation. No one can underestimate the power of this method. It is an important, valuable method, and we must continue to use it. (Right on) We must continue to gain the ballot, to urge the executive and legislative branches of our government to follow the example so courageously set by the judicial branch...Integration will not be some lavish dish that will be passed out by the white man on a silver platter, while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. (laughter) If we are to achieve integration, we mist work for it. We must be willing to sacrifice for it, yes, even to die for it if necessary (applause)" King, *Papers*, 3:307.

¹⁸⁹ "The Negro had been deeply disappointed over the slow pace of school desegregation. He knew that in 1954 the highest court in the land had handed down a decree calling for desegregation of schools 'with all deliberate speed.' He knew that this edict of the Supreme Court had been heeded with all deliberate delay." King, *Wait*, 5.

and religious¹⁹¹—of American democratic life. This, indeed, is the very goal of resistance: not simply remonstration against the structures of social life, but against their *renewal*. But whether democratic action took the shape of resistance or of renewal, love served as democratic action's "regulating ideal."¹⁹² For King, then, love functioned as a form of *compulsion*, as a moral obligation—for the sake of one's neighbors—to "face the hard challenge and wondrous opportunity of letting the Spirit of Christ work among us toward fashioning a truly Christian nation."¹⁹³

Love as Constraint

On the other hand, King understood love as a form of *constraint*, as a moral obligation to protect one's neighbors from the harm of one's own sin. As with compulsion, King's view of agapic constraint was an ethical claim about Christianity. Because King believed that God had made people with dignity, and because King understood that human beings, in sin, deface one another's dignity, he believed that love required the work of constraining one's own sin in the interest of one's neighbors. Thus

¹⁹⁰ "We haven't achieved economic justice in its total meaning in the United States as a race, but we have made real progress in the area of economic justice, and it has come to the point now that the national income of the Negro, collectively, is about 18 billion dollars a year—which is more than all the exports of the United States or total wages and salaries paid in Canada. Now, with this much economic intake, so to speak, I think the Negro has a great weapon and, in many of these areas, particularly in stores that have public eating places, Negroes are spending a lot of money. Many of these firms and many of these businesses would really suffer if the Negro decided to withdraw his support and refused to trade with them. So that I think it's really a powerful weapon and it's not to be underestimated, and, whenever the Negro can use it creatively, I think it is possible to bring amazing results." King, *Papers*, 5:394.

¹⁹¹ "The church is called to be the moral guardian of the community, yet it is so often the preserver of that which is immoral and unethical. The church is called to take a stand against social evils, but it so often remains silent behind the isolated security of stained glass windows. The church is called to lead men to the highway of brotherhood and summon them to rise above the narrow confines of race and class, but it is so often found comforting men in their prejudices and giving their theories of racial exclusiveness biblical and religious sanction." King, *Papers*, 6:472.

¹⁹² King, Testament, 17.

¹⁹³ King, Papers, 4:125. For a more extended account of King's agapic compulsion see King, Wby We Can't Wait.

he says, "Again, I say although the white man has done us wrong it is our Christian obligation not to do them wrong. Someone must have religion enough and morality enough to meet hate with love."¹⁹⁴ In another respect, King's view of constraint was a pragmatic claim about history. That is to say, while King's insistence on agapic constraint was sacred, it was also *strategic*, born of the realists' conviction of the enduring miseries that come from unconstrained harm.

This is because for King, "violence creates many more problems than it solves.... 'He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.' So we must all pray and hope and work that the oppressed peoples of the world will not use the method of violence to stand out against oppression and injustice."¹⁹⁵ To disregard the constraints of love is simply to hasten to "an endless reign of meaningless chaos."¹⁹⁶ Because of these two convictions, King viewed democratic action as a form of *agapic constraint*, as the moral obligation—one behalf of God and one's neighbor—to constrain one's sin for the sake of one's neighbors. As he put it,

As a race we must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship, but we must never use second class methods to gain it. Our aim must not be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must never become bitter nor should we succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, for if this happens, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness.¹⁹⁷

The significance of this is that it is this agapic constraint that lies at the heart of King's unwavering commitment to "nonviolence" as both an ethical ideal and a political

¹⁹⁴ King, Papers, 5:229.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 3:325.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 5:504.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 5:504.

strategy.¹⁹⁸ Many of the details of what King referred to as his "pilgrimage to nonviolence" remain opaque. Indeed in treatments of King's nonviolence, scholars offer differing accounts with respect to both the timing of his first exposure to nonviolence and the sources that informed his subsequent development of his account of non-violence.¹⁹⁹ Importantly, however, two things about King's commitment to nonviolence are clear. The first of these is that starting in 1956—the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott— King began to identify himself in terms of nonviolence, speaking publicly and consistently about non-violence as the most important strategy for political change available to African Americans. As he said,

This method, [used by] Mohandas K. Gandhi ... to free his country from ... the political domination and economic exploitation inflicted upon it by the British Empire ... has also been used in Montgomery, Alabama, under the leadership of ministers of several denominations, to free 50,000 Negroes from the long night of bus segregation.²⁰⁰

For the rest of his life, King consistently struggled to embody this conviction—and to lead his people to do so as well.

The second aspect of King's commitment to nonviolence is that over the course of his ministry he grounded the strategy of non-violence in the Christian ethic of love. This is an important claim. One of the more misleading tendencies in King scholarship is to characterize King's language of love and of non-violence as though they were synonyms, interchangeable ways of describing the political strategy of passive resistance. But this is

¹⁹⁸ As an ethical position, non-violence simply refers to a refusal to inflict harm on another, as a political strategy, it refers to the use of that refusal for the purpose of creating social change.

¹⁹⁹ For a helpful treatment of these complexities, see Burrow, Extremist, 199-306.

²⁰⁰ King, Papers, 6:324.

not the case. For King, non-violence was simply a political expression of a more fundamental theological commitment to *agape*; the relationship between them was not one of interchangeability, but of interdependence. Non-violence needed love as its source, and love needed non-violence as its manifestation. As King said,

At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. In struggling for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns. To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must ... cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.²⁰¹

For King then, nonviolence is best understood as an expression of *agapic constraint*; citizens are to constrain their own tendencies to violence not simply as a political strategy, but because that is what love requires.

That this is so may be seen in King's stated aim for non-violence to constrain individual and collective harm. On the one hand, King's non-violence was motivated by an explicit desire to prevent individuals from harming one another. Because King was an anthropological realist, he knew that the potential to bring harm to another was an ever-present reality. Thus, he saw non-violence as love's constraint against the individual will to bring harm to either the bodies²⁰² or to the souls of another.²⁰³ On the other hand, because King was a social realist, his non-violence was also motivated by the desire to prevent the harm that comes from the impersonal and complex power of social systems. Because of this, King saw non-violence not simply as a way of constraining the sinful

²⁰¹ King, Papers, 6:324.

²⁰² "The nonviolent resister is not aggressive physically toward his opponent." King, *Papers*, 6:324. ²⁰³ "This method ... does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding." King, *Papers*, 6:324.

impulses of the individual will, but also as a way of constraining the sinful impulses of the collective will.

Thus, by peacefully refusing violent attempts to maintain segregated schools, King sought to constrain the harm inflicted by the system of unequal education. By peacefully refusing to sit in the back of the bus, or to eat from the back of the restaurant, King sought to constrain the harm inflicted by a segregated economy. By peacefully refusing to obey unjust laws, King sought to constrain the harm inflicted by white supremacist legislation. By peacefully refusing to affirm American intervention in Vietnam, King sought to constrain the harm inflicted by national self-interest. As he said, "the method of nonviolence ... is directed at forces of evil rather than persons caught in the forces. It is evil that we are seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized with evil."²⁰⁴ But always—whether seeking to constrain individual or collective harm—King understood his labors in non-violence as an expression of the constraining obligations of love. Thus he says,

At the center of the method of nonviolence stands the principle of love. Love is always the regulating ideal in the method of nonviolence. This is the point at which the nonviolent resister follows ... Jesus Christ, for it is the love ethic that stands at the center of the Christian faith. And this stands as the regulating ideal for any move or for any struggle to change conditions of society.²⁰⁵

The significance of King's conviction of the compelling and constraining obligations of love for his view of democratic action is that it provided a way of framing moral obligation that transcended the limits posed by both radicalism and gradualism.

²⁰⁴ King, Papers, 6:325.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 3:326.

Like the radical, King believed that faithful democratic life one of compulsory action: a life in which one is compelled actively to labor toward the realization of a just society. Indeed it is this belief that accounts for the frequency with which he is characterized in overtly radicalist terms. And yet like the gradualist, King believed that the democratic life was one of active constraint: a life in which one actively labors—on behalf of one's neighbor—to constrain the reality of both individual and collective harm. This accounts for the frequency with which some of his contemporaries denounced King as a gradualist. And yet unlike either of them, King's account of "moral obligation" was, in the end, governed neither by merely ideological or merely historical concerns, but by both the compulsions and constraints of love. Thus he says, "In this period of social change the Negro must work on two fronts. On the one hand … we must resist all forms of racial injustice. [And yet] this resistance … must never degenerate to the crippling level of violence. There is another way … Christian love."²⁰⁶

D. "The Bright Days Of Justice:" The Dream of Agapic Action

During his days in the Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King struggled to articulate a vision of democratic action that transcended the limitations found in both the radicalist and gradualist accounts of democratic action. This struggle led him to an agapic vision in which democratic action is understood fundamentally as an expression of the obligations of love. Refusing to choose between either the priority or the peril of transcendent ideals, King began with a transcendent God who yet dwells within history. Refusing to choose between imperfect selves or imperfect social forms, King affirmed the

²⁰⁶ King, Papers, 5:504.
multi-dimensional reality of evil. And, refusing the choice between disruption and patience, King argued for an activism marked by both compulsion and constraint. This was King's re-imagined vision of democratic action, a vision that—like his account of democratic identity—found its origin, its source, and its end in the Christian ethic of love. For King, it was this agapic account of democratic action—rather than radicalist or gradualist accounts—that offered the best hope of leading American democracy out of the "the dark clouds of racial prejudice" and into a time when, "in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."²⁰⁷

Several months after his release from the Birmingham jail, in August of 1963, Martin Luther King stood again on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Before him stretched a crowd of some 250,000 people—gathered together for the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Born of an uneasy collaboration between a number of civil rights organizations, and organized under the skillful hand of Bayard Rustin, the march was, in many ways, a living embodiment of King's account of agapic action. The unending cascade of hymns from across the crowd bore witness to a belief in the presence of God in their midst. The dignity with which the marchers carried themselves and the clarity with which they condemned the racial, economic, and political realities of America bore witness to a resistance to evil in all of its forms. And the deliberateness with which the protesters embraced both the compulsion to protest and the constraint of doing so non-violently, bore witness to the complex obligations of love.

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²⁰⁷ King, Wait, 84.

Throughout the day, a number of speakers addressed the crowd, but it was King, in what would come to be known as his "Dream Speech," who would give them a vision of both the nature and the possibility of agapic action. This is the scene of our final image. Like the photo of the Birmingham jail, it is an image rich with contradictory meaning. King is in a black suit that stands out against the white background that frames his body. His right arm is raised as he speaks—gesturing toward the transcendent—while his left arm clings to the firmness of the podium. The white background is filled by the columns of the Lincoln Memorial—a reminder both of the wisdom of historical institutions and—given Lincoln's murder—of their limitations. In the foreground the fist of an unknown observer is raised, compelled into the air by King's call to action. And yet behind King stand both Bayard Rustin—one of King's early mentors in non-violence and a white police officer: reminders of the need for both personal and collective constraint.

Over the course of this speech King appealed to each of these realities—the presence of God, the realities of sin, and the complex obligations of love—calling his hearers both to take up and to persevere in the work of agapic action. And more than this, he evoked the promise of a coming day when—precisely through this work—his hearers would be able to, "hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope," "transform the jangling discords of our nation into a symphony of brotherhood," and usher in "the bright days of justice."²⁰⁸ This was King's dream, the shimmering possibilities he found in the work of agapic action. But in the coming months, the deepening violence of

²⁰⁸ King, *Testament*, 218. All quotations come from the "I Have a Dream" speech, available at <http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.

American life would force King to re-examine that dream—and to turn the work of reimagining democratic possibility.



Chapter Four

I May Not Get There With You: Love and Democratic Possibility

"I have decided to stick to love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about in some circles today. I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love, I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen to much hate.... He who hates does not know God, but he who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of reality.... Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows." Martin Luther King, 1967 (Last SCLS speech)

A. "I Saw the Dream Turn Into a Nightmare:" The Turn to Democratic Possibility

In the hours following King's "Dream Speech" on that August afternoon in 1963,

nearly all of the 250,000 people who had come from around the nation to participate in the historic "March on Washington" peacefully boarded planes, trains, and buses to return to their homes. This was by design. From the moment news of the impending protest emerged several months earlier, many white Americans had begun to fear the worst. Some, citing the moral inferiority of African Americans, believed that the march would simply be an occasion for mass licentiousness and crime.¹ Others, recalling the recent chaos of Birmingham, feared that the march would simply reiterate the humiliating

¹ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years: 1963-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 872-873.

spectacle of racial violence—this time in the nation's capital and for the world to see.² Others, invoking the ever-present fear of communism, saw the protest as a deliberate Soviet attempt to disrupt the government and thereby threaten national security.³ In light of these varied fears, in the weeks leading up to the protest, President Kennedy and his aides held meetings with King and other civil rights leaders and tried—unsuccessfully—to persuade them to postpone.⁴

In the minds of the African-American leaders, however, these fears served only to demonstrate the necessity of the protest. This is because it was precisely the white fear that African Americans were incapable of responsible democratic participation that sustained black disenfranchisement. From their perspective, the March on Washington provided a crucial opportunity to expose the groundlessness of these fears by embodying—on a massive scale—precisely their opposite. To that end, march organizers, especially Bayard Rustin (1912-1987), imperiously demanded (and meticulously planned⁵) for this protest to be defined more than any other in American history by the law-abiding, peace-preserving, and democracy-honoring behavior of its participants.⁶ Doing so, they believed, would demonstrate not only the integrity of black democratic citizenship, but also the illegitimacy of all who stood in its way.⁷

In almost every respect, Rustin and the other organizers succeeded in their goal. On the morning of the protest, as many white Washingtonians left the city in fear and

² Branch, Pillar, 836.

³ Branch, Parting, 861.

⁴ Garrow, Cross, 271-273; Branch, Parting, 834-841.

⁵ Branch, Parting, 872-873.

⁶ Garrow, Cross, 266.

⁷ Ibid., 267.

many white shopkeepers transferred their merchandise to warehouses outside of the city,⁸ thousands of participants began to arrive in the capitol from around the nation. By midmorning, buses passed through the Baltimore tunnel at the rate of nearly one hundred per hour, and over twenty chartered trains arrived at Washington's Union Station.⁹ There were less conventional arrivals too: one young African American, having left Chicago a week earlier, arrived on roller-stakes, while an eighty-year-old African American bicycled from Ohio.¹⁰ Almost all arrived singing freedom songs.¹¹

In spite of the prodigious crowds (organizers originally planned for 100,000 people) and the wearying heat of the long August afternoon, the hope presaged by these early arrivals remained. It was palpable when the crowd left the Washington Monument staging area and began to walk, arm in arm, toward the Lincoln Memorial.¹² It was evident in the casual interactions between African Americans and whites sitting shoeless together around the Memorial's reflecting pool. It rose in affirmation of the various singers and speakers who came before them. And it positively soared in response to King's performance. Indeed, as crowds made their way back to the trains and buses that afternoon, and as Rustin's clean-up crews restored the Mall to pristine condition, they continued to sing, only now they were singing of a "dream." In this, the crowd exceeded even the hopes of the prescient Rustin: They had not only heard King's dream and

⁸ Branch, Parting, 872.

⁹ Ibid., 876. See also Thomas Gentile, *March On Washington, August* 28, 1963 (Washington, D.C.: New Day Publications, 1983), 133.

¹⁰ Branch, Parting, 876.

¹¹ "A trainload that had boarded in Savannah singing 'We Shall Not Be Moved' arrived at Washington's Union Station singing "We Shall Overcome." [H]undreds of movement people from another city stepped through the train doors singing, 'Woke up this morning with my mind set on freedom. Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah." Branch, *Parting*, 876.

¹² Ibid., 877.

embodied it before white America, they had also decided to take it on their lips and make it their own.

They were not the only ones. As the crowds left the city, King and the other march organizers gathered in the White House for a pre-arranged meeting with President Kennedy. As the leaders filed into the Cabinet Room, Kennedy moved purposefully toward King, greeted him with a smile, and said, "I have a dream." Uncomfortable with being singled out in the presence of the other organizers, King sought to defuse the moment by focusing the President's attention on the "excellent speech" of another speaker. Taking the cue, the perceptive Kennedy individually greeted each of the organizers, congratulating them on the success of the day before turning to the business of the meeting.¹³ But while King had succeeded in defusing the awkwardness of the moment, no one could deny its significance: The words of King's dream, less than two hours old, had been spoken back to him by the President of the United States. In this moment it seemed possible that his dream could become that of the nation.

Neither King nor the other protest organizers could be blamed for thinking so. In fact, they left the White House meeting with the prospect of enlisting Presidents Kennedy and Eisenhower in the passage of long-hoped-for Civil Rights Legislation.¹⁴ In both the *New York Times* and black publications across the country, King's speech was hailed as the summary event of one of the most important gatherings in the capitol's

¹³ Branch, Parting, 883.

¹⁴ Ibid., 883-887. For a detailed account of this legislation see especially Clay Risen, *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act.* First U.S. Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014); and Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights.*

history,¹⁵ and bootlegged versions of the speech were illegally distributed by Motown, Mr. Maestro, and Twentieth Century Fox Records.¹⁶ In the coming weeks, nearly every major American television network aired a program on the subject of race in America, *Newsweek* magazine published a special edition on the "Negro in America," and *Life* magazine placed a photo of march organizers A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin on its cover.¹⁷ Indeed the success of the march was so overwhelming that Rustin and King began to fear a new threat to the movement: self-satisfaction, the temptation to believe that the dream had already been realized. To ward off this temptation, they immediately went to work. Rustin began to develop a strategy for bringing larger economic change to African Americans, while King announced plans for a new direct action campaign in one of four cities¹⁸ and convened a three-day staff retreat to prepare.

This is not to suggest that the movement was suddenly, miraculously, without opposition. As ever, actors around the country labored to wake America from the dream. Predictably, this labor was conspicuously energetic in Birmingham, a city that—even in the midst of the hopeful rhetoric of his "Dream Speech"—King had referred to as "vicious." Faced with a federal court order to integrate their schools—nine years after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision—the leaders of Birmingham resorted to the long-held Southern strategies of public theater and private terror. On September 9th, the day schools were to be integrated, Mayor Boutwell sought a judicial delay and Governor Wallace enlisted the Alabama Guard to prevent it. That night, the home of a local activist

¹⁵ Branch, Parting, 886.

¹⁶ Branch, Parting, 886.

¹⁷ Branch, *Pillar*, 133-135.

¹⁸ The cities under consideration were Albany, Montgomery, Gadsden, and Danville. Cf. Garrow, Cross, 287.

was bombed.¹⁹ And yet even these strategies were not enough. On September 10, 1963 President Kennedy federalized the Alabama guard and then promptly removed it from the schools, allowing Birmingham's black students, for the first time, to take their seats in integrated schools. The dream, it seemed, was on the move.

On the morning of Sunday, September 15, a few weeks after the march, the African-American congregation of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church gathered for its Youth Sunday. A beloved annual event, Youth Sunday was the day when, dressed all in white, the children of the church led the adults in the ushering, songs, prayers, and readings of the morning worship service. Though this was always an important event in the life of the church, the events of the recent months—the Birmingham Campaign six months earlier, the March on Washington three weeks before, and the integration of schools the previous week—made this year's Youth Sunday particularly meaningful. In a wonderful and unexpected way, 1963 was an exciting time to be an African-American child in Birmingham.

During the Sunday School hour before that morning's eleven o'clock service, the adults discussed the day's lesson ("The Love that Forgives") while the children of the church prepared excitedly for their leadership role.²⁰ Four of these children—Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carol Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson—went down together into the basement bathroom where they straightened one another's white dresses and talked excitedly about the morning ahead.

¹⁹ Branch, Parting, 889.

²⁰ Ibid., 889.

It was at this moment—when the adults talked of love and the children talked of leading—that a powerful bomb placed in secret against the church's basement wall exploded. For a moment the adults upstairs thought the blast, which stopped the sanctuary clock at 10:22 am and knocked the face of Jesus out of the church's only stained glass window, was an earthquake.²¹ It was only when they stumbled outside of the church and saw the devastation that they realized the horror of what had happened. The bomb, made of fifteen sticks of dynamite, had been secretly placed that morning under the stone steps of the church's side entrance. It was a cruel calculation: the strength of the stone ensured that the majority of the bomb's force would be directed not outward toward the street where pedestrians were, but inward toward the basement, where the children were.

And so it was. The four little girls in the basement bathroom died instantly. Twenty-two others were injured. One of them, Sarah Collins, the ten-year old sister of Addie Mae, stumbled from the basement partially blinded, bleeding from her nose and ears. But it was not only the children. Within minutes, the most seriously injured adults roared away in ambulances. Others—mostly parents—staggered through the rubble screaming hysterically for their children. One old man, the grandfather of Carol Denise McNair, simply sat and sobbed as he clutched one of his granddaughter's white dress shoes.²²

In one respect the Sixteenth Street Church bombing was simply one more horrible episode in the long history of American racial violence. Indeed, since 1956 there

²¹Branch, Parting, 889.

²² Branch, Parting, 889; Branch, Pillar, 138.

had been more than twenty²³ other bombings—all "unsolved"—in Birmingham alone.²⁴ And, in the hours and days that followed the bombing, the violence against African Americans would continue unabated. On the very morning of the bombing, in fact, two young white Eagle Scouts, returning home from a segregationist rally, shot and killed a 13-year-old African-American boy as he rode by on his bicycle.²⁵ Later that afternoon, as angry crowds gathered in the streets, a white police officer shot a young African-American man in the back of the head as he ran away.²⁶ In this sense, though it is tempting to see the Sixteenth Street bombing as a singular act of inscrutable perversity, in truth it was simply one more horrible reiteration of the long logic of American racial violence.

Indeed King, in his funeral homily for the girls, after characterizing the bombing as "one of the most vicious, heinous crimes ever perpetrated against humanity" went on to explicitly interpret their deaths through the lens of American democratic struggle:

They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. So they have something to say to us in their death.... They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to a Federal Government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of Southern Dixiecrats and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing Northern Republicans. They have something to say to every Negro who passively accepts the evil system of segregation. They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must ... be concerned not merely

²³ Branch, Pillar, 138; King, Wait, 77–100.

²⁴ Sadly, even though within two years the FBI knew that the Sixteenth Street Bombing had been carried out by four known Klansmen—Bobby Frank Cherry, Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr., Herman Frank Cash, and Robert Edward Chambliss, no prosecutions began until 1977. And yet even then only one of the suspects—Chambliss—was prosecuted and for the murder of only one of the victims—Carol Denise McNair. Blanton and Cherry were not tried until 2001 and 2002 respectively, when each was sentenced to life imprisonment. Cash, who died in 1994, was never tried. Cf. Delores Jones-Brown, et al., ed. *African Americans and Criminal Justice: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014).

²⁵ Branch, Parting, 890.

²⁶ Ibid., 891.

about WHO murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, and the philosophy which PRODUCED the murderers.²⁷

But King's words were not mere recrimination. Going on, he suggested that the girls' deaths presented an opportunity for America to "work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American dream a reality."²⁸ Assuring his hearers that "God still has a way of wringing good out of evil," he raised hopes that "the spilt blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future."²⁹ In a sense then, for King, the violence of Birmingham was simply the latest—and worst— expression of the "long night" before the dream's dawn.

And yet even so, the tragedy of this particular bombing marked the beginning of a transition for both King and for the civil rights movement. This is largely due to its proximity to the hope of the March on Washington. Back in August, King had stood before a crowd of 250,000 Americans and dreamed of a day when "right there in Alabama, little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters as brothers."³⁰ But just three weeks later, when Americans looked to Alabama on that September Sunday, what they saw instead was "little black girls" murdered in their own church. The irony was too strong even for King to ignore. Several years later, in a sermon given in Atlanta in 1967, he put it this way:

²⁹Ibid., 222.

²⁷ King, *Testament*, 221, emphasis original.

²⁸King, Testament, 221.

³⁰Ibid., 219.

In 1963 ... in Washington D.C. ... I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare ... just a few weeks after I had talked about it. It was when four beautiful ... Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama.³¹

These words are important because they suggest a change in King. Before the fall of 1963, King described the "nightmare" of American racism and the "dream" of democratic brotherhood almost exclusively as sequential episodes in a single historical movement: now the nightmare, but soon the dream. But after the fall of 1963, in a way that even King himself did not immediately understand, he—and many others—began to wonder if the "nightmare" and the "dream" represented not two stages in a single inevitable future, but two distinct futures—each contending for the final word. Beginning in 1963, in other words, the clean sequential union between the nightmare and the dream began to pull apart. In the space between them a trackless wilderness opened up. And it was here, in this enduring wilderness, that Martin Luther King began the struggle that would define the remainder of his life: the struggle to re-imagine democratic possibility.

B. "Each Represents a Partial Truth:" Perfectionist and Preservationist Accounts of Possibility

King was hardly the first American to struggle over the nature of democratic possibility. Indeed, as he entered this wilderness between the nightmare and the dream he found that he was not alone. The reason for this, of course, is that from the beginning America has labored under a sort of eschatological self-consciousness, a struggle to come

³¹ Quoted in Cone, Martin and Malcolm, 213.

to terms with the nature of its own possibility—both for itself, and through it, for the world. As he surveyed the territory, King discerned two sets of well-worn tracks, each leading to a different account of democratic possibility—the perfectionist and the preservationist traditions. It was with these that King would have to engage as he sought to re-imagine democratic possibility on his own terms.

"The Regeneration of the World:" The Perfectionist Tradition

The first and perhaps most fundamental tradition of American democratic possibility is what may be referred to as the *perfectionist tradition*. While, as we will see, this tradition has many sources and understand itself in different ways, at the heart of the perfectionist tradition is the view that American democracy contains within itself the possibility of achieving not only more perfect citizens or a more perfect union, but also a more perfect world. In order to understand King's engagement with this tradition, it will be helpful briefly to consider three of its most important elements: *Millennialist Republicanism, Secular Progressivism*, and *Wilsonian Liberalism*.

The City On a Hill: Millennialist Republicanism

There is a sense in which civic perfectionism was America's original European import. This is because European monarchies, driven by their own eschatological visions, often framed their exploratory and colonial ventures in messianic terms.³² In this respect, it was not vanity alone that led Christopher Columbus to describe himself as a "messenger of the new heaven and new earth of which [God] spoke in the Apocalypse by

³² On this, see Noll, A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada, 11-28.

Saint John."³³ The appropriately named Christopher understood his voyages, born in the womb of the Santa Maria, as missions of redemption. But if it is true that Columbus was not the first to conceive of the New World in perfectionist terms, it is perhaps more significantly true that he was not the last to do so. Indeed, until the time of the American Civil War some three hundred and fifty years later, American accounts of the possibilities of the New World—though distinctively American—were nonetheless remarkably consistent with Columbus' own. To understand both the consistency and the distinctiveness of early American perfectionism, we must briefly consider its three most important strands: *Puritan Millennialism, Colonial Republicanism,* and *Jacksonian Destinarianism*.

Puritan Millennialism

In the first quarter of the 17th century, after nearly a century of struggling to reform the English church to what they perceived to be the true principles of the Protestant Reformation,³⁴ small communities of English Puritans began to make their way to the shores of the America.³⁵ Their hope in coming was not simply to escape what they perceived to be the dystopic nightmare of European tyranny—not simply to flee the old world—but actually to seek a world altogether new.

³³ Cited in Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 40. Cf. also, Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990); and Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 15-99.

³⁴ For a summary of these principles, see Mark Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: the History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Noll, *History*, 32-35; Noll, *America's God*; Ahlstrom, *History*, 121-360; D. Martin Lloyd Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014).

³⁵ For an account of the movement of Puritans into New England, see Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards*, Rev. ed. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995); and Bremer, *First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in an Atlantic World* (Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012).

Importantly, however, these Puritans framed their vision of this new world not in merely political, but in eschatological—indeed, *millennialist*—terms. In its most general form, millennialism is the belief that a given society, or history in general, is on the verge of a disruptive and utterly transformative event.³⁶ In its specifically Puritan context, millennialism refers to the belief that one lives in a time in which God, through and by His church, intends to transform the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God.³⁷ It is difficult to overstate the role this millennialism played in shaping the early Puritan communities of North America. Indeed almost universally, the early American Puritans understood themselves as both divinely called to the work of building the kingdom of God, and divinely sustained—even through terrible suffering—to that end.

Because of this, Puritan communities interpreted virtually every aspect of their common lives through the lens of millennial burden: Their interpretations of scripture were invariably tinged with eschatological longing,³⁸ their vision of the nation was conceived in terms of Covenantal loyalty,³⁹ their magistrates were esteemed as bearers of the divine will,⁴⁰ their civic ordinances were designed as reflections of the totalizing

³⁷On the specifically Puritan form of millennialism, see Crawford Gribben, *Evangelical Millennialsim in the Trans-Atlantic World*, 1500-2000 (New York: MacMillan, 2011); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin 1984); Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

³⁶ On Millennialism generally see Burridge, New Heaven, New Earth; Landes, Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁸ For an account of this same exegetical method, although applied to slightly different time, see W.H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: the Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the* 1790s to the 1840s (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1978).

³⁹ On the Puritan notion of "national covenant" see Noll, *America's God*, 33-51; McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society*, 11-36; and Michael McGiffert, "Grace and Works: The Rise and Division of Covenant Divinity in Elizabethan Puritanism." *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (Oct. 1982): 463-502.

⁴⁰ T.H. Breen, The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study in Puritan Political Ideas in New England 1630-1730 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

claims of divine law,⁴¹ their vocations were undertaken as expressions of God's design for the world,⁴² their households nurtured as schools for the formation of kingdom citizens,⁴³ and their suffering understood as part of God's inevitable—if inscrutable—providential unfolding of his redemptive purposes.⁴⁴

Thus the famous and oft-repeated words of John Winthrop (1587–1649), one of the founding and most prominent members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. As the ship carrying Winthrop and his fellow Puritans neared the Massachusetts coast in 1630, Winthrop gathered his fellow passengers and delivered what was to become one of the most influential sermons in American history, "A Model of Christian Charity." In this sermon, Winthrop explicitly interprets their new common life in perfectionist terms:

The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways so that *we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness, and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with.* We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, *"May the Lord make it like that of New England."* For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.... Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our covenant with Him, *that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it.*⁴⁵

⁴¹ Milan Babík, Statecraft and Salvation: Wilsonian Liberal Internationalism as Secularized Eschatology (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 83.

⁴² On this see especially Ryken, Worldly Saints.

⁴³ On this see especially Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

⁴⁴ On this see especially, Brian H. Cosby, Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive *Providence* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

⁴⁵ Robert C. Winthrop, ed., *Life and Letters of John Winthrop*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 19, emphasis mine.

For the Puritans, the work of building a society in the New World was a fundamentally spiritual undertaking: a labor carried out under the providence of God for the perfecting of the world.⁴⁶

Revolutionary Republicanism

If one examines the Puritan experiment according to the standards of its own aspiration, it would seem that it was a failure. Indeed, within 50 years, the rigorously theocratic themes of early American Puritanism had been almost wholly discarded as a legitimate vision for the American future.⁴⁷ And yet while the specific features of the Puritan millennialist vision largely faded from American view, millennialism itself did not.⁴⁸ To the contrary, in the middle of the 18th century it was simply taken up again and redefined, not in theocratic but in republican terms.⁴⁹ This is not to suggest that the American founders sought simply to give the millennial theological convictions of the Puritans a new civic shape. Indeed by the middle of the 18th century, the American theological landscape was a complex amalgam of lingering Puritanism, evangelical revivalism, and Enlightenment Deism. Because of this, to speak of a coherent "faith of the fathers" with respect to the American founding is a profound simplification.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ It should be noted at this point that Puritan Millennialism was not, in its early conception, fundamentally nationalistic in the sense of being identified with America. Indeed it could not have been so. As McDermott has shown, Puritan Millennialism—especially in its Edwardian form—was about society *as such*, and a global society at that. On this, see McDermott, *Society*, 41-92. Even so, as we will see, this puritan millennialism was taken up in subsequent generations and given a distinctly American identity.

⁴⁷ Babík, Statecraft, 90-93.

⁴⁸ On this see Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge [U.K.], Cambridge University Press, 1895).

⁴⁹ On the development of this millennial-republican synthesis, see especially Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause* of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium Revolutionary New England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Noll, America's God, 73-93; and Babík, *Statecraft*, 91-99.

⁵⁰ On this see Ahlstrom, History, 360-415.

And yet even in the midst of the significant theological and philosophical diversity of the early Republic, a strong—and unifying—millennial sensibility endured in the colonial mind. Indeed this millennial sensibility is discernible as a unifying quality in colonial leaders with deeply different theological convictions. Thus in 1765 the deeply religious John Adams wrote that he regarded "the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind over the earth."51 In his 1775 treatise, Common Sense, the decidedly less religious Thomas Paine echoed Adam's enthusiasm, urged his fellow colonialists to remember that, "we have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand."⁵² In 1801, the complicatedly religious Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, "a just and solid republican government maintained here will be a standing monument and example for the aim and imitation of the people of other countries."53 It was more striking still when, in 1776, Congress requested that the decidedly non-religious Benjamin Franklin design a seal for the emerging nation, and he suggested an image of Moses dividing the Red Sea and crushing Pharaoh's chariot with the words "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God" beneath.⁵⁴ These words—and others like them—suggest that in the midst of the

⁵¹ Cited in Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: the Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 25.

⁵² Thomas Paine, Common Sense (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 120.

⁵³ Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), 10:217.

⁵⁴ Babík, Salvation, 104.

theological diversity of a late colonialism, a new and distinctly American form of Millennialist republicanism had emerged.⁵⁵

In one respect, the endurance of millennialism in the midst of the growing diversification of the late colonial period suggests a remarkable degree of commonality in the early colonies. Indeed, the ideological and institutional power of common life is such that even those who disagree are most often forced to do so in the context of shared frameworks of understanding.

But in another and perhaps more portentous respect the peculiar endurance of millennialism in the American colonies suggests not commonality but its opposite. Given what America has become, it is sometimes difficult to remember the profound vulnerability of the colonies at the time of the revolution. Internally, this vulnerability was a product of profound and unresolved differences over the nature of governance, the role of religion, the meaning of citizenship, and the character of the economy. Indeed even as early as the mid-18th century, dangerous regional differences had begun to congeal around these very issues. Externally, this vulnerability was a product of the ever-

The power of these internal and external challenges required the republican founders to forge a real and broadly available basis for national unity. They could survive in no other way. Part of my argument is that the foundation of this unity was a form of millennialist republicanism. Whatever else colonial citizens may have believed about the emerging American Republic—its form of governance, its religious character, and its

⁵⁵ For more on this see Noll, *History*, 115–119; Noll, *America's God*, 73–92, and Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution*, 1763-1789 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

rights of citizenship—what they all could embrace was a belief in American greatness. In this sense, and in ways that would prove deeply important to the American future, millennial republicanism was a point of convergence for an otherwise fractious nation; it was not merely an indication of American unity, but an instrument for securing it.

Jacksonian Destinarianism

In the years following the American Revolution, the unifying role of millennialist republicanism would only increase.⁵⁶ Indeed, by the time Alexis De Tocqueville (1805–1859) arrived in the young nation in the 1830s, America's unique civic-religious sense of its own exceptional nature was overwhelmingly evident. Noting that any society will, if allowed to do so, tend to "regulate political society and the divine city in a uniform manner" and will seek to "*barmonize* the earth with Heaven"⁵⁷ he sees suggests that America is a society that *bas* been allowed to do so—and with profound effect. His account of attending a political rally in which American citizens gathered in support of Polish citizens in the Polish-Russian War of 1830–1831, is worth noting at length:

I found two or three thousand persons collected in a vast hall which had been prepared to receive them. In a short time a priest in his ecclesiastical robes advanced to the front of the platform. The spectators rose and stood uncovered in silence while he spoke in the following terms: "Almighty God! the God of armies! Thou who didst strengthen the hearts and guide the arms of our fathers when they were fighting for the sacred rights of their national independence! Thou who didst make them triumph over a hateful oppression, and hast granted to our people the benefits of liberty and peace! turn, O Lord, a favorable eye upon the other hemisphere; pitifully look down upon an heroic nation which is even now struggling as we did in the former time, and for the same rights. Thou, who didst create man in the same image, let not tyranny mar thy work and establish

⁵⁶ On the early days of the republic see Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic*, 1789-1815 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁷ De Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 275, emphasis original.

inequality upon the earth.... May thy wisdom direct their councils, may thy strength sustain their arms! Shed forth thy terror over their enemies; scatter the powers which take counsel against them; and permit not the injustice which the world has witnessed for fifty years to be consummated in our time. O Lord, who holdest alike the hearts of nations and of men in thy powerful hand, raise up allies to the sacred cause of right ... that [they] may go forth again to fight for the liberties of the world. "Lord, turn not thou thy face from us, and grant that we may always be the most religious, as well as the freest, people of the earth. Almighty God, hear our supplications this day. Save the Poles, we beseech thee, in the name of thy well-beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died upon the cross for the salvation of all men. Amen." The whole meeting responded: "Amen!" with devotion.⁵⁸

Importantly, for De Tocqueville, this assembly was no mere anomaly. To the contrary, it was indicative of the fundamentally millennial and republican character of the new nation. Over two hundred years after John Winthrop's sermon, the American burden to be a city on a hill remained.

Within two decades of De Tocqueville's account, Americans' millennial notions had taken on a more expansive quality. No longer content to be a shining city, Americans began to aspire to be a mighty nation, describing that aspiration in the language of "manifest destiny." Though the idea of American destiny was nearly two centuries old, this particular term was coined by American journalist John L. O'Sullivan in 1845. Contextually, O'Sullivan's words emerged in support of a very particular vision of American possibility—that of Jacksonian Democracy.⁵⁹ Jacksonianism, a typically American fusion of anti-federalism, populism, egalitarianism, free-market capitalism, and white supremacy, tended to view all forms of democratic constraint as expressions of

⁵⁸ Tocqueville, Democracy, 277.

⁵⁹ On this see William MacDonald, *Jacksonian Democracy:* 1829-1837, Commonwealth ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Pub., 1907); Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: the Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005).

tyranny. In many ways, these aspects of Jacksonianism represented fairly conventional themes of American democratic identity. But during the 19th century national border disputes—with Native Americans in the West, Texans in the Southwest, and British in the Northwest—Jacksonianism took on a more explicitly millennial character.⁶⁰

It is in this context that O'Sullivan's language of "manifest destiny" first appeared in 1845 articles in both the *Democratic Review*⁶¹ and the *New York Morning News*. In these articles, O'Sullivan defended America's right to expansion not merely on the basis of Jacksonian resistance to tyranny, but more fundamentally on the basis of America's inherent millennial destiny. America, he said, has a fundamental claim to the territories of the New World, namely "by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us."⁶² For O'Sullivan, the language of "Providence" was no mere rhetorical trope. For him, as for many others in the Jacksonian Age, the call for American expansion was born not of American imperial vanity, but of divine calling. His extraordinary words to this effect, taken from an 1839 article, are worth quoting in full:

We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us ... In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its

⁶⁰ On this see especially Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). and Hatch, *Democratization*.

⁶¹ John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation" in United States Magazine and Democratic Review, 17 (July-August 1845): 5-11.

⁶² Trevor B. McCrisken, "Exceptionalism: Manifest Destiny" in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy* Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002): 68.

congregation the Union of many Republics.... We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission—to the entire development of the principle of our organization freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings…and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who ... can doubt that our country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity?⁶³

These words were significant, for they signify that American millennialist republicanism had begun to function not simply as an animating and unifying idea, but as a comprehensive and divinely ordered social, economic, and geographic mandate. Within fifteen years of O'Sullivan's words, that mandate would express itself in the Civil War.

"With New Eyes:" Self-Reliant Progressivism

It is true, of course, that the American Civil War was a product of long-standing American tensions over constitutional authority, democratic citizenship, economic development, and regional identity. But it is also true that America's long-standing republican millennialism—its obliging burden of national exceptionalism—gave these differences both an inherently sacral and therefore inescapably martial character. To have a social vision is one thing; to have a divinely ordered and redemptive destiny to establish that vision in the world is another thing altogether. Because of this, though the Civil War was a contest over many things, it is perhaps best understood as a contest over the

⁶³ John L. O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity" Democratic Review 6, no. 23 (1839): 427, 430.

particular shape the American manifest destiny would take as a crisis over the character of democratic possibility.⁶⁴

Of all the casualties of the American Civil War, one of them was the notion that the millennialist republicanism of the nation's founding—the commonly held sense that America was itself an expression of the divine will—was a sufficient basis for national unity.⁶⁵ Indeed, in his *Second Inaugural Address*, Lincoln plainly acknowledged the insufficiency of naïve appeals to the divine will as a basis for common life:

Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."66

⁶⁴ That this is so many be seen in the fact that the presenting issue for Southern Secession was the newly elected Abraham Lincoln and his intention to oppose the expansion of slavery into the West. Given the strength of American destinarianism, the South was simply pre-disposed to view Lincoln as a tyrannical anti-Christ seeking to thwart the manifest will of God. Viewed in this way, it thus no surprise that in the moments after Lincoln's murder on April 15, 1865, John Wilkes Booth—standing before a horrified audience at Ford's Theater—would raise a bloody knife and cry, "Sic Semper Tyrannis."

⁶⁵ For more on this see especially David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: America Before the Civil War*, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper Collins, 1977); and Noll, *Civil War as Theological Crisis*, 75-94.

⁶⁶ Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address" in *Selected Speeches and Writings, Library of America*, ed. Gore Vidal and Don E Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 2009), 450.

These words suggest that for Lincoln, divine providence remained a powerful presence in American life. But they also suggest that for Lincoln—in a way that was different than the Puritans, the Colonial Republicans, and the Jacksonian Destinarians—the intentions of providence had become horribly opaque.⁶⁷

One would not have thought it possible, but in the days following Lincoln's assassination by John Wilkes Booth six weeks after this address, the American destiny became even more opaque, more horrible. Everywhere they looked, Americans beheld visions not of the millennium, but of the apocalypse: the bodies of a generation of Americans rotting in fields; smoldering cities across the nation sending ash into the sky; the economy of the South irreparably destroyed; and the murder of a president who, seemingly alone, maintained a vision of an American void of malice and verdant in charity. Walt Whitman (1819–1892), in a section of his work *Specimen Days* and titled "A Glimpse of War's Hell Scenes," described these apocalyptic vistas with characteristic power. Reflecting on seeing the bodies of executed confederate soldiers rotting in a town square, he said,

Multiply [this scene] by scores, aye by hundreds, light it with every lurid passion, the wolf's the lion's lapping thirst for blood—the passionate volcanoes of human revenge for comrades, brothers slain—with the light of burning farms, and heaps of smutting, smouldering black embers—and in the human heart everywhere black, worse embers—and you have an inkling of this war.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "The result [of the Civil War] in American intellectual life can be keyed to the stance of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln joined together trust in providence and much agnosticism about the work of God in the world. After Lincoln, American thinkers were increasingly divided between those who, on the one side, continued to trust in providence and who knew very well what God was doing in the world, and those, on the other, who gave up on providence and embraced agnosticism about the ultimate meaning of the world." Noll, Crisis, 94.

⁶⁸ Walt Whitman, "Specimen Days" in Poetry and Prose (New York: Library of America, 1982).

Surveying realities such as these, one could not be faulted for wondering if the American experiment could survive. But it did survive. And it did so—as it had during the crisis of the Revolution—by re-invigorating its millennialist vision. This time, however, this vision began to be sourced by new streams; the waters of millennialist republicanism were simply too poisoned with the ash and blood of the war.⁶⁹ And so a new form of American perfectionism began to emerge, a form characterized less by religious appeals to the transcendent purposes of divine providence, and more by romantic appeals to the transcendental energies inherent in democracy itself.

This is not to say that millennialist republicanism, even that of an explicitly theological variety, ceased to exist. To the contrary, as we will see below, the religious, republican, and destinarian themes of American perfectionism continued to persist after the Civil War. But even so, the age in which American aspirational sensibilities were *fundamentally* shaped by millennialist republicanism had passed. A new age had come—the age of Democratic Progressivism. To understand the meaning of this new age requires us to briefly consider two of its most significant convictions: *Self-Reliance* and *Social Resilience*.

Self-Reliance

At the heart of this revisioned perfectionism stood the question of cultural possibility,⁷⁰ the question as to what might serve as the moral foundation and directive force for the social order. This is not surprising; there is nothing quite like civil war to lead one to re-evaluate inherited social foundations. This is perhaps especially the case if,

⁶⁹On this movement see especially Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). More on this below.

⁷⁰ On this see Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

for the past two hundred years, the order in question had consistently nursed the selfcongratulatory hallucination that it was, in a way different from all other orders, directly expressive of the messianic purposes of the divine will. But even so, this re-evaluation was not easy. If it turns out that even the divine will, at least as previously conceived, was an insufficient foundation for the social order, what could possibly take its place?

This, or something very much like it, was the question looming in the minds of a number of American intellectuals in the years immediately surrounding the American Civil War. And in the face of this crisis—this struggle to re-imagine democratic possibility—many of these intellectuals began to turn to the self. Having looked outward to the divine will and found it wanting, they began to turn within.

Of these, perhaps the most important was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).⁷¹ Emerson was many things—essayist, poet, orator, and public intellectual—and turned his capacious mind to many subjects—nature, language, art, and democracy among them but the heart of Emerson's project was the re-imagining of the meaning and possibilities of the American self.⁷² In truth, Emerson's turn to the self began some years before the horrors of the Civil War in his turn to the philosophy of Transcendentalism.⁷³ A fusion of Unitarianism's⁷⁴ convictions about the goodness of humanity and the reliability of reason

⁷² "For three and a half decades, from the opening of his first book *Nature* (1836) to the mellower *Society and Solitude* (1870) of his old age, Emerson consistently laced his writings with invocations of the limitlessness of the individual's (and specifically the American's) capabilities." Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless Self: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 52.

⁷¹ On Emerson see Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Alexandria, Va: Centennial, 1996); and Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁷³ On Transcendentalism see especially Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Holifield, *Theology in America*, 431-451; Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1977) vol. 1: 397-427; and Ahlstrom, *History*, 597-614.

⁷⁴ On Unitarianism see especially Holifield, *Theology*, 197-233; Noll, *America's God*, ch. 7 and 14; Noll, *History*, ch. 6 and 9; and Ahlstrom, *History*, 388-402.

and Romanticism's⁷⁵ search for personal liberation and noumenal experience,

Transcendentalism emerged as an American religious movement in the first decade of the nineteenth century. But it was not until the mid 1830s—until Emerson—that transcendentalism came into its distinctively American democratic form.

At the heart of Emerson's transcendentalism was an anthropological vision, a claim about personhood. Joining Unitarianism's assurance of the innate goodness of humanity to Romanticism's insistence that truth is found beyond the confines of doctrinaire convention, Emerson's "revisioned self" took on the character of the heroic. To be fully one's self is not to conform to inherited notions of the divine will, but to press beyond these diminishing constraints into the divine capacity sowed within one's own nature. In what is perhaps his most famous essay on this subject, "Self Reliance" (1841), Emerson put it this way:

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.... Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and we must accept in the highest minds that same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos in the Dark.⁷⁶

In one sense, Emerson's account was simply a reiteration of the destinarian

perfectionism of the time. Indeed it was its anthropological horizon: a mandate to press

⁷⁵ On the European roots of Romanticism see especially, Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Rudiger Safranski and Robert E. Goodwin (trans), *Romanticism: A German Affair* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014). On the specifically American development of Romanticism see especially Jennifer Hurley, *American Romanticism* (San Diego, CA: Green Haven Press, 1999); Roger Lundin (ed), *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 23-49; and Ahlstrom, *History*, 583-596.

⁷⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson and Joel Port (ed), *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 260.

beyond every unholy constraint and to settle fully into the fertile boundlessness of one's own soul. But in another sense, Emerson's account was a new development in American perfectionism. This is because it located the noblest possibilities for American democracy—not in relation to the transcendent divine will, but in relation to the transcendental self. For Emerson, America's true democratic potential lay not in mindless obedience to inherited religious traditions, which he called "a disease of the intellect,"⁷⁷ nor in meek obeisance to societal structures, which he viewed as a "conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."⁷⁸ Instead, America's noblest possibility lay in the emancipation of its citizens, to "walk on our own feet … work with our own hands … [and] speak our own minds."⁷⁹ Emerson's self-reliance, in other words, was not simply an anthropological claim, but a political claim as well: America's true possibility lay within the hearts of its citizens.

In the years after the Civil War, a number of American intellectuals—many of whom were deeply influenced by Emerson—began quietly to set aside his account of irreducible human goodness and the inevitable social progress. They had seen enough to know that humanity could reduce itself to horrifying fragments and that nothing certainly not progress—was inevitable.⁸⁰ But crucially, while resisting Emerson's famed optimism, they retained his focus on the self. It was a chastened self to be sure, but it was a self nonetheless. And with this chastened self, they began the task of once again reimagining American possibility.

⁷⁷ Emerson, Essays, 276.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 261.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁰ Indeed Lundin suggests that Emerson himself had undergone a similar transformation: Lundin, Nature, 2.

This turn to a more chastened form of self-reliance as the foundation of democratic possibility marks the emergence of one of the most significant philosophical movements in American history—Pragmatism.⁸¹ While, as Louis Menand notes, certain aspects of Pragmatism have deep roots in American cultural history,⁸² it was the post-Civil War crisis over American possibility that forged it into a coherent philosophical movement.⁸³ In response to this crisis, the central figures of American pragmatism⁸⁴ made two fundamental claims.

The first claim is that all essentialized conceptions of transcendence—whether Puritanism's transcendent Divine, or Romanticism's transcendental self—are immodest illusions; that what we call reality is not an encounter of a universally fixed norm, but is, rather, an expression of a particular community's felt needs. Thus, in the Pragmatist account, a given community's conception of the divine, the self, the other, and the world are not, in fact, revelations to be received from the gods, but are resources to be used by the community—and over which the community has authority. Truth is, in other words, best understood as communal and contingent.⁸⁵ Menand puts it this way:

If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, [these four thinkers] had with one another, we can say that what [they] had in common was ... a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting

⁸¹ For helpful secondary accounts of Pragmatism see especially Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Geneology of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country:* Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1998); Michael Bacon, *Pragmatism: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012); Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Malden, MA: Polity 2010); Menand, *Metaphyscial*; McClay, *Masterless*, 167-176; and Lundin, *Nature*.

 ⁸² Cf. Cornel West's suggestion that Emerson himself was the first American pragmatist. West, *Evasion*, 9.
⁸³ Menand, *Metaphysical*, xi.

⁸⁴ For Menand these are Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935), John Dewey (1859-1952), Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), and William James (1842-1910). West excludes Holmes and includes Emerson. ⁸⁵ On this see especially Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3-72.

to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed ... that ideas are social.⁸⁶

Pragmatism's second claim is that this communal and contingent revisioning of "truth" is good news for society. It is important to remember that American pragmatism, unlike the English skepticism with which it shares some affinity, was formed not by debating propositions on the croquet fields of ancient universities but by burying young men on the farmsteads of the New World. This had two powerful effects on Pragmatism's development. First, it gave American Pragmatists a profound hatred of ideology. They had seen what human beings could—and would—do in the name of transcendent absolutes, and they wanted no part of it. As Menand put it, "The belief that ideas should never become ideologies—either justifying the status quo, or dictating some transcendent imperative for renouncing it—was the essence of what they taught."⁸⁷

But secondly, the war gave American Pragmatists an equally profound admiration for their fellow citizens. Yes, they had seen the senseless waste born of violent transcendentals. But they had also seen the irrefutable courage of their fellow citizens who gave themselves not only for those ideals but also for one another. And out of this dual vision a insight emerged: If human beings could be freed from the violence of contending with one another over the divine will and freed *to* a vocation of collaborating with one another for the construction of a common weal, what democratic vistas⁸⁸ might

⁸⁶ Menand, *Metaphysical*, xi. Rorty puts it this way: "The doctrine that made pragmatism both original and infamous [is] its refual to believe in the existence of Truth, in the sense of something not made by human hands, something which has authority over human beings." Rorty, *Achieving*, 27.

⁸⁷ Menand, Metaphysical, xii.

⁸⁸ The phrase "democratic vistas" is Whitman's, taken from an essay of that title in published in 1871. See Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*.

yet be attained? In this respect, Pragmatism is perhaps best understood not as a rejection of America's perfectionist past, but as a reframing of that perfectionism on chastened grounds. Indeed the second generation Pragmatist philosopher, European-born Horace Kallen (1882-1974) explicitly articulates a pragmatist version of the perfectionism:

American civilization may come to mean the perfection of European civilization, the waste, the squalor, and the distress of Europe being eliminated—a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind. As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization, with this difference: *a musical symphony is written is written before it is played, in the symphony of civilization the playing is the writing.*⁸⁹

In the years after the Civil War, these insights of Pragmatism reinvigorated the perfectionist account by reframing it in two important ways. First, it relocated Emerson's notion of moral capacity from the courageous individual, to the democratic community. It was not in the life of individual solitude but in the shared lives of citizens that the virtues necessary for the American future could be found. Secondly, it reconceived the American future not in terms of inevitability but in terms of achievability. For the Pragmatists, the true hope for America's "more perfect union," lay not in conformity to the divine will, but in the collaboration of its very ordinary citizens.⁹⁰

Social Resilience

⁸⁹ Cited in Menand, *Metaphysical*, 393, emphasis mine. It is important, however, to note that already Kallen's glistening vision of American perfection has begun to take on a racial hue. This, as we will see, provides an important clue to King's resistance to American perfectionism: African American's may (or may not) have been given a place in the orchestra, but the white man continued to conduct.

⁹⁰ For a contemporary example of this Pragmatist perfectionism see especially Rorty, *Achieving*; and Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays*, 1972-1980 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982).

By the mid 1870s the chastened optimism of Pragmatism had become discernible as a national mood.⁹¹ In one respect this optimism was born of an understandable national yearning: America was wounded and desperately longed to heal. As Jackson Lears put it,

All history is the history of longing. The details of policy; the migration of peoples; the abstractions that nations kill and die for, including the abstraction of 'nation' itself—all can be ultimately traced to the viscera of human desire.... This is what happened in the United States between the Civil War and World War I. During those decades, a widespread yearning for regeneration—for rebirth that was variously spiritual, moral, and physical—penetrated public life, inspiring movements and policies that formed the foundation for American society in the twentieth century.⁹²

Viewed in this way, the optimism of the late nineteenth century may be seen as a sort of Augustinian-American fusion, a manifest destiny of desire.

And yet even so, this optimism was based on more than aspiration; it was also based on accomplishment. Part of this accomplishment was political: While the inauguration of sectional violence in the Civil War had indeed signaled a form of national defeat, its conclusion with those same sections once again in democratic union signaled an even greater national triumph. Democracy had been tried—and what a trial it was and it had been sustained. This political triumph, perhaps more than any other development of the late nineteenth century, nurtured the rebirth of American national possibility. Lincoln, just six weeks after his Second Inaugural Address and for days before his assassination, evoked this rebirth in his "Speech on the Reconstruction."

⁹¹ A fact that interestingly illustrates one of Pragmatism's core claims: that ideas are a reflection of the people.

⁹² Jackson Lears, Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920 (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

We meet this evening not in sorrow but in gladness of heart. The evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond and the surrender of the principle insurgent army give hope of a righteous and speedy peace whose joyous expression cannot be restrained. In the midst of this, however, He, from Whom all blessings flow, must not be forgotten. A call for national thanksgiving is being prepared, and will be duly promulgated.... By these recent successes the re-inauguration of the national authority—reconstruction—which has had a large share of the thought form the first, is pressed more closely upon our attention.... Let us all join in doing the acts necessary to restoring the proper practical relations between these states and the Union.⁹³

But there were other achievements too. In addition to the political, Americans began—with extraordinary verdancy—to build a new nation. They built new models of industrialization, forever transforming American habits of organization, production, transportation, and communication.⁹⁴ They built a new economy, developing America's signature brand of titan-led industrial capitalism, and fashioned America into a world economic power.⁹⁵ They forged a new American martial identity, evoked by the American cowboy,⁹⁶ expressed in the "splendid little"⁹⁷ Spanish-American War of 1898,

⁹⁵ On this see especially Lears, *Rebirth*, chapter 2; Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons the Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962); Charles R. Morris, *The Tycoons: How Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, and J.P. Morgan Invented the American Supereconomy* (New York: Times Books, 2005); Steve Fraser, *Every Man a Speculator: A Cultural History of Wall Street in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Charles Geisst, *Wall Street: A History* (updated edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). ⁹⁶ On this see especially Michael Kimmel, *Manbood in America: A Cultural History* 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University of Nevada Press, 2001).

⁹³ Lincoln, Selected, 454-456.

⁹⁴ On this see especially Maury Klein, *The Genesis of Indsutrial America:* 1870-1920, Cambridge, 2007, Klein, *The Power Makers: Steam, Electricity, and the Men Who Invented Modern America, Bloomsbury 2009, Samuel P. Hays, The Response to Industrialism:* 1885-1914, University of Chicago, 1995.

⁹⁷ This was the phrase of the American Secretary of State John Hay, who as a young man had served as Lincoln's assistant. No stranger to the horrors of war, Hay nonetheless described this war as "splendid" because it allowed America to reassert its military strength identity—but this time against a common external enemy. On this see especially, G. J. A. O'Toole, *The Spanish War: An American Epic*, 1898 (New York: Norton, 1986); and John Lawrence Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba:* 1895-1898 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008).

and embodied in the "manliness" of the American President—Theodore Roosevelt.⁹⁸ They developed cities like Chicago and Atlanta from regional to national importance and began the transformation of America into an urban nation.⁹⁹ In short, they re-imagined America not as a war-broken land of defeat, but as a virile,¹⁰⁰ capable, indefatigably expanding international force. It is true that these achievements were a reflection of national necessity. The agreement to live together required an infrastructure capable of sustaining that common life. But it is also true that while a form of American reconstruction was inevitable, the extraordinary scale and scope of this reconstruction was not. Indeed, to many observers it seemed that the fruit of American ingenuity bordered on the miraculous. It seemed that the collective capacity envisioned by the Pragmatists had willed a regenerated civilization into being.¹⁰¹

Others, however, were not so sure. They had spent enough time wandering the side-shows of the carnival grounds to know that not everything that glitters is gold. They saw the ingenuity, of course. But they saw disingenuity too.¹⁰² They were right to do so. The political structures that had united a war-torn nation had also failed to extend the

⁹⁸ On this see Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders: An Autobiography* (New York: Library of America, 2004); and Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001).

⁹⁹ On this see Lears, Rebirth, chapter 4; David E. Nye, American Technological Sublime (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); Thomas Bender, Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975); H.W. Brands, The Reckless Decade: America in the 1890s (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); and Donald L. Miller, The City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

¹⁰⁰ It is indeed no coincidence that this moment witnessed a surge in American interests in sport (especially boxing), bodybuilding, and carnival feats of strength.

¹⁰¹ Although ominously—and significantly for King—this civilization was increasingly explicit about its devotion to long-standing white supremacist pre-suppositions. On this, see Lears, *Rebirtb*, chapter 3. ¹⁰² Of these one of the most important and unquestionably the most entertaining was Mark Twain (1835-1910). Very little escaped his glinted eye, and the contradictions of late nineteenth American perfectionism were no exception. It was these contradictions that led him, in 1873, to publish a satire of the thinness of American excess entitled "The Gilded Age." On this see Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2001); Sean Dennis Cashman, *American in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, Third ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1993).
freedom of that union to the African Americans for whom the war was, in some measure, waged.¹⁰³ The industrialization that allowed extraordinary advances in American work had also brought enormous hardship to the American worker.¹⁰⁴ The economic systems that afforded virtually unimaginable wealth in a few had also abandoned countless Americans to impoverished abjection.¹⁰⁵ The burgeoning cities that glimmered with opulent light hid, in their shadows, unparalleled squalor.¹⁰⁶ For those who had eyes to see, the imperfections of American perfectionism were readily apparent.

Crucially, however, these insights gave rise not to resignation but to reform. That is to say, those who saw these imperfections responded not by renouncing America's perfectionist aspirations but by redoubling their efforts to realize those aspirations in purer form. In so doing, they inaugurated one of the most unequivocally perfectionist chapters of American cultural history: the Age of Reform.¹⁰⁷ During this period especially from the 1890s until 1917 when America turned its attention to Europe and entered World War I, Americans devoted themselves to an extraordinary array of initiatives that sought to reform the excessive contradictions of the Gilded Age. Labor movements struggled to reform the lived experience of the American worker.¹⁰⁸ Marxist

¹⁰³ Indeed this is the context in which Du Bois remarked that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 16. For a poignant reflection on the dissonance of African American experience in the "gilded age" see also his essay, "On the Meaning of Progress" in *Souls*, 48-57.

¹⁰⁴For an interesting account of these tensions, see James Green, *Death in the HayMarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America,* reprint (New York: Anchor Books, 2007). ¹⁰⁵ Lears, *Rebirth,* 71.

¹⁰⁶ On this see especially the 1890 classic by Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1997).

¹⁰⁷ On this see especially Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1955); and Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State*, 1877-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

¹⁰⁸ On this see especially Chaim M. Rosenberg, *Child Labor in America: A History*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2013); Clayton Sinyai, Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement (Ithaca,

political parties¹⁰⁹ and an increasingly regulatory Federal Government¹¹⁰(also at odds) struggled to reform the excesses of American capitalism. Religious movements, ranging from the theoretical reform of the Theology of the Social Gospel to the applied reform of the Gospel Mission Movement, sought to reform the inefficacy of the churches in the city.¹¹¹ Temperance and fitness initiatives labored to reform the crumbling bodies¹¹² of America's industrial class. And political movements—such as Populist movements in the American West and South and Progressive Movements¹¹³ in the Northeast and Midwest—struggled (often at odds with one another) to perfect America's unrealized democratic potential. This, the miracle of democratic progressivism, is perhaps the true miracle of the post Civil War era: In a mere fifty years after the conclusion of the Civil War, the resilience of American society allowed Americans once again to contend with one another. Only this time, they struggled not to dissolve the Union, but to perfect it unto greater degrees of glory.

NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Philip Dray, There Is Power In a Union: the Epic Story of Labor In America (New York: Doubleday, 2010); Nelson Lichtenstein, State of the Union : a Century of American Labor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Gilmore, Defying Dixie; and, of course, Philip S. Foner's magisterial History of the Labor Movement in the United States (New York: International Publishers, 1947), especially vols 1 and 2.

¹⁰⁹ On this see especially Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957); and Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*.

¹¹⁰ On this see especially William Letwin, *Law and Economic Policy in America: The Evolution of the Sherman Antitrust Act* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981); and Tim McNeese, *The Robber Barons and the Sherman Antitrust Act: Reshaping American Business* (New York: Chelsea House, 2008).

¹¹¹ On this see especially Rauschenbusch, *Christianity*; Edward H. McKinley, *Marching to Glory: The History of the Salvation Army in the United States*, 1880-1980 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

¹¹² On this see Paula Lupkin's very interesting, *Manbood Factories*: YMCA Architecture and the Making of Modern Urban Culture (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2010).

¹¹³For helpful accounts of American Progressivism, see Jackson Lears, *Rebirth*; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*; Robert C. McMath, and Eric Foner. *American Populism: a Social History*, 1877-1898 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America*, 1877-1920 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michael Wolraich, *Unreasonable Men: Theodore Roosevelt and the Republican Rebels Who Created Progressive Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); and Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon* (New York: Norton, 2013).

"For the Good of the World:" Moralistic Internationalism

When, in 1845, John O'Sullivan first coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" to describe American possibility, the words fairly trembled with the glistening thrill of their own romantic unfolding. But by the beginning of the 20th century, having survived through the disintegration of a nation into its undeniable rebirth, they had taken on the quality of a truism. In just a few short decades Americans had emerged from the wilderness of war, pioneered innovations in industry, built one of the world's most powerful economies, and established its political reach, in the words of the 1895 hymn "America," from "sea to shining sea." To the new nation and to nations throughout the world, the truthfulness of America's manifest destiny seemed perfectly clear.

Less clear, however, were the boundaries of that destiny. The reason for this, of course, is that there were none. It is true that, as a general rule, the American government had begun to renounce overt efforts at territorial expansion. Part of this was simply a reflection of America's limited infrastructural capacity. Even forty years after the Civil War, American cities—especially in the South—struggled to support the weight of their own populations. Given this, for America to expand its territorial claims abroad would likely engender instability at home. And certainly, part of the reason for American demurral on geographic expansion was a desire to establish good relations with its neighbors around the world. One of the ironies of American growth after the Civil War is that it entailed a growing dependence on economic and political partnerships around the world. While post-war America had grown unquestionably strong, it was not yet strong enough to risk the wages of bellicosity. This form of diplomatic self-limiting did not,

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however, signify an American renunciation of its own expansionist instincts. To the contrary, it signified a refinement of those instincts into a form more suitable to the world beyond its geographic borders. This refinement marked the inauguration of a new era of American expansionism—an internationalist era—when American expansionist ambitions looked not simply to the seas, but beyond them.

American Internationalism

Initially expansion took economic form.¹¹⁴ This was only natural; the explosive power of American industrialism left American business owners with little choice but to look to foreign markets for both raw materials for production and new populations for consumption. To that end, American business owners, supported by American economic policy, began to turn simultaneously in two directions. The first movement was toward the largely still untapped resources of the New World.¹¹⁵ Beginning in the 1890s, in order to secure the cheap procurement of raw materials, American business leaders began to forge critical partnerships with the largely poor post-colonial governments of Latin America. It was a shrewd movement: American economic leaders were able to procure extremely valuable raw materials for a minimal cost; Latin American leaders were able to demonstrate "progress" their populations; and American political leaders, in the name of

¹¹⁴ So Lears, "Through the nineteenth century, American elites had depended on the westward advance of white settlement to diffuse class consciousness by creating a sense of abundant possibility, if not always actual abundance. But after 1900, as attention shifted from the settlers' empire to an overseas empire, advocates of commercial expansion envisioned a system of economic growth untethered to possession of territory. At home it depended on rising wages, rationalized credit, and consumer demand; abroad it depended on the entrepreneurial exploitation of opportunity." *Rebirtb*, 283.

¹¹⁵ On this see especially Victor Bulmer Thomas, *The Economic History of Latin America Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chapters 3-5; Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Reviews Press, 1997); and Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (New York: Putnam, 1991).

American magnanimity, were able to create points of crucial economic and political leverage throughout the western hemisphere. To that end, starting in the 1890s America expanded its economic reach into Cuba, Panama, Colombia, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.¹¹⁶

The second movement was toward the economic markets of the old world.¹¹⁷ In one respect, this movement reflected a growing need for participation in established models of credit and security. America had money, but it was largely derived from wildly profitable forms of speculation. To create a stable economy, America would need to anchor currency in the established economic systems of Europe. In another respect, this movement reflected a growing dependence on consumer markets. The fertility of American industrial productivity necessitated access to foreign markets; America had created the supply, now they had to create the demand. And so they did. By the turn of the century, British intellectuals were expressing anxiety about what they called "The American Invaders." Presciently, however, the invasion they feared was wholly economic and cultural. In 1902 the British journalist W.T. Stead, put it this way:

The Average (English) man rises in the morning from his New England sheets ... pulls on his Boston boots over his socks from North Carolina, fastens his Connecticut braces ... and sits down to breakfast ... where he eats bread made from prairie flour, tinned oysters from Baltimore and a little Kansas City bacon, while his wife plays with a slice of Chicago ox-tongue. The children are given "Quaker" oats. At the same time he reads his morning paper printed by American machines, on American paper, with American ink, and possibly edited by a smart journalist from New York.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶Lears, Rebirth, 279-281

¹¹⁷ On this see especially Kristin Hoganson, Consumer's Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007); Victoria DeGrazia, Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth Century Europe (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Lears, *Rebirth*, 284.

Safeguarding these economic and cultural footholds required American internationalism to take an additional form: political expansion. As I noted above, this expansion expressed itself not primarily in the acquisition of territory or regimes (although it certainly entailed both) but through the imposition of ideals, namely the ideals of democracy. It seems astonishing to think of it now: a nation just four decades removed from Civil War viewing itself as the oracle of global peace. But at the turn of the century, perhaps because of having survived the war, American leaders became enthusiastic evangelists for the ideal of a democratic world. This development would have two important and enduring effects. First, American leaders (and their allies) began to divide the nations of the world into two categories: those who did or could embrace American convictions about the meaning and shape of democratic government, and those who did or would not do so. Secondly, because the world had become a clean binary between democratic civilization and various forms of ideological primitivism, American political leaders—in a sort of internationalist expression of the American cult of virility increasingly resorted to the use of force in the pursuit of these ideals.¹¹⁹ Indeed, from the late 1890s until the advent of World War I, the economic and political dimensions of American internationalism took an increasingly martial shape.

American Moralism

¹¹⁹ For a history of the American use of force, see especially, Walter LaFeber, *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States in the Caribbean*, 1898-1917 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1988).

Unsurprisingly, American leaders framed America's internationalist expansion in explicitly moral and even theological terms. Indeed, for the first time since the Civil War, Americans broadly embraced the language of "providence." But it had a distinctly progressive accent. Where, as we saw in Abraham Lincoln, early America interpreted their circumstances—both good and bad—through the lens of providence, progressiveera Americans tended to interpret providence through the lens of their (unusually happy) circumstances. This was the ethos of the new American moralism: not that we are on God's side, but that He is on ours. That this is so may be seen in the Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge's (1862-1927) quasi-theological justification for America's annexation of the Phillippines.¹²⁰ Reminding Americans that "God has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world,"¹²¹Beveridge perfectly embodied America's reinvigorated moral confidence.

It is critical to note the internationalist impulse of his words, for they signify a shift in the American moral imagination. It is true that American perfectionism— especially in its early Puritan and Revolutionary forms—had international inclinations. But even so, these inclinations were largely exemplary; America's goal was to *be* a city on a hill, not to build cities on hills around the world. Beveridge's words, however, were not simply exemplary; they were *imperial*—and divinely so. Fatefully, this newly invigorated imperialist moralism would lead many Americans to interpret international disagreements over economic, political, or military policy not as legitimate philosophical or cultural differences, but as ethical divides. Indeed in the American mind, "democracy" and

¹²⁰ On this see David J. Sibley, A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902 (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

¹²¹ Lears, *Rebirth*, 2.

"civilization" began to function not just synonymously, but indivisibly. Thus, by the first decade of the twentieth century, American perfectionism—having been weakened by war—found a new strength. Indeed its strength was greater than ever before: America's old millennial obligations, galvanized by a newfound American self-assurance, turned its moral imperative to the world.

Not everyone in the world was happy with this, of course. Indeed, for a time the strength of Europe and, to a lesser degree, eastern Asia, provided an informal check against American internationalist expansionism. But, in the second decade of the twentieth century, as America hummed and whirred with the tumultuous energy of progressive self-perfection, this check began to weaken as Europe drifted slowly toward the crisis of World War I. It is this crisis, perhaps more than any other variable, which enabled America's unique brand of moralist internationalism to become a truly global phenomenon.

For reasons largely related to the internal American contests of the Gilded Age and largely unrelated to the enthusiasm of the American people, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) was president of the United States at the moment of this crisis.¹²² Even so, he was perfectly—one might even say providentially—suited for the task that was to become quintessentially his: that of bearing American perfectionism into its international future. This is because Wilson was a virtually pristine embodiment of that tradition in his own right. To a degree greater than many of his contemporaries, Wilson was an authentic heir to the theological millennialism of the American Puritans. Wilson's father, Joseph

¹²² James Chace, 1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft, and Debs—the Elecection that Changed the Country (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

Ruggles Wilson (1822-1903), was a prominent pro-slavery Presbyterian minister and chaplain for the Confederate Army, who understood both the Christian faith and the Confederate cause in millennialist terms. Indeed, in a sermon entitled, "Mutual Relation of Masters and Slaves" preached at Augusta, Georgia's First Presbyterian Church on January 6, 1861, the elder Wilson framed the institution of slavery in explicitly in the terms of perfectionist possibility:

What a pleasing scene would the institution of slavery exhibit, were all our servants to yield their obedience in this spirit of the Christian religion! It would commend itself to true philanthropy as containing the best system of labor which is allowable to fallen man ... [We] ought to look forward to the time when they will all be what the Bible would make them; a race whose love for the Master above will spread through their rejoicing millions a measure of sanctification which will convert their services into the very first of home-blessings, and their piety into a missionary influence for saving the black man everywhere from the ruin of perdition.¹²³

Growing up in this context, Woodrow Wilson developed an almost visceral form of theological millennialism, the conviction that the only proper foundation for personal, national, and international life was faithfulness obedience to the word of God. Over time this conviction would prove to be the foundation not simply of Wilson's private morality, but of his public vision. Arthur Link, one of the most influential Wilson scholars of the twentieth century, put it this way: "Every biographer of Woodrow Wilson has said that it

¹²³ J.R. Wilson, "Mutual Relation of Masters and Slaves as Taught in the Bible: A Discourse." Preached in the First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia, on Sabbath Morning, January 6, 1861, http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wilson/wilson.html.

is impossible to know and understand the man apart from his religious faith because every action and policy was ultimately informed and molded by his Christian faith"¹²⁴

At the same time, Wilson was an authentic embodiment of American Progressivism. Though as a Southerner he was an instinctive democrat, Wilson nonetheless understood himself in the inescapably moralist terms of social reform. He was right to do so: In each of his campaigns, he positioned himself variously as a "candidate of reform," a "restorer of liberty" and a "Champion of the common man." ¹²⁵ Throughout the course of his scholarly and political career, Wilson labored toward the transformation of many of the institutions of American public life: religious life,¹²⁶ economic practice,¹²⁷ labor conditions,¹²⁸ and women's suffrage.¹²⁹ Indeed in his Second Inaugural Address, given in 1917, Wilson framed his presidency as the fulfillment of Progressivisms' promise "to cleanse, to reconsider, to restore, to correct evil without impairing the good, to purify and humanize every process of our common life without weakening or sentimentalizing it."¹³⁰ He was in earnest: Both the number and the

¹²⁴ Arthur S. Link, *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson and Other Essays* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 4. On the role of religion in Wilson's political vision see also Babík, *Statecraft*; Lears, *Rebirth*, 313; and Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Page, 1927), 1:68; John M. Mulder, *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). Speaking specifically of the Puritan roots of Wilson's domestic and international agenda, Babík says: "His domestic political agenda manifested a religious mission to transform the United States into God's kingdom on earth, after all, Wilson defined patriotism as nothing else than Christianity enacted in political practice.... He tended to imagine his quest for the League of Nations in terms of completing, on a worldwide scale, the sacred mission of liberty initiated in the American wilderness by small flocks of Puritan settlers." *Statecraft*, 163, 181.

¹²⁵ Lears, Rebirth, 314; Babík, Statecraft, 169-171.

¹²⁶ Babík, Statecraft, 149-152.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 170-171.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 170.

 ¹²⁹Beth Behn, "Woodrow Wilson's conversion experience: The president and the federal woman suffrage amendment." (PhD dissertation, U. of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2012).
 ¹³⁰ Lears, *Rebirth*, 318.

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reformist character of bills signed into law during the Wilson presidencies show him to be "one of the most reformist presidents in United States history."¹³¹

But while Wilson embodied the key elements of the perfectionist tradition, his ultimate political significance lies in the way with in he forged these into an internationalist vision. It is course true that a number of Wilson's contemporaries also had an internationalist impulse, not least the ever-manly Theodore Roosevelt whom Wilson had defeated in the 1912 election. But Wilson's internationalism was different than Roosevelt's; it was simultaneously less bellicose than Roosevelt's and yet more ambitious. For both theological and temperamental reasons Wilson detested what Jackson Lears describes as the "mystic militarist"¹³² ethos of Roosevelt's internationalism. To the contrary, Wilson sought the international expansion of America's democratic and economic interests not through the conquest of other nations, but through their mutual collaboration in building a distinctively American—and distinctively Progressive—world order.

At the heart of this approach stood Wilson's unwavering commitment to the idea of a League of Nations: a formal international organization whose sole purpose was to hold its members to the common pursuit of global peace.¹³³ Though the idea of a League of Nations did not originate with Wilson, in time he became its most famous champion. This is because it was, in many ways, the perfect expression of Wilson's own moral

¹³¹ Babík, Statecraft, 169. Also Richard Hofstadter, who said, "The first Wilson administration ... produced more positive legislative achievements than any administration since the days of Alexander Hamilton" in *The American Political Tradition and the Men who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 334.
¹³² Lears, Rebirth, 324.

¹³³ On this see especially John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), chapter 22; John Milton Cooper, *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002).

concern for a just world; his reformist conviction that such order could only come through change; and his rationalized progressivist commitment to pursue that change not through American military might—but through American models of procedural clarity and technical expertise.¹³⁴

He was in earnest about this too. When, in 1915, German U-boats sunk the British Liner *Lusitania*, killing over eleven hundred passengers and crew—over one hundred of the Americans—many of Wilson's more hawkish colleagues were ready for war. Still Wilson demurred, earning the everlasting opprobrium of Roosevelt, and insisted that the path to peace did not lead through war.¹³⁵ For two years, as war raged in Europe, Wilson was unrelenting. But in 1917, when Germans stated their intentions to engage in submarine warfare on all commercial vessels travelling to England—including American vessels—Wilson understood this as a declaration of war, and, in April of 1917, he reluctantly and "with ashen face"¹³⁶ declared war in return.

Critically however, Wilson understood this declaration not in terms of martial retribution but in terms of moral necessity. In his mind, American entrance into the war was not an abandonment of his vision of global peace, but a necessary and tragic intervention toward that end. Less than a year later, in a speech given to the American Congress on January 8, 1918, Wilson articulated this moral vision to America and the world. Though given in a time of war, Wilson did not explicitly mention the war at all. Instead, reiterating his vision for a League of Nations, he outlined a "Fourteen Point"

¹³⁴ So Lears, "The League was a managerial scheme designed to create a cooperative commonwealth of nations. Efficiency and uplift, science and morality, merged in its complex harmony of bureaucratic system" *Rebirth*, 336.

¹³⁵ So Lears, "[Wilson] was no pacifist, but he hated war and sought to prevent it by imagining a League of Nations that would replace realpolitik with international law." *Rebirth*, 326.
¹³⁶ Lears, *Rebirth*, 339.

platform for securing global peace. Wilson's message was clear: America was at war for the sake of global peace.¹³⁷

By the end of 1918, the victory of the Allies—and of Wilson's vision—seemed within reach. To that end Wilson, who insisted on personally leading the American diplomatic team, spent the first six months of 1919 negotiating the Treaty of Versailles. Though in later generations many would come to see it differently, at the time, the treaty seemed to be a profound affirmation of Wilson's perfectionist internationalism. Indeed the Treaty both directly reflected the substance of Wilson's "Fourteen Points" and explicitly established the League of Nations. But it was also an affirmation of Wilson himself. Wherever he went during his six months in Europe, he was hailed as a Savior. As H.G. Wells put it,

For a brief interval, Wilson stood alone for mankind. And in that brief interval there was a very extraordinary and significant wave of response to him throughout the earth. So eager was the situation that all humanity leapt to accept and glorify Wilson—for a phrase, for a gesture. It seized upon him as its symbol. He was transfigured in the eyes of men. He ceased to be a common statesman, he became a Messiah.¹³⁸

Versailles seemed, in many respects, the apogee of American perfectionism, the climactic expression of American possibility on an international scale. But, even so, in a way that Wilson could not have expected, the true strength of American perfectionism was about to be revealed. When Wilson returned from Europe, the crowds that greeted him were enthusiastic, but they were not messianic. The reception of his political colleagues was decidedly less of either. The reason for this was that the Treaty of

¹³⁷ On this speech see Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*: A Biography, ch. 19.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Lears, *Rebirth*, 348.

Versailles, largely because of Wilson's influence, required each of its signatories to enter into the Covenant of the League of Nations. As a part of this Covenant, member nations were required both to cease military aggression against other member nations and also to provide military support for those nations, should it be required. For Wilson it seemed entirely natural that the United States "would willingly relinquish some of its own sovereignty ... for the good of the world."139 For other American leaders however, the idea that America would be obligated either to cease military action that was in its interest or to undertake military actions that were not, was an unacceptable concession. Because of this, and in spite of Wilson's nearly year-long campaign to secure support for the Treaty, American lawmakers refused ratification. Though Wilson's League of Nations had come into being, it would not include his own nation. Thus it was in the halls of Washington moment—rather than in the streets of Paris—the true power of American destinarianism was most clearly beheld. For in this moment, America refused to constrain the possibility of its own national perfection, even for the prospect of a more perfect world.

Summary

In the years that following the war, America entered into an era of extraordinary volatility. The wild speculation of the market and the subsequent Great Depression, the growing fear of communism and the attending labor wars, and the resurgence of white supremacy (enabled by Wilson's own administration) converged to create an America marked by violence and anxiety. As a result, as it had after the Civil War, American

¹³⁹ Lears, Rebirth, 349.

perfectionism fell on hard times. Even so, perfectionism not only endured as a powerful source of the American democratic imagination, but also maintained its essential features—millennialist republicanism, self-reliant progressivism, and moralist imperialism—as it did so. This is important to understand because it was these features, indeed this entire tradition, with which Martin Luther King would explicitly struggle as he sought to re-imagine American possibility.

"The Restraint of Evil:" The Protectionist Account

One of the ironies of the drive to perfection is that though it offers many possibilities, it offers only one certainty: an unyielding awareness of imperfection. This is the inescapable burden of perfectionism, the burden of Tantalus: the capacity to envision but not to embrace. As we saw above, part of the story of America is the profound degree to which this burden of perfection has been a creative force in both the moral imaginations and the material innovations of the nation, the degree to which it sustained an expansive vision of American possibility.

But that is only one part of the American story. From the beginning, another account of American possibility has also served as a moral and political source in American life, what I refer to here as *protectionism*. Throughout American history, the protectionist account has expressed itself in many seeming contradictory ways: alliance and rupture, isolation and empire, jeremiad and boredom. This is because American protectionism, like the destinarian tradition to which it so frequently reacts, best understood less as way of behaving in the world—though it certainly entails behaviors—

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and more as a way of being in the world; less as a strategy and more, in the words of Christopher Lash, a "sensibility."¹⁴⁰

At the heart of this sensibility lies what may be called *concern*—an instinctive (though indeed, principled) ethos of worry about the nature of the future. To be sure, this concern is complex in both origin and expression—sometimes appearing as sage watchfulness, at other times exploding in mass hysteria. But in virtually all of its forms, this concern is driven by two irreducible convictions: the possibility of catastrophe and the responsibility to protect against it.

On the surface, this seems a fairly unremarkable claim; even the most adventurous—whether persons or nations—bear the burden of concern. We call this wisdom. But my argument suggests that in parts of the American democratic imagination, this ethos of concern functions not simply as wisdom but as worldview, not simply as an inevitable part of life in the world, but as an irreducible *perspective* on life in the world. Furthermore, I suggest that in America this perspective also functions as an account of American possibility, an insistence that the true meaning of America's future is not finally to perfect itself, but to protect itself from harm.

In order to understand this claim, we must briefly consider the fundamental characteristics of the protectionist account: Puritan labors to protect against *moral evil*, Post-Civil War concerns to protect against *cultural corruption*, and twentieth struggles to protect against *civilizational annibilation*. For in understanding these, we will come more fully to understand the ways in which Martin Luther King not only embraced the

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Lash, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991), 17. This is reminiscent of Oakeshott's claim that being conservative is, first and foremost, a "disposition." See Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, 407.

concerns of protectionism, but also struggled to move beyond the bondage its constraints.

"Preserved from the Corruptions of this Evil World:" Puritan Protections from Evil

Protectionist sentiment predates the new world, but it was the Puritans that originated and cultivated its distinctly American form. And though, as I will argue below, it was not until the after the Civil War that American Protectionism began to function as a distinct account of American possibility, understanding its roots requires us to look to Puritan New England. It is not difficult to imagine the reasons for this. After all, the Puritan experience was in many ways synonymous with catastrophe. They had passed through a century of brutal religious war, fled their homes as exiles, buried spouses and children at sea, washed up on the shores of a world for which they had little preparation and in which many of them would die within a year. If the Puritan's evidenced a predisposition to interpret experience in terms of the catastrophic, they could not be blamed. This is not to suggest that the puritan sentiment of concern was wholly experiential, however. It was also heavily informed by theological convictions about God, human beings, and the Civil Order. And it was these convictions—especially as they were wed to Puritan experience—that nursed the emergence of American protectionism.

The Puritan God: Good, Free, and Just

The Puritan account of God was in many ways a fairly conventional reflection—in both methodology and substance—of the post-reformation Protestant scholasticism of Western Europe and the British Isles.¹⁴¹ Even so, embedded in this theological account, indeed essential to it, lay three important theological emphases that would have important implications for the development of American protectionism. The first of these is the Puritan emphasis on God's *goodness*. One of the marvels of Puritanism is the degree to which, in the midst of extraordinarily traumatic experience, it continued unyieldingly to affirm the goodness of God. Indeed, the *Westminster Confession of Faitb* (1649), in many ways the high point of Puritan confessionalism, describes God as singularly so, when it says, "There is but one only, living, and true God ... most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin."¹⁴²

In its most basic form, this is simply a claim about the character of God: For the Puritans, understanding God's goodness was fundamental to understanding God Himself. Thus the English Puritan Stephen Charnock (1628-1680) in his *Discourse on the Goodness of God*, says, "The goodness of God is the most pleasant perfection of the Divine nature ... comprehend[ing] all His attributes ... God's goodness is His glory."¹⁴³ For the Puritans, to be God was to be good.

And yet importantly, this claim of God's goodness also functioned as a claim about *bistory*. As it is for all human beings, the Puritan experience of the world was a complex and often mysterious comingling of pleasure and suffering, fullness and loss,

¹⁴¹ On the Puritan account of God see especially: John Flavel, *Mystery of Providence*, 1678 (Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963); Willem J. Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011); Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (London: Paternoster Press, 1979); and Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.

¹⁴² Westminster Confession of Faith, II:1.

¹⁴³ Stephen Charnock, "Discourse XII: On the Goodness of God," in *The Existence and Attributes of God*, vol 2 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 219.

growth and decay. And yet one of the distinctives of Puritanism was the strength of their commitment to interpret each of these experiences, indeed all things, fundamentally as expressions of the goodness of God. Charnock reflects this theme as well:

All his acts towards man are but the workmanship of this [goodness.] What moved Him at first to create the world out of nothing, and erect so noble a creature as man? ... Was it not His goodness? What made Him separate His Son to be a sacrifice for us? ... Was it not a strong bubbling of goodness? What moves Him to reduce a fallen creature to the due sense of his duty, and at last to bring him into eternal felicity? Is it not only His goodness? ... When [God] confers happiness without merit...bestows happiness against merit ... bears with provoking rebels ... performs His promises ... commiserates a distressed person ... supplies an indigent person ... succors an innocent person ... pardons a penitent person ... all [is] summed up in this one name of goodness. This is the captain attribute that leads the rest to act. This attends them, and spirits them in all His ways of acting. This is the compliment of all His works.¹⁴⁴

Even so, the complications of such a view, especially given their own catastrophic experience, were not lost on the Puritans. They knew, too well, that their convictions about the goodness of God and their experiences of the life of the world seemed strangely incommensurate. It was this knowledge, in part, that gave rise to the second aspect of the Puritan account of God: its emphasis on God's *freedom*. For the Puritans, who were heirs of both an Augustinian vision of God's sovereignty¹⁴⁵ and the Reformed scholastic tradition's Aristotelian metaphysical framework for articulating that sovereignty,¹⁴⁶ God's freedom—His unrestricted moral and agential capacity to conceive and enact His own determinations—was fundamental to God's identity. This is why,

¹⁴⁴Charnock, "Goodness," 219-220.

¹⁴⁵On this see especially, Charles Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁶ On this see especially: Flavel, Mystery of Providence; Van Asselt, Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism; Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life.

having rooted its vision of God in goodness, the *Confession* turns immediately to God's freedom:

God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and *bas most sovereign dominion over them*, *to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleases*. In His sight all things are open and manifest, His knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to Him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all His counsels, in all His works, and in all His commands. To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them.¹⁴⁷

Like the conviction of God's goodness, this conviction of God's freedom functioned most basically as a framework for understanding the character of God. Divine freedom means that He is not in any essential way obligated to or dependent upon anything outside of Himself; that God can and *does* do only what He wills. As the *Confession* puts it, God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of His own will.¹⁴⁸

And yet, as it had with God's goodness, this conviction of God's freedom also functioned as an account of history. Indeed what would come to be the Puritan doctrine of "providence" is, in its essence, the use of the doctrine of divine freedom as an interpretive framework for the contingencies of history. Because God is free and because

¹⁴⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith, II:2.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., V:1.

all things are both contingent upon and ordered by Him, human experience can only be understood as the experience of God's providential action. As the *Confession* puts it, "God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass."¹⁴⁹ Importantly however, this ordination is neither based on God's foreknowledge of human events¹⁵⁰nor can it be thwarted by human actions.¹⁵¹ For the Puritan the contingencies of history are best understood as the expression of God's perfect freedom.

There is a sense in which this account of history was an attempt to allow God's people to view history with a measure of intelligibility: No matter what they encountered, they knew that God—in His goodness—had brought it about. And yet—in a way that would prove important for the development of American protectionism—this account of God's freedom had the effect of inflecting the world with a sense of profound unpredictability. This is because while the Puritans could be sure that the world was being ordered according to God's good and sovereign purposes, what they could never sure of, was the shape those purposes might take. Because of this, although the Puritans understood themselves to be anchored in the "unsearchable counsels" God's will, they also—in par because of this unsearchable character—found themselves exposed to the dark and tempestuous currents of history's open sea.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., III:1.

¹⁵⁰"Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions;[4] yet has He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions." *Westminister Confession of Faitb*, III:2.

¹⁵¹"Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure." *Westminster Confession of Faitb*, V:2,3.

It is this fact, perhaps as much as any other, that accounts for the third aspect of the Puritan doctrine of God; its emphasis on *God's justice*. For the Puritans, God's justice, like His goodness and His freedom, is fundamental to His identity. The reason for this is that justice is, in fact, where God's goodness and God's freedom most clearly converge. Indeed this convergence is the foundation of the *Confession's* account of God:

There is but one only living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, *most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty*.¹⁵²

These words reveal that, like the Puritan conceptions of God's goodness and freedom, this conviction of God's justice functioned most basically as an account of God's character. But importantly, for the Puritans God's justice also served as an account of history. It did so in one sense by assuring the Puritans that, in spite of their current suffering, God's redemptive purposes for the world would surely lead them to the repose of everlasting vindication. It taught them to believe, as King would say, that the arc of the universe "bends toward justice." For the Puritans, God's justice functioned as form of assurance about the character of the future.

But in a subtler, and yet much more important sense for the development of American protectionism, it functioned as a form of agency in the present, a tool for negotiating the contingencies of lived experience. Here's how: Though much of human

¹⁵² Westminster Confession of Faith, II:1. Emphasis mine.

experience remained mysterious to the Puritans—not least the misery that it entails what was *not* mysterious to the Puritans was that some of this misery was the result of God's just judgment on sin. It is true of course that in the Puritan mind the intentions of God's judgment were different with respect to those who were in the church and those who were not.¹⁵³ But even so, the misery of that judgment had a universal quality. Though it was not clear that all evil experiences were the result of judgment, it was clear that judgment was evil's inevitable result. The implication of this was not lost on the Puritans: To avoid the unnecessary experience of misery, one must avoid the just judgments of God. And to avoid judgment simply requires an individual—or a community—to avoid sin.

The Puritan Self: Created, Corrupted, and Condemned

This deduction however, for all of its elegance, was not entirely consoling. This is because while the Puritan view of God was an exalted account of goodness, freedom, and justice, the Puritan account of human beings was decidedly less so. It is true that the Puritan account of humanity assumes an original state of creational perfection in which human beings were endowed "with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with

¹⁵³ This distinction is made explicit in the Confession itself: "The most wise, righteous, and gracious God does oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins, does blind and harden from them He not only withholds His grace whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their corruption makes occasion of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others." *Westminster Confession of Faith*, V:5-6.

knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it."¹⁵⁴

But it is also true that even that original vision had a quality of contingency to it; that even though humans had the power to fulfill God's law, that power entailed "a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change."¹⁵⁵ In the Puritan account, even perfect was subject to revision. And so it was, with tragic effect. For Puritans, the fall of the original humans was a moment of utter anthropological devastation in which they, "fell from their original righteousness and communion, with God … became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body."¹⁵⁶ But this devastation fell not only upon Adam and Eve alone; to the contrary, "the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation."¹⁵⁷

As with the Puritan account of God, this account of humanity functioned also as a claim about history. This is because it characterizes human action in the world—both that of the church¹⁵⁸ and its neighbors—as "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil."¹⁵⁹ And not only inclined, but actually engaged in evil, proceeding "to actual transgressions."¹⁶⁰ The story of history, in

¹⁵⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith, IV:2.

¹⁵⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, IV:2.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., VI:2.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., VI:3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., VI:5, "This corruption of nature, during this life, does remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin."

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., VI:4.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., VI:4.

other words, is the story of human beings inflicting misery upon the earth. And yet given what we have seen about God's good, free, and just action, history must also be the story of God bringing judgment to the earth, a story of miseries compounded. Indeed this is precisely the bleak picture that the *Confession* paints when it proclaims that "Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God ... bring[s] guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.¹⁶¹

The Puritan Ethic: Conformity and Constraint

Taken together, these accounts—of a God who orders all things for His glory and judges all wickedness with justice, and of a humanity who was created for obedience but has been corrupted into sin and judgment—portray history as a protracted and mutually recriminatory war between good and evil. Given the Puritan belief in God's final vindication of Himself and salvation of His people, it is not quite a tragic account, but there is plenty of tragedy within it. In the space between these two convictions—between the glory of God and the sinfulness of humanity—the Puritan theological ethic emerged. At the heart of this ethic was a two-fold vision of human life in the world: the call to conform to the law of God and to constrain the evil lying within and without.

Though the language of conformity can suggest a sort of moral and intellectual somnolence, this was not at all what the Puritans had in mind. To the contrary, they understood conformity to the law of God as the fruit of deliberate and sustained effort. Because of their views of justification, they were insistent that this effort was not in any

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¹⁶¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, VI:4,5.

way meritorious, of course. This is because human labors to conform to God's law were inevitably tainted by human sin. As the Confession says, "We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the ... infinite distance that is between us and God ... and because as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment."¹⁶² To the contrary, human conformity to God's law was merely a testimony to the power of God's work in sinful humanity. And yet even so, it was a human work too; a work in which human beings were " not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but ... to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them."¹⁶³

This Puritan ethic of conformity to the law of God was, of course, an individual ethic. That this is so may be seen the strong emphasis Puritanism placed on the Bible as the source of understanding God's law;¹⁶⁴ on the necessity of recognizing one's own sins as a violation of that law;¹⁶⁵ on the deliberate effort to renounce those sins and "turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments;"¹⁶⁶ and on cultivating the practices of what Puritan John Owen called "Communion with God"—of scripture reading, prayer, and worship¹⁶⁷—necessary to sustain the work of conformity.¹⁶⁸ Through these the individual might grow more deeply

¹⁶² Westminster Confession of Faith, XVI:5.

¹⁶³ Ibid., XVI:3.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., XVI:1.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., XV:6.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., XV:6.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., XXI.

¹⁶⁸ For more on Puritan notions of individual piety see especially, J.I. Packer, A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life, 1994 (Reprint, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Lewis Bayly. The Practice of Piety.

in what the Puritans called *vivification*: coming into the fullness of life found through conformity to the law of God.¹⁶⁹

But the work of conformity was also a corporate work. That is to say, for the Puritans, God's law was to be not simply individually but *collectively* embodied. The foundational expressions of this collective conformity were the family and the congregation. Indeed, in the Puritan imagination, this was one of the fundamental purposes of each.¹⁷⁰ But critically, this work of collective conformity extended beyond both of these to the civic order itself.¹⁷¹ This is because the Puritans conceived of home, church, and city on a continuum—as concentric embodiments of collective conformity to the will of God. Indeed in describing the duties of those "Magistrates" who governed the civic order, the *Confession* calls them "especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth"¹⁷² and to "take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled,

^{1637. (}Reprint, CreateSpace, 2015); Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines In Seventeenth-Century New England*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982. ¹⁶⁹ On this, see John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. 1668. (Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004). ¹⁷⁰ On this see *Westminster*, XXI:6, "God is to be worshipped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families, daily and in secret, each one by himself; so, more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calls thereunto; XXIV.2, "Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and *for preventing of uncleanness*, and XXV.3, "Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto."

¹⁷¹ On this see especially James Kerr and C. Matthew McMahon, ed., *The Covenanted Reformation* (Coconut Creek, FL: Puritan Publications, 2009); Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: the Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1970).

¹⁷²Westminster Confession of Faith, XXIII:1.

administrated, and observed."¹⁷³ In the Puritan vision, the central work of both the individual believer and of the social order was conformity to the law of God.

Even so, the Puritan ethic entailed not simply conformity, but also constraint. Given the Puritan account of human sin, this is hardly surprising. Because human beings—individually and corporately—are "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil" the ethic of conformity necessarily entailed an ethic of constraint.¹⁷⁴ And like conformity, constraint had both individual and collective horizons. For individual Puritan men, women, and children, this work of constraint began with a clear-eyed moral inventory, a rigorous form of self-examination for sins of mind, heart, and body, of word and deed.¹⁷⁵ Constraint began, in other words, with vigilance.

Having done this (which was in truth never done), one was to turn to the work of what the Puritans referred to as *mortification*—the act of putting one's sinful self to death.¹⁷⁶ This work entailed many things, ranging from private renunciation of hidden motivations to public renunciation of open sins. But in every case, the intention was to constrain both the power and effects of one's own sin.

The collective horizon of the Puritan ethic of constraint was, in many ways, simply the application of this mortifying vigilance on the social order. In the church this

¹⁷³Ibid., XXIII:3.

¹⁷⁴ On this see especially, Milan Zafirovski, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Authoritarianism* (New York: Springer, 2007).

¹⁷⁵ On this practice see especially, Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); Jonathan Edwards and Stephen A. Nichols, ed., *Jonathan Edwards' Resolutions: And Advice to Young Converts* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Samuel Bolton, et al. *The Puritans on Conversion*. Los Angeles: Soli Deo Gloria Ministries, 2003.

¹⁷⁶ On this see John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*.

work took various forms, ranging from theological exhortation;¹⁷⁷ weekly confession of sin, practices of congregational examination (especially around the celebration of the sacrament of communion);¹⁷⁸ and even to seasons of congregational repentance.¹⁷⁹ Each of these, in various ways, was ritualized into the life of the Christian community, each a part of the Puritan liturgy of constraint. But the most powerful ecclesial expression of constraint was that of formal censure. In Puritan congregations the officers of the church were taken to be the instruments of God's judgment in the context of that congregation. As such, in the context of the congregation, they had the power to "retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent ... and to open it unto penitent sinners ... as occasion shall require."¹⁸⁰ Though the power of censure has many purposes, its essence is the power of constraint. As the *Confession* puts it, "Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming ... of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump ... and for preventing the wrath of God."¹⁸¹ In these words we see both the power and the purpose of constraint: to protect the congregation against the evil that crouches at the door. For the Puritans, this power was not incidental, but central to its conception of the Christian life. This is seen in the fact that in a theological confession seeking to summarize the central teachings of

¹⁷⁷ On this see especially Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

¹⁷⁸ For an interesting account of the "token" system of admittance to the table, cf. Laurie Stanley-Blackwell, *Tokens of Grace: Cape Breton's Open-Air Communion Tradition* (Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁹ On this cf. Jonathan Edwards and Philip F Gura, ed., *Jonathan Edwards: Writings From the Great Awakening* (New York: Library of America, 2013); Rhys S. Bezzant, *Jonathan Edwards and the Church* (New York: Oxford, 2013).

¹⁸⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith, XXX:2.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., XXX:3.

the English Reformation in thirty-three chapters, one chapter is wholly given over to articulating the censorial power of the church.

Even so, the culmination of the Puritan ethic of collective constraint was found not in the church but in the civic order. For the Puritans, this power resided in the office of the Civil Magistrate. It is true that in Puritan thought the power of the Civil Magistrate was itself constrained. Indeed, as the *Confession* makes clear, the Magistrate was not, in any way, to presume to exercise leadership in the theological and sacramental affairs of the congregation. Indeed, with respect to the church, the responsibilities of the Magistrate were largely to nurture a civic space for the church's flourishing.¹⁸² But with respect to the larger social order, the power of the Magistrate was subordinated only to the authority of God Himself. At the heart of this power stood the power of constraint, the power given, as the *Confession* puts it, "for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers."¹⁸³

While this, in many ways, mirrors the constraint of ecclesial censure, and while it was at times the case that the church and the state colluded in the work of censure,¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid., XXIII.3, "Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; yet he has authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administrated, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he has power to call synods, to be present at them and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God."

¹⁸³ Westminster Confession of Faith, XXIII:1.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., XX:4, "And because the powers which God has ordained, and the liberty which Christ has purchased are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.[15] And, for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ has established in the Church, they may

there is an important sense in which, for the Puritan's, the Magistrate's power of constraint is utterly unique. This is because the Magistrate's censorial powers had recourse to a power that the church did not—the power of the sword. Indeed in Puritan thought, the sword—constraint's most elemental form—belongs *only* to the Magistrate. That this is so suggests that while the Puritans certainly longed for a civil order that conformed to the law of God, they also knew that this longing was more an aspiration than an achievement; that in the final analysis, the essence of the Magistrate's power was not finally the power to conform the social order to God's law, but to constrain all which strove against it.

The Puritan Roots of Protectionism: Summary

The significance of these theological convictions for the larger story I am seeking to tell, a story about Martin Luther King's reimagining of American democracy, is that they converged to form the basis of the Protectionist account of American possibility. In this account, history is interpreted largely through two lenses: First, through the strife that exists between the good, free, and just judgments of God and the corrupt and corrupting sinfulness of humanity; and secondly, through the lens of the struggle of the faithful to escape the miseries of this strife through conformity to God's law and the constraint of human sin. In this account "the possible" is best understood not as an incandescent singularity awaiting the inevitability of its own unfolding, but as a range of possibilities, each containing within it the seeds of its own demise. Because of this, the work of possibility is not simply that of building a shining "City on a Hill" but also—and

lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the Church and by the power of the civil magistrate."

perhaps fundamentally—of guarding the fragile light of that city from the darkness that ever threatens to engulf it.

It is in this Puritan context that the distinctly American form of protectionist sentiment first emerged. And though in time the substance of Puritanism's theological convictions would be set aside, its account of possibility, with its ethos of concern and its habits of vigilance would endure. Indeed in the following decades, as Colonial Americans faced the power of the British Empire; as Jacksonian Americans faced the threat of the Nations of Native America; and as Southern and Northern Americans faced the threat of sectional crisis, the features of Puritan protectionism were everywhere apparent. For in each of these, the pursuit of American possibility meant not simply the perfecting of our hopes, but the *protecting* of those hopes from everlasting harm.

"Crucified Upon A Cross of Gold:" Post-War Protections from Loss

For much of the time from the Puritan era to the Civil War, perfectionist and protectionist accounts of American possibility lived together in a conscious if uneasy union, even in the same minds. Indeed they seemed to require on another, the work of securing the American future required both the ambition and the chastening respective to each. That this is so may be seen in the fact that the same eighteenth-century Republican leaders who believed that America would be, in Jefferson's words, "an example for the aim and imitation of the people of other countries" based the structure of the American form of government on a system of checks and balances—a system of constraint. It may be seen in the fact that even as nineteenth century Americans uniformly embraced the rhetoric of destinarianism, they strove—through violently contested border state legislation—to prevent that destiny from taking unwanted form. And it may be seen in the fact that even as Northern and Southern Americans sang that their "eyes had seen the coming of the glory of the Lord" they did so with the sound of cannons in their ears. That this is so suggests that for a time Americans seemed to believe that perfectionist and protectionist accounts of American possibility were, in some sense, twinned; that while each had its distinctive emphasis, each required some measure of the other.

But in the wake of the Civil War, each of these began to take on a life of its own, functioning less as discrete emphases within a single account of American possibility, and more as distinctive accounts of possibility itself. As we have seen, in the years following the Civil War, American perfectionism increasingly took the shape of self-reliant progressivism and moralist internationalism in which constraints of any kind were rendered out of accord with the power of American possibility. Alongside this development, and in part in response to it, American protectionism began to take its own shape, to infuse American possibility with its own distinctive sensibility.

At the heart of this sensibility lay both a profound a fear of loss and a desire to protect against it. Given the realities of the Civil War, this fear of loss is completely understandable: Every American had lost something, and many Americans had lost everything. Because of this, many Americans began both to describe their nation and to navigate its life in decidedly protectionist terms, insisting that that American possibility lie not in the gilded delusions of the emerging progressive movement, but in protecting America from the harms that this movement was certain to bring. In doing so they developed the protectionist instincts of Puritanism into a distinctly American account of democratic possibility. To understand this development—and its significance for Martin

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Luther King—I want briefly to look at two general forms of loss from which Americans strove to protect both themselves and their nation: the loss of agency and the loss of transcendence.

The Loss of Agency

One of the effects of war, of any war, is the diminishment of human agency. Indeed that is part of war's goal for one side to deprive the other of its power. But one of the effects of Civil War—especially in a democracy—is that this deprivation was experienced on a national scale. Because of this, one of the features of post-war America was a deep and broadly evidenced concern to re-establish confidence in the capacity of human beings to act—reasonably and efficaciously—in the world.

For some, as we saw above, this reassertion of human agency took a perfectionist form. Fusing Emersonian self-reliance, industrial rationalization, and martial force, America not only recovered a sense of agency, but expressed that agency more powerfully than ever before. In this respect, the story of the twentieth century is a story of the perfecting of American agency. But there was another story too—a story in which Americans struggled not to perfect their agency, but simply to protect themselves from what they perceived to be its further diminishment.

Some American understood this diminishment in largely political terms. For obvious reasons this was especially true in the South, where many understood the Civil War simply as an exercise in Northern political aggression. But it was true in the North as well. Beginning as early as the late 1870s and increasing powerfully in the years that followed, when Americans—from across the political spectrum—spoke of their

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government, they did so using the language of "corruption." The ubiquitous quality of these two realities—southern fear of aggression and northern fear of corruption—suggest that in the post-war era many Americans viewed their political process not as an expression of their will, but as a violation of it, they saw themselves not as acting through their government, but as being acted upon.¹⁸⁵

In response to this loss of political agency, Americans threw themselves into a variety of movements oriented toward political protection. Indeed it is in this context and for this reason—that Northerners developed strategies for Federal regulation, Southerners developed the notion of the "Redeemer Governments," and Americans from every part of the country embraced the cultural rhetoric, though not always the political platform, of the populist movement. Each of these claimed to represent a distinct positive vision, and at times contended with one another. But even so, the striking similarity with which they described the meaning of their existence suggests that they were born of a shared anxiety: the loss of political agency.

But perhaps more profoundly, Americans sensed a diminishment of their economic agency. In one respect this sense of loss was rooted in the development of America's new mechanized and rationalized form of economic production. In the years following the Civil War, many Americans left their small fields and their small towns to work in America's burgeoning urban centers of industry. But to many of these new American workers, the work that they were given to do was almost unrecognizable as such. To most of these men and women "work" entailed the employment of the whole

¹⁸⁵ This may be seen in the fact that this is the era in which "Muckraking" journalism, whose entire purpose was to expose governmental corruption, first emerged.

body in an array of skills such as gardening, hunting, cooking, sewing, and building. New modes of production, by contrast, required little more of them than standing or sitting in one place and repeating a singular movement. Also, while their old work had involved participation in the entire process of production—plowing, seeding, weeding, tending, harvesting, and storing—in the new labor they were cut off from this process, and simply contained to one of its stages. And while the old work had required attentiveness to the limits of land and season, their new labor entailed none of this: neither the machines nor the companies that owned them seemed ever to tire. Because of this, American workers increasingly experienced the work of economic production as a process in which they were asked not merely to operate machines, but in a sense to become them as well.¹⁸⁶

In another respect, this sense of the loss of economic agency was rooted not in America's new patterns of economic production, but in its new patterns of economic consumption. While the extraordinary power of the new American form of industrial capitalism was evident to everyone, it appeared that the benefits of that power were truly available to only a few. The phenomenon of urbanization only deepened this conviction: while America's industrial titans built and inhabited gleaming monuments to America's economic glory, the men and women who worked on and in those monuments went home to crowded tenements filled with the impoverished, the diseased, and the forgotten. This experience—broadly characteristic of American working life in cities around the¹⁸⁷ country—produced in the American worker the sense that not only were

¹⁸⁶ For more on the effects of industrialization, cf. Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 1865-1920 (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Pub. Co., 1975); Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism*, 1885-1914 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Jacob A. Riis, How the Other Half Lives (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1890).
they working so that others might consume, but that they were also being consumed themselves.

As it had with politics, this sense of lost economic agency drove Americans to create an array of strategies for own economic protection. In the North, Americans fought for Federal regulation of the markets. In the South, Americans rehabilitated the agrarian ideal. And throughout the country Americans embraced the artisan ideal, beginning arts and crafts movements to reinvigorate non-industrial forms of economic production. And, as it was with politics, while each of these struggled to articulate a distinctive positive vision, the most distinctive characteristic of each—and the characteristic that united them—was a sense of loss, and a desire to protect against it.

The Loss of Transcendence

In the years following the war, many Americans began to struggle with trustworthiness of the transcendent. Having just been through a war in which neighbors killed one another while singing of the "glory of the Lord," they had reason to do so. Because of this, many Americans—drawing on the chastened self-reliance of Emerson and the Pragmatism of Dewey—began to turn away from the transcendent to the contingent, away from the divine to the human. In the wake of holy war, secularity seemed a solace.

But for others, this turn to the self seemed not liberating but confining. The reason for this, of course, is that because of the political and economic realities of post-Civil War America the "self" had diminished. It is one thing to be self-reliant if, like Whitman, you "contain multitudes;" it is another thing altogether if you are simply a cog in an overpowering industrial machine. Because of this, many Americans began to look

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beyond the industrialized version of the self, to protect themselves from the disconsolations of their own smallness. They began, in other words, to protect against the final loss of the transcendent.

For some, as we saw above, this return to the transcendent took a perfectionist form. Fusing the moral energy of Puritan millennialism with the presumptions of American destinarianism, American perfectionists sought transcendence in America's moral vocation in the world. It was, in a sense, the deification of a nation; America became its own object of transcendence. But others took a different road. Rather than simply projecting their own transcendence onto the world, many Americans simply sought to protect themselves from the sense that they were living in a world in which transcendence was vanishing altogether.

Some did this through a quest for *religious experience*. For many late nineteenth century Americans, the forces of industrialization and urbanization had infused human experience with a decidedly rationalized ethos. And while the power of these forces to produce economic bounty was undeniable, their power to provide existential meaning was not as clear. To the contrary, for many the rationalization of culture inaugurated what Jackson Lears refers to as the experience of "weightlessness."¹⁸⁸

In response to this, Americans began—in various ways—to pursue a different sort of experience—religious experience. This is not to suggest that Americans were seeking an experience of traditional religion. To the contrary, many began to seek these experiences in forms that were antithetical to such religion: the expansive aesthetic of romanticism, the hidden mysteries of eastern mysticism, in the nostalgic mythology of

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Lears, No Place of Grace, 32–46.

agrarian yearning.¹⁸⁹ But even so, these experiences had a religious quality to them: They were rooted in desire, embedded in communities, and ritualized in the habits of those who sought them out. Formally speaking, these various paths of experience differed from one another sharply: The agrarian populist and the eastern mystic were not natural friends. But culturally speaking, these movements—which proliferated at the same time were born of a common experience: the loss of transcendence.

But the search for religious experience was not the only way that Americans sought to protect against this loss. At the very moments that some Americans were making their way into the incensed chambers of the mystics; the bohemian communes of the artists; and the pastoral vistas of the agrarians in search of religious experience, others were forming a movement anchored in *religious certainty*: American fundamentalism.

In a very basic sense, American fundamentalism is a simply a fusion of longstanding themes in American culture: Religious millennialism, institutional separatism, and political populism, to name just a few.¹⁹⁰ It is, in this respect, not an innovation but a reconfiguration of existing parts into a new whole. But in another sense, the development of American Fundamentalism marks a watershed moment in American history. This is because it is, above all things, a religious movement singularly expressive of the logic of protectionism. Deeply troubled by the methodological skepticism of liberal

¹⁸⁹ On the re-emergence of the agrarian ideal, cf. Thomas Summerhill, *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism In Nineteenth-Century New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Eric T. Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007). On American spiritual movements at the turn of the twentieth century, cf. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls : the Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco, CA: Harper SanFrancisco, 2005).

¹⁹⁰ On this see especially, Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*; George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); Noll, *Theology in America*; Noll, *History*; Hofstadter, *Reform*; McMath, *Populism*; and Ahlstrom, *History*. Protestantism, the anti-foundationalism of pragmatism, and the evolutionary science of Darwinism, American Fundamentalists saw themselves as a theological bulwark against religious decay.

Because of this, in the decades of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American Fundamentalists across denominations collaborated to the work of theological protection. They developed a list of theological non-negotiables for Christians (what they called "the fundamentals"); they developed religious colleges for training students and seminaries for training clergy; and they started radio programs and publishing houses to distribute their message to the masses. Each of these was—and understood themselves to be—an attempt to protect America from the loss of transcendence through a return religious certainty.¹⁹¹

On the surface, these two American movements—the vague eclecticism of the search for religious experience and the doctrinaire precision of Fundamentalism's search for religious certainty—seem worlds apart. They certainly understood themselves to be so. But even so, in truth they were part of a single cultural movement, a movement in which Americans sought to protect themselves from the impending loss of transcendence in American cultural life.

"Mutually Assured Destruction:" Cold War Protection from Annihilation

¹⁹¹ As an analog to this theological protectionism, American Fundamentalists also pursued a form of moral protectionism. For a classic example of this, see Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil: An Interpretation of American Probibition* (New York: Norton, 1976). Cf. also Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture* and *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism;* Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimoderism and the Transformation of American Culture*, 1880-1920. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

When Americans returned from the cultural devastation of the World War I, they bore within them a new form of fear: the fear of civilizational annihilation. The horror of both the global scale and the industrialized character of the war opened up a new space in the American imagination, and in that space a shadow fell.

The Presence of Enemies

Initially this shadow took the shape of a form of an almost pathological obsession with the threat of enemies—particularly radical, anarchical, or communist enemies inside the United States. The resurgence of American political and economic power during the Gilded Age had done much to restore the battered confidence of the once fractured nation. But even so, as Americans looked on at the unfolding chaos of World War I, these gains seemed fragile. Some of this sense of fragility was due to the growing criticism of the new American economy coming from agrarians, labor unionists, and populists in the United States. But in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the stated intention of its leaders to initiate a global revolution, this sense of fragility took on new form. Americans populists seeking to reform the excesses of the Robber-Barons was one thing, European radicals seeking to rid the world of democracy was another thing altogether. Because of this a new era of American protectionism began—the era of protecting American from the presence of enemies in its midst.

Shortly after the Russian Revolution began and after the United States entered the war, the Wilson administration passed the "Espionage Act of 1917" which criminalized attempts to subvert the United States Military or to support enemies of the United States during wartime. A year later the "Sedition Act of 1918" was passed, extending these

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provisions to include wartime criminalization of speech or conduct that could be interpreted as disloyal to the United States and its efforts abroad. In the wake of these legislative acts, American officials began systematically to protect America from what Wilson called "the poison of disloyalty," targeting perceived dissidents, most of whom were European immigrants, and either arresting or deporting them altogether.

Looking back, such legislation—however dubiously Constitutional it may have been—wasn't simply a reflection of American paranoia run amok. American lawmakers had heard of an ongoing "Red Terror" following the Russian Revolution in which thousands—perhaps millions—of Russians were being killed. And in the spring of 1919, American law enforcement officers uncovered a terrorist plot to mail thirty-six package bombs to the homes and offices of many of America's political and economic elite. Several months later, several such bombs did explode, one of which damaged the home of the United States Attorney General Mitchell Palmer (1872-1936), killing the attacker—Italian immigrant and anarchist Luigi Galleani—in the process.

These explosions inaugurated the "First Red Scare" of 1919-1920, in which American society erupted in a desperate and often violent struggle to contain the threat of its own internal radical enemies. In the "Palmer Raids" of 1919-20, the Department of Justice began to monitor and record the movements of thousands of perceived dissidents (a program led by the young J. Edgar Hoover), eventually deporting over 500 in those two years alone. State Governments across the country began to pass legislation criminalizing socialist ideology and symbolism: New York State General Assembly dismissed five of its elected members for being socialists, and Kansas outlawed the display of the red flag associated with the Russian Revolution. And ordinary Americans—to a degree not seen again until the civil rights movement—incited vigilante riots in cities across America, targeting European immigrants and African Americans suspected of seeking to destroy the American way of life.

In the market collapse of 1929 and the Great Depression to which it led, that way of life seemed to collapse. Because of this, most Americans had neither time nor energy to pursue vendettas against the critics of American capitalism. In fact, many suspected that the critics of American excess—at least the white ones—may have had a point. Because of this, while American concerns about Communism never really went away (J. Edgar Hoover would see to this), mass American anxiety over the presence of enemies receded for a time. America was seeking to rebuild itself—protecting what it built would come later.

Not surprisingly, "later" came in the midst of World War II. As war unfolded in Europe, American political leaders—in a departure from the decidedly isolationist policies of the Great Depression Era—began once again to fear the presence of enemies within. That this is so may be seen in that during the summer of 1940, the United States Congress passed the "Alien Registration Act" which—like the "Espionage" and "Sedition" Acts several decades earlier—criminalized the act of advocating for overthrowing the United States and required all non-citizen adult residents to register with the Government. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in December of that same year, the cultural logic of this Act expressed itself President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which enabled the forced relocation and incarceration of more than 100,000 Japanese Americans—over half of which were legal United States Citizens—in "Internment

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Camps" throughout the western United States. A new era of protection from internal enemies had begun.

This era reached its high point in America's "Second Red Scare," a period of intense anti-communist anxiety that spanned the decade following the war.¹⁹² Popularly speaking, the central figure in this period was Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957). In 1947, the year McCarthy first arrived in Washington, President Harry Truman (1884-1972) signed "Executive Order 9835," known popularly as the "Loyalty Order." The provisions of this order allowed the American Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, to open investigations on employees of the Federal Government so as to assess their loyalty to America's post-war international strategy. The purpose of this order was, quite simply, to root out the dreaded presence of Communist sympathizers in American leadership and to save America from the presence of enemies within. And although Truman explicitly stated that he wished to avoid a witch-hunt, the hunt was on.

Though there were others that participated in the hunt in ways that were both more substantive and more damaging, McCarthy—largely because of his penchant for theater and his eventual exposure—became its face. This began in 1950 when he asserted that he had a list of State Department employees who were "members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring." It was a sensational claim that—for a time—cast McCarthy as a protector of American democracy, a role that he embraced with zeal. In the following years McCarthy broadened his accusations to include American

¹⁹² For more on this period, cf. Landon R.Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

entertainers, Labor leaders, and military officials, and often brought the accused before panels of inquiry. In time it became evident—even to those who feared Communism as much as he—that McCarthy had overplayed his hand: The evidence for his claims never fully materialized and, given the damage he had done, he was censured by the Senate in 1954. McCarthy died from alcoholism three years later at the age of 49. And while, as Martin Luther King would discover first hand, American fears of enemy presence endured, by the early 1950s it had also begun to expand to another even greater fear the possibility of annihilation.

The Possibility of Annihilation

On July 16, 1945, some 400 people gathered in the desert of New Mexico to witness the first detonation of a nuclear weapon. Many of them had been laboring toward this moment in secret for years, carefully theorizing the means of development, the process of detonation, and the nature of its devastation. They were eager to see the fruit of their labors. Even so, they were not prepared for the extraordinary wonder of what they experienced. In his official report upon witnessing the test, Brigadier General Thomas Farrell put it this way: "The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray, and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined."¹⁹³ For the designers of the bomb and for the American government that had employed them, the test was an undeniable success: American

¹⁹³ Leslie Groves to Henry Stimson, "Memorandum on Alamogordo Air Base atomic fission bomb test," July 18, 1945. Foreign Relations of the United States: Conference of Berlin (Potsdam), vol. 2, 1361-1368. Accessed at <http://www.nuclearfiles.org>.

technological power rendered in the discourse of the sublime. The next day, as President Harry Truman joined America's war allies in the Potsdam Conference to plan the postwar order, he knew that he did so with a secret—one might say, unspeakable—power.¹⁹⁴

Even so, he left the conference with grave concerns. One of the ironies of World War II is that it required America to protect its interests abroad by forming an alliance with the very enemy that it most feared at home: Soviet Russia. The gamble of this wartime alliance was, in many ways, critical to the war's successful conclusion: By drawing Germany into a two-front war, they had succeeded in breaking its strength. But as the contest of World War II began to recede, old antipathies—hastily buried—began to emerge.

Initially these tensions arose as the allies turned to the task of re-arranging of the world. For the second time in four decades, Europe had been utterly ravaged by war. Because of this, as the allies gathered to plan the post-world order, part of their goal was to help Europe recover something of its lost cultural life. But the allies had lost lives too, and because of this, even as they meditated on the competing interests of the various European nations, they were mindful of their own interests as well. It was Stalin's strategy for securing Soviet interests that unsettled Truman. Citing the risk of a resurgence of German aggression, Stalin insisted on acquiring Poland in order to create a "buffer" between Germany and the Soviet Union. And yet in spite of Stalin's assurances to the contrary, rumors of Stalin's own cruelty and whispers of a possible "Eastern Bloc" raised

¹⁹⁴ On the American nuclear program, cf. Kai Bird and Martin J Sherwin, *American Prometheus: the Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Henry Shue, *Nuclear Deterrence and Moral Restraint: Critical Choices for American Strategy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

the specter of the expansion of communism into the very Europe that Wilson once sought to unite around the cause of freedom. But even though Truman went back to Washington with concerns about expanding Soviet interests, he was confident that American interests nonetheless remained secure. After all, he knew something that the rest of the world did not: America had the bomb.

Four days after leaving the Potsdam Conference, Truman disclosed his secret by dropping two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing 130,000 people—most of them civilians—in an instant. In the subsequent weeks, the descriptions of the bombings' effects lacked the sublimity described in the New Mexico report. No one spoke of gold, purple, or violet. Instead, they spoke of vaporized neighborhoods, blackened children, and poisoned rain. But if the Japanese bombings lacked the beauty of the earlier test, they did not lack its illuminating quality: In its light the whole world could see that a new power, inhuman and terrible, had come into the world.

Four years later, in August of1949, another explosion shook the American imagination, an explosion as darkly revelatory as that in the New Mexico desert two years before: the Soviets successfully tested a nuclear weapon. Stalin had the bomb too. In truth, even as Stalin and Truman sat with their allies arranging the affairs of post-war Europe, the Soviets' nuclear program had already begun in earnest, though they had not yet come close to the construction of an actual devise. That success—to the everlasting

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gall of American political leaders—was due largely to the work of an atomic spy-ring that included Americans working within America's own nuclear program.¹⁹⁵

In one respect, this revelation of the Soviet nuclear program utterly transformed the character of American Protectionism. No longer were American leaders simply seeking to protect their interests in the arrangement of the world, they sensed that they were now seeking to protect against its final derangement, against the final annihilation of the world.

But in another respect, this revelation simply ushered in the consummation of all of the themes of American Protectionism that had come before. Re-enlisting the old Puritan categories of evil and judgment, Americans began broadly to characterize Communism in general and the Soviets in particular in wholly diabolical terms. Reinvigorating post-Civil War anxieties about the loss of agency, Americans consoled themselves with the power of technique, with the knowledge that somewhere, geniuses in lab coats, technicians with instruments, and strategists with maps were keeping them safe. True, these were the very rationalized forms of technique that had made an earlier generation of Americans seem utterly powerless. But things were different now. A horror greater than the gilded indulgences of bloated Robber-Barons had emerged: the horror of God-hating communist scientists plotting the incineration of America's children. In the face of such a threat, populists brandishing pitchforks simply wouldn't do. In this way, the rationalized technocracy that seemed so evil to an early generation of American protectionists seemed to a later generation America's only hope. And finally, re-

¹⁹⁵ On the Soviet nuclear program, cf. David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: the Soviet Union and Atomic Energy*, 1939-56 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

appropriating the earlier protectionist longing for transcendence, Americans fashioned a new mythology of America as sacred nation. In this mythology, American Christian Civil Religion and American Democratic ideals became indivisible, and America became the world's only hope in the great bi-polar struggle toward liberty and justice for all.¹⁹⁶

In this sense, American Protectionism of the Cold War is best understood not as a departure from its Protectionism's earlier themes, but as the establishment of these themes—indeed, their sacralization—on a global scale. For in it, Americans understood their future not in terms of perfecting the world, but in terms of protecting it from final self-immolation.¹⁹⁷

C. "We Must Find an Alternative:" The Turn to Agapic Possibility

The story of Martin Luther King's final years is, in a sense, the story of his struggle with these two accounts of American Democratic Possibility. Did America's possibility lie in the inevitable perfection of its moral and political vision around the world? Or did it lie simply in the determination to—at all costs—protect itself from harm? Did America's democratic possibility finally lie in the dream or the in nightmare? This was, I believe, the central question of King's final years.

¹⁹⁶ On Truman and the Truman Doctrine, cf. Denise M. Bostdorff, *Proclaiming the Truman Doctrine: the Cold War Call to Arms* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008). On America's transition to world superpower, cf. Nicolaus Mills, *Winning the Peace: the Marshall Plan and America's Coming of Age As a Superpower* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

¹⁹⁷ On America in the Cold War, cf. esp. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: a New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005) and Ned O'Gorman, *Spirits of the Cold War: Contesting Worldviews In the Classical Age of American Security Strategy* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012).

The Dilemmas of Possibility

In one respect, King's reasons for turning to this question were profoundly personal. Indeed, for the last five years of his life he seemed to embody the tension between these poles in his very self. In October of 1964, just over a year after the tragic bombing of the Sixteenth Street Church took the lives of the four African-American girls in Birmingham, King received a phone call that he had been selected to receive the Nobel Prize for Peace. This announcement, which came while King was in the hospital recovering from exhaustion, immediately transformed King into a figure of international stature: He was no longer merely an activist in a regional American struggle, he was a symbol of international esteem. Immediately the entailments of such esteem began to come to him: Roman Catholic Archbishop Paul Hallinan knelt before King in his hospital room and asked for his blessing, while Robert Kennedy wrote to congratulate King on being the embodiment of "the greatest of American ideals."¹⁹⁸

And yet at the same time there were others—the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972) among them—who viewed King as America's greatest domestic threat. For Hoover, an arch-protectionist and veteran of the Red Scare, the threat of communism still loomed large. Because of this, he feared that the civil rights movement in general and King in particular were expressions of a larger communist plot to destabilize American democracy. Because of this, in December of 1963, Hoover and several other top FBI authorities gathered for an all day retreat devoted wholly to the topic of "neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader."¹⁹⁹ At this summit, the FBI leaders decided on a three-

¹⁹⁸ Branch, Pillar, 516-517.

¹⁹⁹ Branch, Pillar, 195.

fold strategy: They decided to stop protecting King, refusing henceforth to "warn" King of potential death threats;²⁰⁰ they decided thwart efforts to honor him, successfully blocking him from receiving honorary degrees from several institutions;²⁰¹ and they decided to begin elevated surveillance of King in order to "expose him in some manner or another in order to discredit him."²⁰² In time this scrutiny yielded Hoover's hoped-for results: FBI agents discovered that King was having regular sexual affairs in several different cities, and they began secretly to record the encounters. Hoover had King, and he knew it.

In November of 1964, while King and his colleagues were on a retreat to plan the part in the Nobel ceremony, Hoover made his move. In a press conference devoted to the whereabouts of three missing Civil Rights workers—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman—a reporter asked Hoover to reflect on a recent public statement in which King said that the FBI wasn't doing enough to solve the crime. In response, J. Edgar Hoover dismissed King, saying that he was "a notorious liar" and "one of the lowest characters in the country."²⁰³

It was an uncharacteristically reckless move, but Hoover was not afraid—he knew what he had on King. Within hours, as a pre-emptive move against any rejoinder from King, Hoover decided it was time to let King know as well. Within twenty-four hours FBI agents had assembled and mailed a package to King containing a highlights reel of his bawdy sexual encounters and an anonymous letter telling him "your end is approaching

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 198.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 245.

²⁰² Ibid., 196.

²⁰³ Branch, Pillar, 528.

... you are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation."²⁰⁴ To millions around the world King seemed a symbol of the perfection of American possibility. And yet to others, he seemed a symbol of its undoing, an enemy from whom America needed protection.

But King's questions about American possibility were not simply born of the tumult of his own personal life. They were also born of similar oscillations in the civil rights movement to which he had devoted nearly a decade of his life. Earlier that year, in June of 1964, Americans opened their newspapers and read that three Civil Rights workers were reported missing in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The three men—Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner—were in Mississippi to participate in "Freedom Summer," a massive campaign to register African Americans to vote in the American South.²⁰⁵ Over a month later, their bodies would be found buried in an earthen dam. To many race-weary Americans, the murders seemed yet another example of the fragility of American democratic life. And yet in the intervening month—even as the nation waited news of the missing boys—President Lyndon Johnson announced that he was signing the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* into law. This law, first proposed by President Kennedy before his murder and finally passed seven months later, outlawed racial discrimination in voting practices, schools, and public accommodations.

The same pattern followed in 1965. In late March of that year, Americans watched as some twenty-five thousand marchers walked in triumph across Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge; the place where many of them had been brutally beaten by police

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 528.

²⁰⁵ On this see especially Marsh, God's Long Summer, and Susanna Goldman Rubin, Freedom Summer: The 1964 Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (New York: Holiday House, 2014).

officers just two weeks before. And not only that, protected by nearly four thousand Federal and State officers, the mostly African-American crowd traveled safely through 50 miles of Alabama highway to Montgomery, where they preached, prayed, and sang on the capitol steps.²⁰⁶ In the wake of this campaign, President Johnson signed the *Voting Rights Act of 1965*, which opened the door to mass enfranchisement of African Americans in the South. And yet just days after Johnson signed the *Voting Rights Act* into law, another conflict between police officers and African Americans erupted in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. This riot, which lasted nearly a week, would end with over thirty people dead, over one thousand people injured, and over \$40,000,000 in property damage to the mostly African-American Watts Community.²⁰⁷

In many ways Watts marked a turning point for the civil rights movement. For the past decade many white Americans had, in general, characterized the movement as an attempt to address the backward Jim Crow legacy of the American South.²⁰⁸ For years they had watched in horror as white authorities set dogs, hoses, and clubs on non-violent Southern blacks. And many of them had celebrated the Federal Government's defeat of those as Lyndon Johnson signed the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and the *Voting Rights Act of 1965*. Indeed at the beginning of 1965, many white Americans believed they were witnessing the moment when the power of American democracy—expressed through courageous non-violent black activists and powerful white politicians—had finally broken the back of its own white supremacist past. It was a consoling thought, and played well with larger

²⁰⁶ Branch, At Canaan's Edge, 5-205.

²⁰⁷ On this see especially, Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Errol Wayne Stevens, *Radical L.A.: From Coxey's Army to the Watts Riots*, *1895-1965* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Although Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam saw it differently. On this, see Branch, *Pillar*, 3-20.

perfectionist ethos of 1965 America.²⁰⁹ But as Watts burned, these illusions—that race was a regional phenomenon and that democracy had solved it—burned with it.

King saw them burn. Several days later, having made his way to Los Angeles, he and Bayard Rustin made their way through an angry crowd and stood before a stillsmoldering building. As he began to speak, an African-American man shouted out, "Get our of here, Dr. King. We don't want you!" King persisted, telling his audience that "All over America Negros must join hands and...." "And burn!" someone in the crowd shouted.²¹⁰ Their anger bubbling to the surface, the crowd shouted their complaints about unemployment, poverty, discrimination, and police violence, and about the helplessness of non-violence. King persisted however, commanding the crowd with the force of his presence and the power of his words, reiterating his call for African Americans to persist in non-violence, and assuring his hearers that "together, we shall overcome."²¹¹ But as he looked out upon the destruction behind him and the desperation before him, he was no longer sure.

King was not alone. In truth, the dilemma of possibility that marked both King's life and the civil rights movement was simply reflective of a larger dilemma in America itself. This is because in many ways this tension between the hope of the perfectionist tradition and the fear of the protectionist tradition was embodied with pristine clarity in the American President, Lyndon Johnson.

²⁰⁹ For an account of American sensibilities at the beginning of 1965, see James T. Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

²¹⁰ Branch, Cannan, 296.

²¹¹ Branch, Canaan's, 297.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson was elected to the presidency by the largest popular vote in United States history. He was so, in part, because he offered a guilty nation the explatory possibility of yet achieving the perfectionist visions of President John Kennedy, whose weeping widow and saluting children still haunted the American imagination. It was no false promise, in the month following Kennedy's death Johnson signed the Civil Rights act first imagined by Kennedy, and signaled to the world that the American dream of progressive reform remained powerfully alive. By the fall of 1964, Johnson both expanded and formalized his commitment to this reform into a set of domestic programs ordered to achieving what he referred to as "The Great Society."²¹² Through this program—the largest domestic reform initiative since Roosevelt's New Deal—Johnson sought to eliminate American poverty, reform American education and health care, provide adequate infrastructure for America's cities, and overcome the legacies of American racism. Everyone knew that it was a vision of extraordinary ambition, but the conditions were right for success: A popular president, an aligned Congress, and a nation eager realize the perfect fullness of democratic possibility.

And yet at the same time Johnson was articulating his perfectionist vision of the Great Society, he had begun to escalate a conflict born of the protectionist logic of the Cold War: the conflict in Vietnam. In many ways Johnson's escalation of Vietnam was an expression of his desire to continue Kennedy's legacy as well. In October of 1962, a year before his assassination, the White House received confirmed reports a Soviet Nuclear

²¹² On Johnson and the Great Society see especially, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991); Julian E. Zelizer, The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society (New York: Penguin, 2015); and Robert A. Caro, "The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power," Political Quarterly, vol. 84, issue 1 (2013):169-171.

missile site had been both constructed and operationalized in Cuba, just 90 miles from America's Florida coast. This was the possibility American protectionists had long feared: the possibility of annihilation. In response, one of the most terrifying episodes in American history, Kennedy and the Soviets engaged in a thirteen-day contest of nuclearbrinksmanship that came to be called "The Cuban Missile Crisis." In a speech during the crisis, President Kennedy made it clear to Americans and to the world what was at stake, saying, "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."²¹³

Though the Soviets eventually withdrew from Cuba—indeed *because* they did so the American political embrace of the protectionist tradition gained new symbolic power. From this moment forward, to be an American President meant, perhaps above all, to protect the nation from their enemies. This lesson was not lost on Johnson. Because of this, within three days of Kennedy's assassination, and in spite of his ambivalence about Vietnam, Johnson told his aides that "the battle … against communism … must be joined with strength and determination."²¹⁴

Even so, Johnson was slow to join. This is, in part, because he knew that doing so would destroy the possibility of implementing his Great Society program for American renewal. Desperately hoping that this particular "battle" against communism could eventually be taken up by the South Vietnamese, Johnson sought both to minimize the presence of American troops in Vietnam and to minimize the presence of Vietnam in the

²¹³ http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkcubanmissilecrisis.html

²¹⁴ Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 339.

American imagination. But in the end, he could not succeed—international fears of communism and Johnson's personal fears of being the President who failed to protect against it—proved too strong. In the beginning of 1965, there were 3,500 American troops in Vietnam; a year later, there were over 200,000. When the war finally ended ten years later, nearly 60,000 of these troops would be dead.

Over the next two years of his Presidency, Lyndon Johnson struggled mightily to advance his vision of domestic reform, even under the conditions of war. And though he succeeded in some of his initiatives, in the end he found his social vision eclipsed by the darkness of Vietnam. With fires burning in Watts and villages burning in Vietnam, Johnson's perfectionist vision of the Great Society collapsed under the weight of the protectionist logic of a society at war. The power of this collapse may be seen in the fact that in 1967, just three years after the his election by the largest popular vote in American history, and virtually ensuring his party's defeat in the upcoming election, Lyndon Johnson chose not to run for the Presidency of the United States.

It was in this context that King finally realized that his struggles over democratic possibility were not his alone, that the tension between the dream and the nightmare was not simply a personal tension between being the laureate and the liar, nor simply a Civil Rights tension between democracy's triumph over racism or helplessness before it. In fact, it was a deeply American tension between the perfectionist and protectionist accounts of democracy itself. King realized, in other words, that what he needed, what the civil rights movement needed, and what America needed was not simply to choose between these two versions of democratic possibility, but to re-imagine that possibility altogether.

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The Democratic Possibilities of Love

The formal expression of this work is King's final book—*Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?*—begun in 1966, and published in 1967, less than a year before his death. Though King had always struggled with the question of America's democratic possibility,²¹⁵ the title suggests that he had taken it up with a new form of intentionality. And so he had: The majority of King's major sermons and speeches in his remaining two years of life were given over to the question of what America would finally become and of why. His struggle with this question led him to new depths in his struggle to re-imagine American democracy. Indeed in these final years, King not only expanded his critique of American racism, greed, and militarism, he also proposed specific policy changes—in business, education, housing, and military practice—that would lead to the "restructuring the whole of American society."²¹⁶ In this respect, King's later work represents a new development in his thought about the possibilities of American democratic life.

And yet even as King pressed more deeply into his work of re-imagining American democracy he did so by returning to old themes—not least to the theme of love. That is to say, while King's work on American possibility entailed a new direction in his thought, it did not entail a departure from the agapic framework that had marked his thought for years. It was, as we will see, simply an application of this agapic framework to the problem of American possibility. Indeed in King's last speech to the Southern

²¹⁵ Indeed the question of American possibility was present in his first public speech as a fourteen year old: "My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom. And I with my brother of blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect, may stand beside the Saxon—a Negro and yet a man! Cf. King, *Papers*, 1:109-111.

²¹⁶ King, Testament, 250.

Christian Leadership Conference, titled *Where do We Go From Here* and given just a few months before his death, he described his work in just this way: "I have decided to stick to love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. I know it isn't popular to talk about in some circles today. [But] He who has love has the key ... to the meaning of reality. Let this affirmation ... give us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future."²¹⁷

One of the tragedies, of course, is that though King had ideas about the shape of that future, he never had the opportunity either to specify its meaning or to see its fulfillment. For him, the future possibilities of love remained simply that—possibilities. Because of this, as his words above betray, there is a sense in which King's account of possibility remained largely impressionistic and evocative. But even so, a close reading of his work during this time reveal the contours of an account that sought both to expose the respective failures of the "perfectionist" and "protectionist" accounts, and to reestablish American possibility on other grounds. For King, the best hope—indeed the *only* hope—for American possibility consisted in renouncing the pride of perfectionism and the fear of protectionism and in taking up the pilgrimage of love.²¹⁸

"We Will Not Let You Go:"²¹⁹ Turning Away from Perfectionist Pride

²¹⁷ Ibid., 250.

²¹⁸ The following sections are structured around the theme of the biblical Exodus. The reason for this is that in almost all of King's most important meditations on the question of democratic possibility he appropriates this image. See, for example, his 1957 sermon "Birth of a Nation," his 1963 "Dream Speech," and especially his last speech, "I See the Promised Land," given on April 3, 1968, the night before he was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee.

²¹⁹ This phrase is taken from "Birth of a Nation."

King's vision of American possibility begins with humiliation—with renouncing the pride of American perfectionism. It is of course true that the call to renounce pride was a long-standing theme in King's ministry. Indeed as early as 1958, he made this call explicit in his sermon, "Paul's Letter to American Christians."²²⁰ But it is also true that this theme took on renewed power when King turned to the theme of American possibility. Indeed it may be seen as early as the summer of 1963 in what may be the greatest of all of his reflections on this theme: the "Dream Speech."

One of the marvels of this speech is the degree to which he was able to evoke America's perfectionist tradition and, at the same time, to expose the pride within it. The evocation is clear enough: King stood in Lincoln's shadow, and reminded Americans of how they had once perfected their union through the miracle of Emancipation. Having done so, he then summoned them forward to even brighter days of justice—days when not just slaves but America itself would be released from the bondage of racial prejudice, when Americans would, with a single voice, cry out, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty I'm free at last!" King was no fool: He knew that in these words he was evoking American pride by portraying American democracy as a land of promise.

And yet even as King evoked the pride of American perfectionism, he wasted not time in exposing that pride to open contempt. "One hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.... One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in

²²⁰ King, Papers, 2:338-345.

his own land."²²¹ This was an extraordinary reversal, for in just a few sentences Martin Luther King had proclaimed to the watching world that America was not the Promised Land. It was, in fact, Pharaoh's Egypt.

This was no mere rhetorical excess, for King followed these words with a litany of condemnatory illustrations, excoriating the hypocritical self-satisfaction of white America:

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied.²²²

These words would be humiliating in any context, but in 1963 they were doubly so: Not only were they coming from an African-American man standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, they were also coming in the midst of the Cold War—indeed just a few months' distance from the Cuban Missile Crisis. Standing before the world, Martin Luther King evoked America's perfectionist pride and exposed the hypocritical vanity within it. It was not the last time. In years to come, King's exposure of America's imperfections—both domestic and international—would only increase.

Domestic Imperfection

²²¹ King, Testament, 217.

²²² Ibid., 218-219.

With respect to America's domestic imperfections, King's initial and most enduring target was its pervasive racism. As we saw in Chapter Two, King had long condemned American racism as a refutation of its own democratic ideals. But in the final years of his life—especially in the wake of the Watts riot—King began to see the power of American white supremacy in ways that he had not before. Many Americans—and at times King himself—understood American racism as largely a Southern problem. But when King stood before the angry crowd and charred ruins of the Watts neighborhood, he understood in a new way that the dehumanization of African Americans was a deeply American problem. In his introduction to *Where Do We Go From Here*, Vincent Harding puts it this way:

When King and several of his coworkers rushed to Watts to engage some of the young men who were most deeply involved in the uprising, they heard the youth say, "We won." Looking at the still smoldering embers of the local community, the visitors asked what *winning* meant, and one of the young men declared, "We won because we made them pay attention to us."²²³

But in many ways, Watts was just the beginning of King's deepened concerns over the intractability of American racism. These concerns would reach their apex in Chicago, Illinois, in August of the following year—1966. Earlier that summer King, largely in response to the terrors of Watts, decided to take his civil rights labors out of the South. To that end, he and his family moved into Chicago, home to one of the largest African-American populations outside of the American South. His goal was both to expose the impoverished conditions of African Americans in Chicago and to engage city leadership

²²³ King, Where Do We Go From Here, x.

in strategies of redress.²²⁴ But while the poverty saddened him, it was the racism that astonished him. During a peaceful march to protest sub-standard housing, a mob white of Chicagoans, enraged by the potential of African-American families moving into their neighborhoods, exploded in violent attack against the marchers.

As King's car approached the march's designated start area, white men with signs that said, "The Only Way to End Niggers is Exterminate" began ominously to chant, "We want King." As King emerged from the crowd, they threw cherry bombs, bricks, and rocks. One rock—the size of a fist—struck King just behind the right ear, knocking him to the ground. While officers sought to pull him out of harm's way, the entire city block erupted in chaos as the mob began to beat officers and marchers alike and set fire to vehicles. Emerging from the church where he had been pulled to safety, King told the gathered reporters, "I have never in my life seen such hate. Not in Mississippi or Alabama. This is a terrible thing."²²⁵

For King, one of the most terrible aspects of this racial hate was the inability—or unwillingness—of Northern white liberals to address it. It is true, of course, that King had addressed this concern several years earlier in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, saying that he had been "gravely disappointed by the white moderate." But disappointed as he was, he was also not surprised, he had seen enough Southern white moderation to know what to expect. But what he faced in Chicago was different—these were Northern moderates who proudly scorned the white supremacy of the South. It was in this moment that King fully understood that American racism was not merely a regional but a national plague. In the

²²⁴ Branch, Canaan, 500-536.

²²⁵ Branch, Canaan, 510-511.

first chapter of *Where Do We Go From Here*, this realization expressed itself in a candid and plaintive litany of lament:

Why is equality so assiduously avoided? Why does white America delude itself, and how does it rationalize the evil that it retains? The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and steady growth toward a middle class utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity ... America, with segregationist obstruction and majority indifference, [has] silently nibbled away at a promise of true equality.²²⁶

But King's Chicago campaign exposed another form of domestic imperfection as well: economic imperfection. He had gestured to this in the "Dream Speech" several years earlier, declaring that "the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity"²²⁷ but—as with race—it was not until his time in Chicago that he understood the depth of African-American poverty. In considering the "Negro's status in 1967,"²²⁸ King lamented the fact that "half of all Negroes live in substandard housing and … have half the income of whites."²²⁹ And not only this, but "twice as many [are] unemployed" and of those that are employed, "75 percent hold menial jobs."²³⁰ Anticipating the white supremacist trope that these economic realities are a result of African-American insufficiency, King declared, "Depressed living standards for Negroes are not simply the consequence of neglect. Nor can they be explained by the myth of the

²²⁶ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 4-5, 11.

²²⁷ King, Testament, 217.

²²⁸ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 6.

²²⁹ Ibid., 7.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Negro's innate incapacities.... They are a structural part of the economic system in the United States."²³¹

King's language of structure here is important, for it suggests that he is not simply talking about individual economic habits of discrimination or greed. To the contrary, King is questioning the institutional economic structures of American national life. In his 1967 speech, "Where Do We Go From Here," he puts this question very plainly: "One day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America? And when you begin to ask that question you are raising questions about the economic system. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy."²³² For King, poverty on the scale of that found in America was not a sign of individual but of structural failure.

But in King's mind, the economic system was not the only broken structure in the United States. Related to it, as both cause and effect, was America's educational structure. Although King freely acknowledged educational improvements such as "job-training programs,"²³³ an increase in "periodicals and books written for Negroes,"²³⁴ and the opportunity for African Americans to take "demanding courses that lead to college and beyond,"²³⁵ he also proclaimed his "alarm" that, even ten years after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, "in elementary schools Negroes lag one to three years behind whites … their schools receive substantially less money … one-twentieth as many Negroes as whites attend college, and half of these are in ill-equipped Southern

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² King, Testament, 250.

²³³ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 9.

²³⁴ Ibid., 10.

²³⁵ Ibid., 11.

institutions."²³⁶ Indeed for King, the American educational system—in spite of its pretentions to enlightenment—was itself a "system of exclusion" that had "not yet begun to approach the needs of the Negro and the poor."²³⁷

International Imperfection

But this was not all. For King, America's imperfections had not simply a domestic but an international horizon. Given its legacy of slavery this is hardly a novel claim; America's imperfections had always been international in scope. But as we saw above, in the twentieth century, American internationalism took a decidedly perfectionist turn. No longer seeking (at least explicitly) to take life from other nations, America—in deeply moralistic terms—presumed to bestow life upon them. For King, the hypocrisy of this presumption was most clearly evident in the war in Vietnam where America, sanctimoniously declaring itself the liberator of the oppressed, systematically destroyed those whom it presumed to liberate.

King's opposition to Vietnam was a fraught endeavor. For many white Americans—especially those drawn to the idea of America as a defender of democracy— King's opposition confirmed long-standing white fears about his political allegiances. Because of this, many of his fellow Civil Rights colleagues warned him to avoid the topic. The success of the civil rights movement depended upon the support of white liberals not least President Johnson. To oppose the war was, they believed, to guarantee that support's withdrawal.

²³⁶ Ibid., 7. See also, King, Testament, 245.

²³⁷ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 204.

But King would not relent. On April 4, 1967—one year to the day before his murder—he stood in the pulpit of New York City's Riverside Church and, in a sermon called, "A Time to Break Silence," exposed the hypocrisy of American internationalist perfectionism to the world.

[They] must see Americans as strange liberators. [They] proclaimed their own independence in 1945 [and] though they quoted the American *Declaration of Independence* in their own document of freedom ... our government felt that the Vietnamese people were not ready for independence, and ... fell victim to the deadly Western arrogance that has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long. For nine years following 1945 we denied the people of Vietnam the right of independence.... All the while the people read our leaflets and received the regular promises of peace and democracy.²³⁸

But not only did America deny the Vietnamese people the right to order their

lives, we also-in the name of democracy-destroyed those lives:

They move sadly and apathetically as we herd them off the land of their fathers into concentration camps where minimal social needs are rarely met. They know they must move on or be destroyed by our bombs. So they go, primarily women and children and the aged. They watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops. They must weep as the bulldozers roar through their areas preparing to destroy the precious trees. So far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children. They wander into the towns and see thousands of the children, homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals. They see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. They see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers.²³⁹

In these words, King exposes the pride of American moralist internationalism: Not only was America rife with its own domestic imperfections, it had also exported those very imperfections to ends of the earth.

²³⁸ King, Testament, 235.

²³⁹ King, Testament, 236.

More could be said on each of these, of course—and King did say a great deal more during the last months of his life. But the general contours of King's exposure of America's imperfections are clear enough: In spite of its pretentions to destinarian glory and international beneficence, American was afflicted with a "malady of the spirit," plagued not only by the humiliating gap between its domestic aspirations and its achievements, but also by a besetting blindness to this fact. And for King, that malady that plague—was pride.

Because of this, America—and the world—needed to recognize that it was not in fact a land of promise, but a land of bondage whose entire society needed to be remade. Considered from this vantage, the resounding conclusion of King's "Dream Speech"— "Free at Last, free at last, thank God Almighty I'm free at last"—is perhaps best understood not simply as evoking a future emancipation, but as exposing a lingering bondage.

The power of this exposure could suggest a sort of contempt in King—a desire to expose America's imperfections for the sake of exposure itself. But to do so would be to miss King's point. King labored to expose the imperfections of America not so that America would be humiliated, but so that America would be healed—to renounce pride is to restore life. "If America would come to herself," he says, "she would give the democratic creed a new authentic ring, enkindle the imagination of mankind, and fire the souls of men." For King, the path to American possibility begins with the renunciation of perfectionist pride.

"We Will Reach the Promised Land:" Turning from Protectionist Fear

But if America were Egypt, refusing to release its people from slavery, it was also Israel, refusing to believe in the Promised Land. Because of this, having called America to turn from the self-congratulatory pride at the heart of its perfectionism, King also called the nation to turn from the heart of its protectionist tradition as well: fear.

In considering this aspect of King's vision it will be helpful to remember two things. First, King was no stranger to the reality of fear. Indeed he knew—perhaps more than most—the frightful possibilities of life in this world. In addition to the "ordinary" fears that came with being an American in the Cold War and a black man in America, King knew the extraordinary fears that attended being bombed in his home, stabbed in his chest, jailed with his colleagues, maligned by his government, and pursued by enemies known and unknown. He knew fear. Secondly, King was not opposed to fear as such. Indeed, in a chapter titled "Antidotes for Fear" in his 1963 book, Strength to Love, King explicitly says that he does not "mean to suggest that we should seek to eliminate fear altogether from human life" because fear is "normal, necessary, and creative."²⁴⁰ King, in other words, was no naïve optimist: He knew both the reality and the necessity of fear. Because of this, King's call to renounce fear is best understood as the call to turn not from fear as such, but from a particular kind of fear—self-interested fear—a fear that seeks simply to protect itself from harm. And in doing so, he called America to renounce the tradition of fearful, self-interested protectionism that lay at its heart.

²⁴⁰ King, Testament, 511.

King's reason for this, ironically, is that self-protective fear, rather than preventing harm, actually ensures it by curving human beings inward on themselves, cutting them off from one another, and closing the door to a future of brotherhood. Self-interested fear, in other words, is the enemy of possibility. This, in King's judgment, is precisely what America—through its own self-protective fear—was doing both to itself and to the world. Because of this, King called Americans to renounce their fear by reminding them of the profound harms—both to America and to its neighbors—to which fear leads.

Self-Harm

When King looked at America, he saw a nation disabled by its own self-protective anxiety. "Everywhere," he said, "men and women are confronted by fears."²⁴¹ And while Americans worried over a host of things—physical health, economic failure, and social upheaval, King saw that each of these was, in essence, the self-interested fear of loss. For King this fear, so common to America, was also deeply corrosive to America because it ensured the presence of two destructive tendencies in American life: self-protective passivity and self-protective violence.

Since the very beginning of the civil rights movement King had struggled against the plague of self-protective passivity. He had seen it in Southern moderate whites who, though ostensibly concerned about African-American equality, had failed to act in order to make that equality a reality. Thus, in his 1963 *Letter from Birmingbam Jail*, he wrote that he had "almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is ... the white moderate ... who constantly says: "I agree

²⁴¹ Ibid., 510.

with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action."²⁴² In the years that followed—especially in the wake of the Chicago campaign of 1966— King's condemnation of white passivity would only increase. Surveying American culture, he saw many white moderates who were "uneasy with injustice but unwilling to pay the price to eradicate it."²⁴³ Importantly, however, King located this passivity specifically in white self-protective fear of loss, saying, "Our own problem of racial injustice … is buttressed by such irrational fears as loss of preferred economic privilege, altered social status, intermarriage, and … new situations. Through sleepless nights and haggard days, white people attempt to combat this corroding fears."²⁴⁴

But strong as self-protective passivity was in the white community, it was perhaps a greater force in the black community of mid-century America. There were reasons for this, of course. The precondition of white supremacy is the diminishment of black agency; for centuries, black passivity was a violently reinforced feature of American life. But while King understood this passivity, he also understood that it was rooted in selfprotection, and as such, inevitably entwined with self-harm. This is because this sort of fear prevented African Americans from aspiring to their own true possibility: full participation in American democratic life. Because of this, King spent the last years of his life calling African Americans to renounce their self-protective fears, to renounce passivity, and to—as he said time and again—"keep climbing."

This is the challenge facing every Negro ... the determination to "keep climbing." There is always the understandable temptation to ... seek a passive way out by

²⁴² King, Testament, 295.

²⁴³ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 12.

²⁴⁴ King, Testament, 513.

yielding to the feeling of inferiority; or by allowing the floodgates of defeat to open with an avalanche of despair ... but we must develop the courage to confront [this] circumstance with determination.²⁴⁵

Passivity, however, was not the only form of harm to which America's selfprotective fear led the nation. It also led to the harm of violence. The critique of violence was, of course, a long-standing theme in King's ministry. But in his later years, he began more fully to see this violence—white and black alike—both as an expression of America's long-standing tradition of self-protection and as an enemy to American possibility.

With respect to whites, King had long known that white supremacist violence was rooted in fear—in the desire to protect America's white supremacist inheritance. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter Three, this fear served as the principle justification of Klan violence in the American South. Believing the federal government to be under the "control of atheists who are Bolsheviks by nature," Klan members were "militantly determined … to save their lives and the Life of this Nation."²⁴⁶ For all of its swaggering malice, white supremacist violence was rooted in self-protective fear.

But in the wake of the violence of Selma in 1965, the Meredith March of 1966, and the Chicago campaign later that year, a new form of American violence emerged: the violence of Black Power. It is an indication Black Power's rising significance that King devoted an entire chapter of *Where Do We Go From Here* to considering its meaning. In this chapter King candidly confessed empathy for Black Power's impulse toward violence. Describing the cry of "Black Power" as a "cry of disappointment," King labored to help a

²⁴⁵ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 130.

²⁴⁶ Cited in Marsh, God's Long Summer, 50 (emphasis original).
fearful white America understand that black violence was born of "the wounds of disappointment ... of daily hurt and persistent pain."²⁴⁷ And not only this, King viewed Black Power fundamentally as an attempt to recover a sense of black agency, the ability to have power over the shape of one's own life.²⁴⁸ In this sense, King viewed Black Power as the inevitable legacy of the long centuries in which African Americans had been disempowered by the fearful self-protection of White America.

And yet even so, King understood that in the end, Black Power was its own form of self-protection, a capitulation to nihilistic fear "that the Negro can't win ... that American society is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within."²⁴⁹ Black Power was, in other words, an expression of despair, and of the belief that the most African Americans could finally hope for was violent contest. Because of this, King believed that Black Power—for all of is stridency—was a form of black re-enslavement that confined African Americans to a prison of "bitterness ... cynicism ... and self-defeating black paranoia."²⁵⁰ It was, in other words, a form of fear that contained within itself "the seeds of its own doom."²⁵¹

Global Harm

When Martin Luther King looked at the history of Cold War America, he saw a history of fear. It was fear of Communist ideology that led America to monitor and persecute its own citizens. It was fear of an unending World War that led America to

²⁴⁷ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 33.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 37.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 45.

²⁵⁰ King, Where Do We Go From Here, 47.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 47.

develop atomic weaponry. It was fear of Society aggression that led America into the crisis of Cuba. This is not to suggest that there weren't frightening circumstances; there certainly were. It is to suggest, however, that for the first half of the twentieth century, many of America's most globally significant decisions were driven by fear.

It was the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam that opened King's eyes fully to the harms that this fear entailed. This is because for King—in a way that was different from the circumstances of both World War II and Cuba—Vietnam was wholly motivated by what he called America's "morbid fear of communism."²⁵² In King's view, and in spite of American pretentions to the contrary, American presence in Vietnam was motivated neither by a love of democracy, nor by a love of the Vietnamese, but by selfprotective fear.

For King, the harms of this fear were both evident and terrible. Not only had American fear destroyed Vietnam's "two most cherished institutions: the family and the village," it had also "destroyed their land and their crops ... corrupted their women and children ... killed their men," and "cooperated in the crushing of the nation's only non-Communist revolutionary political force—the unified Buddhist Church."²⁵³ For King, it was this last offense that proved the absolute folly of American self-protection: by virtue of the injustice of our labors to defeat communism in Asia, we had actually enabled its rise. Thus, in exasperation, King cried out,

Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now.... War is not the answer. Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons. Let us not join those who shout war.... We must not engage in a

²⁵² King, Testament, 242.

²⁵³ King, Testament, 236.

negative anticommunism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy, realizing that our greatest defense against communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice, which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops.²⁵⁴

As with King's renunciation of pride, his renunciation of fear could seem to be an expression of cynicism about American possibility. But to the contrary, it was an expression of hope, of a desire to help America find a "new way beyond the darkness"²⁵⁵ and to believe again that it could "get to the promised land."²⁵⁶ For King, this promised land of possibility could only be reached if America renounced its self-protective fear and rededicated itself "to the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world"²⁵⁷

"Always There is a Wilderness Before Us:" Taking Up The Pilgrimage of Love

These two works of renunciation—of pride and of fear—are foundational to King's agapic re-imagining of American possibility. Indeed they were its deconstructive edge. On one hand, King deconstructed perfectionism by showing that while America, in its pride, viewed itself as the land of promise, it was in truth the land of Egypt. On the other hand, he deconstructed protectionism by showing that while America, in its fear, passively resigned itself to the violence of Egypt, the promise of a new world yet remained. This powerful reversal was King's way of telling America that its true possibility lay neither in the land of slavery nor in the land of promise, but in the wilderness between.

²⁵⁴ King, Testament, 238, 241.

²⁵⁵ King, Testament, 231.

²⁵⁶ King, Testament, 286.

²⁵⁷ King, Testament, 243.

For those unfamiliar with the structure of King's biblical imagination, his choice of the wilderness as the locus of American possibility may seem strange. The wilderness, after all, is where possibilities go to die. But for King, the opposite was true: remembering the biblical book of Exodus, he knew the wilderness was a place where the God of love and a people of love journeyed together on a pilgrimage of love. He knew, in other words, that the wilderness is where nations go to be born. Because of this, King's agapic re-imagining of democratic possibility consisted not only in a call for America to turn away from its pride and its fear, but also in a call to turn toward the wilderness and to find its possibility in love.

The God of Love

One of the great consolations of the biblical account of Israel's exodus is that even as the wilderness promised emptiness, it promised fullness too: the fullness of the love of God. Indeed the story of the wilderness was, perhaps above all things, the story of the God of love shaping the people of Israel into the fullness of their new life. Because of this it is not surprising that the love of God played a central role in King's struggle to reimagine democracy from the moment that struggle began. Indeed, as we have seen, God's love was the foundation of King's re-imagining of both democratic identity and democratic action. So it was now: in turning to the question of democratic possibility, King turned again to the love of God. For King, this is where American possibility began.

First, King located American possibility in God's loving judgment. Though the language of God's loving judgment is readily discernible throughout King's ministry,²⁵⁸ in the last few years of his life this theme took on greater significance. Given his experiences in Selma, Watts, and Chicago, this seems only natural. As he looked out at the racial, economic, and martial violence of America he felt—perhaps more than ever—that he still languished in Egypt. Because of this, following the logic of the exodus, King simultaneously cried out for God to pass loving judgment on American sin and consoled himself that God would, in fact, do so. In his sermon Birth of a Nation-in which he explicitly renders American possibility in terms of the Exodus—King said, "It seems this morning that I can hear God speaking...saying, 'Be still and know that I am God. And if you don't stop, if you don't straighten up, if you don't stop exploiting people, I'm going to rise up and break the backbone of your power. And your power will be no more!"²⁵⁹ It is important to remember, however, that the purpose of this "rising up" in judgment was never to destroy American possibility. God's judgment is an expression not of hatred, but of love; of a desire to emancipate American possibility from its bondage to sin.²⁶⁰ For King then, America's possibility begins with God's loving judgment against America's own evil.

²⁵⁸ On this, see especially, his sermons "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore" (King, *Papers*, 6:504–514) and "Our God is Able" (King, *Papers*, 6:243–246.

²⁵⁹ King, "The Birth of a New Nation," April 7, 1957. Papers 4.155–167.

²⁶⁰ For a more explicit link between Exodus and judgment, see King, *Papers*, 3:261, "Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation, and his great struggle has been to free himself from the crippling restrictions and paralyzing effects of this vicious system. For years it looked like he would never get out of this Egypt. The closed Red Sea always stood before him with discouraging dimensions. There were always those Pharaohs with hardened hearts, who, despite the cries of many a Moses, refused to let these people go. But...there is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil. This is our hope."

But it does not end there. Because God's love expresses itself not only in judgment, but also in *redemption*; King sought to anchor American possibility in God's redeeming love. It must be admitted that King's understanding of the relationship between God's loving redemption and American democratic possibility is not always entirely clear. But like so many aspects of his thought, King's view is best understood as the resistance of what he perceived to be two extremes.

On one hand, King resisted understanding God's redeeming love in merely spiritual terms. For him, this was the error of both fundamentalism and the Southern doctrine of the "spirituality of the church:" each diminished the deeply social nature of God's redeeming love by denying its relevance to the cultural and institutional realities of this world. On the other hand, King resisted understanding God's redemptive work in fundamentally nationalist terms. As we have seen, American history is replete with the temptation to see God's redemptive purposes and America's national destiny as inexorably conjoined. But for King, this nationalist account naively ignores the deeply sinful character of American culture and the degree to which, if America was in fact to experience God's redemption, it would do so in spite of itself.

For King, God's redeeming love is best understood as neither merely spiritual nor as merely national, but as what might be called *creational*. By this word I don't simply mean what we now narrowly refer to as "the natural world." To the contrary, I mean the whole of God's creation—human persons, cultural institutions, national and international communities. For King, each of these was made by God, each was broken by sin, and each could be redeemed by God's redeeming love.²⁶¹

Understanding this creational vision of redemption is crucial for rightly understanding his account of American possibility. King believed that America—its people, its cities, its social systems, and its entire national life—were broken by sin. And yet he also believed that each of these could be redeemed—remade—by God's love. This is why he so frequently spoke about American possibility in the deeply Christian language of "the kingdom of God," "brotherhood," and the "Promised Land." He did so not because he believed that God—in some exceptional sense—loves America, but because he believes that God loves the world and intends to make all things new. Because of this King sought to anchor America's democratic possibility not simply in God's loving judgment, but also in God's loving redemption.

But to speak only of God's judgment of evil and redemption of creation is, in a sense, to keep God's love at the extremes of human existence—in either the land of Egypt or the land of promise. Because of this King also anchored American possibility in God's loving presence in the journey between them. In this King reflected the themes of the Exodus as well, which insists on the reality of God's presence—in smoke and in fire—

²⁶¹ This is, roughly speaking, what King meant by the kingdom of God: the realization of God's will in all of life. "The phrase meant literally the reign of God, the condition of things in which God's will is everywhere supreme." Here we are left in no doubt as to the true meaning of the concept. Whether it come soon or late, by sudden crisis of through slow development, the kingdom of God will be a society in which all men and women will be controlled by the eternal love of God. When we see social relationships controlled everywhere by the principles which Jesus illustrated in his life—trust, love, mercy, and altruism—then we shall know that the kingdom of God is here. To say what this society will be like in exact detail is quite hard for us to picture, for it runs so counter to the practices of our present social live. But we can rest assure that it will be a society governed by the law of love. King, *Papers*, 1:272.

along the way.²⁶² As he put it, "God is not like a spectator that sits in some far-off cosmic grandstand frequently looking in on the game of human life. Rather God is an active part of the game itself, sustaining and protecting it, and without God's continual sustaining power this game of life could not be played....God is forever on the scene sustaining and protecting us."²⁶³ For King, American possibility rests not simply God's promise to rid the world of evil and realize the world's redemption, but in his loving promise to remain in and with the world through the long wilderness journey from one to the other.

King's re-anchoring of American possibility in the God of love is a direct confrontation of both perfectionist and protectionist accounts of possibility. To the perfectionist who presumes that America's bright future would simply grow, as a matter of inevitability, out of the soil of American destiny, King says "No." For King, America may yet find a form of perfection, but if so it will come not from America's own life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, but wholly from the love of God. And to the protectionist who presumes that America's future can be secured through the prevention of loss and the containment of harm, King again says, "No." For King, if America is finally to be protected from its own destruction, this protection will come—not from itself—but from the Lord who is mighty to save.

And yet even as King confronts, he consoles. To the perfectionist who longs to see a world made just, in which grace and peace exist not merely as aspirations but as attainments, King says, "Yes." And to the protectionist who longs to see a world made safe; in which harms are finally healed, King says, "Yes." But for King each of these

²⁶² It was indeed the experience of God's presence that transformed both King—and the civil rights movement—in Montgomery in 1956.

²⁶³ King, Papers, 6:572.

longings is finally fulfilled not by the power of America, but by the love of God—who judges evil, redeems creation, and inhabits the world in love.

A People of Love

And yet even as the Exodus is a story about God, it is also a story about a people. This, indeed, is part of the power of its account—the pilgrimage from slavery to Canaan was a pilgrimage that God and His people took together. For King, this fact provided a critical insight into the nature of American possibility: America's future lay not simply in the God of love, but in a people who labored to take up that love and make it their own. As he said, "It is not either God or man that will bring about the world's salvation. It is both man and God, made one by a marvelous unity of purpose, by an overflowing love…on the part of God, by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man these two together can transform the old into the new."²⁶⁴ American possibility, in other words, could only be realized as God's love took shape in a people.

For King, the first shape this love takes is that of *protesting evil*. Because God, in love, promises to judge evil, so the people who follow God will, in that same love, take up the work of protesting that same evil. From the very beginning of his ministry, King called his people to this work: in Montgomery in 1956, in Birmingham in 1963, in Stockholm in 1964, and in Selma in 1965. But in his last years, as his awareness of evil grew more pronounced, so did his call for a love that would protest against it. It was this call that, in 1965, led him to Watts, and to the protests against police brutality. It was this call that, in 1966, led him to Chicago, where he sought to dramatize the evil of

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²⁶⁴ King, Papers, 6:552.

poverty. And it was this call that led him, in 1967, to the Riverside Church to protest the evil of protectionist warfare. Having called his country "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world" and having rehearsed the harms America had brought to the people of Vietnam, he stood before the congregation—before the nation—and took up this work of protest:

Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation: The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.²⁶⁵

For King, words of protest such as these were not merely a form of social courage (though they were that), nor a passing spasm of activist fervor. They were instantiations of the love of God who judges evil, in the love of a people who—in God's name—protest against it.

Continuing the path of imitation, this love also takes the form of *pursuing redemption*. Because King believed that God's love promised the redemption of the entire created order, he also believed that the people who follow God will, of necessity, participate in the realization of that redemption in their world. This pursuit of redemption was also a long-standing theme in King's ministry: In Montgomery he pursued God's redemption on city buses. In Birmingham he sought it from a prison cell. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial he proclaimed it to an entire nation. And in the last years of his life, he pursued it in the political, economic, educational, and

²⁶⁵ King, Testament, 238.

international horizons of American life. He was, as he put it, "maladjusted" to the order of this world, and as a result gave himself both to working toward—and to calling others to work toward—a world made new. Again, it is important to understand that for King, this pursuit of redemption was not simply a religious expression of American perfectionist vanity. It was an attempt to embody the very redeeming love of God for the world. As he said,

The world is in dire need of a society of the creatively maladjusted. It may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of such a creative minority. We need men today as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."²⁶⁶

Finally, this love took the form of *persevering in suffering*. For King, the God of love desires to be present with His people in the midst of the wilderness, even in the wilderness of crucifixion and death. Because of this, King believed that a people who imitate God's love will also give themselves to the work of being present in the wilderness of the world—even in the midst of suffering. As with both evil and redemption, it is true that suffering had long been a prominent theme in King's ministry. Indeed in 1956, just a few days after his home was bombed in Montgomery, he preached a sermon entitled, "It's Hard to Be a Christian" in which he both lamented the sufferings faith and called his people to continue to be present within them. But it is also true that in the latter years of King's life, he not only focused more intently on the sufferings of love, but also began to believe that they lay at the heart of American possibility. Time and again, he told his

²⁶⁶ King, Papers, 6:475.

people not only that they were to persevere in suffering, but also that their suffering would have redemptive effect on the nation:

It is becoming clear to me that the Negro is in for a season of suffering. As victories for civil rights mount in the federal courts angry passions and deep prejudices are further aroused. The mountain of state and local segregation laws still stands. Negro leaders continue to be arrested and harassed under city ordinances, and their homes continue to be bombed. I pray that, recognizing the necessity of suffering; the Negro will make of it a virtue. To suffer in a righteous cause is to row in our humanity's full stature. If only to save him from bitterness, the Negro needs the vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transfigure him and American society.²⁶⁷

It is important to understand that in words like these King sought neither to fetishize suffering, thereby condemning African Americans to a new form of messianic enslavement, nor to trivialize it by neatly packaging it in a naïve optimism. To the contrary, he was seeking to reinterpret suffering as a participation in God's own loving and redemptive presence in the midst of the world.

King's vision of a people of love constitutes a profound reimagining of the role of the self in American possibility. This is because it suggests that American possibility can finally be realized neither through a people devoted to perfecting themselves, nor through a people obsessed with protecting themselves. For King, American possibility can only be realized through a people who, in love, give themselves away for the sake of others.

The Possibilities of Love

The final and perhaps most profound dimension of King's agapic account of possibility is the degree to which it resists the temptation to false closure offered by both

²⁶⁷ King, Papers, 5:289.

the perfectionist and protectionist accounts. In the perfectionist account, American possibility is interpreted simply through the lens of inevitable greatness, and the work of American possibility is simply to participate in this inevitability. In the protectionist account, American possibility is interpreted through the lens of an intractable concern, and the work of American possibility is to police the borders of this concern in anxious vigils of containment. Each of these accounts, in other words, though in different ways, offers the illusory consolation of clarity.

King's account of agapic possibility, by contrast, sees American possibility as just that: a possibility. For in it, America is neither destined to greatness nor doomed to shame. Rather, its possibility unfolds in the wilderness encounter between the unwavering love of God and a people's choice to embrace that love or to set it aside. In his most harrowing account of this choice, King put it this way:

We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history....And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."²⁶⁸

It is a vision of possibility at once horrifying and hopeful. Horrifying because it

frankly suggests that the American people may yet turn away from love and plunge both itself and the world into the darkness. But hopeful, because even in America's turnings,

²⁶⁸ King, Testament, 243.

God's love endures, calling America—and the world—to turn back and once again take up the pilgrimage of love in which its possibility most fully is found.

But in the end, King's is a vision in which American possibility remains deliberately indeterminate, finally reducible neither to horror nor hope, to slavery or freedom, to God or ourselves; a vision in which each of these mingle together in that real if not fully specifiable fashion reminiscent of King's favorite image—the dawn.

D. "I Don't Know What Will Happen Now:" Love and Democratic Future

In the autumn of 1967, just a few months after calling America to choose between brotherhood and annihilation, King gathered with the leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and told them that for his part, the choice was made: "I have decided to stick with love."²⁶⁹ Several months later after this, in April of 1968, that choice and the pilgrimage that followed led King to Memphis, Tennessee in support the poor sanitation workers of that city in their strike for higher wages.

Though a relatively small and low-profile affair when compared to the Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma campaigns of previous years, the Memphis strike nonetheless dramatized King's long labor to re-imagine American democracy in uniquely crystalline form. It was here that the sanitation workers first wore the famous "I <u>AM</u> A MAN" signs, capturing the essence of the struggle for democratic identity. It was here that King struggled—unsuccessfully—to keep a march from turning violent, highlighting

²⁶⁹ King, Testament, 250.

the ongoing struggle over the nature of democratic action. And it was here that King, in his final speech, gave an almost pristine picture of his vision of democratic possibility.

In the wake of the violent outburst at the march several days before, King and his colleagues worked mightily to bring both the civil rights veterans and the young black power activists back together to try the march again—this time non-violently. They agreed and set the march for April 4th, 1968. The night before, in preparation for the march, event organizers held a rally. But weather was bad and crowds were thin, and King—exhausted from travelling—asked Ralph Abernathy if he would speak in his stead so that King could rest. It was not to be. Not long after arriving, Abernathy called King and pleaded with him to come to the hall. The crowd was tired too—and they needed to hear from King. Though deeply weary, King agreed and stepped out into the storms of the night.

He stepped to the microphone at around 9:30pm, and began what was to be his final speech. Its theme: democratic possibility. Weaving together passages from several earlier speeches, King summarized the essence of his agapic vision. Slowly and deliberately he reminded his audience of their sojourn in Egypt. "We've got...to force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out."²⁷⁰ Continuing on this theme, he urged his people to stay unified during this time, reminding them that "whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt...he kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But when the

²⁷⁰ King, Testament, 281.

slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity."²⁷¹

And yet all along, even as he reminded them of bondage, he evoked the hope of liberation. Reminding his people that "something is happening in Memphis," he told them that he was "just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding...happy that he's allowed me to be in Memphis."²⁷² Then, leveraging this sense of redemptive unfolding, he called his people to "rise up with a greater readiness...stand with a greater determination...to make America what it ought to be."²⁷³ In these words King called them to remember that even though they lived in the land of slavery, they were nonetheless headed toward the Promised Land.

And then with a strange and sudden urgency, King's voice began to soar, leading his people away from both the fearful slavery of Egypt and the distant freedom of the promised land, leading them high into the wilderness mountains in between.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"²⁷⁴

With those words the King stepped backwards, and sank exhausted into the arms of a chair as the crowd cheered. They were the last public words Martin Luther King Jr.

²⁷¹ King, Testament, 281.

²⁷² King, Testament, 280.

²⁷³ King, Testament, 284-285.

²⁷⁴ King, Testament, 286.

would ever speak, and he had spoken truly: He would not get there with us. Instead, having reminded us of both the perils of Egypt and the promises of God, he would leave us in the wilderness and to the work of seeking our own democratic possibility through the improvisations of love.

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