

Why King Was Not an Adventist

Martin Luther King's becoming an Adventist "would have hampered his becoming one of our nation's greatest leaders."

by Roland J. Hill

COULD MARTIN LUTHER KING HAVE BEEN both a civil-rights activist and a Seventh-day Adventist? No. Here is why.

The milieu of the black community, the black theology of the Baptist Church, and the liberal Protestantism of his seminary training all played a role in shaping this national leader. Of these three influences, black theology had the greatest impact on King's life. The very fibers of King's soul pulsed with the religion of his people. This is what King himself thought of his theological roots:

I am first and foremost a [black] minister. I love the church, and I feel that civil rights is a part of it. For me, at least, the basis of my struggle for integration—and I mean full integration of Negroes into every phase of American life—is something that began with a religious motivation . . . And I know that my religion has come to mean more to me

than ever before. I have come to believe more and more in a personal God—not a process, but a person, a creative power with infinite love who answers prayers.¹

Notice that his religious experience began with a view of God. Not the God of the white man, whose God is mainly a God of the head and not the heart, whose God is colored by his privileged position, but the God of an oppressed people, who needed not only to know God but also to experience God. A God who could not only save their souls but also liberate their bodies from the shackles of white oppression. No black man (other than blacks rooted in the white religious experience) could escape this view of God.

The Black View of God

King was greatly influenced by his black view of God as the God of liberation. It was not uncommon for blacks to speak of God as promising to deliver them as he did Israel

Roland J. Hill, assistant professor of religion, Southwestern Adventist College, received his B.A. from Oakwood College, an M.Div. from Andrews University, and a D.Min. from the Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi. Hill's first book has just appeared—Theo Economics: The Call to Responsibility (Helping Hands Press: Keene, Texas, 1994).

from Egypt. James Harris in his book, *Pastoral Theology—A Black Perspective*, writes “black theology believes that liberation is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and any authentic Christian theology affirms that God is on the side of the oppressed.”² Even though black theology as we know it today is relatively new, most black churchmen and leaders agree that it does reflect the roots of black religious thought. James Cone believes King’s theology emerged from black faith.

King’s faith was derived primarily from his people’s suffering and struggling in a society where whites talked of freedom and justice, while blacks experienced slavery and segregation. A separate faith emerged among black Christians in the United States because they believed that the God of the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus did not condone the mistreatment they received from whites. . . . It was a black faith that emphasized God’s will to make right what white people made wrong, so that the rule of love would be established among all races of people. This was the hope that encouraged black Christians to bear witness, through public protest, to God’s creation of human beings, just like white people, and not as slaves or as second-class citizens.³

This black view of God shaped Martin Luther King and the other black ministers’ views about civil and political action against injustice. Since God was on the side of the oppressed and they were on God’s side, they had no other choice. If they were to be on the side of God, they must protest against the oppressor. King’s theology was in sharp contrast to that of Seventh-day Adventism and the theology of any other predominantly white religious organization.

For the white Protestant American, God is indeed a transcendent, omnipotent God. During the civil-rights movement, whites magnified God’s transcendence at the expense of His immanence. It seemed that white people viewed God as concerned about human beings’ spiritual welfare, but could not see him as concerned about their everyday living. This

is clearly seen by the actions of many of the church’s pioneers. Many early Adventists, in response to their understanding of God, lifted prophetic voices against social ills like slavery and alcohol. Our theology hasn’t changed, but our practice has.

I can remember my own father, now a retired Adventist pastor, leading the first “sit-in” protests in Savannah, Georgia. His actions were in defiance of official communiques from the General Conference warning against involvement in the civil-rights movement. Despite the church’s official stand, many black preachers participated in the civil-rights movement, but seldom in a leadership role, for fear of reprisal from the leadership of the church. Their fears were not without basis, for Adventist history documents the treatment of men who sought to be leaders of social change in the black community. These men were banished from the church and left without any supporting organization. It appears that black theology forms a natural resistance to white theology and sets black preachers and leaders, of which Martin Luther King was a part, on a collision course with white Protestant Americans.

The Blackness of the Black Church

The black church played perhaps the most crucial role in liberating Martin Luther King to be the leader of the civil-rights movement. Unlike the development of new white churches, the black church was not born out of some new theological proposition, but solely on sociological grounds. The black church was a clear response to white oppression. Gayraud S. Wilmore, reflecting on the roots of the black church, writes about the Free African Society—the forerunner of the African Methodist Church:

Wherever the Societies were organized, they began as a protest against white prejudice and neglect and with the objective of providing not only for religious needs, but for social service, mutual aid and solidarity among people of African descent.⁴

Because the black church is centered in protest, this has given rise to protest leaders. In fact, simply by leading black churches, preachers get programmed to protest. Any preacher in the black tradition is expected to be involved in social change. In black theology, the church and community are tied together in single garment of destiny. In fact, in a 1968 Gallup Poll, 75.6 percent of the black community expected the church to be involved in the civil-rights movement. It is no small wonder, then, that Martin Luther King surfaced as both a Baptist preacher and a civil-rights leader.

Black ecclesiology sets the preacher as the center of church life. He is the leader, the general, and in many situations, the ultimate authority among the people. He is the Moses come to liberate his people. W. E. B. Du Bois expresses the position of the black preacher in these terms: "The preacher is the most unique

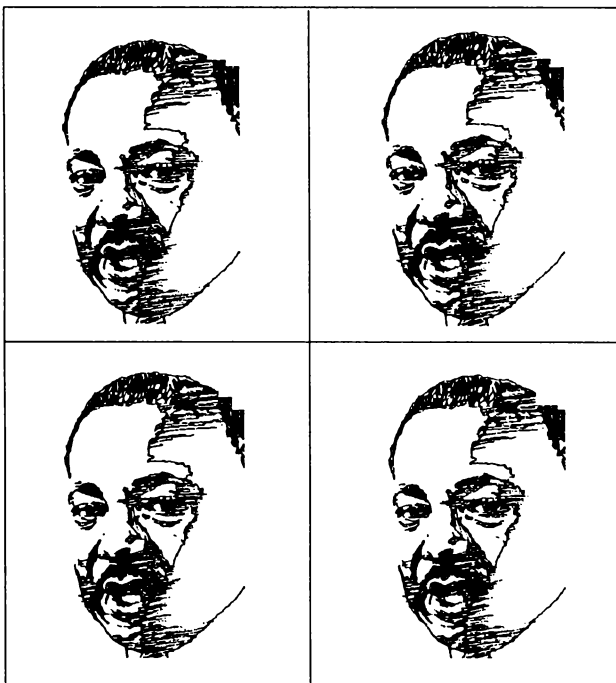
personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a boss, an intriguer, an idealist—all these he is, and ever too, the center of a group of men."⁵ Peter J. Paris correctly states:

The experience of self-governance provided blacks with the opportunity to practice the basic rights of citizenship long before the basic rights became constitutionally guaranteed and politically enacted for them. Ironically, it became the destiny of the black preachers to emerge as the freest of all persons, black and white alike, because they embodied the condition of independence and freedom more than any other. In their pulpits they could condemn virtually any social evil in either the white or the black community without fearing the possibility of censorship.⁶

The black preacher of bygone days entered the ministry, built up a sizable church and personal following, and then combined parish work with political work. Even today, many black politicians are a senior or associate pastor of a church. In a 1965 Gallup survey, 88.3 percent of the blacks polled favored the involvement of the preacher in political matters. It was therefore easier for Martin Luther King than for a white preacher to become involved in the civil-rights movement.

Adventist views of the church place the movement ahead of the preacher. This view becomes detrimental to the production of great leaders. Adventist ecclesiology has no room for men who overshadow the organization. Martin Luther King towered over his local congregation, which he eventually gave up, and even over the organization he founded, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The black tradition gave its churches and its ministers almost full autonomy, something the Adventist Church could not afford to do.

In order to keep its centralized government, the Adventist denomination can never have any superstars. Leaders such as Martin Luther King must have their independence. Adventism as we know it today could not survive the



growth of ecclesiastical giants. A centralized government demands control. Clearly, Martin Luther King would have had a difficult, if not impossible, time working within the Adventist Church.

The Mission of the Black Church

Unlike the Adventist Church, which sees its primary mission as preaching the third-angel's message to the world in preparation for the second coming of Christ, black missiology has more of a "this-world concern."

The mission of the black churches has always transcended their own constituency by aiming at the reform of the larger white society, that is, causing the latter to practice racial justice as an expression of genuine Christian understanding and devotion. Their mission, therefore, has had both internal and an external dimension in that they have sought religious, moral, and political reform in both the black and the white community, though not in the same respect.⁷

With a mission that has as one of its major concerns social justice, it would logically provide encouragement for preachers to become involved in social concerns. In fact, in the black community the church has always been the largest institution. It must take on a large social role if social change is to occur. This broad mission of the black church allowed King to preach in a sermon at Ebenezer, his father's church:

There's something wrong with any church that limits the gospel to talkin' about heaven over yonder. There is something wrong with any minister . . . who becomes so otherworldly in his orientation that he forgets about what is happening now. There is something wrong with any church that is [so] absorbed in the hereafter that it forgets the here. Here where men are trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. Here where thousands of God's children are caught in an airtight cage [of poverty]. Here where thousands of

men and women are depressed and in agony because of their earthly filth . . . , where the darkness of life surrounds so many of God's children. I say to you that religion must be concerned not merely about the streets flowing with milk and honey, but about the millions of God's children in Asia, Africa, and South America and in our nation who go to bed hungry at night. It will be concerned [not only] about a long white robe over yonder, but about [people] having some clothes down here. It will be concerned not merely about silver slippers in heaven, but about men and women having some shoes to wear on earth.⁸

The social conditions of black people fore-ordained that the mission of black churches would encompass the whole life of the black community. Indeed, concerns for the plight of black Americans brought the black church into existence.

Martin's missiology also took shape around Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel. King studied the writings of Rauschenbusch and reflected his thinking in most of his writings. Rauschenbusch believed that personal existence is basically social, and that a relevant Christianity would "bring men under repentance for their collective sins" and would



proclaim a corresponding social salvation. He contended that the church should be at the forefront of social change through a program for more revolutionary social action. The social gospel movement was characterized by a sharp criticism of social injustices, especially economic injustices. A cursory reading of King's writing and his sermons, reveals strains of the social gospel woven throughout.

Of course, two major problems of the social gospel was its utopian elements and strained view of the nature of humanity.

Black Views of Humanity and Salvation

King's understanding of salvation (soteriology) was also affected by the social gospel. To understand his soteriology, we must first investigate his view of humanity. King, like the liberal Protestants of his time, believed that humanity is basically good—that the reason humans do evil things is because of their lack of knowledge. This philosophy is seen in King's optimistic view of white preachers during the civil-rights movement. He believed that by educating them about the injustice done to black people in this country and



appealing to their goodwill, they would respond positively. A new age would begin.

Had King been an Adventist, his theology would have checked any overly optimistic view of human nature. He would have believed that human beings are basically evil—that social changes do not change the human heart. Adventism teaches the need to work for the betterment of society, but does not see social cures as the answer to the moral condition of humanity. Only a renewed heart can really change the human heart and thus society.

King's liberal anthropology and his black theology gave rise to a soteriology that tended to be "this worldly." In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, King implied that the salvation of humanity will come from overturning oppressive systems. Little in his soteriology called for deliverance from sinful human nature.

Black Eschatology

Martin Luther King's theology shaped his views on the end of time. King's ultimate goal was a new world order on the earth. Again, in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, we catch a glimpse of this eschatology.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, . . . I have a dream that one day . . . sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, knowing that we will be free one day . . . This will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing."⁹

This optimistic view of the future was born out of an eschatology that saw God as ushering in a new age on this earth. Had King been an Adventist, his optimistic dream for America would have been shattered. Our eschatology proclaims "that when they shall say, Peace and

safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them.”

Investigating Martin Luther King's thought allows us to understand how he could become

the great leader of America's civil-rights movement. It also becomes clear that Adventist theology and practice would have hampered his becoming one of our nation's greatest leaders.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or Nightmare?* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 122, 123.

2. Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 60.

3. Cone, p. 120.

4. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), p. 113.

5. James H. Harris, *Pastoral Theology: A Black-Church Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 77.

6. Paris, p. 109.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

8. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remember Who You Are," sermon given July 7, 1963 at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

9. Martin Luther King, Jr., March on Washington, Washington, D.C., 1963.