

Beyond the River Jordan: An Essay on the Continuity of the Black Prophetic Tradition

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The history of the American Negro is the history of this striving—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a truer self. . . . 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 merely wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.

—W. E. B. Du Bois
The Souls of Black Folk

If America undergoes great revolutions, they will be brought about by the presence of the black race on the soil of the United States; that is to say, they will owe their origin, not to the equality, but to the inequality of condition.

—Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America

Ever since the framers wrote the words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the United States has had a kind of schizophrenic personality, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once observed. On the one hand, we have professed the highest ideals of democracy and republican freedom; and on the other, we have sadly practiced the antithesis of these principles.¹ Throughout this historical dialectic, the prophetic wing of the black church has served as a kind of national conscience, voicing the needs and concerns of socially excluded and of politically disenfranchised African American people. Because of this history of political protest on the part of black prophetic Christians, the United States has had to confront its inconsistencies and begin to develop an understanding of democratic freedom that envelops the lives of all of its citizens, irrespective of race, creed, or color.

The realities of social life under the plantation regime forced the African slaves to understand their Christian faith in relation to their status as slaves. “The intellectual life of the African slaves,” as Cornel West writes, “consisted

¹Martin Luther King, Jr. “The American Dream,” *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 274.

primarily of reckoning with the dominant form of evil in their lives.”² The fact that the Declaration of Independence, arguably one of the mainsprings of American constitutional law, proclaimed the “self-evident” truth that we are endowed by our Creator with “certain inalienable rights,” and that the Constitution implicitly and explicitly condoned slavery, placed the American legal system at the center of black theological reflection. It made political protest a basic function of black Christian faith and worship by making abolition (and thereby the transformation of American constitutional law) a necessary item on the agenda. The slaves brought to their reading of biblical scripture a longing for freedom and thus took from it a hermeneutic of freedom that recognized the abolition of slavery and the exercise of individual liberty as central to Christian faith and worship. Thus, “[h]owever much Christianity taught submission to slavery,” Eugene Genovese writes, “it also carried a message of foreboding to the master and of resistance to the enslaved.”³

The first stage of black prophetic protest witnessed the construction of a distinctive political discourse that became the slaves’ chief tool in their struggle to abolish slavery. By courageously reappropriating the revolutionary language of the framers—that is, the natural rights doctrine of the Enlightenment, the democratic idealism of the American Revolution, and the evangelicalism of the Protestant church—the slaves developed a prophetic public discourse that remained inherently American even while it sought to transform American society. This political discourse provided a mediating language between white and black Americans in a larger plan of moral suasion, serving sometimes as a shield and other times as a sword. Two of the more notable figures during this period are the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet and, of course, the great Frederick Douglass.

Like Douglass, Garnet was born a slave. In 1824, when he was only nine years old, his family made their way to New York. By 1835, Garnet had already decided on a career as a Presbyterian minister. In 1840, he was asked to deliver an address before his graduating class at the American Anti-slavery Society. It was here that Garnet first put forth his philosophy of “the natural and unalienable rights” of black people. Garnet voiced praise for what he called “our Puritan and Pilgrim Fathers.” His words celebrated the finest of the American democratic and Judeo-Christian traditions. But even while Garnet identified with the “sincerity of purpose and the devotion to freedom” of our white “forefathers,” he criticized “the base conduct of their degenerate sons,” who made the United States Constitution a “covenant with death” by refusing to outlaw slavery from the territories of the Union. Garnet demanded “redress for the wrongs we have suffered” and full “restoration of our birth-right privileges.”

²Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), p. 35.

³Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 165.

Garnet's words shrewdly embraced the "mainstream" position of the black freedom struggle by identifying with America and its traditions of liberty, but "sought to turn these traditions to the black cause."⁴

Following the Supreme Court's ruling in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (41 U.S. [16 Pet.] 539 [1842]) which indirectly nullified the "personal liberty" laws of New York and thereby made Northern blacks even more susceptible to fugitive-slave hunters, the black people of Troy, New York, came together to discuss an appropriate plan of action. With Garnet serving as the chairman of the Resolutions Committee, the group resolved that it was "in total agreement with the statement of Patrick Henry, and solemnly declare[d] that we will have liberty or we will have death."⁵

In 1843, delegates of the National Negro Convention met in Buffalo, New York, and Garnet was again asked to give the main address. This time Garnet departed from the mainline protest position of the abolitionist movement. Garnet encouraged the shedding of blood if a general strike failed.

Garnet's "Address to the Slaves of the United States" placed the overwhelming burden for the abolition of slavery on the slaves themselves. He encouraged them to "use every means," whether moral, intellectual, or physical, "that promises success."

Garnet's "Address" stressed that the abolition of slavery was prerequisite to the creation of a truly Christian community. In his mind, the Christian call to conscience was at once synonymous with an appeal to those in power to abolish slavery and to the slaves themselves to take their fate into their own hands and "RESIST! RESIST! RESIST!" Garnet's words transmitted to the enslaved, with irresistible force and clarity, the message that only as free men and women could they keep God's laws. "You are not certain of heaven," Garnet warned the enslaved masses, "because you suffer yourselves to remain in a state of slavery, where you cannot obey the commandments of the Sovereign of the Universe."⁶

Following the address, the delegates voted on whether to circulate Garnet's speech as a collective pronouncement of the views of the convention. After several hours of debate and at least three official votes, the committee finally decided—by a narrow majority of one vote—that Garnet's address involved "too much physical force," as Frederick Douglass put it, to warrant endorsement.⁷

⁴Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Freedom Struggle in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), p. 41.

⁵Ibid, p. 141.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Eric Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 2 (New York: International Publishers, 1950), p. 23.

It was not that Douglass, who was present at the convention, was any less dedicated to the abolitionist crusade than Garnet, but that Douglass was not prepared to instigate insurrection. Douglass's tactical thrust favored "a firm, devoted, unceasing assertion of our rights and a full, free and determined exposure of our multiplied wrongs." He believed that the greatest weapon against slavery was "the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder." Still heavily influenced by William Lloyd Garrison's philosophy of "non-resistance and moral suasion," Douglass proposed a moral appeal to the national conscience. When Garnet bitterly objected to the proposal, Douglass took the floor in support of his motion and sustained a majority vote in favor of his plan.

In 1847, Douglass was elected by the members of the National Negro Convention to chair a committee whose purpose was to draft a report on the best means of abolishing slavery. In it, Douglass condemned "any attempt to lead our people to brute force as a reformatory instrumentality." Instead, Douglass endorsed "a faithful, earnest, and preserving enforcement of the great principles of justice and morality, religion and humanity . . . as the only invincible and infallible means within our reach to overthrow this foul system of blood and ruin."⁸

Although Douglass was not an ordained minister of the Gospel nor a devotee of organized religion, he was convinced that his own freedom from slavery (and thus his work on behalf of the abolitionist crusade) was an act of providential agency which, he said "has ever. . . attended me and marked my life with so many favors." Douglass wrote:

From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God.⁹

That Douglass's intellectual assault against the slaveholding South was rooted in his understanding of the universal law of God is evident in the motto he chose for *The North Star*—"Right Is Of No Sex; Truth Is Of No Color; God Is The Father Of Us All, And We Are All Brethren"—and in the following quotation from his now famous address delivered at Rochester, New York in July of 1852:

Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the em-

⁸Ibid.

⁹Harding, *There Is a River*, p. 148.

phasis I command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!

What to the American slave is your Fourth 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 a 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.¹⁰

In Douglass's strategy of moral suasion, one sees the earliest beginnings of what was to become the most powerful "material force" in the black freedom struggle: an explicit theology of national redemption, which favored social transformation through moral reform.

Following abolition, African Americans faced new legal and extralegal challenges to full citizenship, in the form of Jim Crow laws. In response to these repressive institutional structures, black prophetic Christians restructured the language of black prophetic theology to address the evil of segregation. In this regard, the political theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., may be seen as archetypal.

Like Douglass, King was convinced that the greatest weapon against institutional oppression was the power of truth over the conscience of the white majority. "[T]he marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community," King would later declare, "must not lead us to a distrust of all white people. For many of our white brothers and sisters have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and that their freedom is inextricably bound with our freedom. We cannot walk alone."¹¹

King believed that the task of African American people was to refurbish the nation's moral fiber with the kind of spiritual and moral vision that only comes through centuries of oppression. King wrote:

The black man in America can [and must] provide a new soul force for all Americans, a new expression of the American dream that need not be realized at the expense of other men around the world, but a dream of opportunity and life that can be shared by all humanity.¹²

¹⁰Douglass, "Oration at Rochester, July 5, 1857," in Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. p. 190, 192.

¹¹Martin Luther King, Jr., *Ebony* 41, no. 3 (January 1986): 41.

¹²King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 318, 323.

King hoped that “out of the universality of our experience,” “we can help make peace and harmony in this world possible.”¹³

Not all African Americans were persuaded of this view. Others, like Malcolm X, denounced Christianity as a tool of African enslavement and renounced everything that smacked of Eurocultural hegemony. Where King, like Frederick Douglass, favored nonviolent solutions to the problems of black Americans, Malcolm X, like Henry Highland Garnet, was prepared to use “any means necessary.” Where King was hopeful of the prospects for integration, Malcolm X did not believe that whites would ever integrate with blacks; nor did he believe that integration was a viable solution to the plight of blacks in America. Malcolm X believed that:

Just as the government of biblical Egypt was against the God of the Hebrew slaves, today the American government is against the God of her Negro slaves, the God of our forefathers. And just as that Pharaoh tried to trick the Hebrew slaves into rejecting offers of salvation from their God by deceiving them with false promises through hired magicians and carefully staged demonstrations like the recent ridiculous march on Washington, today this government is paying certain elements of the Negro leadership to deceive our people into thinking that we’re going to get accepted soon into the mainstream of American life.¹⁴

Malcolm said he saw no point in appealing to the moral conscience of whites because

“America’s conscience is bankrupt. . . . [White people] don’t try and eliminate an evil because its evil, or because it’s illegal, or because it’s immoral; they eliminate it only when it threatens their existence. So you’re wasting your time trying to appeal to the moral conscience of a bankrupt man like Uncle Sam.”¹⁵

Much of what has been written about Malcolm X has tended to accent Malcolm’s nationalist sensibilities, thereby de-emphasizing important points of continuity between Malcolm’s political rhetoric and what might be considered the mainstream of black prophetic thought. But one could just as easily argue that Malcolm’s philosophy of black nationalism, which meant only that “the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community,”¹⁶ was consonant with American political process, with its interest-group orientation. Indeed, Malcolm X frequently took his cues from the founders of the republic.

¹³ibid.

¹⁴Malcolm X, *The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989), p. 149.

¹⁵Malcolm X, “The Ballot Or The Bullet,” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 40.

¹⁶Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 21.

This is what old Patrick Henry meant when he said liberty or death. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or kill me. Treat me like a man or kill me. . . . Respect me, or put me to death. But when you start putting me to death, we're both going to die together."¹⁷

"I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. [But] any time you know you're within the law, within your legal rights, within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die for what you believe in."¹⁸

True, Malcolm saw America through the eyes of "a victim of Americanism." But by condemning the worst in the American tradition, Malcolm simultaneously celebrated the best in it: "freedom of speech" and "the right to protest for right." To that extent, one might argue that Malcolm's critique of American society was aimed not at the *principles* of American democracy as such, but at the *practice* of American democracy—what he called "nothing but disguised hypocrisy." He said:

I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. . . . Being born here in America doesn't make you an American. Why, if birth made you an American, you wouldn't need any legislation, you wouldn't need any amendments to the Constitution, you wouldn't be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C. . . . They don't have to pass civil rights legislation to make a pollock an American.¹⁹

Malcolm's intentions "to take Uncle Sam before the world court" at the United Nations for violating our "God-given human rights" affirms his dedication to the principles of democratic freedom and the doctrine of natural rights. Malcolm's demand for "the ballot or the bullet" is an indication of his willingness to work within the bounds of the American democratic process—if given the opportunity. His indictment that "being born in America doesn't make you an American" is perhaps the central critique put forward by the black prophetic tradition.

A basic difference between King and Malcolm was that King's aim was not "to defeat or humiliate the white man," but to enable him to see "that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience."²⁰ King's unique moral character enabled him to see beyond the conditions of his day—to see that "God is not merely interested in the freedom of black men and brown men" but that "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race."²¹ His aim was to lead souls blinded by the darkness of sin

¹⁷Malcolm X, "The Second OAAU Rally," *By Any Means Necessary*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 86.

¹⁸Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," p. 34.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁰King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 230.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 215.

to the light of Christian love. King thus extolled moral conduct as the instrument of divine will, challenged the conscience of the American people, and criticized the leaders, conventions, and habitual practices of American society in the name of those values and beliefs we as Americans hold dear.

King saw social degradation, political oppression, and economic exploitation as impediments to Christian faith and Christian practice because they undermine the dignity and worth of the human personality. King exposed what Anthony Cook calls “the mutual dependence of order and freedom. . . . He understood that the primary difference between the two was that a belief in the primacy of order assumed that human nature was fundamentally evil and in need of restraint, while a belief in the primacy of freedom assumed that it was fundamentally good and capable of autonomy.”²² King recognized that the privileging of order over freedom assumed that the latter was only possible where the individual was restrained by sovereign authority—an assumption King categorically rejected. For King,

“[a]ny religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men that is not equally concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that cripple them, and the social conditions that strangle them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.”²³

King saw the work of the church as that of building a just international community where all men and women live together in harmony, fraternity, and sorority. In King’s broad overview, says Cook, “one’s duty to God could only be understood by reference to one’s duty to others, and one’s duty to others obligated the individual to be his brother’s and sister’s keeper, to meet power with power in the struggle for justice.”²⁴ Thus, the work of the church as the agent of Christian love was inseparably linked to that of the state as the agent of social justice. This mutual dependency between church and state was the source of King’s demand for “religion and education to change the attitudes and to change the hearts of men” and “legislation and federal action to control behavior”: “It may be true that the law can’t make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me. And that’s important too.”²⁵

The aim of King’s nonviolent direct action was thus to transform society through the transformation of individual moral consciences. King believed that all human beings had both a potential for evil and a potential for good. The strategy of nonviolent direct action was designed to appeal to that good. For

²²Anthony E. Cook, “Beyond Critical Legal Studies: The Reconstructive Theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Harvard Law Review* 103, no. 5 (March 1990): 1,024.

²³Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Coretta Scott King (New York: Newmarket Press, 1983), p. 66.

²⁴Cook, “Beyond Critical Legal Studies,” p. 1,032.

²⁵King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 215.

King, any law which was in discord with the universal law of God (such as segregation codes that degrade the human personality) was evil and must be resisted. "I would go on to say that an unjust law is a code that the majority inflicts on the minority that is not binding on itself. An unjust law is a law that binds individuals who did not have an opportunity to participate in the legislative process."²⁶

In the years between 1965 and 1968, King began to redirect his attention from issues of race and personal dignity "to programs that impinge upon the basic system of social and economic control." At this level, social programs were to go beyond race and deal with basic class issues between the privileged and the underprivileged. King realized, as Garrow observes, that the period between 1954 and 1965 did not accomplish everything:

Even though we gained legislative and judicial victories . . . these legislative and judicial victories did very little to improve the lot of the millions of Negroes in the teeming ghettos of the North.²⁷

But King's decision to wage the Poor People's Campaign for Economic Justice only confirmed for many Americans the charges leveled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that King was a Communist. Ever mindful of what he called America's "paranoia or morbid fear of communism," King pressed on. Though he praised Marx's "great passion for social justice," but added, in Garrow's words, that "Marxism ought not . . . be mistaken for the economic goals that the movement sought."²⁸ King writes:

I read Marx as I read all of the influential historical thinkers—from a dialectical point of view, combining a partial yes and a partial no. In so far as Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangling totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous 'no'; but in so far as he pointed to weaknesses of traditional capitalism, contributed to the growth of a definite self-consciousness in the masses, and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches, I responded with a definite 'yes'.²⁹

The Poor People's Campaign was designed "to bring the full range of domestic issues 'out in the open,' . . . to make everyone face the fact that America is a racist country, [and] to discover some method . . . to make the nation deal with its problems." King reiterated, says Garrow, "that their goal was definite economic improvements for the black masses."³⁰

The night King stepped before the podium at Bishop Charles Mason Temple

²⁶Ibid., p. 49.

²⁷David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 228.

²⁸Ibid., p. 537.

²⁹Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 95.

³⁰Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 582.

in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, the eve of his assassination, he reiterated, “We ain’t gonna let nothin’ turn us around.” He went on,

And so, I don’t mind [what happens now]. 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.³¹

By invoking the biblical image of Moses, standing at the top of the mountain, commissioning Joshua to carry the slaves out of the wilderness, over Jordan, and into the promised land, King was trying to create a vision and a hope for the future. The 34th chapter of Deuteronomy reads:

Moses went up from the plains of Moab, unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is over against Jericho. . . . And the Lord shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan. . . . And the Lord said unto him, This is the land which I swore unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob. . . . I caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither. (Deuteronomy 34:1,4)

Having witnessed this sight, Moses then went before the people and said,

The Lord has said unto me, ‘Thou shalt not go over this Jordan. . . . [But] Joshua, he shall go over before thee. . . . And Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and of good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the Lord hath sworn unto their fathers to give them.” (Deuteronomy 31:2,3,7)

Clearly, King understood that while the civil rights movement had succeeded in delivering America from the Egypt of blatant institutional racism in the form of Jim Crow laws, we as a people were still far from the promised land of an inclusive, just social order. If one accepts my reading of King’s last address, one must see this phase of the movement as analogous to the wilderness period of Israelite history, which followed Moses’ death. Our task is to make the difficult crossing over the troubled waters of material self-interest and individualism into the promised land of a national community.

Finally, in his last book, *Chaos or Community: Where Do We Go From Here?*, published just months prior to his death, King writes,

Some years ago, a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: “A widely separated family inherits a great house in which they have to

³¹King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 285.

live.” This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live.³²

In the conclusion of *Chaos or Community*, King argues that our best hope for “creative living” in this “world house” is to connect the moral ends of our lives “in personal character and justice.” “Without this spiritual and moral re-awakening, we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our own instruments.”³³ King thus juxtaposed the poetry of scriptural prophets with the lyrics of patriotic anthems in the whole task of constructing a “mediating language” capable of bridging racial gaps in our society. Our task—that is, the task of present and future generations—is to broaden that mediating language so that it incorporates a poor people’s campaign for economic justice into its basic configuration.

The need for a poor people’s campaign is so urgent today that any “mediating language” which does not incorporate such a campaign into its basic configuration will almost certainly fail to give us the necessary social glue. According to an article which appeared in the January 1986 issue of *Ebony* magazine: “8.3 million more Americans of all races were living in poverty in 1984 than there were when the Poor People’s Campaign was launched in 1968. . . . [And] more than a third of black Americans are still below the poverty threshold.”³⁴

Unfortunately, in the years since King’s assassination, the black prophetic movement has been virtually silent. One reason for this silence is that many of those who benefited most from the limited gains of the civil rights movement have tended to judge the overall success of the movement vis-à-vis their own upward social mobility and have thus quietly acculturated themselves to the luxury of American middle-class status. But those who equate inclusion into the mainstream of American society with King’s elaborate social vision are misinformed, for King explicitly asked us not to see our movement “as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all existing values of society.” He asked that we become “those creative dissenters who will our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau, indeed, to a more noble expression of humaneness.”³⁵ He writes:

However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger, world house in which we are dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the

³²Martin Luther King, Jr., *Chaos or Community: Where Do We Go From Here?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 167.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁴Coretta S. King, “Martin’s Legacy,” *Ebony* 41, no. 3 (January 1986): 106.

³⁵King, *Chaos or Community*, p. 133.

problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war.³⁶

On the most fundamental levels, King's protests forced the court system to hear a wide array of legal issues, "including symbolic speech, the public forum, freedom of association, libel, and the rules governing civil disobedience and mass demonstration."³⁷ The Montgomery Bus Boycott, which King orchestrated at the tender age of twenty-six, as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, led the way for *Gayle v. Bowder*, the Supreme Court decision which invalidated *de jure* segregation in intrastate transportation. King's protests in Selma, Birmingham, and Washington, D.C., set the stage for the passage of two of the most essential pieces of legislation to come from the civil rights movement—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In all of this, King's most effective weapon was the combined force of civil disobedience, nonviolent passive resistance, and the mediating language of black prophetic theology—that peculiar combination of American democratic principles, natural rights philosophy, and Christian social ethics. King's articulation of the biblical and republican strands of our democratic and Judeo-Christian heritage created a political climate conducive to the kinds of sweeping legislative and judicial changes witnessed in the period between 1955 and 1968. It is thus here, in the quarters of African-American religion and experience, that we may find the wings necessary to carry us over the troubled waters of the River Jordan into the promised land of the Beloved Community.

The success of King's movement demonstrates the political power of Christian social ethics when united with constitutional values. It also confirms what President George Washington declared in his farewell address some two centuries ago: "Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on the minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National Morality can prevail in the exclusion of Religious Principle."³⁸

Like King, we must come to understand that "if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life, nor liberty, nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists."³⁹ King writes:

We must honestly admit that capitalism has often left a gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty, has created conditions permitting necessities to be taken from the many to give luxuries to the few, and has encouraged

³⁶Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 186.

³⁷Randall Kennedy, "Martin Luther King's Constitution: A Legal History of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Yale Law Journal* 98, no. 6 (April 1989): 1,001.

³⁸Quoted in Robert N. Bellah, "American Civil Religion," *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 173.

³⁹King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 274.

smallhearted men to become cold and conscienceless so that . . . they are unmoved by suffering, poverty-stricken humanity.⁴⁰

The challenge confronting present and future generations of African American intellectuals is to tailor the language of black prophetic theology in such a way that it addresses the problems of economic exploitation and the still-unresolved issues of discrimination based on gender, race, and sexual orientation. It must also address itself to the ecology of our society. Our task is to appeal to the moral conscience of the American people by invoking those values that embrace the best in the American tradition yet simultaneously speak to the heart of the problems of contemporary American society. Just as Dr. King invoked the language of the Declaration of Independence—"that all men are created equal"—in his crusade to persuade Americans that segregation was evil, present and future generations of prophetic Christians must invoke the language of the equal protection clause, which states that "no state shall deprive any person within its jurisdiction of equal protection of the laws"—in our campaign to redistribute American economic and political resources. For "the very groundwork of this government," as Frederick Douglass wrote, "is a good repository of Christian civilization. The Constitution, as well as the Declaration of Independence, and the sentiments of the founders of the Republic, give us a platform broad enough, and strong enough, to support the most comprehensive plans for freedom and elevation of all people of this country, without regard to race, class, or clime."⁴¹

⁴⁰King, *Chaos or Community*, p. 187.

⁴¹Douglass, "The Dred Scott Decision," in Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 2 p. 415.



In fact, American Christianity seemed to thrive on the problems that plagued the United States in the years following 1898. The church responded to urbanization, poverty, and social unrest by engaging in a wide variety of reform efforts. Its new commitments brought the church practical rewards: "Its membership increased by approximately sixteen million between 1900 and 1914, an advance which can be explained by its willingness to face squarely the problems of the new day."¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, a German-American Baptist who occupied the chair of church history at Colgate-Rochester Seminary, became the leading exponent of the Social Gospel in the United States. Rauschenbusch argued that fundamental moral, economic, and social reform, involving the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a noncompetitive economic system, would have to precede the establishment of the Kingdom of God. His ideas provided a theological basis for social reform and served to restore faith in the continued vitality of religion.²