

A biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

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Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956, King's leadership gradually shifted from the religious to the political realm, but his worldview remained constant. Although family connections contributed to his rapid emergence as a national spokesperson for the civil rights movement, he challenged educated and affluent blacks to revive the African American prophetic tradition. Publicly criticizing Cold War liberalism and capitalist materialism while also rejecting communism, King admitted in "Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story" (1958) that reading the works of Karl Marx had reinforced his long held concern "about the gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty." He charged that capitalist materialism was "always in danger of inspiring men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life." King's evolving eclectic radicalism mixed his Christian and Gandhian non-violent civil disobedience with the socialist tradition and with anti-colonial currents flowing out of the successful independence movements in west Africa.

King's growing influence resulted not from his intellectual originality but from his political and moral leadership. Yet his public role was always undergirded by his thinking, just as his incomparable oratory drew its power not only from his training as an elocutionist preacher, but from his study of history and ideas theology and philosophy. His key legacy for Christian ethics and for American political thought was his

reassertion, in the face of mid-century Nieburian skepticism about ideals such as pacifism, of the doctrine of non-violent resistance. Drawing on the African-American social gospel precepts instilled in him as a child, as well as the ideas of Gandhi, Jesus, and on the early Niebuhr of "Moral Man and Immoral Society" (1932), King argued that unwarranted suffering was redemptive—and, in the particular case of Americans, the only politically effective strategy in the struggle for rights. King was restating the long-standing liberal Protestant tenet that the law of love should rule in all spheres of life, private and public. But he gave that doctrine new saliency by demonstrating insisting that the preaching of love had to be joined to the practice of love combined with militant, non-violent resistance to social evil. A community grew in solidarity as it embraced that suffering joined in struggle.

And that travail became redemptive when the members of that community eschewed bitterness, when they forgave the enemies against whom they struggle. What Niebuhr had called "the spiritual discipline against resentment" because an essential feature of King's militant resistance to injustice. It permitted a minority community to deepen its inner life while invoking God's judgment upon the failure of the wider community to live up to its own avowed moral standards. Embarking on the path of suffering laid the seeds for a reconciliation that could follow the period of crisis of conflict.

Trying to moderate

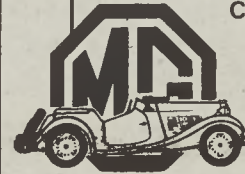
President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) after its establishment in 1957, King experienced difficulty maintaining a middle course between older national civil rights leaders, who generally

stressed litigation and lobbying efforts to achieve civil rights reform, and the grassroots leaders who moved toward mass militancy early in the 1960s. Many of the black college students who launched a series of desegregation sit-ins in 1960 initially looked to him for inspiration but not for tactical direction. In particular, young organizers affiliated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were increasingly influenced by the emergent ideas of their own local movements, especially those in Mississippi and elsewhere in the deep South. Most SNCC activists agreed with King's broad conception of the objectives of the southern struggle, and they drew upon the same ideological sources that had influenced King, but SNCC's organizing efforts emphasized the development of sustained

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That I was a drum major for righteousness.
And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

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