

King drew many social ideas from other cultures

By Clayborne Carson

One of the world's best known advocates of non-violent social change strategies, Martin Luther King Jr., synthesized ideas drawn from many different cultural traditions.



King

Born in Atlanta on January 15, 1929, King's roots were in the African American Baptist church. He was the grandson of the Rev. A. D. Williams, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist church and a founder of Atlanta's NAACP chapter, and the son of Martin Luther King Sr., who succeeded Williams as Ebenezer's pastor and also became a civil rights leader. Although, from an early age, King resented religious emotionalism and questioned literal interpretations of scripture, he nevertheless greatly admired black social gospel proponents such as his father who saw the church as a instrument for improving the lives of African Americans. Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays and other proponents of Christian social activism influenced King's deci-

sion after his junior year at Morehouse to become a minister and thereby serve society. His continued skepticism, however, shaped his subsequent theological studies at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pa., and at Boston University, where he received a doctorate in systematic theology in 1955. Rejecting offers for academic positions, King decided while completing his Ph. D. requirements to return to the South and accepted the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala.

On Dec. 5, 1955, five days after Montgomery civil rights activist Rosa Parks refused to obey the city's rules mandating segregation on buses, black residents launched a bus boycott and elected King as president of the newly-formed Montgomery Improvement Association. As the boycott continued during 1956, King gained national prominence as a result of his exceptional oratorical skills and personal courage. His house was bombed and he was convicted along with other boycott leaders on charges of conspiring to interfere with the bus company's operations. Despite these attempts to suppress the movement, Montgomery bus were

desegregated in December, 1956, after the United States Supreme Court declared Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional.

In 1957, seeking to build upon the success of the Montgomery boycott movement, King and other southern black ministers founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As SCLC's president, King emphasized the goal of black voting rights when he spoke at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. During 1958, he published his first book, "Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story." The following year, he toured India, increased his understanding of Gandhian non-violent strategies. At the end of 1959, he resigned from Dexter and returned to Atlanta where the SCLC headquarters was located and where he also could assist his father as pastor of Ebenezer.

Although increasingly portrayed as the pre-eminent black spokesperson, King did not mobilize mass protest activity during the first five years after the Montgomery boycott ended. While King moved cautiously, southern black college students took the initia-

tive, launching a wave of sit-in protests during the winter and spring of 1960. King sympathized with the student movement and spoke at the founding meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960, but he soon became the target of criticisms from SNCC activists determined to assert their independence. Even King's decision in October, 1960, to join a student sit-in in Atlanta did not allay the

tensions, although presidential candidate John F. Kennedy's sympathetic telephone call to King's wife, Coretta Scott King, helped attract crucial black support for Kennedy's successful campaign. The 1961 "Freedom Rides," which sought to integrate southern transportation facilities, demonstrated that neither King nor Kennedy could control the expanding protest movement spearheaded by students. Conflicts

between King and younger militants were also evident when both SCLC and SNCC assisted the Albany (Ga.) Movement's campaign of mass protests during December of 1961 and the summer of 1962.

After achieving few of his objectives in Albany, King recognized the need to organize a successful protest campaign free of conflicts with SNCC. During the spring of 1963, he and his staff guided mass

See KING Page 3C

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- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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