MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.’S RECEPTION AS A THEOLOGIAN AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST IN GERMANY – EAST AND WEST

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During the past few years I have given several talks on Martin Luther King Jr. as a theologian, especially his understanding of the *Imago Dei*, and how he derived the concepts of human dignity and human rights from his understanding of all people being created in the image of God. I have argued that King should be seen not only as an influential civil rights activist and global freedom icon but also as a serious theologian.\(^1\) Certainly, I have had to deal with the problems of plagiarism in King’s past in order to identify what really was his authentic contribution. Yet the really interesting thing for me about these talks has been the different reactions of the audiences in the former West and East German areas. Whereas people in the former states of West Germany, even theology students, remarked that they never thought of King as a theologian but as a political activist, the church-affiliated audiences in the former states of East Germany were astounded that King’s status as a theologian was ever in doubt: “Why are you trying to prove that King was a theologian? This is crystal clear. We never perceived him differently.”

It is remarkable that King, who became a global celebrity after delivering his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, was perceived by many primarily as a political activist, even though he was an ordained minister, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference he founded and led was, obviously, a Christian, church-based organization.

A number of activists and scholars, especially referring to his “I Have a Dream” speech, doubt whether King simply used religious rhetoric to mobilize people for his political agenda. Yet, with few exceptions, it took a rather long time before more extensive and qualified research was done on him as a theologian. In the current literature on King, there still seems to be a gap between analysis of his role as a political activist and of his profession as a theologian.

So, why did and do the East German church folk perceive King differently, and first and foremost as a theologian? And does this perception contribute to our understanding of King’s dream fifty years ago and, in turn, to our understanding of the unfulfilled dream today? At least it seems to be one of the many untold stories of the March on Washington.

\(^1\) See Michael Haspel, “Gottebenbildlichkeit und Menschenwürde. Implikationen für Bildung und öffentlichen Diskurs in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Konzeption ‘Öffentlicher Theologie,’” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie* 64, no. 3 (2012): 251-64.
Different Perceptions of King in East and West Germany

Let me start with the question of why King was perceived differently in East Germany and West Germany. King visited Berlin, including East Berlin, on September 12 and 13, 1964. Willy Brandt, who was then the mayor of West Berlin before becoming the secretary of state and later chancellor of the Federal Republic, had invited him to visit West Berlin. Church officials from the East invited him to visit the Eastern part of town as well. It is said that the U.S. State Department took his passport away to prevent him from going to the East, but for reasons not entirely clear, the East German border police let him pass with his American Express card as proof of his identity.2

After preaching at the Waldbühne amphitheater in the Western part of the city earlier on September 13th, King was scheduled to preach at the Protestant St. Mary’s Church in East Berlin that evening. So many people wanted to listen to King that an additional appearance in the Church of St. Sophia was spontaneously arranged that evening, and this location was also packed. His visit made an enormous impression on the Protestant churches in East Germany, which had been cut off from the Protestant churches in West Germany since the Berlin Wall had been erected in 1961. They were in a process of defining their way as churches not for or against but simply within a supposedly socialist society.3 Pressure from the communist regime increased on Protestant churches after the Wall was built and it became nearly impossible to leave the country. Thus, East German Protestants were looking for their own way in the tradition of the Confessing Church, which had resisted the influence of National Socialism on the church during the 1930s and 1940s. They were also trying to build strong ecumenical relations, especially with countries that were also under communist rule, or with churches that were affiliated with the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle. King was an ideal model for them of a theologian struggling for freedom and justice — and the communist rulers were not suspicious of him or his ideas because they saw him as a political activist fighting against the oppression, exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism of the capitalist superpower, as a representative of the “other America.” This, in turn, made the U.S. government wary of him during the Cold War with its pronounced anti-communist tendencies.

It was the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in East Germany seeking contact with King and publicly endorsing his actions in the civil rights protests of 1963 that made him a global icon. This party was created in

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2 There are various versions of this story. For the most accurate account, see Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany (New York, 2010), 100. Given the political situation and the character of the regime in East Germany, it is very unlikely that a border guard and his immediate superior could have made a decision of such importance on their own. It is more likely that GDR intelligence agents were informed that King planned to visit East Berlin and decided to let him enter to avoid negative publicity. Perhaps secret talks between church and government officials had also taken place to come to an agreement about how the visit could and should unfold. Unfortunately, we do not yet know of any documentation for these theories.

3 For the history and the development of theological reflection of the Protestant churches in East Germany, see Michael Haspel, Politischer Protestantismus und gesellschaftliche Transformation. Ein Vergleich der evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR und der schwarzen Kirchen in der Bürgerrechtsbewegung in den USA (Tübingen, 1997).
the so-called Democratic Bloc to attract Christians and, by this token, to include them in the system of communist rule. Several other parties besides the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) were permitted in order to make the political system look diverse. However, the whole Democratic Bloc was strictly controlled by the communist regime.4

Gerald Götting, a CDU party functionary, had tried to invite King to officially visit East Berlin during the dates he was supposed to be in the Western part of the city. We can assume that he did not take this action without previously consulting with the communist authorities. For the East German state it would have been prestigious to host King officially in East Berlin and thus gain legitimacy in the international public arena. Though King replied courteously, he declined the invitation. There was further correspondence between Götting and King.5 However, King apparently never accepted another invitation to a communist country, including East Germany.

It is remarkable that even though King had refused the official invitation on the grounds of time constraints, he did change his mind later and not only visited East Berlin but even delivered two sermons there. He probably wished not to be an official “guest of the Communist state” but rather a guest of a Christian church audience. We still know rather few details of this visit, which is barely mentioned in literature on King and the civil rights movement.6 At home quarrels about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the upcoming Democratic National Convention were in full swing. Sometimes, the literature mentions only that King went to Europe for a couple of days and places more emphasis on the audience King, his wife Coretta Scott King, and Ralph Abernathy had with the pope. For example, Peter Ling, after going into the details of the domestic political turmoil, reports briefly:

In mid-September, King, Coretta, and the attention-craving Abernathy went on a short European tour that included Berlin, Rome, Madrid, and London. The SCLC preachers had an audience with Pope Paul VI but, apart from two days in Spain, there were too many speeches and press conferences for this to be a vacation.7

4 For the development of the Christian Democratic Union in the GDR, see Michael Richter and Martin Rißmann, Die Ost-CDU. Beiträge zu ihrer Entstehung und Entwicklung (Weimar, 1995); “Sozialismus aus christlicher Verantwortung? Die Ost-CDU und die Kirchenpolitik in der DDR,” epd-Dokumentation 20 (2012).


6 Though King emphasized during his visit how special the experience was for him, he did not refer extensively to it afterwards, either. This is surprising because his father had been in Berlin exactly thirty years before him to attend a world conference of Baptist ministers—an experience that moved him to change his and his son’s name from Michael to Martin Luther. In other words, after that visit to Berlin, Michael King Jr. had become Martin Luther King Jr. Whereas his father had visited during the Nazi period, King himself faced the dividing line of the Cold War. See inter alia Peter J. Ling: Martin Luther King, Jr. (London, 2011), 11.

7 Ling, King, 174-75. There is also a brief account in David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York, 1988 [1986]), 351. Taylor Branch gives more details about the Berlin visit but also puts the emphasis on the audience with the pope in Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65 (New York, 1999), 483-85. Even the FBI seems to have been more concerned with King’s audience with the pope, which Hoover wanted to inhibit, than with his visit to Berlin. See David J. Garrow, The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, 1983 [1981]), 121. See also Höhn and Klimke, A Breath of Freedom, 104.
It seems that something extraordinary happened on September 13, 1964, when King preached in two churches in East Berlin. The communist state via the Christian Democratic Party endorsed King’s political claims. After he was murdered, they organized memorial speeches and rallies at universities and other public venues. For them, King was a fighter against the capitalist colonial powers, which allegedly oppressed the working class in the non-communist countries. He was seen as a popular witness against the capitalist enemy. His Christian motivation was termed “humanist heritage” and was regarded as compatible with the communist ideology. Since he was a Christian minister struggling, in their understanding, as a political activist against racist oppression and capitalist exploitation, he could be presented to the so-called reactionary or bourgeois Christians as a role model, and in this function also communicate that Christians as humanists could and should struggle against capitalism and support the construction of a socialist society. Interestingly, this was similar to West German protesters’ interpretation of King. Among them, King was mainly viewed as a political activist and as a leader of a protest movement against injustice and oppression. He was seen through a political rather than a theological lens.

That King was endorsed by the communists and their forced allies constituted both a chance and a problem for the Protestant churches. On the one hand, it was safe for them to refer to King and his liberating philosophy and activism because the regime did this also. On the other hand, it was dangerous to challenge the party’s authority with regard to the political interpretation of King. This made it possible and nearly necessary to interpret King differently from the official line without conflicting with it. Thus, the churches interpreted King as a “progressive” religious leader and theologian:

In the shorter term, the repercussions of King’s visit were felt primarily in the religious sphere. East German publishing houses thus considered it politically safe to extensively publish texts by and about him in the following years. In this way, these publishers helped incorporate King into official doctrine by insisting that “Christianity and the humanistic goals of socialism” were not opposed to one another.

Interpreting King as a Christian and theologian was a very appropriate solution — though it might not have been a conscious and strategic
decision. The circumstances forced the Protestant churches in East Germany to interpret King this way, yet they may have found a deeper truth in doing so. His theological understanding of human dignity and human rights provided a sound basis for Christians in East Germany—who were confronted with a communist regime violating basic human rights every day, oppressing Christians and the Christian churches in all venues of public life—to engage in theological reflection. King’s emphasis on the biblical concepts of justice and peace influenced the church-based peace movement and the civil movement, which was crucial to the Peaceful Revolution of 1989. Höhn and Klimke conclude in their treatise on King’s visit to Berlin:

King’s writings and actions, as well as his theology, did undoubtedly serve as an inspiration for the East German opposition movement in the long run. Yet the exact ways in which his reception and the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, among a multitude of other factors, contributed to the emergence of a civil society based in East German churches that would eventually bring down the communist regime in 1989 remains to be explored.  

However, there are many reports of how King was present in spirit in the protests in East Germany through readings of his texts, applications of his methods, and songs from the movement. Heinrich W. Grosse, one of the first scholars in Germany to study King and translate his works, reports that on November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall was opened, a minister from East Germany made this connection explicit in writing to him: “Finally, the wall is unnecessary. One of my sons started from October 2 [to participate in the demonstrations] every Monday in Leipzig. I think many were thinking of Martin Luther King as an example.”

Was King a Theological Thinker in His Own Right?

Was King a theologian in the sense of being a productive theological thinker? To be sure, King received a doctorate in systematic theology. But in exploring this question, one has to consider two facts: It is beyond any doubt that King used other scholars’ material excessively for his academic work, public speeches, sermons, and publications. So was he only reproducing and compiling material from others or generating something unique? The second issue is the claim that

10 Ibid.
13 I avoid the term “original” here since Keith D. Miller convincingly makes the point that we should differentiate between “originality” and “creativity” in light of his analysis of King’s oratory, in which he borrows heavily from other sources yet creates something new out of it (see Keith D. Miller, Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources [Athens, 1992], 9).
many of his publicized works were actually largely written by his friends and coworkers.

King’s use of other authors’ material has been widely discussed. Though it is evident that King did not always follow academic rules adequately, I don’t think that the charges against King are strong enough to disregard his theological thought. Keith D. Miller and Richard Lischer in their analyses amply demonstrated that King used material from sermon textbooks for many of his sermons and speeches, including the “I Have a Dream” oration. However, they showed equally convincingly that King’s overarching achievement was to synthesize the material and make new texts from these elements, creating a new artwork, so to speak, that served a special purpose. Miller emphasized that King was perhaps the first ever to synthesize the black oral and white written oratory and preaching traditions, which both included certain classic and common motifs and formulations. One could compare King’s accomplishments to those of a chef. While most dishes may be based on the same basic ingredients, the outcome of his recipes might be quite distinct:

King adapted material in a highly creative way. No matter what he borrowed or how often, after leaving Boston University, he managed never to sound stilted and artificial. Instead, he paradoxically, but invariably, sounded exactly like himself. His long training in the folk pulpit accounts for his extraordinary ability to use others’ language to become himself. This training also explains why his audiences never objected to his borrowing and why an entire generation of scholars failed to guess that he mined sources frequently. His skill in transporting procedures of folk preaching into print ensured that his borrowed lines fit his persona more closely than did the words of ghostwriters.

This insight can also be applied to King’s theological work as a whole. He used others’ material extensively, but his original synthesis and recreation of that material generated some of the most significant theological texts of the twentieth century. As Richard Lischer put it, “Most scholars would have published their thoughts on justice and history in learned journals. But the circumstances and choices of King’s life were such that the only verbal medium he had at his disposal was the sermon. He hammered out his Christian theology on the anvil of the pulpit.”
Some of the published versions of King’s sermons and speeches differed significantly from the originals, prompting some observers to claim that the published King was not the original King. This was first discovered when the published version of the homily King delivered spontaneously at the first mass meeting that sparked the Montgomery bus boycott at Holt Street Baptist Church, which happened to be recorded on tape, did not match the original wording.\(^\text{18}\) The emphasis had shifted from justice to freedom. Some argue that this must have been intentional to make it more appealing to a broader white audience.\(^\text{19}\)

The sixth volume of the King papers, published in 2007,\(^\text{20}\) documents the contents of a private file of sermon materials that King had kept in his study, which were later discovered in his basement. His widow made them available in 1997. It provides evidence that King penned his own sermons.\(^\text{21}\) He was the one creating the theology of his sermons and mass meeting speeches. The editors describe King’s process:

> King continually revised his favorite sermons to increase their rhetorical effectiveness as well as to incorporate new themes and contemporary references. The documents illustrate his characteristic ability to weave together biblical texts and ideas from various sources — the sermons of other ministers, the insights of philosophers, passages from literature and Christian hymns, contemporary news and set pieces — into a coherent, persuasive presentation.\(^\text{22}\)

It is also clear that the published material, including his sermons in *Strength to Love*, were edited supposedly to make them less provocative to a broader public. The editors of the King papers argue that while officials of the original publisher, Harper, “agreed with King’s broad view of race relations and may have privately cheered his methods and his language calling for the attainment of social justice, in their editing of King’s sermons, they reworked his sentences with the purpose of toning down what they saw as the militant character of his speech.”\(^\text{23}\)

All in all, one can conclude that King used others’ material extensively and often without adequate citation. Yet his theological and other writings are authentic because he created new texts out of the given material, including sound theological analyses and arguments.
Without casting doubt on the support provided by his own staff and professional editors, we can still claim from the strong evidence that King himself was the mind behind the published work. The published papers and available archival material provide a solid ground for an account of his theology.24

**King’s Theology as the Foundation of His Political Activism**

Various facets of King’s theological thought and its relationship to his political activism can be discerned.25 One is his understanding of human dignity based on the biblical image of all human beings created in the image of God. The second is his understanding of the church, which includes the mission of promoting justice in this world grounded in the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. A third dimension is King’s application of the concepts of civil religion while simultaneously acting as a prophet of Protestant theology and the religion of the republic. Finally, one needs to look at King’s homiletics, his paramount emphasis on freedom, human rights, and human dignity, as well as his universalizing tendency, as fundamental features of his theology. These stem from the American branches of Reformed and non-conformist theology and the African American theological and church traditions and have no parallels in European theological discourse. His synthesis of liberal Boston Personalism and Niebuhr’s Christian Realism is especially interesting. It is important to note that his social theory and anthropology were deeply grounded in theology. As King stated:

> Personalism’s insistence that only personality — finite and infinite — is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.26

King’s call to engage in the political struggle for human dignity and human rights cannot be separated from the theological concept of *Imago Dei*, which is a fundamental component of black religion and

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24 The editors of the published sermon material in *Papers of MLK*, vol. 6, claim to have gleaned novel insights from this material (see, in addition to the “Introduction,” 1-44, also Carson, *Martin’s Dream*, 173-83). While its publication is undoubtedly advantageous for research, similar evidence was previously available in the documents in the Martin Luther King, Jr., Archive at Boston University (BU), including drafts of *Strength to Love*. The list of documents I consulted and excerpted in the early 1990s is documented in Michael Haspel, *Politischer Protestantismus*, 374. However, I have not yet been able to systematically compare the documents at BU with the published documents in Carson, ed., *Papers of MLK*, vol. 6.


abolitionist theology. King argued: “All men, created alike in the image of God, are inseparably bound together. This is at the very heart of the Christian gospel.”27 His theological critique of segregation follows from this understanding: “Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ; for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, Negro nor white.”28

These aspects of human dignity based in the ideas of all human beings being created in God’s image and being interrelated find their expression in King’s concept of the “beloved community,” which refers to a vision of a society in which people live together with fundamental respect, overcoming hatred and violent conflict. This grounds his claims for justice and reconciliation in the integration of the voices of biblical prophets and Jesus’s teaching of loving one’s enemy. Richard Lischer argues:

Much traditional theology, including his own Baptist heritage, isolated “faith” and “love” as successive moments in the life of the believer. In King’s vocabulary the two are inseparably joined. There can be no discussion of faith as the intellectual or spiritual preparation for love, or of love as the inevitable response to faith. Faith assumes two modalities at the same time: trust and love.29

Closely related to the concept of the beloved community is King’s understanding of “redemptive suffering.” Although his contemporaries and other theologians also often criticized this idea,30 it was essential to his understanding and justification of nonviolence, as the following quotations in Stride Toward Freedom make clear: “Through nonviolent resistance the Negro will be able to rise to the noble height of opposing the unjust system while loving the perpetrators of the system”;31 and “The way of nonviolence means a willingness to suffer and sacrifice.... The answer is found in the realization that unearned suffering is redemptive.”32 This latter statement, in turn, is grounded in his belief that God is on the side of justice in the end: “Let us realize that as we struggle for justice and freedom we have cosmic companionship.”33

27 Martin Luther King, Jr., “For all — A Non-Segregated Society: You Are All One in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3, 28).” BU Box 3, Folder I-11, 5 of 9, 1 (Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., 4:123-25). On King’s understanding of the Imago Dei, see Richard W. Wills, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God (Oxford, 2009). Though I basically do agree with Wills’s analysis, his methodology is flawed in that he refers to King’s student papers, which are basically reproductions of other texts, as we have discussed above, as material proving some of King’s theological concepts as if they were his original work.

28 King, Stride Toward Freedom, 205.

29 Lischer, The Preacher King, 229. On the development of King’s terminology from “beloved community” to the “Kingdom of God,” see 234.


31 King, Stride Toward Freedom, 214.

32 Ibid., 216, 103.

33 Martin Luther King Jr., “A Look to the Future. Address Delivered at the Highlander Folk School’s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Observance September 2, 1957.” BU Box 54, Folder VII-14, 13 (Papers, 4:269-76). See also “Annual Address Delivered at the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change under the Auspices of the Montgomery Improvement Association, 3 December 1956, Holt Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama.” BU Box 2, Folder I-11, 14 (Papers, 3:451-63).
“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.”

Against this backdrop, King developed his theological concept of the church. In King’s ecclesiology, it is crystal clear that the church not only has to deal with otherworldly affairs but also with questions of justice, equality, and freedom in this world. King declared repeatedly: “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind the Marxists like to see — an opiate of the people.”

From the very beginning of his ministry in Montgomery, King’s church, as a religious and a civic institution, took part in the struggle against segregation. Again, this was not only in an instrumental sense but also in his theological understanding of the church, which was deeply rooted in the tradition of the urban black church and had been handed down to him by his father and his predecessor in the pulpit in Montgomery. As King put it: “Whenever a crisis emerges in society the church has a significant role to play.” He leaves no doubt about what the task of the church is: “The church ... must face its historic obligation in this crisis. In the final analysis the problem of race is not a political but a moral issue. ... The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable must confronting the church today.” For King, theology has to be transformed into action: “It is not enough for the church to be active in the realm of ideas; it must move out into the arena of social action.”

The third dimension of King’s theological identity was his use of concepts from two religions: Christianity and civil religion. Robert Bellah’s concept of civil religion describes the religious strands in the philosophy and rituals of the American republic. Within this civil religion, there is a belief shared by most Americans that all men are created equal by God, independent of their religious orientation. This concept had been widely accepted in the last several decades and
was also applied to the interpretation of King’s public oratory. Some scholars have thus concluded that King’s use of religious language was only a rhetorical tool.

Yet I believe King’s religious language was also a matter of conviction, and that Winthrop Hudson’s concept of “two religions” can be applied to understanding and interpreting King’s theology. One religion is evangelical Protestantism, which was so pervasive in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that even non-Protestant denominations were modeled upon it. The other he calls the “religion of the republic.” Hudson’s differentiation between the two religions is still useful because it reminds us that the “religion of the republic” did not emerge in a situation of religious pluralism. The religion of the republic bridged mainly the differences among Protestants and the gap between believers and non-believers. Since the American myth starts with people longing for the freedom to practice their religion, it is sometimes overlooked that most colonists did not view religion as a major concern. In this context, the “religion of the republic” emerged as the original form of civil religion, embraced by an overarching majority of the people as part of their culture, as a source of the guiding principles of the commonwealth, and as a truly American phenomenon.

What was later termed civil religion can be found in King’s very first public appearance. He based his central concept of human dignity on the fundamental civil religious principle of all men being created equal, quoting Lincoln and appealing to his unfulfilled legacy. To be sure, King used this widely accepted code not only strategically but also as a fundamental part of his theology, along with the other basic convictions of the religion of the republic. He used biblical sources as well as the rhetoric and iconography of civil religion. His use of President Abraham Lincoln and the United States Constitution is legion. But he also critically engaged with the ideology of civil religion throughout his career, invoking its promises and referring to those that were broken. In other words, “[King’s] civil religion was succeeded by its demythologization.” He used the major symbols of civil religion to criticize the current injustices in contemporary politics, turning civil religion into normative arguments in a conflict rather than simply as a means to reduce conflict by means of a shared set of symbols.

All in all, the examples cited here show that King’s religious language was not merely a rhetorical tool to communicate his political claims. The biblical grounding and theological foundation are actually
the prevalent and predominant dimensions in King’s thought. He employed the language of civil religion to lend more weight to his argument; the legal arguments were important for him, the founding fathers of the United States and the Constitution were significant. But most fundamental was his Christian conviction that God had created all human beings to be equal in His or Her image.

We can see this in the fourth dimension of his theological gestalt, his homiletic and oratorical style, which I want to illustrate briefly using King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, drawing upon Keith D. Miller’s persuasive analysis of it in *Voice of Deliverance*. Miller argues that the address was actually not a speech but a sermon, evoking in the decisive passage no less than three biblical references — to the prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel. He not only shows which material King used and how he combined and arranged it but also argues convincingly that the dream part of the speech was even a folk sermon. After all the inductive arguments in the other speeches at the March on Washington, which started from the experiences of oppression, King arranged his oratory deductively, first referring to secular authorities such as Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, then referring to biblical authorities. The references to the secular authorities actually did not describe a dream — they resulted in the description of a nightmare. Only when he started to refer to Amos — “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream!” — did the dream unfold — and the mode of the talk changed into a sermon. King abandoned the written typescript and began extemporizing. Miller states:

As he catalogued an American nightmare, King essentially argued that the finest secular presences, including Jefferson and Lincoln, had failed miserably. The “architects of our republic” offered a “promissory note” that pledged liberty. But for blacks the note proved “a bad check,” a check “marked insufficient funds.” By introducing divine authority after secular authority, which had proven inadequate, this new Biblical prophet suggested that an impatient God would now overrule secular forces and install justice without delay. When God ordains for justice to roll down like waters, the flood must eventually cross the Mason-Dixon line. When valleys are exalted, racism will end. When the stone of hope emerges from the mountain, it will smash the flawed kingdom of segregation.44

King did not make a concrete political claim, but he provided a biblical vision of justice that was ultimately radically political.

**King as a Contextual Theologian and Thus Political Activist**

Ultimately, King’s theology can be qualified as *contextual* theology. Analysis of the cultural, social, and societal context is built into the very concept of his theology. Therefore, King’s theology focuses not only on political and social action but also provides the categories for linking theological interpretation, ethical orientation, and political action.

Most models of contextual theology emphasize one aspect of a given social context as the criterion for contextualization. In many feminist approaches, it is the (subjective) experience of women. In African and Asian models of enculturation, it is the respective culture. Liberation theology focuses on a certain kind of societal structure.45 Elsewhere I have argued that these models may produce inadequate results since they only pay attention to one level of society. The concept of theological contextualization I have suggested draws on the elements of the “life-world” developed by Jürgen Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action*.46 Methodologically, contextualization is structured according to the subjective, objective-cultural, and social world relations. I suggest that with these three dimensions one can sufficiently analyze a social context and reconstruct theology in a way fitting its communicative, cultural, and political challenges while remaining true to its original intention.

With regard to King’s theology, my claim is twofold: First, I want to propose that King actually employed such a method of contextualization. Second, I argue that this was a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for his contribution to the civil rights movement and its success.

King was prepared enough to arrange his contextual theology to support the civil rights movement. His academic training equipped him with the intellectual and theological tools to analyze the mental, ideological, economic, and political schemes underlying racism and exploitation. While at Boston University he took sociology classes in summer school at Harvard. King was fully aware that segregation and racism were structurally caused and also had subjective psychological effects:


This is the ultimate tragedy of segregation. It not only harms one physically but injures one spiritually. It scars the soul and degrades the personality. It inflicts the segregated with a false sense of inferiority, while confirming the segregator in a false estimate of his own superiority.47

Moreover, he systematically combined the subjective experience of segregation with its objective-cultural and societal causes: “Men convinced themselves that a system which was so economically profitable must be morally justifiable. ... This tragic attempt to give moral sanction to an economically profitable system gave birth to the doctrine of white supremacy.”48 And he was clear about the social preconditions of the civil rights movement:

The last half century has seen crucial changes in the life of the American Negro. The social upheavals of the two world wars, the great depression, and the spread of the automobile have made it both possible and necessary for the Negro to move away from his former isolation on the rural plantation. The decline of agriculture and the parallel growth of industry have drawn large numbers of Negroes to urban centers and brought about a gradual improvement in their economic status.49

King’s concept of theology stressed that religion had to start with people’s social reality in order to change it according to the prophetic visions of freedom and justice:

Certainly, otherworldly concerns have a deep and significant place in all religions worthy of the name. ... Religion, at its best, deals not only with man’s preliminary concerns but with his inescapable ultimate concern. ... But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social conditions.50

King employed a complex method of theological contextualization that centered on analyses of the subjective, objective-cultural, and social-societal world relations. This enabled him to start his theology from social reality and aim to change it. His ability to fulfill this theological enterprise so brilliantly fueled the civil rights movement with intellectually sound and emotionally moving visions and spurred action accordingly. Thus, the East German understanding of King

47 King, Stride Toward Freedom, 37.
48 King, Strength to Love, 44.
50 King, Stride Toward Freedom, 36. This new approach was shared by other ministers such as Wyatt Tee Walker, who stated: “I didn’t see that preaching, visiting sick, praying with troubled people, and burying the dead was the fulfillment of the ministerial responsibility. I had to be concerned about whether people had enough to eat, what kind of homes they lived in, etc.” (Interview, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Howard University [Washington, DC, 1967], 7).
as a theologian might actually lead us to a better understanding of King the civil rights leader. In the words of James Cone, one of the greatest articulators of Black Liberation Theology: “… if one wishes to know what it means to be a theologian, there is no better example than Martin Luther King, Jr.”

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51 James H. Cone, The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., 36.