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Martin Luther King Jr.'s Theological Evolution and the Impact of the (Black) Social Gospel on His Political Views

The aim of this article is to analyze Martin Luther King Jr.'s theological evolution and to present theological ideas that influenced his political views, paying special attention to the (Black) social gospel. The article also provides an overview of the academic debate among King scholars who differ in opinions on the importance of various elements of his theological outlook and their influence on his activism. Referring to Gary Dorrien's definition and analysis of the influence of the Black social gospel, a tradition of the Black Church that was often omitted in earlier analyses, I will discuss his contribution to this debate.

Key words: Black Church, Martin Luther King Jr., social gospel, Black social gospel, religion and politics, King scholarship, academic debate

Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, social activism, political leadership, religious and philosophical views as well as their impact have been analyzed many times and from various perspectives. Nevertheless, over time many myths about King have been created. He became an iconic figure with a national holiday in his own name, but the conflict over the meaning of his historical legacy has been ongoing with political forces across the spectrum claiming the correct interpretation of his message (Burns 7). In order to promote their own perspectives and views, conservatives as well as liberals have stressed different elements of his message, often taking them out of context. While conservatives would often point out his message of color-blind society in order to criticize affirmative action as well as his 'theology of reconciliation' in order to suggest 'moderate approach to racial issues,' liberals would emphasize his consistent (though not entirely successful) fight for the rights of African Americans, sometimes connecting it to his progressive stance on social issues, including poverty, and more radical on the war in Vietnam, and sometimes not. (Burns 7).

Not only political circles have tried to appropriate King's message to their views, but religious groups have also chosen only certain aspects of his theological views to concentrate on. Some religious conservatives would stress his evangelical background and conservative elements of his inherited faith, including gender issues, without mentioning his departure from biblical literalism. Liberal Christians on the other hand, would focus on his fascination with liberal theology, without mentioning that he saw certain limitations to it. In addition to these differences, Black churches would rightly stress the Black Church[1] heritage as formative to King's views and actions, without mentioning, however, the divisions among themselves, including those concerning granting or not granting support for King's activism and civil disobedience actions.[2] Therefore, it is important to repeatedly reexamine his views, their evolution, and the role of different theologies that shaped them.[3]

Interestingly, however, scholars who attempted this task often differed in their opinions on the importance of various elements of what became his theological outlook. Some would play up Reinhardt Niebuhr's influence on King, yet others would stress Brightman's personalism, Gandhi's nonviolence, the social gospel or the Black

[1] It is important to distinguish the terms *Black Church* and *Black churches.* The term *the Black Church* evolved from the phrase *the Negro Church* used by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903). It is usually used to denote "the collective reality of black Christianity across denomination lines" (Pinn IX). The term *Black churches* is used to describe local Black Protestant churches within a particular denomination (Pinn IX). I will use both terms, depending on the context. There is also a debate among scholars whether to capitalize the term *Black/black*. For example, the authors of *Black Church Studies. An Introduction*, capitalize it as "a means of moving beyond skin color towards a notion of shared history, cultural heritage, and group identity" (Floyd-Thomas et al. XXVI). In this text I follow their decision. More about the debate in: Appiah.

[2] More about it in: Marable; Harvey.

[3] I shortly discussed this topic in Napierała, "The Ebenezer…". Here I extend my previous analysis. Studying Martin Luther King's theology was just a part of my research conducted in 2022 thanks to the Kosciuszko Foundation's support. Understanding the ideas that shaped his approach to social and political issues is crucial for understanding contemporary Black churches' stance on these issues as well as theological and political divisions among them.

Baptist tradition – sometimes in various configurations. King himself often emphasized his personalist philosophy (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 443). He also stressed that he came to Gandhi through Mordecai Johnson, (representative of the Black social gospel), and to the social gospel through reading Walter Rauschenbusch as well as through studying Hegel and Niebuhr (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263-264). There are scholars, however, who would challenge this account. Some of them, including David Garrow and James Cone have argued that King's books were often ghostwritten and therefore not entirely reliable (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 264).[4] According to Garrow as well as David L. Chappell, personalist ideas did not really matter for King in his civil rights activism (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 279; Rivers 538). While Garrow stresses the influence of Niebuhr's Christian realism on King's views and argues that King turned Niebuhrian after moral suasion failed in 1962, Taylor Branch and David L. Chappell suggest that King accepted Niebuhrian doctrine early on (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 280; Cook 81).[5] Rufus Burrow, on the other hand, criticizes scholars who "try to undermine the importance of personalism as a major influence on him" (Burrow 20)[6] and stresses the importance of the personalist thought, as well as of the social gospel. He additionally acknowledges the influence of the Black Baptist tradition on King (and applauds Garrow for criticizing the earlier lack of attention to King's African American cultural heritage) concluding that King's views were a product of the synthesis of Black cultural and religious influences and the Western traditions and theologies (Rivers 538).

The most vocal critic of early scholars' disregard for King's Black religious background, who expressed these reservations much earlier than Burrow, is Lewis V. Baldwin.[7] Although he finds King's books reliable in reflecting his views, he thinks that King's account of life (as well as many subsequent accounts) downplayed the influence of the Black Church culture in his formative years (Cook 75; Dorrien, *Breaking…* 264). Baldwin stresses that many of them reflected "a narrow, elitist, racist approach" in their insistence that King's intellectual development was mainly "a product of white Western philosophy and theology" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 264). Another scholar who, like Baldwin, stressed the role of the Black Church heritage was Gayraud S. Wilmore. In his book *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* first published in 1972, he put special emphasis, though, on radicalism, arguing that to a certain degree King continued the early radical tradition of the Black Church.[8] He explained that radicalism had been present in Black folk religion,[9] but the 1920s–1930s were marked by the "deradicalization" of the Black Church (Wilmore 163). King, in his view, was the one who reversed this trend and stopped, what he calls, a 'dechristianization of Black radicalism' (Wilmore 204).

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4 More in: Garrow; Cone, "The Theology…"; Cone, *Malcolm…*

5 More in: Chappell; Branch.

6 Including Garrow.

7 More in: Baldwin.

8 According to Wilmore, Black radicalism "sought liberation from white domination, commended respect for Africa, and used protest and agitation in the struggle for liberation" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 5). It was also "less political and ideological than other forms of radical politics" because integration to the pathologies of white society was not seen as the best solution. Due to the same reasons, it was usually nationalist and unlike King's approach, it concentrated more on separation than integration (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 5).

9 He admits, however, that it was present in some Black communities, but not all.

Wilmore's approach, characteristic for Black liberation theologians, was significantly different than those presented in most of the early analyses. One of them, written as early as 1968 (which might be a good example of what Baldwin criticized) while stressing the impact of different streams of theology on King, certainly minimizes the Black Church tradition. Rathbun summarizes King's views as "influenced by four major intellectual movements:" the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch; Protestant neo-orthodoxy, especially the teachings of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich; personalism taught at Boston University; and the "nonviolent philosophy of love fashioned by Gandhi" (Rathbun 38). Concerning King's religious heritage, Rathbun mentions only that King was "successful in carrying out a critical analysis of his religious beliefs" and rejected fundamentalism in which he was raised, keeping only "Baptist doctrines of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers" (Rathbun 38).

One of the most important analyses of King's theology, conducted in 1990s by a group of scholars led by Clayborne Carson for the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project, does include the effects of King's upbringing in the Black Church. While the authors also note that King Jr. rejected fundamentalist literal approach to the Bible preferred by his father, they stress, however, that the activist tradition of the Ebenezer Baptist Church cultivated by his father and grandfather strongly influenced King Jr. In 1994 Carson noted "that the current trend in scholarship may understate the extent to which King's African-American religious roots were inextricably intertwined with the European-American intellectual influences of his college years" (qtd. in Rivers 238). They conclude, however, that the most important influences came from the social gospel and especially personalism ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 24).

Discussing the importance of the social gospel, in her 2016 article Vaneesa Cook noticed that, "While many scholars of King have acknowledged the influence of the social gospel on his thought and activism, the centrality of social gospel theology in King's intellectual and political development has received insufficient attention" (77). She also stressed that especially when analyzing King's last years and what is perceived as a "radical departure (…) from his earlier, liberal framing of civil rights reform" (74), "scholars have a tendency to downplay the most fundamental component of King's activism— his religion" (75). Connecting it rather to Black radicalism or socialist labor movement, they fail to notice that there was an "intersection between King's radicalism and his religiosity" (Cook 75).[10] She agrees with Michael K. Honey, who in his book *Going Down Jericho Road* "acknowledges the significance of the social gospel in shaping King's radical response to the injustices of capitalist labor" (qtd. in Cook 76). And while she acknowledges the role of the Black Church tradition in influencing Martin Luther King's career and conception of the community, she still puts more emphasis on the social gospel learned at northern schools. Generally agreeing with Lewis V. Baldwin on the important role of the Black Church, she thinks that his approach "does not adequately address the fact that King framed his entire religious vision, including his vision of the black church, through a radical conception of the social gospel" (75). In stressing the social gospel impact on King, however, she – as well as a number of other scholars - would not distinguish between the social gospel and the so called 'Black social gospel.' Therefore, she does not consider the social gospel influence as coming from the Black Church tradition.

[10] She admits that there are some scholars who have identified this intersection, though.

One of the first scholars to precisely distinguish between the two kinds of the social gospel was Gary Dorrien. He dedicated a great part of his scholarship to analyzing the history and impact of the Black social gospel. In his opinion, it was the Black social gospel that was the main influence on King's thought. As Dorrien stresses, King was not the first Black thinker who appropriated the social gospel to the specific situation of the Black community. He was rather a continuator of the Black social gospel tradition. And although it was certainly not the mainstream approach dominating in Black churches, Dorrien argues that the Black social gospel was exactly this part of the Black Church tradition that became most important and formative for King – even though later he was also immersed in the white social gospel. According to him, the Black social gospel has been long unnoticed or downplayed by scholars, while in fact it had a greater impact on King's views than previously suggested.[11] Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze Martin Luther King's theological evolution, paying special attention to the Black social gospel – as distinguished by Dorrien. It will be presented in the context of other theological ideas that also influenced King, and were emphasized in earlier analyses.

King's thought has been analyzed from the perspectives of various fields of studies. For a political scientist, theological ideas embraced by political or social leaders are important as long as they influence their political views or actions. According to a research scheme developed by Maciej Potz (*Political…*)[12] for political science of religion, religion is considered a system of beliefs and practices (related to the supernatural) that motivates people to social and political behavior (Potz, *Political…* 20-21). His three-level approach consists of three distinct—but integrated—theoretical perspectives: a macro-level transactional/economic perspective, a mezzo-level social movement theory perspective, and a micro-level cultural/humanistic perspective, which "seeks to explain the relationship between religion and politics from the point of view of the individual" (Potz, *Perspektywy…* 277; 284-289). My analysis will be placed at the micro (individual) level - as determining individual motivations and social mechanisms behind the religiously inspired political behavior of individuals as well as possible influences of various doctrines on people's (political) behavior is crucial in understanding the roles undertaken by leaders, such as Martin Luther King. In political science of religion, it is important to refer to other disciplines, including theology and religious studies - as long as they help in understanding the influence of religion on power relations (Potz, *Perspektywy…* 288). Therefore, while focusing on how the discussed theological ideas might have impacted King's political views, I will refer to analyses presented by theologians and other scholars over the years. I will compare their arguments and interpretations, providing at the same time an overview of the academic debate concerning theological influences on King's activism, while also trying to assess Dorrien's contribution to it. Apart from the literature review and historical analysis of the Black Church's activism, my research is also based on a critical analysis of some of King's writings and practical

[11] Dorrien acknowledges that religious historians – David Wills, Ralph E. Luker, and Calvin Morris – pioneered early research in this area, but only recently has there been more interest in it. More in: Dorrien, "Recovering…".

[12] I also discussed his approach in: Napierała, "The Role…". Here I use elements of the previous analysis.

political proposals and policies he supported. As the article aims especially at discussing the role of the Black social gospel, it is crucial to precisely define it and distinguish from the white (or general) social gospel.

1. Social gospel and Black social gospel

Most generally speaking, the social gospel was a religious movement within Protestantism that began in the late nineteenth century and gained prominence especially in the early twentieth century. It was a Christian ethical response to social problems such as urban poverty, child labor, low wages, economic inequality, crime, and limited access to education. According to a most general definition, it was "a religious social reform movement prominent in the United States from about 1870 to 1920" whose advocates "interpreted the kingdom of God as requiring social as well as individual salvation and sought the betterment of industrialized society through application of the biblical principles of charity and justice" ("Social Gospel"). Developed by liberal Protestant ministers and theologians, including Washington Gladden, Lyman Abbott and Walter Rauschenbusch, it was inspired by New Testament passages that present Christ as a challenger of the status quo. The social gospel movement was providing Protestants with religious justification of actively addressing social problems. It was also a response to conservative theological ideas that stressed individual sin rather than socioeconomic justice.[13] Its proponents usually rejected both secular socialism and laissez-faire capitalism and tried to apply "Christian law" to social problems ("Washington Gladden"; "Lyman Abbott"). The advocates of the movement stressed the importance of the Biblical passage from the Gospel of Matthew (6:10): "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (qtd. in Tichi, 206, 220-221). Theologians such as Rauschenbusch understood history as linear and morally progressive, believing that civilization might evolve through progress, approaching an ideal (Cook 81).

In 1907 Rauschenbusch published the book *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which contained a harsh critique of industrial capitalism and its selfishness (Luker, *The Social…* 317-323). In 1917, he wrote *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, feeling that the movement which was not unified, needed "a systematic theology" that would "make it effective" (Rauschenbusch 1-2). As it turned out later, his theology of the social gospel has lasted longer than the social movement itself.[14] It stressed the doctrine of the "Kingdom of God" on earth as central to theology. In his view, all other doctrines should be organized around it because it had the potential to

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[13] More in: Marsden.

[14] There is a debate over when the movement (soon strongly linked to Progressivism) faded. Some scholars suggest that it was after the First World War. Dorrien argues that until 1917 it generated "the greatest wave of social justice activism" in American Protestant churches, but "by the 1930s it was mostly a peace and ecumenical movement" (Dorrien, "Recovering…"). Elements of the theology of social gospel, however, remained present in liberal Protestant churches. Other historians have suggested that the movement survived until the late twentieth century, perhaps even until today. Theologian Max L. Stackhouse thinks that it might have been going through different phases, such as ''classic'' one, Christian realism phase, the civil rights campaign phase, and liberation theology phase (Cook 76-77).

be a revolutionary social force that could correct imperfect social order (Rauschenbusch 134-137). "The idea of redeeming social order" should, according to him be an "annex to the orthodox conception of the scheme of salvation" (qtd. in Luker, *The Social…* 321). Rauschenbusch strongly emphasized the social significance of Jesus' message that praised the ethic of love and a "brotherhood of man." He thought that by following the example of Jesus, it was possible to "direct history toward the Kingdom of God on earth" and that "social problems are moral problems on a large scale." He also stressed that through the ethic of love, "Jesus worked on individuals and through individuals, but his real end was not individualistic, but social, and in his method he employed strong social forces" (qtd. in Cook 79). Therefore, the church should be oriented toward this world more than to the hereafter (Cook 79).

Importantly, although both the social gospel movement and its theology soon became characteristic of liberal and mainline Protestantism, in the beginning, their elements were also accepted by pre-fundamentalist, postmillennial evangelicals (including Black evangelicals). It was eventually rejected by conservative evangelicals, especially white premillennialists and Christian fundamentalists. Nonetheless, a number of Black evangelicals seemed to have adhered to elements of it—despite conservative shifts in theology.[15] With time, however, they created their own Black social gospel.

What is also important in this context is that historians noticed racial failures of the white social gospel. Many stressed that some of its representatives were racist (e.g. Josiah Strong) and others were long silent on the race problems (e.g. Gladden or Rauschenbusch) (Luker, *The Social…* 2). Ralph E. Luker notices, however, that American social Christianity did play an important role in racial reform since the period of Emancipation. A number of its representatives, as he points out, advocated education and later "civil rights of the freedmen" (*The Social…* 87). Nevertheless, he admits that although "white social gospel prophets were less indifferent to race relations than historians suggest," they differed greatly on these issues. As he stresses "their attitudes spanned a broad spectrum" (Luker, *The Social…* 268). And while a number of them, together with Black leaders, opposed lynching and involuntary servitude, they were greatly divided on disenfranchisement issues (Luker, *The Social…* 233). Other scholars add that their attitude to racial problems and African Americans was highly paternalistic (Trimiew 17-37). Therefore, Black intellectuals and pastors who appreciated the message of the social gospel, and especially Rauschenbusch's stress on the dignity of every human,[16] developed their own Black social gospel, although this has been long disregarded in historiography.

According to Gary Dorrien, while the Black social gospel, which should be understood as both the tradition of thought and of activism, had its roots in the abolitionist tradition, it was mainly a response to new challenges. These were connected

[15] Protestant Fundamentalism was created in white evangelical churches but it found its way in various forms into some Black churches, too.

[16] The early Rauschenbusch was silent about racism, therefore scholars wrongly claimed that the white social gospel ignored racial justice issues (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 35). Luker was of the first to stress that he was not entirely silent. In *Christianizing the Social Order* Rauschenbusch wrote that the spirit of Jesus "smites race pride and prejudice in the face in the name of humanity." In his last book, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, he described "racial lynching as the ultimate example of social evil" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 35).

to the failure of Reconstruction, and the fact that newly granted constitutional rights for African Americans were being taken away from them while lynching and Jim Crow regulations became an everyday reality. It also responded to the problems that the white social gospel was trying to address: industrialization, economic justice, and the role of the government in protecting constitutional rights. However, as Dorrien stresses, it addressed these issues in a different way than the white Progressives because of racial oppression, which overshadowed all other problems of African Americans and "refigured how other problems were experienced" (Dorrien, "Recovering…"). Black social gospel theologians unlike their counterparts did not have access to the general public, therefore they had to create a counter-public sphere. They also could not downplay the meaning of the cross in favor of moral influence theory (unlike their white counterparts) because they experienced being "persecuted, crucified people" everyday (Dorrien, "Recovering…").[17]

As Dorrien stresses, the Black social gospel "emerged from four groups that asked what a new Abolitionism would look like after Reconstruction was abandoned." Among them:

> [t]he first group identified with Booker T. Washington and his program for political accommodation and economic uplift. The second group espoused the nationalist conviction that African Americans needed their own nation. The third group advocated protest activism for racial justice, strongly opposing Booker Washington. The fourth group implored against factional division, calling for a fusion of pro-Washington realism and selective anti-Washington protest militancy (Dorrien, "Achieving…").

Another important influence on the Black social gospel was later brought by W.E.B. Du Bois whose protest tradition additionally influenced such social gospel ministers as Reverdy C. Ransom and Richard R. Wright, Jr. The influence of the second group led by bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Pastor Alexander Crummell was not as significant for the development of the final version of the Black social gospel as the influence of the representatives of the third group (e.g., Pastor Reverdy C. Ransom and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett) and the fourth group (e.g., Pastor Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Baptist educator Nannie Burroughs).

As Dorrien stresses, the final fully-developed version of the Black social gospel was mostly based on the last two groups. Their representatives also had affinities with white social gospel advocates. Thus, "the full-fledged black social gospel stood for social justice religion and modern critical consciousness," but since racial oppression was the most serious problem in their communities, "[h]ere the belief in a divine ground of human selfhood powered struggles for black self-determination and campaigns of resistance to white oppression" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 3). According to an operating definition of the full-fledged Black social gospel proposed by Dorrien:

> It combined an emphasis on black dignity and personhood with protest activism for racial justice, a comprehensive social justice agenda, an insistence that authentic Christian faith is incompatible with racial prejudice, an emphasis on the social ethical teaching of Jesus, and an acceptance of modern scholarship and social consciousness (*Breaking…* 3).

[17] However, just like the white social gospel, "It also wrestled with modern challenges to religious belief" (Dorrien, "Recovering…").

The Black social gospel founders were not only clergymen but also journalists (many were both), who "established that progressive theology could be combined with social justice politics in a black church context" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 5-6). But although they were fighting for Black communities, opposing Jim Crow, lynching, and economic injustice, they did not manage to convince all Black churches to their progressive positions. Contrary to conventional wisdom and certain myths created after the CRM era, Black churches have always been divided in their attitude toward social engagement.[18] Despite the "radical tradition" within the Black Church,[19] some congregations withdrew from this-worldly matters, focusing on the conservative evangelical theology and spirituality. The founders of the Black social gospel, some of whom, as Dorrien stresses, often also came from the "radical tradition" of the Black Church, "gave way to a generation of social gospel ministers who refused to give up on the black churches, even as a rising tide of black intellectuals contended that black churches were hopelessly self-centered, provincial, insular, anti-intellectual, and conservative" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 6). Among the Black scholars who criticized Black churches for their passivity and overemphasis on otherworldliness were, e.g. W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, and Rayford Logan, but also Benjamin E. Mays, who at the same time was a representative of the Black Church and the Black social gospel.[20] For him, the Black social gospel was a solution that more Black churches should accept. Mays, who was later mainly known as the president of Morehouse College, was also the editor of the first important anthology of Rauschenbusch's work (Luker, *The Social…* 321). Among other famous representatives of the full-fledged Black social gospel were: Howard University president Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Baptist Pastors Vernon Johns and J. Pius Barbour, theologian Howard Thurman, and minister and politician Adam Clayton Powell Jr.[21]

2. Martin Luther King Jr.'s socio-religious background

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929 and grew up in a politically active Black church. His father, Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., and grandfather, Rev. Alfred Daniel Williams were both pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta as well as

[18] Partly due to accepted theology, but also due to the specific circumstances they had to operate in. More about historical analysis of the Black Church's activism in: Napierała, *The Ebenezer…*

[19] Both Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone analyzed the "radical tradition" in Black religion. They agreed that it was sometimes present in Black churches, but not always. According to Wilmore, Black religious radicalism, that came from the Black folk religion, was not deeply ideological and until 1970s lacked theological justifications. He generally considered Black religion as "lacking theological self-consciousness" before the creation of Black liberation theology in 1970s. Therefore, as Dorrien points out, he did not take into account the Black social gospel – neither as part of the radical tradition, nor as a serious Black theology (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 5).

[20] More in: Frazier; Du Bois; Mays.

[21] As Dorrien stresses, in the next generation of the Black social gospel representatives, apart from Martin Luther King Jr., were also ministers Wyatt Tee Walker, Fred Shuttlesworth, Andrew Young, Ralph Abernathy, James Lawson, and Joseph Lowery; activists John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette; and lawyer/priest Pauli Murray ("Recovering…").

community leaders. They were successful preachers who provided economic security to their families, but both remained socially active on the side of the vulnerable. Williams, who was a conservative born-again Baptist, apart from discussing strictly religious matters, was also addressing segregation and other problems of poor and working-class residents ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 3; Warnock 121).[22] Remaining committed to conservative evangelical principles, Williams preached individual salvation and personal relations with Jesus alongside issues like home ownership and human rights (Warnock 121). The authors of The MLK Jr. Papers stress that he was one of the first Black pastors who were developing the distinctive African American version of the social gospel by promoting "a strategy that combined elements of Washington's emphasis on black business development and W.E.B. Du Bois's call for civil rights activism" (3). Such approach, according to Dorrien's classification, would rather locate him in the fourth group of the Black social gospel forerunners, however.

His ministry inspired Martin Luther King Sr. ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 10) who also "led Ebenezer with a mixture of evangelical faith and progressive social action" (Evans; Warnock 123-126). According to the authors of The MLK Jr. Papers, he preached "a social-gospel Christianity that combined a belief in personal salvation with the need to apply the teachings of Jesus to the daily problems of their black congregations" (10). As Dorrien stresses, King Sr. applied emotional preaching style and "preached about a personal God of judgment, grace, and miracles, a gospel of sin and redemption, and a gospel never lacking a social dimension" (*Breaking…* 257). King Sr. considered himself a social gospel preacher. But although he became acquainted with modern theology during his studies at Morehouse and included social issues in his sermons, his son, Martin Luther King Jr., after studying theology at Morehouse, described him as a fundamentalist (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 257). While King Sr. declared he wanted to avoid "an overreliance on emotional oratory," ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 10), his son concluded that both his father and grandfather adhered to an evangelical style that "appealed to emotions rather than to the intellect," especially during frequent revivals ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17-18). King Jr. admitted, however, that their conservative evangelical faith did not prevent them from engaging in this-worldly issues, having both priestly and prophetic overtones.[23] As Dorrien puts it, "Daddy King was fully a social gospel minister in the sense that the category mattered to him" (*Breaking…* 257). According to his classification, however, King Sr. was not a representative of what he calls the full-fledged Black social gospel (which included acceptance for modern scholarship and biblical criticism as well as stress on social justice) but rather of one of the groups from which it evolved.

King Jr. was growing up aware of his father's vocal opposition to segregation. As he admitted later, his father's activism largely shaped his understanding of the ministry ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 12). But while he was inspired by the activist tradition of the Black Church and exposed to his father's version of the Black social gospel, he did not accept all elements of his religious upbringing. A.D. Williams and King Sr. were both deeply rooted in the American evangelical movement (from which Black

[22] He was active in the NAACP (Evans).

[23] King Sr. explicitly opposed the vision of a solely otherworldly church ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 13).

churches evolved), and adhered to doctrinal conservatism, fundamentalism—in their literal approach to the Bible—as well as to revivalist emotionalism, which King Jr. would come to reject. Moreover, although they remained socially active, King Jr. noticed that a number of fundamentalist churches (both Black and white) were not. As some authors stress, observing not only racial injustice but also "the plight of poor whites," King Jr. started to question "the conventional practice of American democracy and the conservative agenda of Christian fundamentalism, both of which tacitly accepted the status quo" (Cook 78-79).

Growing up in the South, where lynching, legal prejudice, racism, segregation and poverty created a climate of "ordinary" violence, certainly contributed to the fact that early in his adult life, King Jr. "identified social issues as the central component of his religious worldview" (Cook 78-79).

3. Martin Luther King Jr.'s education and theological evolution

Although Martin Luther King, Sr. had always wanted his sons to become ministers (and ideally to also serve as pastors for Ebenezer), when Martin Luther King Jr. entered Morehouse in 1944, he was in fact planning to become a lawyer or a physician, not a pastor ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). His initial reluctance to become a minister emerged from being uncomfortable with the intense emotionalism he observed in his church ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 14). He later admitted that he would sometimes sneak away from Ebenezer to hear Pastor Borders preach in his church a block away, appreciating his sophisticated language and more intellectual style (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 260). He later recalled he had felt discomfort with the idea of fervent revivals and emotional sudden "conversion" experiences.[24] In his memoirs, he admitted to the lack of "dynamic conviction" during the revival that culminated in his baptism and to the fact that he was just following his sister ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 14). As he explained: "Conversion for me was never an abrupt something." It was rather "unconscious" and "gradual intaking of the noble ideas" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 14). Therefore, he rejected the idea of studying to be a pastor, being convinced that he would have to adhere to his father's type of religiosity. Morehouse, however, showed him a different solution.

3.1. Morehouse College and the first encounter with the Black social gospel representatives

Although he was only 15 when he entered college and was initially too young and too unfocused to earn good notes (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 259), with time he became more engaged with his studies, including subjects concerning theology and biblical criticism. His education made him increasingly critical about conservative evangelicalism. During his years at Morehouse, which finally culminated with the Bachelor's degree in sociology, his "questioning of literal interpretations of biblical texts evolved (…) into criticism of traditional Baptist teachings" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). Years later he even wrote, referring to the time at Morehouse, "the shackles of fundamentalism were

[24] Understood as being born again.

removed from my body" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). His studies, however, did not make him depart from religion - they "opened him to liberalism as a potentially acceptable religious orientation" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). He recalled that at that time he was wondering "whether [the church] could serve as a vehicle to modern thinking" and "wondered whether religion, with its emotionalism in Negro churches, could be intellectually respectable as well as emotionally satisfying" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 18). Interestingly, when he understood that he could be a minister without adhering to fundamentalist interpretations and excessively emotional religious style of evangelical worship, he "decided to accept the challenge to enter the ministry" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 18).

There were several factors that contributed to his decision. He did appreciate the activist part of his father's ministry, and now could separate it from the elements he was not fond of. Moreover, after two summers spent on a tobacco farm in Connecticut, where he learned about race relations outside of the segregated South, observed African Americans attending the same churches as whites, and got involved in leading weekly religious gatherings (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 241-242), he decided that integration is possible and that religion can unite people. Most important influence, however, came from his Morehouse professors, especially Benjamin E. Mays and George D. Kelsey who became his role models. As he later wrote, "Both were ministers, both deeply religious, and yet both were learned men, aware of all the trends of modern thinking." He stressed, "I could see in their lives the ideal of what I wanted a minister to be" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 18).

Benjamin E. Mays, one of the most important representatives of what Dorrien calls the full-fledged Black social gospel, was the first Morehouse president with a doctoral degree. [25] He wanted to "instill a belief in its students that 'Morehouse men' were distinctive in their talent and commitment to racial uplift" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 15). He was a politically-engaged scholar whose teachings promoted not only prophetic social gospel but also the philosophy of *Mahatma* Gandhi. He often argued that "a religion which ignores social problems will in time be doomed" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 15). This belief led him to be highly critical of the Black Church of the time, which in his view was not proactive in terms of working toward African American progress, and for overstressing otherworldliness, understood as "the afterlife religious motif of escapism" (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 242). In his books, including *The Negro's Church* (1933) and *The Negro's God* (1938), he expressed his skepticism about "the emotional fervor of rural black worship and the Sanctification churches" (Dorrien, "Recovering…"). He was calling for "modernized churches committed to social justice theology" and stressed the need of "strong and progressive male ministers" (Dorrien, "Recovering…"; Savage 205-237). This message strongly resonated with King.

"Mays embraced wholeheartedly Rauschenbusch's teaching that the church is supposed to be a revolutionary Christ-following movement that transforms society into the kingdom of God" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 114) during his doctoral studies at University of Chicago, and throughout his career he was interpreting Rauschenbusch's teachings in the context of the particular needs of the Black community.

[25] While The MLK Jr. Papers Project scholars write about Mays, they do not classify him as a representative of the specific/separate Black social gospel.

A very important figure who also influenced Mays' socio-theological convictions (and who would later also directly influence King) was Mordecai Wyatt Johnson; the first African-American president of Howard University (Atari).[26]

Johnson, one of the Black social gospel leaders (who succeeded Reverdy Ransom and Adam Clayton Powell Sr.) studied at the Rochester Theological Seminary where Walter Rauschenbusch championed his thought (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 24, 33). Johnson witnessed "Rauschenbusch's painfully belated attempts to address racial justice" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 35), but embraced his teaching that true Christianity inspired movements for social justice and considered him "the ideal of confident, missionary, modern, radical Christianity" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 36). While interpreting Rauschenbusch within the African American context, Johnson preached that "the church betrayed Jesus Christ if it reduced religion to private faith or status quo religion" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 44). He was also "one of the first to call for a fusion of social gospel theology and Gandhian anticolonial internationalism" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 24). He led Charleston's NAACP chapter, gave speeches on racial and economic justice, advocated more schooling for African Americans, and reformed Howard University, bringing it to national prominence (Washington; Dorrien, *Breaking…* 45; Atari). He also absorbed strong socialist leanings.

Johnson employed Benjamin E. Mays in 1934 as one of the outstanding scholars with whom he wanted to build the prestige of Howard and "infuse its religious culture with the social gospel" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 60; Atari). Mays' position as dean of Howard University's School of Religion (1934-40) gave him the opportunity to travel abroad to participate in several international conferences (including one in India). He was surprised how racial barriers were transcended there which made him even more critical about "the hypocrisy of American Christianity" (Savage 207). After his trip to India, his appreciation of Gandhi's philosophy increased. He thought that Gandhi showed the Indian masses "a new conception of courage" and stressed that "when an oppressed race ceases to be afraid, it is free" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 15). He agreed with Johnson - who was one of the early supporters of Gandhi's noncooperation campaign in the 1920s - on the importance of Gandhian message for African Americans. Johnson influenced Mays in many ways. When Mays later departed from Howard for Morehouse, he stayed in touch with Johnson whom he considered a role model (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 78).[27] To Mays, Johnson was "the exemplar of social gospel possibility" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 97).

After coming to Morehouse, Mays followed Johnson's example in working to improve Black academia. Apart from paying attention to teaching standards and professors' qualifications, he also believed that Black colleges should be "experiment stations in democratic living." Therefore, students should be encouraged to oppose segregation ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 15). While working at Morehouse, Mays passed on the ideas of Johnson, Rauschenbusch as well as his own interpretations of them. He was criticizing American Christianity for not challenging segregation, but also, just like Johnson, stressed that churches should join the NAACP and Urban League as vehicles for social change (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 77). While insisting that "religion counts," he thought it was important to teach students to develop

[26] The famous historically Black, federally chartered research university in Washington, D.C.

[27] So did Howard Thurman, who also influenced King Jr. and who will be discussed below.

"a critical but secure religious position" which would "replace the orthodox religious views of their precollege years" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 15). He was convinced that Black seminaries should be "incubators of the prophetic and intellectually proficient theology that the churches needed" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 120) and that "the minority advocating a prophetic, educated, social Christianity needed to grow dramatically" and replace "the ministerial majority that made the church look feeble" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 118). Mays also advocated for a fully integrated Christian church where people regardless of race would worship together (Savage 217)[28] and stressed that religion should "give direction to life--a direction that is neither communistic nor fascistic--not even the direction of a capitalistic individualism" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 15). He conveyed his message during lectures and sermons in the college chapel. King came to absorb Mays' teachings and his "intellectual, ethically oriented, theologically liberal sermons" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 260). Mays remembered King as an eager listener, who often debated certain points of his lectures, and King later described Mays as "one of the great influences in my life" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 16).[29]

Before King Jr. met his second great role model, George D. Kelsey, he had taken courses taught by Walter Richard Chivers and Samuel Williams which also contributed to his intellectual and theological evolution. While Williams' course fueled his interest in philosophy, especially Hegel (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 260), the courses taught by his new advisor, sociologist, Walter Chivers, who stressed the economic roots of racism, seem to have contributed to King's increasing criticism toward a capitalist economy and to his general awareness of social, economic and political issues ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 16-17).[30] Chivers was a vocal critic of segregation and supported social reformers, including representatives of the Black social gospel, such as Pastor Adam Clayton Powell Jr. from the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.[31] Chivers' discussions of working-class issues touched upon Marxist ideas, but according to various sources, he never openly advocated socialism, and rejected communism, considering its totalitarianism similar to fascism ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 16).

As scholars stress, however, it was a course on the Bible taught by theologian George D. Kelsey that became a breaking point for King's theological development and for his future plans (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 260; "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). Kelsey, who was the only instructor who awarded King an A at Morehouse, also helped to convince him that "pursuing a career in ministry would enable him to address issues of social justice and racial reform" ("Kelsey"). However, while strongly stressing the implications of the Christian gospel for social and racial reform, he

[28] He criticized white churches for not accepting Black worshipers and blamed them for introducing segregation even in churches. He defended, however, all-Black churches and independent Black denominations by explaining that their development was only a response to segregation in white churches (Savage 210).

[29] Through Mays King was indirectly influenced by Johnson, but later when he had a chance to meet him, the influence became more direct. It will be discussed below.

[30] As it was demonstrated in several of his essays from this time ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 34).

[31] He was critical, however, of the idea of "talented tenth Negro leaders" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 16).

also accentuated that the Kingdom of God could "never be realized fully within history" because the sinful nature of man "distorts and imposes confusion even on his highest ideas" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). This approach must have resonated with King's dilemmas and with his observations of racist relations in the South which, as it is generally argued by various King scholars, later also made him open to some elements of Reinhold Niebuhr's theology. Kelsey was an ordained minister in the American Baptist Convention who received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1946 ("Kelsey") and taught introductory courses on the Bible and philosophy of religion. His lectures on biblical criticism turned out to be a great discovery for King (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 261). A newly discovered possibility of departing from literalistic religion resulted in King's new interest in theology. In fact, the moment he reconsidered going to the seminary was after realizing that Bible studies could be more like Kelsey's lectures than like his Bible Sunday school (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 261).

Interestingly, his father, King Sr., also appreciated Kelsey, who was generally respected among Baptist ministers. He considered him a teacher who "saw the pulpit as a place both for drama, in the old-fashioned, country Baptist sense, and for the articulation of philosophies that address the problems of society" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). Just like his father, King Jr. was attracted to Kelsey's stress on the social dimension of Christianity, but was even more fascinated by "his professor's tough-minded approach to theological issues" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). Through Kelsey and Mays King Jr. was acquainted with liberal Protestantism and the full-fledged Black social gospel that inspired him to be a minister. Kelsey is also believed to have provided "some of the intellectual resources King needed to resolve the conflict between the religious traditions of his youth and the secular ideas he had learned in college" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17). King later explained that this conflict had continued until Kelsey's course helped him realize "that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 17).

When King Jr. decided to become a minister after all, his father invited him to preach at Ebenezer, which he would occasionally do during his final year at Morehouse (even before being ordained in 1948). King Sr. felt that in order for his son to join him at Ebenezer, his Morehouse diploma was enough. King Jr., however, wanted to follow the example of his educated role models and pursue graduate studies (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 261). He decided to apply to the northern, theologically liberal school, Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. Although his father was anxious that Crozer was "too white and liberal," and worried that King Jr. would never come back to the segregated South, he agreed to financially support his son's education. He had a friend at Crozer, a Baptist Pastor J. Pius Barbour (who was Crozer's first Black graduate) and was hoping he would take care of his son ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 18-19; Dorrien, *Breaking…* 261).

In King Jr.'s last year at Morehouse, he focused much more on his studies in order to receive recommendations letters to Crozer. He also joined an interracial student group that held monthly meetings at Emory University. King Sr. did not approve of his son's participation in such meetings, but for King Jr. it was an important experience and an exercise in a dialog with white peers, therefore he continued ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 18). At the end of college, King Jr. secured recommendation

letters from several professors, including Lucius M. Tobin, Benjamin Mays, George D. Kelsey, as well as his father and several family friends. Most of them wrote that his scholarship was not excellent, but had potential ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 19).

3.2. Crozer Theological Seminary: social gospel, Black social gospel, personalism, Christian realism, and Gandhian nonviolence

King was admitted to Crozer in 1948 and became one of eleven Black students (including six in his class) at the seminary, which at that time had around a hundred students ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 19). One of the courses he chose in the first term was James Bennett Pritchard's *Introduction to the Old Testament.* Pritchard, a Hebrew Scripture scholar, who taught about biblical criticism, argued that the story of Exodus was exaggerated and that Moses might have been legendary (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 262). King was ready to accept biblical interpretations based on archeological research ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 19). As he later explained, thanks to his teachers from Morehouse, including Mays and Kelsey, "when I came to Crozer, I could accept the liberal interpretation with relative ease" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 261). In his course essays, King expressed his appreciation of the "scientific method" to Old Testament study, but also concluded that while scientific archeological "findings might reveal that biblical stories have mythological roots, they did not necessarily undermine the essential truths of the Old Testament" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 19-20). King further studied biblical criticism in his second semester while taking a course offered by a New Testament scholar Morton Scott Enslin (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 262). In his papers for Enslin, King recognized that Christianity was indebted to earlier religious traditions and again stressed the value of scientific biblical scholarship. At the same time, he reiterated that it did not "undermine essential Christian values" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20). Apart from appreciating biblical criticism, in other papers written in his first year, he showed his continued dedication to socially engaged religion. When discussing scholarship on Jeremiah, he stressed that the prophet could teach that Christians should never "become sponsors and supporters of the status quo (…)." In his view, Jeremiah taught that religion could be a vehicle of social progress (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20).

As King scholars usually argue, the most important moment for King at Crozer was taking courses offered by George Washington Davis. Some claim that it was after meeting Davis that King started to shape his own theological perspective ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20). According to Dorrien, teaching and friendship with Davis was indeed a breakthrough for King (*Breaking…* 262). King had already been exposed to the social-gospel teachings through Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey, but as the authors of The MLK, Jr. Papers stress, Davis who was also influenced by Rauschenbusch writings, expanded his understanding of the philosophical fundaments of modern Christian liberalism (20). In Davis' classroom King was directly introduced to the work of Rauschenbusch. It was also there that King first read Edgar Brightman's writings on personalism ("Davis"). Eventually, King took seven courses with Davis, which was more than one quarter of his courses at Crozer ("Davis"; Dorrien, *Breaking…* 262).

Davis strongly stressed social implications of Christianity which corresponded with King's earlier beliefs concerning the need for social reform ("The MLK, Jr.

Papers…" 20). In his papers for Davis,[32] King reflected on the liberal understanding of the Bible and on social Christianity. In one of the essays, he "rejected literalist interpretations of the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ" and stressed that the kingdom of God "will be a society in which all men and women will be controlled by the eternal love of God" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 262). However, while he repeatedly acknowledged his acceptance of critical biblical scholarship, he always left some space for some traditional Christian beliefs ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20). For example, he insisted that such beliefs as the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the second coming, and the bodily resurrection should be understood metaphorically. However, while viewing Jesus as human, he argued that there was "an element in his life which transcends the human," a divine quality (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20-21). Consistently rejecting fundamentalism - as too bold in claiming "certainty about the nature of divinity" - he insisted that biblical scholars were not trying to destroy religious belief. For him the Bible was subject to historical analysis, because: "This advance has revealed to us that God reveals himself progressively through human history, and that the final significance of the Scripture lies in the outcome of the process" (qtd. in "MLK Jr. Papers…" 21). He also rejected agnosticism as an approach eliminating "mystery from the universe." He concluded that "genuine Christian faith" should accept "that the search for God is a process not an achievement" (qtd. in "MLK Jr. Papers" 21).[33]

What interested King the most in Davis' lectures, however, was his professor's teaching on Rauschenbusch. While King had been exposed to some of Rauschenbusch's ideas by several professors at Morehouse (mostly through the perspective of the Black social gospel), now he came to study them directly. In his notes for one of the courses King wrote that the social gospel was right in its belief that economic justice was an essential aspect of gospel teaching and that he was "a profound advocator" of it (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 262). He was fascinated by Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (just like his Morehouse role models). As he later wrote, it was "a book which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experience" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 262).[34] In his 1963 *Strength to Love*, he stressed that it taught him that "the gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but also his body, not only his spiritual well-being but also his material well-being" (qtd. in Cook 80). Also, Rauschenbusch's Christian approach to socialism inspired King.[35] He thought it reclaimed the teaching of Jesus and the gospel for so-

[32] According to King scholars, his papers for Davis became more reflective and intellectually engaged than the previous ones, but many flawed by unacknowledged textual appropriations ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20).

[33] Quotations based on King, Jr. essays from that time (available online at *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*).

[34] Quote from *Stride toward Freedom.*

[35] Rauschenbusch supported changes connected to practical socialist ideas (e.g. more public ownership, unions, protective labor laws). He did not, however, wholly embrace socialist movements and criticized secular socialists for their anti-religious stance, class hatred, and neglect for the issue of personal morality. He wanted to be a mediator between the Christian church and socialist movements. He never allied with any socialist group, and was sympathetic to their goals, but not always their methods (Feuerherd).

cial justice activism. It was important to King that it pointed to systemic structures of oppression and he agreed with Rauschenbusch's critique of American capitalism as "exploitative and predatory" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263).

According to most King scholars, the impact of the social gospel (although they usually focus only on its white version) on King's theological evolution is undeniable. What they do not always agree on is whether it was at the center of his theological views or was there a different theological thought (or tradition) that dominated it. Indeed, during his education King came across several other streams of thought that also influenced his final theological outlook. During Davis' classes, he was introduced to personalism that played an important role for him. Later, his education in Crozer and Boston University will also bring him encounters with neo-orthodoxy and Niebuhr's Christian realism.

Edgar S. Brightman's personalism in simplest lay terms is "the belief that all human life is created in God's image and, therefore, has dignity, value, and a fraternal linkage. What laypersons might call the 'soul,' Boston personalists call 'personality:' self-conscious experience capable of rational thought and moral judgment" (Rivers 536). Proponents of this view "consider personality to be the most useful clue toward understanding reality" (Rivers 536). According to the authors of The MLK Jr. Papers, King also became interested in Brightman's personalism because "it recognized the importance of nonintellectual sources of theological knowledge, including one's own experiences" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 21). He valued Edgar S. Brightman for seeing "human awareness of God's presence as the very essence of religious experience" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 21).

Davis' classes at Crozer were, however, not his sole encounters with Boston personalism. King learned and discussed personalism also during his dinner visits to his father's old friend from Morehouse, Pastor Barbour, who was now an important representative of the full-fledged Black social gospel. Barbour was "influenced by Brightman's personalism," and encouraged King to study it. He was also interested in "Niebuhr's realism, Rauschenbusch's socialism, and Henry Nelson Wieman's naturalistic behaviorism" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 269), and all these interests with time also influenced King.

Although King struggled with understanding Brightman's *Philosophy of Religion* ("which confused, challenged, and inspired him") until the end of his education at Crozer (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 270), he often used Brightman's arguments against the arguments of Karl Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians, which he also came to study in Davis' courses. He was convinced that "genuine Christian faith" accepts "that the search for God is a process not an achievement" (qtd. in "The MLK Papers" 21). Due to this belief King criticized "the views of Karl Barth and other 'crisis' or neo-orthodox theologians who argued that man, corrupted by original sin, could never come to know God through reason" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 21). Brightman's view on the importance of "human awareness of God's presence" was more convincing to him. ("The MLK Papers" 21).

However, while highly appreciating the social gospel and Boston personalism as well as rejecting fundamentalism and criticizing Barth's neo-orthodoxy, with time King started to acknowledge the limitations of liberal theology. He did not reject biblical criticism, but referring to his personal experiences from the South, he argued in one of his essays for Davis that liberals too "easily cast aside the term sin, failing to

realize that many of our present ills result from the sins of men" (qtd. in "The MLK Papers" 21). Therefore, gradually he came to pay more attention to neo-orthodox ideas. As he put it, "At one time I find myself leaning toward a mild neo-orthodox view of man, and at other times I find myself leaning toward a liberal view of man." He explained that the roots of his "mild neo-orthodoxy" were in his southern experiences with "a vicious race problem," some of which made it very difficult for him "to believe in the essential goodness of man" (qtd. in "MLK Jr. Papers" 21-22). His relation to neo-orthodoxy, however, remained quite complex. As he wrote:

> I have become a victim of eclecticism. I have attempted to synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology and come to some understanding of man. Of course I must again admit that the insights which I have gained from neo-orthodox theology about man are quite limited. Its one-sided generalizations are by no means appealing to me. However I do see value in its emphasis on sin and the necessity of {for} perpetual repentance in the life of man (King, "How Modern…").

Apart from the writings of Karl Barth, at Crozer King also encountered Reinhold Niebuhr's works, which he further studied at Boston University. As he explained in his later accounts, he differentiated between Niebuhr's Christian realism and continental forms of neo-orthodoxy. While the latter seemed to him "anti-rational," he found Niebuhr's ideas more useful. As he stated in 1958, "Niebuhr's great contribution to contemporary theology is that he has refuted the false optimism characteristic of a great segment of Protestant liberalism" (qtd. in Cook 83).[36]

In his 1960 essay for the *Christian Century*, King also claimed that before his introduction to the ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr at Crozer, he had been "absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason" (King, "Pilgrimage…"). As he added, "My reading of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence" (King, "Pilgrimage…"). However, while many of his later accounts indicate that he had not considered sinful nature of man before reading Niebuhr, his earlier writings prove otherwise. The social gospel theologians whom he had studied admitted man's sinfulness, although they chose "to dwell on man's capacity to achieve the good life" (Rathbun 39). Also, his essays from Morehouse indicate that he had been exposed to Kelsey's balanced teachings on sin much earlier. Kelsey's lectures might have influenced his receptiveness to some of Niebuhr's ideas although, as his papers from Crozer suggest, not all. Especially that Niebuhr's thought went much further than Kelsey's. In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Niebuhr "challenged the usefulness of moral idealism in struggles for social justice." According to his new approach, Christian realism, "reliance on the power of reason through education and moral suasion was naive and misplaced" ("Niebuhr"). According Niebuhr, "humankind could never achieve perfection in this world, given the persistence of evil and sin" (qtd. in Cook 80). Social relations are power relations, therefore moral suasion will be ineffective without the use of force. Thus, the strategy Niebuhr suggested to social activists included "means of coercive justice" (Cook 80). Concerning the US, he stressed, "However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves

[36] Quotation from King's *Stride toward Freedom*.

completely with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if he is not forced to do so" (qtd. in "Niebuhr").

Niebuhr's thought certainly influenced and complicated King's "understanding of human nature, social relations, and Rauschenbusch's social gospel" (Cook 80). As he later wrote, "I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism" (King, "Pilgrimage…"). Therefore, King, who had believed that "human goodness and the power of love could overcome individual and social ills if strenuously applied" (King, *The Autobiography…* 19), while continuing to stress main convictions tied to liberalism, especially social gospel, gradually came to include elements of Niebuhr's "less hopeful philosophy." Instead of focusing only on man's ability to achieve good, King turned to Niebuhr in support of his own conclusion that reason might be sometimes "darkened by sin" (King, "Pilgrimage…"; Rathbun 39-40; "Niebuhr"). He also came to see segregation as "(…) an expression of [man's] awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness" (Rathbun 39-40).[37]

While he still stressed that "all one-sided generalizations about man must be rejected, whether found in liberal or neo-orthodox thinking" (King, "How Modern…"), in his last years at Crozer he gradually became interested in various aspects of Niebuhr's thought. One of the unsigned papers (attributed to King), written for professor Kenneth L. Smith's course (which King took during his last semester there), strongly suggests author's interest in Niebuhr's ideas. The author of the essay argues against the views of American pacifist leader A. J. Muste,[38] stressing that "absolute pacifism would lead to anarchy" and explaining that "since man is so often sinful there must be some coercion to keep one man from injuring his fellow" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 23).

Nevertheless, despite the conclusions in the paper, Professor Smith, recalling his famous student's attitudes at that time, stressed that "King remained a fervent advocate of the social-gospel Christianity he had derived from both his childhood experiences and his study of Walter Rauschenbusch" (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 23). Smith later added that while discussing "the relative merits of the social ethics of Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr," King would rather argue in favor of Rauschenbusch rather than Niebuhr (qtd. in "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 23).[39]

Dorrien also suggests that King's criticism toward Muste's radical pacifism might not have been (entirely) inspired by Niebuhr's thought. According to his analysis, it might have been an outcome of King's fascination with early Rauschenbusch. He stresses that neither was early Rauschenbusch pacifist in his views concerning fighting the oppression, nor was King (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263). Dorrien also refers to King's early experiences from the South, where he was used to seeing all households possessing guns as means of protection, which was understandable for him

[37] However, to counter this harsh deadlock, King stresses man's freedom (Rathbun 39-40).

[38] Muste came to Crozer during King's second year, advocating radical Christian pacifism (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263).

[39] According to the authors of The MLK Jr. Papers Project, Smith in his "Reflections of a Former Teacher" also speculated that King's later direct-action approach to civil rights might have indicated an eventual acceptance of Niebuhr's brand of realism.

(*Breaking…* 263).[40] As King would later explain his early position on pacifism, "The 'turn the other cheek' philosophy and the 'love your enemies' philosophy are only valid, I thought, when individuals are in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations are in conflict a more realistic approach is necessary" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263).[41]

To King scholars it is also important to understand when, if so, King eventually accepted Gandhian pacifism for which he was later known. In his later accounts, King would explain that he came to endorse pacifism not long after having doubts about Muste's position. As he stressed, it was when he heard Mordecai Johnson, who came to speak about Gandhi's legacy to Philadelphia during King's second year at Crozer. A well-known representative of the Black social gospel, who had earlier also influenced King's Morehouse role models, reportedly electrified King with his lecture (Rathbun 48; Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263). While Muste's message was not entirely convincing to King, hearing a pacifist message of Gandhian method from a Black social gospel leader was both intriguing and inspiring. King recalled being encouraged to read more about Gandhi's life and works (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263). As he explained, Johnson's Gandhian message made him change his mind about believing that "love your enemies" applies only to individual relationships. He decided that he had been wrong about being "realist about the struggles between nations, classes, and racial groups" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263). As he later explained, "It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263). He understood "the doctrine of love" as a motivation and Gandhian non-violence as a method – together a potent weapon for the African American struggle in the USA (Rathbun 48).

As mentioned in the introduction, King's story of his appreciation of Gandhi's method early on (especially through Johnson) as well as his accounts on his educational development have been questioned by some scholars, including David Garrow, James Cone, and Taylor Branch (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263-264). Not only have they pointed out the fact that many of his books and speeches were ghostwritten, but also stressed that some of King's writings contained unacknowledged borrowings, unaccredited references, or even plagiarized sections (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 264).[42] This additionally led some researchers, including Miller and Garrow, to depreciate King's graduate educations in general (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 264). In Dorrien's view, however, "To some degree King's faulty citation practices reflected his boundary situation as a product of the oral culture of black church preaching (…). King grew up in a folk culture that viewed speech and ideas as communal property (…)"

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[40] According to Dorrien, later, when King acquired ghostwriting allies who admired Muste, the story would be softened, implying that Muste impressed him without persuading him (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263).

[41] This balancing explanation, according to Dorrien, might not have been the whole story, though. In his view, King might have also had a short fascination with Nietzsche at that time (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263).

[42] Keith D. Miller in *Composing Martin Luther King, Jr*. reported to have found unattributed passages in *Stride toward Freedom*. Clayborne Carson, senior editor and director of the King Papers Project also revealed that King had extensively plagiarized many of his (Crozer) seminary and graduate school papers, including his doctoral dissertation at Boston University. More in: "The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20; Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263-264).

(Dorrien, *Breaking…* 276). Dorrien does not suggest that it can be an absolute excuse for King. He does think, however, that it is unjust to say that King was reckless about his graduate education and that his school papers did not reflect his views. As he emphasizes, King "studied Rauschenbusch intently" as well as Christian socialism and liberal theological tradition (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 265). The authors of The MLK Jr. Papers Project (including Clayborne Carson) while stressing King's violations, also find his writings competent and conclude that "his essays contained views consistent with those King expressed in other papers and exams written at the time; thus, even though King's writings were derivative, they remain reliable expressions of his theological opinions" ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 20). While the ghostwriting of King's later books and speeches has to be seriously taken into account in academic analyses, relying on King's academic papers to reconstruct his theological development still seems to be valid. Therefore, while analyzing King's stance on Gandhian non-violence, Dorrien mainly refers to his academic writings and other records from his universities (often comparing them to the later accounts).

Scholars who question King's narrative on absorbing Gandhian message either emphasize that King did not name (and quote) the books he read on Gandhi or refer to (much later) accounts of events supplied by Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley (from The Fellowship of Reconciliation).[43] The two activists came to Montgomery in 1956 to support the Montgomery bus boycott and to convince the organizers to rely on nonviolent direct action. King was supposed to tell them that he knew very little about Gandhian nonviolence (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 265). While Dorrien admits that King's knowledge of Gandhi might have been patchy at that time, he also suspects that Rustin and Smiley exaggerated King's ignorance.[44] To support his claim, he refers to King's Professor Kenneth Smith, who remembered King's paper on Gandhi written for his course at Crozer, in which he referred to Gandhi's biography (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 265-266).

On the other hand, Dorrien agrees that King's story of early acceptance of Gandhian nonviolence as a spiritual way of life (told by him and his ghostwriters during the CRM struggle), was most likely also exaggerated. It does not mean, however, as some would like to suggest, that King never became a true-believing Gandhian (and maybe was mostly Niebuhrian, as some of his biographers claimed). As Dorrien stresses, while it is true that King encountered Gandhi's ideas early on (also through Mordecai Johnson), he initially approached them critically. One of the reasons for that was that he also had Niebuhr's ideas in mind at that time. In fact, while at Crozer he wrestled with both Gandhi and Niebuhr (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 266). However, being impressed with Niebuhr's critique of idealism and pacifism did not mean that King was unaware of Rauschenbusch and other social gospel theologians' realism concerning human evil and sin. Yet, as Dorrien argues, "Niebuhr may have helped King confront a deep truth of his own experience or at least given him language for it" (*Breaking…* 266).

At the same time, King did not agree with Niebuhr on a number of issues. For example, although finding Niebuhr's claim that "reason is never innocent of the self-interested struggle for power and advantage," he still believed in the "possibility

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[43] E.g. Miller and Branch.

[44] On the other hand, he admits that King learned most of Gandhian strategy from Smiley and Rustin (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 266).

that reason can be purified by faith" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 267). He even thought that Niebuhr misunderstood Gandhi's strategy as too naïve trust in the power of love. For King, Gandhi's teaching was "that pacifism is not nonresistance to evil, but nonviolent resistance to evil," therefore it is not passive or naïve. It means to resist, but "with love instead of hate." Therefore, as he argued, "True pacifism is not unrealistic submission to evil power, as Niebuhr contends" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 267).[45] Dorrien acknowledges that King wrote these words after befriending Rustin and Smiley, insisting, however, that it was also a language used by Professor Walter Muelder, whom King had encountered much earlier (*Breaking…* 268). He concludes that, "At Crozer and Boston University King knew just enough about Gandhian strategy to feel attracted to it," while still struggling "with the implications of Niebuhrian realism." He learned it through the (Black) social gospel perspective which prevailed in his thinking. And even despite accepting elements of Niebuhr's pessimism, "King's hope that racial injustice might be eradicated rested on his faith that even whites were capable of goodness" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 268).

Also Rathbun in his early analysis admits that despite Niebuhr's influence, King continued to accept several main convictions associated with the social gospel and liberalism: "the collective guilt of institutional forms; the divine judgment on public policies and actions; the prophetic quality of the deeply religious life; and the primacy of love for the individual and his institutions" (Rathbun 39). Among scholars who think that the social gospel message remained more important to King than Niebuhr's approach are also Ralph E. Luker and Vaneesa Cook (Luker, "The Kingdom…"; Cook). They both stress that King was never a thoroughgoing Niebuhrian. Cook additionally criticizes historians, including David L. Chappell, who overstate "the extent to which King embraced Niebuhr's worldview" (82). In her view, "King's continuing faith in nonviolence indicates that he never gave up on his belief in humanity's essential goodness" (Cook 82). She strongly stresses that while King accepted "a realistic adjustment to the social gospel," he retained a faith in most of its central tenets, including moral progress toward the Kingdom of God (Cook 84) and "ultimately refuted the pessimism and defeatism underlying" Christian realism (Cook 82). She concludes that King in fact found the means for a "realistic pacifism" in the civil disobedience of *Mahatma* Gandhi (Cook 84).

The authors of The MLK Jr. Papers Project also stress King's attachment to the social gospel. However, instead of blaming other scholars for exaggerating Niebuhrian influences, they blame King himself. Similarly to scholars who criticized King (and his ghostwriters) for presenting his certainty of the Gandhian message earlier than in reality, they criticize him for overstating his engagement with Niebuhr's ideas during his time at Crozer - especially in his *Stride toward Freedom*. Since few of his Crozer papers (which they thoroughly analyzed) mentioned Niebuhr, they think that his critique of liberalism might have derived from variety of other sources as well. Therefore, they suggest that another theology that King encountered at

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[45] Dorrien thinks that "King was influenced by Niebuhr's theorizing about the unavoidability of coercive violence in all struggles for justice" since early on. In this sense he was Niebuhrian, but at the same time he remained "dead serious about embracing Gandhian nonviolence as a way of life, not merely a tactic." He did not feel he had to "choose between nonviolence and recognizing that it was coercively violent" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 280).

Crozer – personalism – was more important to him at that time. As they conclude, being aware of some shortcomings of social-gospel Christianity, "King sought a theological framework that combined scholarly rigor with an emphasis on personal experience of God's immanence" and most likely found it in Edgar S. Brightman's personalism, which he continued to explore at Boston University ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 23-24). Both Rathbun (45) and Cook (87) also stress the importance of personalism in King's theological evolution. Dorrien, while also appreciating its influence, suggests, however, that King later overemphasized it (as compared to the real influence of the Black social gospel).

3.3. Boston University: personalism and the social gospel

According to the authors of The MLK Jr. Papers Project, "King's discovery of personalist theology had both strengthened his ties with African-American Baptist traditions and encouraged him to pursue further theological study at Boston University ("The MLK, Jr. Papers…" 24). Although at Crozer and in Barbour's salon King was still confused with some of Brightman's ideas, after he was admitted to Boston University, his "confusion became clarifying" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 270) and he eventually identified himself with Brightman's theology. He fully embraced Brightman's emphasis that critically interpreted experience is the source of religious knowledge (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 270). He wanted to take Brightman's course on the philosophy of religion, but because of professor's poor health, he decided to take five courses with another personalist, L. Harold DeWolf. There he thoroughly explored Boston personalism as a variant of post-Kantian idealism, and absorbed Brightman's high regard for Hegelian idealism. Eventually, he accepted personalist thinking on several levels: philosophical, theological, and socio-ethical (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 272-274).

King felt that his belief in personality (divine and human) was his pillar in a violent world. It was important for him that "there was a modern, progressive, justice-oriented theological perspective that centered on his most cherished belief" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 280). Dorrien stresses that in fact, "this perspective blended black church religion, liberal theology, Christian philosophy, and racial justice and social justice militancy like nothing else" (*Breaking…* 280). As Rathbun puts it, "Both his reading in the Social Gospel and his adoption of Personalism have convinced King that the highest 'law' for man is love" (47). In his 1958 book, *Stride toward Freedom*, King wrote, "This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. 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" (qtd. in Rathbun 45).

The topic King chose to analyze in his Ph.D. dissertation, also related to personalism, was inspired by the discussions at Barbour's living room and Davis's classroom, where he first analyzed the theology of Paul Tillich and the naturalistic behaviorism of Henry Nelson Wieman (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 277). Now he decided to examine and evaluate their ideas from a personalist perspective. King concluded that while both Tillich and Wieman "refused the attribution of personality to God," "Tillich overemphasized God's power and Wieman overemphasized God's goodness."

Importantly, although he had always wanted to be a religious intellectual like Mays, Kelsey, and Barbour, and despite the fact that personalism corresponded with the Black church's idea of God in certain ways, in his dissertation King did not decide to relate any of his theological convictions to his experience as a black American (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 277).

Apart from Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf, at Boston University, King was also influenced by Dean Walter Muelder and Professor Allen Knight Chalmers (Rathbun 45), who were both committed to civil rights struggles and to educating Black students. Chalmers was a professor of preaching and applied Christianity at Boston University's School of Theology and an activist theologian with a "passion for social justice." In *Stride toward Freedom* King wrote that Chalmers' commitment to social justice was rooted in his optimism and faith in humanity ("Chalmers"). He was also active in civil rights organizations and later continued to support and influence King throughout the CRM period ("Chalmers").

Although King took no courses from Walter Muelder, who represented the "Socialist pacifist, antiracist, anticolonial, and feminist" wing of the social gospel (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 443), he studied his social ethical writings and often identified with his "Christian Socialist pacifism" (which also influenced Boston personalism in the 1950s). He also continued to study Niebuhr, but now referred to Muelder's arguments in order to criticize some of Niebuhr's ideas. While agreeing with Muelder that "Niebuhr's theological ethic was strongest as a critique of liberal perfectionist complacency and sentimentality," he pointed to the flaws in Niebuhr's ethic. Repeating after Muelder, he wrote, "This weakness lies in [the] inability of his system to deal adequately with the relative perfection which is the fact of the Christian life" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 274). King stressed that Niebuhr ignored the fact that "the availability of the divine *Agape* is an essential affirmation of the Christian religion" and quoted Muelder, who argued "that there is such a thing as redemptive energy that transcends individual and collective egotism (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 274). According to Dorrien's analysis of King's papers, and contrary to his later accounts, it seems that at this time he was further departing from Niebuhr's ideas and held strong to the social gospel.

3.4 Other influences at Boston University and beyond

During King's days in Boston and later in life King came across other philosophical, theological and religious ideas that also influenced his theological development. An important thinker and role model who strongly influenced Martin Luther King Jr. while he was still at Boston University was Howard Thurman. Not only was he a theologian and a famous representative of the Black social gospel, but also a minister and mystic with a nondenominational approach. His theology of radical nonviolence gave King another important link to Gandhi's philosophy. Thurman's book *Jesus of the Disinherited* (1949), which interprets Jesus' teachings through the experience of the oppressed and the need for a nonviolent response to such oppression as well as his unconventional (as for his times) interpretation of Christian theology influenced King's greatly ("Thurman"). Thurman, just like King, was an alumnus of Morehouse College (1923), and later continued his education at northern universities and seminaries. He studied under Quaker philosopher Rufus Jones and was

influenced by his pacifist thought and approach to mysticism ("Thurman"). According to Thurman, he and King met "informally" during King's last years as a doctoral student when Thurman was Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. Later he also sent Martin Luther King Jr. his book *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* ("Thurman") and encouraged King to read books by Rufus Jones (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 245). According to King's biographer Lerone Bennett, during the Montgomery bus boycott, King "read or reread" Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* ("Thurman").

Another representative of the Black social gospel who had influenced King even before he moved to Montgomery was Vernon Johns, who by the early 1930s "had a genius reputation comparable to those of Johnson and Thurman" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 283). He preceded King at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (1947-1952) and was known for his rebelliousness. Johns strongly disagreed with and was offended by "prevailing assumptions that a black preacher had to be some kind of fundamentalist." He stressed that Black churches also battled over modernism versus fundamentalism, just like white Protestant denominations in 1920s. The stereotypical image of the conservative Black Church dominated, in his view, because "white publishers ignored Reverdy Ransom, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., Mordecai Johnson, and Howard Thurman" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 282). He was a strong proponent of liberal theology and what mattered to him in the interpretation of the Bible was that "Jesus, Peter, James, and John were 'members of a despised race'" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 282-283). He was an early advocate of civil rights activity in Montgomery, and encouraged his congregation to challenge the status quo. In *Stride toward Freedom*, King described Johns as "a brilliant preacher with a creative mind" and "a fearless man, [who] never allowed an injustice to come to his attention without speaking out against it" (qtd. in "Johns").

King was later also influenced by his close advisor Bayard Rustin, not only on the Gandhian method, but also Quaker concept of pacifism. As Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes argues, King was "nurtured and inspired by his Quaker friends and meetings with the proponents of mystical approach to religious experience;" apart from Thurman, John R. Yungblut was also supposed to influence King on mysticism (245). In his famous "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," King listed a number of theologians and philosophers who also influenced his views on the "sin of segregation." Apart from St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Christian theologians discussed above, he refers to non-Christian philosophers, including Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber and Greek philosopher Socrates (King, "Letter…"). In his other writings he also mentions Henry David Thoreau. Later he was also in dialog with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a religious Jew from a Hasidic family in Poland, who stated "Racism is Satanism" (Heschel).[46] During his activity in the CRM, he cooperated and/or exchanged ideas with such representatives of the Black social gospel as ministers Wyatt Tee Walker, Fred Shuttlesworth, Andrew Young, Ralph Abernathy, James Lawson, and Joseph Lowery; and activists John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette (Dorrien, "Recovering…").

[46] Rabbi Heschel joined demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, to demand the need for a federal voting-rights law. Later both King and Heschel opposed the Vietnam war and both gained enemies for doing so (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 243).

A number of theological and philosophical ideas influenced King's theological evolution, especially during his education, but also later in life. Although researchers do not always agree which were most dominant and meaningful for his activism, they usually admit that one of the most important ones was the social gospel. According to Cook "the core themes of social gospel theology, including social justice, human solidarity, the love ethic, and the kingdom ethic, remained salient for the rest of King's life, permeating nearly all of his speeches, sermons, and essays and underscoring his commitment to racial and class equality" (Cook 80). For Dorrien even more important was the Black social gospel, whose representatives King met at different stages of his academic education and who kept influencing his intellectual development. While interpreting Rauschenbusch and other social gospel theologians through the Black perspective, they encouraged King to enter ministry and to dedicate it to social and racial issues. Dorrien's distinction between the two streams of the social gospel allows us to analyze how each of them shaped King's political views and actions.

4. Social gospel, Black social Gospel, and politics

The influence of the Black social gospel became evident early on. Having absorbed its values, there was no doubt for King whether to accept the position of a spokesmen and president of the Montgomery Improvement Association when the Montgomery bus boycott started in December 1955. He started to fight for the Black social gospel ideals, using the Gandhian method of nonviolence and civil disobedience (also postulated by its representatives). Through participating in protests, organizing famous campaigns and marches against racial segregation as well as by establishing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 he was bringing them to life at an unprecedented level. The SCLC that became known as "the political arm of the Black Church" (Lincoln and Mamiya 211) offered training and leadership assistance for local efforts to fight segregation, involving a growing number of Black pastors. Most of its founders were Baptist ministers (including King, C. K. Steele, A. L. Davis, Samuel Williams, T. J. Jemison, Fred Shuttlesworth, Ralph Abernathy, and Kelly Miller Smith) who all were under a strong influence of the Black social gospel (especially its Baptist stream) and all of them believed that ministers should be social justice activists (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 302).

Soon after King had moved to Montgomery, he also spoke at the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, where he expressed his (Black) social gospel convictions by criticizing colonialism, imperialism, and segregation as well as the role of the church in supporting them. The president of National Baptist Convention Rev. Dr. Joseph Harrison Jackson did not approve King's position, arguing that "authentic black Baptist Christianity was otherworldly, separatist, and orthodox, and King's celebrity was a baleful creation of white liberals and backsliding black Christians" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 310). Although King's comments might have been classified as the expression of the general social gospel ideas, his criticism of segregation and the role of the church in supporting it also had the Black social gospel overtones. Jackson, however, denied the existence of the Black social gospel (which could also indicate that at that time it was still a minority movement

within the Black Church). His comments perpetuated stereotypes about the Black Church's conservatism and otherworldliness, and disregarded the divisions in the Black Christianity.

Moreover, Jackson, who was famous for saying: "From protest to production!" and stressed his attachment to a "patriotic law and order, anticommunist, pro-capitalist school of gradualism" (Lincoln and Mamiya 131), strongly criticized King, who translated his social gospel beliefs not only to protest politics but also to political views, which were moderately socialist.[47] King early on pointed to systemic structures of oppression and he agreed with Rauschenbusch's critique of American capitalism as "exploitative and predatory" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 263). After studying at Morehouse he already knew that the Black social gospel could reach further than his father's version of the reform-minded measures that encouraged Blacks to seek advancement through capitalist methods. As Cook explains, "he considered the social gospel, put into practice, as a decentralized, spiritualized form of socialism" (88). As Dorrien stresses, King took his worldview from Rauschenbusch, Du Bois, Johnson, Randolph, Barbour, the early Niebuhr, Mays, Muelder, and Rustin (*Breaking…* 311). Therefore, it is very difficult to establish whether King's socialist position was inspired more by the representatives of the white social gospel or the Black social gospel. On the other hand, Dorrien suggests that Rauschenbusch was King's main intellectual influence on social gospel socialism and it mattered to him greatly that he also influenced Johnson, Mays, Thurman and Barbour (*Breaking…* 18). Christian socialism of Rauschenbusch, however, differed slightly from socialism of Johnson or Muelder. Most likely, while the base for his convictions was in Rauschenbusch's white social gospel socialism, he also mixed elements of Christian socialism as postulated (and modified) by the representatives of both groups.

These socialist convictions of King were not socially acceptable in 1950s-America. Therefore, the leaders of the CRM tried not to publicize them. Instead, the narrative was redirected to the fact that he also fully embraced the Gandhian nonviolent and pacifist approach. Even after his death, his "worldview remained something of an insider secret" (Dorrien, *Breaking…* 443). King, however, "did not consider himself daring or exceptional" due to his socialist convictions, mostly because they came from Christian religion and social ethics. Describing himself as democratic socialist, he also explained he thought that capitalism played a positive role in the eighteenth century when it was disrupting the trade monopolies of the nobles, "But like most human systems it fell victim to the very thing it was revolting against. So today capitalism has outlived its usefulness. It has brought about a system that takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes." He stressed, however, that he believed in "evolutionary Socialism, not a Marxist materialist or revolutionary" (qtd. in Dorrien, *Breaking…* 443). In his 1968 analysis of King's views Rathbun concluded, "On balance, then, he appears to strike a position between the excesses of collective enterprise and free enterprise, between Communism on the one hand and immoderate Capitalism on the other" (Rathbun 52). In 1990 Douglas Sturn argued that "King's democratic socialism was not Marxist in the classical or orthodox sense of that movement; it was instead a democratic socialism derived through the

[47] What Europeans would consider moderate socialism, might be considered differently in the USA.

social gospel of Rauschenbusch, modified by the Christian realism of Niebuhr, and governed by the basic philosophical categories of personalist idealism" (91).

Although not publically discussed when King was alive, with time his socialist views were detectable in particular political solutions that he supported. For example, in 1964 he advocated for a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged," which would guarantee education, jobs, and social services to all citizens experiencing poverty (Burns 12). He supported the idea of a "domestic Marshall Plan" (proposed by Whitney Young Jr. and the National Urban League) that would eliminate poverty and rebuild the inner cities. He also promoted "compensatory or preferential treatment" for the poor by which he meant, however, collective solutions, such as the reconstruction of public education and job programs. In the last year of his life, he called for a "human rights revolution," placing economic justice at the center (Burns 12-13). Together with the SCLC, he organized the "Poor People's Campaign" to address various issues of economic justice. King was trying to mobilize "a multiracial army of the poor" that would push for congressional provision of a guaranteed livable income for the poor, through jobs or income support (Burns 15). He additionally connected the war in Vietnam with the problem of economic injustice. During his visit to the New York City Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, he delivered a speech titled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," in which he opposed the U.S.'s role in the war. He described the war as an effect of colonialism and militarism.[48]

His opposition to the war brought him many enemies. It also brought controversies concerning his "radicalization," especially when paired with a very broad program of the "Poor People's Campaign." As Burns stresses, however, King's thinking did not change dramatically during the 1960s. While his strategy, programs, and intermediate goals might have changed since Montgomery, his basic values, political perspective, and long-term goals did not change. For Burns it is an apparent paradox that "the more the superstructure of his politics changed, the more the moral and spiritual base of his thinking stayed essentially the same" (Burns 8). For Cook it is proof of the significance of the social gospel in shaping King's radical response to the injustices of capitalist labor (qtd. in Cook 76).

Importantly, due to the fact that King in his last years was engaged in the campaigns on behalf of all poor and neglected citizens as well as of the people in Vietnam, most scholars did not see it as an expression of the Black social gospel. If they perceived it as an outcome of religion, it was simply attributed to the influence of the white social gospel. Cook, for example, stressed that "King's social gospel theology and praxis (…) contained universal implications that transcended the special dispensation of any single group or race of people" (Cook 91). Indeed, King wrote, "the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism and materialism" (qtd. in Cook 91).[49] Following Dorrien's analysis, one could argue, though, that it was still a "black revolution," which would not have been possible without the Black social gospel.

[48] On August 31, 1967 the National Conference for New Politics in Chicago he named three main social evils: racism, economic exploitation and militarism. More in: Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 244-245.

[49] Quoting from in King's *A Testament of Hope*.

Dorrien emphasizes that the Black social gospel "got little credit for being a tradition, much less for shaping King's idea of prophetic Christianity. But without the black social gospel, King would not have known what to say when history called on December 3, 1955" (443). While one must agree with Dorrien that King was deeply immersed in this tradition, it seems, however, especially after analyzing his last political campaigns, that both versions of the social gospel had a huge impact on King's political and social views. One put more stress on the conditions of the Black community, and the other highlighted the faults of the system that affected the whole society. And yet, sometimes their messages overlapped and their influences were difficult to distinguish.

Conclusions

This article analyzed Martin Luther King's theological evolution, paying attention to the role of the Black social gospel as a separate version of the social gospel, and examined the influence of both on King's political views. Gary Dorrien's proposal to highlight this long-omitted tradition of the Black Church was discussed in the context of the academic debate concerning most important theological influences on King's political activism. It was concluded that despite differences in opinions, an increasing number of scholars agree on the importance of the social gospel (among other influences) in shaping King's theological and political outlook. Some even stress its centrality. Not too many, however, distinguish the Black social gospel as a separate version of the social gospel. Yet, Dorrien's emphasis on analyzing it separately seems to be important for several reasons. First of all, distinguishing it reveals its unique features. Second, it allows to place it within the tradition of the Black Church, which has often been considered a monolith (either conservative, passive and otherworldly – before the CRM – or fully activist and engaged – during and after the CRM). Placing it within its tradition, in fact, perfectly illustrates Black Church's complicated nature. Third, it allows to notice its particular and important influence on such representatives of the Black Church as Martin Luther King Jr.

Dorrien agrees with scholars who stress that in many analyses of King's views, the influence of the Black Church was omitted or downplayed. In his view, one of the reasons for that was that the Black social gospel was not considered a tradition within the Black Church. Yet, it seems to be exactly this part of the Black Church tradition that might have influenced King the most (although at that time it was not the dominant one)[50].

King first encountered the Black social gospel when his father preached one of its early versions. At Morehouse he learned about the full-fledged Black social gospel and understood that the Black social gospel could reach further and be more progressive than his father's version. Some of its most important representatives directly (and indirectly) impacted his intellectual development.[51] He absorbed the

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[50] After rejecting fundamentalism, excessive emotionalism and otherworldliness, apart from the Black social gospel, King also kept, e.g. the Black church preaching tradition and strong belief in a personal God.

[51] Although some of them were mentioned in earlier analyses, they were usually not identified as the Black social gospel leaders.

ings of Benjamin Mays, which together with George Kelsey's theological liberalism helped him in the decision to enter the ministry and to make it a social ministry. Mordecai Johnson additionally opened him up to the idea of advancing the Black social gospel using the Gandhian method of nonviolence. Pius Barbour inspired him to study it alongside personalism and other theologies to enrich the perspective. Howard Thurman influenced King with his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* as well as with his pacifism and mysticism. Vernon Johns and other Black social gospel leaders active in the CRM inspired him with their activism.

At Crozer King also came to study white social gospel (especially through reading Rauschenbusch). As Dorrien stresses, however, while endorsing its teachings and becoming its ardent proponent, he still found the representatives of the Black social gospel "viable models of a radical social gospel ministry" for him (*Breaking…* 443). Therefore, according to Dorrien, although the Black social gospel was long forgotten in scholarship, it is "the category that best describes Martin Luther King Jr., his chief mentors, his closest movement allies, and the entire tradition of black church racial justice activism reaching back to the 1880s" ("Recovering…")

Yet, scholars often omit King's first encounters with the Black social gospel at Morehouse,[52] stressing mostly his Crozer education and the white social gospel. Some of them also imply that it was only after reading Rauschenbusch at Crozer that King rejected his father's fundamentalism (Rathbun 39). In fact, King's first encounter with liberal theology was at Morehouse, also through the representatives of the Black social gospel. Rejecting fundamentalism did not mean, however, that King was rejecting the whole tradition of the Black Church or even its major part.

As Dorrien stresses, the confusion among the researchers concerning theological tradition that might have influenced King's views the most, has partly been caused by the fact that King (and his ghostwriters) often downplayed the influence of the radical aspects of the social gospel in his intellectual and theological evolution, and most often offered "a seminary-oriented account of his development that emphasized personalist philosophy" (443). A deeper analysis of his college essays, social actions and political proposals suggests, however, that both versions of the social gospel deeply influenced King's political and views. While one put more stress on the conditions of the Black community, and the other highlighted the faults of the system that affected the whole society, both of them installed in him a deep devotion to Christian socialism, which has been translated into democratic Socialism within the political sphere. Even if sometimes their influences were difficult to distinguish, Dorrien's stress on analyzing them separately is still valid. It helps better illustrate that King's views were a product of the synthesis of a very specific Black tradition with the Western traditions and theologies (including also personalism and elements of Niebuhr's thought).

For a political scientist, the impact that King's theological views had on his political outlook is a great example of how and to what extent religion can shape individual political preferences and through them also influence social movements.

[52] Some of the articles on King do not concentrate on Morehouse education as formative for his theology since it was undergraduate school and King's major was not in theology (including Cook; Rathbun).

Additionally, it highlights the role of liberal theology and progressive Christianity in the political sphere, and sheds light on theological (and political) divisions within churches, especially within the Black Church.

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